

CHAPTER 1



“REVENGE”

It was 10:30 am; for almost an hour Suresh had been chased by the police through the streets of Bombay. He was covered with perspiration and his heart pumped fiercely. No matter which route he took, his pursuers always seemed to be just a block or two behind. Darting into side streets, he was trying every way he could find to make it to the British Consulate, but the police sensed his plan and made sure there was always someone wedged between him and his goal.

Suresh stopped at an intersection next to a tall building, a pile of pungent smelling trash at his feet. He intentionally slowed his breathing to compose himself before peering around the corner. A group of police were situated at the intersection one block down; they were releasing a pack of German Shepherds from out the back of a police van. The dogs barked loudly, straining against their leashes. *My God, if they set them free... this is like a horrible dream. Six months ago I was a college student visiting this country and now I'm hunted like some rabid animal.* A surge of adrenaline shot through his body, making him feel light-headed. Swooning, he clung to the corner of the building to keep from falling.

While steadying himself, Suresh noticed the American Consulate halfway down the block on the other side of the street—perhaps the Americans would give him asylum. But he would have to run directly towards the police to get there. *This is my only chance—will they let me in? God help me.*

He bolted down the street toward the Consulate, dodging between cars as the drivers slammed on their brakes and angrily blared their horns. Above this noise

he could hear the distant shouts of police and the dogs frantically barking as they ran in his direction.

At the entrance to the Consulate, a young Marine Sergeant raised his white-gloved hand, prompting Suresh, gasping, to stop. He then dropped to his knees, pulled a British passport from his shirt pocket and thrust it at the Sergeant. "I am a British citizen and the police are trying to arrest me for a crime I did not commit. If they capture me, I am dead. I beg you, *please*, for asylum!"

The guard was temporarily bewildered by the situation—an Indian man with a perfect British accent and British passport, running from the police. Looking up he saw two German Shepherds heading straight for them. The Marine grasped Suresh by his shirt and yanked him into the guardhouse, his spine prickling as he slammed the door shut just as the snarling dogs arrived at the entrance.

The dogs leapt up on the door of the small enclosure and barked furiously at the object of their wrath—a cowering and shaken 23-year-old Suresh. Pools of saliva on the glass ran together and rolled down to the sill. The commotion was so loud the young Marine could barely hear his Lieutenant, whom he'd quickly telephoned for instructions what should be done with the fugitive.

* * * *

Later that day a DC-10 jumbo jet forged its way through the cold, still air 30,000 feet above the North Atlantic. Three massive General Electric turbofan engines sucked in air, ripping it from the atmosphere, then combined it with fuel, compressed it, and fed the potent mixture into a blazing inferno at the rear of each engine. Expanding with violent energy as it ignited, it pushed its way out of the rear of the engines through whirling blades, thrusting the plane forward with 150,000 pounds of energy. Visible moisture trails whirled in spiraling contrails in the wake of the three engines as the plane moved through the sky.

The blunt nose of the aircraft bludgeoned its way through the cold air, compressing it so that it heated, warming the aluminum surface while releasing energy with a thunderous roar. Inside the cockpit, however, the thick glass of the double-paned windows dampened the sound to a velvety rush.

Captain William Mosley, a graying airline veteran with deep lines across his face, testimony to the millions of miles he had flown in his long career, stared out of the window. There were dark, turbulent cumulus clouds to the left, but the course ahead was clear. He idly contemplated his son's upcoming graduation from Texas A & M University. The younger First Officer, Dick Engleman, clean-shaven but with thick black hair slightly longer than regulation, leaned

back in his seat, his black shoes propped up on the foot rest below the instrument panel and his hands clasped behind his head. Flight Engineer 'Zak' Richardson, a heavyset black man with salt-and-pepper hair, scribbled on a notepad at his table behind the two pilots, calculating the fuel reserves required to make it to Bangor, Maine, from their present position south of Greenland. At 63, he was the oldest man in the cockpit.

Earlier conversation had lapsed into silence, the three crew members attending to their own thoughts, when a chime sounded, signaling that a flight attendant in the main cabin was calling the cockpit. The First Officer winked at the Captain and, leaning back in his seat, reached back behind the center console and picked up a handset that resembled a telephone. With a grin he answered, "Engine room."

There was a giggle before a female voice said, "This must be Dick. It's boiling in first class, would you ask Zak to cool it down?"

"Sure," Dick said, nodding at Zak. Putting the phone back in its cradle, he said, "They want you to cool it down. They say it's boiling back there."

The Captain looked at the First Officer. "It's always too hot just about now."

Engleman smiled quizzically. "Really? How come?"

"Easy," the Captain said, smiling. "When they start serving lunch, which is just about now, they get hot pushing those food carts around."

Zak grunted in acknowledgment of the Captain's observation and, adjusting a knob on his panel, tweaked the temperature down a couple of degrees. "Ever notice that it is never just warm, they say it's boiling; and never just cool, it's freezing?"

"Yup," the Captain answered. "Always been that way and always will."

Suddenly there was a muffled *thump* and the plane shifted. The Captain looked at the Flight Engineer's panel, examining the array of lights and instruments that monitored every system in the airplane.

The First Officer turned in his seat. "What was that?"

Zak studied the panel and shrugged. "I don't know. Everything looks normal to me."

"Agreed," Mosley said. "I don't see anything, either."

The First Officer looked perplexed. "That was a hell of a thump, and the plane actually moved. Do you think we slung some ice?" They had earlier climbed through a layer of moisture encased in black clouds. If ice had accumulated on the fuselage it was possible that a chunk had fallen off, possibly hitting a wing or stabilizer.

The Captain looked thoughtfully at the First officer. "If so, it was a damn big piece of ice."

He then turned to the Flight Engineer. "Zak, why don't you take a stroll down the back and look at the wings. Ask the flight attendants discreetly if anybody saw anything." He paused for a moment. "By the way, we have the Ambassador from India sitting in first class. He's on his way to the UN. You might do a little 'PR' with him while you're back there."

Zak nodded then pulled himself up from his chair, stretching as he rose to his feet. "Okay. You guys want anything while I'm back there?"

"Not for me," replied the First Officer.

"I'll take a cup of coffee if it's fresh," said the Captain.

Zak swung open the cockpit door and was greeted by a cloud of acrid smoke. As it rolled into the cockpit, in the background he could hear muffled screams. "Captain, we've got a problem!"

"Shit!" exclaimed the First Officer. He reached over his right shoulder and grabbed his oxygen mask.

"Close the door and stay in here!" the Captain shouted. He reached for the interphone and rang the chime for a flight attendant.

A distraught female voice responded. It was a flight attendant from the mid-cabin. "Captain, there is a big bump in the floor in first class and smoke is pouring into the airplane."

Zak looked at his panel and noticed red warning lights were illuminating. Sitting back down, he shouted, "Captain, fire in the forward cargo hold!" He reached up and put his hand on a panel marked 'Fire Control System'.

"Fire the bottle," the Captain commanded, but Zak had already pressed the discharge button.

"Oh God, what's happening?" the flight attendant pleaded over the interphone. The Captain could tell the young woman was close to panic.

A new voice came on the intercom. "Captain, this is Amy, what's happened?"

Good girl, the Captain thought, relieved to hear the calmer voice of his lead flight attendant.

"I don't know, Amy, but we are putting out a fire in the forward cargo compartment. Maybe that will stop the smoke. Now listen—I need you to calm your people down so we can get through this, okay?"

"Sure. Sara is spooked but we'll get her under control. This is really scary. How much trouble are we in?"

The Captain paused before replying. "Well, we're not about to crash. The plane is flying okay, but I don't know what happened, either. What we need to

do is keep everybody calm while we try to figure it out. How are the passengers reacting?" He could hear commotion and cries in the background as Amy spoke.

"Not too well. They're moving around the cabin, trying to get away from the smoke."

"That's not good," the Captain said. "I'll make an announcement; you try to get everybody seated."

He picked up the public address microphone and started to speak in a practiced, calm voice. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is the Captain. I'm not sure yet what happened in the back of the plane, but we are flying fine and responding to an overheat condition in the forward cargo compartment. It is very important that you all take a seat, and remain seated, so we can deal with the problem. By moving around the cabin you will only get in our way and make it more difficult to fix whatever the problem is. As I said, the airplane is flying fine so please be seated and fasten your seatbelts. I will keep you advised as we determine our status and what we are going to do." Captain Mosley had learned long ago to be absolutely honest in his PA announcements.

In Seat 23L in the economy section, a short, stocky black man, Asaid Saides, listened to the Captain's announcement and wondered what had gone wrong. Surely the plane wasn't strong enough to withstand the plastic explosive concealed in his checkered bag and set to detonate while the plane was far out over the Atlantic Ocean.

Today was the anniversary of the attack on his village in Africa. He had said his final prayers and was ready for the bomb to explode, an experience he imagined would be both terrifying and exhilarating. He had wondered if he would die immediately or stay alive for a while, tumbling through the air until the darkness came.

But this—simply a dull thump and smoke, while the plane remained soaring through the sky? This he hadn't been expecting.

His checkered bag with the explosive had, in fact, been loaded near the top of an LD3 cargo container and later positioned in the forward cargo compartment, directly under the first class section. When the bomb detonated, the explosion had compacted all the loose bags around it, absorbing much of the energy from the explosion. The container had bulged on all sides but was restrained on the forward and back ends by the adjoining containers. The deformation of the top, bottom and sides of the container had further spent the energy of the explosion.

The container had split at all its seams and a fire immediately started inside. The top of the container had been pushed up into the first class cabin floor, creat-

ing a three-foot high hump on the left aisle. The plush first-class seats tilted oddly over the strange deformation of the floor. Some of the passengers were groaning from compression injuries to the spine and neck.

An elderly couple were struggling to push off a flight attendant who was draped over them. She had been serving in the aisle almost directly over the bomb when it detonated, her legs shattering as she was flung straight up into the ceiling of the cabin; she had then fallen, her body twisted and broken, on top of the panicked passengers. She was alive but unconscious, which was just as well. White leg bones protruded through the navy blue fabric of her pants.

The Indian Ambassador to the United Nations, Deepak Daudia, was sitting on the right side of the first class cabin. He was terrified. His lunch had tumbled off of his tray table and onto his lap, the coffee burning him; but he had hardly noticed the sensation. He unlatched his seat belt and struggled to his feet, looking around frantically, wondering if they were about to crash and if he was about to die.

On the outside of the airliner, the left side and bottom of the fuselage around the damaged container bulged out like a bruised garden hose that was about to burst. When the bomb detonated, the airplane had staggered like a dog that had run full tilt into an unexpected tree branch, continuing ahead, a bit wobbly but straightening out as it regained its senses. Rivets had popped but no holes had appeared in the aluminum skin.

It was a better day to be sitting in economy class. Those passengers felt the thump but they couldn't see the chaos in the first class section, due to the curtains that separate "the common folks from the big spenders". But the appearance of smoke curling in through vents at the top of the cabin was enough to spur screams, wild-eyed looks and panic. Husbands and wives looked desperately at each other. Children clung to their mothers.

Asaid reached over and pulled out a small bag from under the seat in front of him, then felt inside for the parts he had managed to bring on board. Once assembled, they would form a small gun, only .22 caliber but effective enough at close range. It could fire two shots. Disassembled, the various pieces had passed through the airport security check without disclosing their real purpose. The gun could be assembled in less than two minutes.

Concealing the bullets had been a more difficult problem. He had finally decided to carry them inside a large stainless steel pen. When he reached the airport metal detector, he had taken the large pen from his pocket and casually thrown it into the small bowl used for loose change. After he walked through, a

security person politely handed it back to him. His small bag passed through the x-ray machine without any questions.

As he assembled the weapon, Asaid recalled the evil day a year ago in the small village of Zombalu...

* * * *

The horrible event had taken place on a beautiful spring morning. The village had awoken, as usual, to the comforting smell of wood fires. After some light, friendly banter, the men had left for the day’s hunt while the women started their work in the village. The men, gathered in small groups, laughed as they discussed the just-announced consent for the marriage of Sontay, the chief’s daughter, to Asaid, the 19-year-old son of the chief of the neighboring village. At the time, Asaid wasn’t aware he had become officially engaged, since he was attending school in Germany, arranged through the United Nations’ ‘African Initiative’ program. The marriage would take place upon his return.

The marriage was the object of some sexual innuendo, but there was great respect for the arrangement. Embarrassed, Sontay did not plan to leave her hut until the men had left. She was flushed with pleasure about the news. It was all that she had hoped for in the three months since Asaid had left for his special school. They had discussed marriage and asked their respective fathers if it could be arranged. Both loving fathers saw the wisdom of the union and, after several weeks of symbolic negotiation, the consent for marriage had been announced.

But unknown to the villagers, nervous soldiers, uncharacteristically dressed as warriors in paint and thongs, had been waiting at the outskirts of the village that day for the signal to attack.

The village was located on an interesting and valuable piece of land. Six months before, a team from a U.S. company, Satellite Logistics, Inc., had arrived to survey possible sites for a satellite download station. They had used small explosives, earth sampling equipment, a portable lab and other scientific paraphernalia to test for suitable locations. Zombalu was found to be ideally situated for a combined U.S. satellite receiver and radio observatory for deep space projects. It was not only its geographic location and elevation that made it so perfect—the soil and underlying bedrock had a high composition of hard minerals that were geologically ideal for a station of this type.

The team reported this discovery to its company, and soon a representative appeared on the doorstep of the Prime Minister to discuss a long term lease of the property—a lease which could make a substantial contribution to the coffers of

the reigning government of Zombalu. The extra funds could be used to develop much-needed schools and highways. In addition, a separate cash fee would be provided for the Prime Minister's favorite charity, which, at this moment, happened to be his second residence, a chalet in Basel, Switzerland—it desperately needed more art to compete in the neighborhood.

A government official had been dispatched to the village to suggest relocation. The proposal was rejected out of hand by the chief, who agreed that it was indeed a perfect location. There was a river teeming with fish nearby, and, on the other side of the village, a forest abundant with wildlife. The people in the village had little concern for money or hard goods, since they found their happiness in the village life. They were unimpressed by highways and schools—these things seemed to have little to add to their quality of life. Actually, they would probably have been persuaded most by the argument that sacrificing their present location would honor the great chief of the region by improving his household. But that consideration was not mentioned by the government representative.

The official had shrugged and dutifully reported the refusal to the Prime Minister. It became necessary to consider an alternative way to convince the tribe that a move would be beneficial for all concerned.

One thing that could be said for the Harvard-educated Prime Minister was that he understood his people, including the simple native population. He knew that further negotiations with the chief would be useless, so direct action would have to be taken. The American company had already found a suitable alternate site but, unfortunately for the highway and school builders of the country (and the art dealers of Europe), that site lay in a neighboring country.

The Prime Minister didn't consider himself an evil man, but highways and schools were important to his developing nation. *To lose this opportunity, along with all the related benefits, because a small village of 28 simple-minded natives wouldn't move to another piece of land that would be just as suitable for them, was unacceptable.* The problem would have to be solved using more traditional methods.

He ordered the complete elimination of the village. It was important that no man, woman or child survive, as any surviving villager would have a claim to the property.

The attack was swift and furious, the government soldiers making it appear as though the raid had been undertaken by another tribe—although the villagers, in their last moments, were not fooled. The slaughter was merciless, and complete.

At the time of the raid, a woman from Sontay's village, along with her son, had been visiting her mother in a neighboring village. This had been anticipated

and was known by the soldiers. Fifteen minutes into their two-hour return walk, two ‘warriors’ leaped from the brush and annihilated the mother and son without a word. The soldiers did not know the ambush was observed by a 15-year-old boy from the neighboring village. He had been practicing his stalking skills by shadowing the mother and child since they had left his village. He was shocked by the brutality of attack, his throat constricting while he watched the butchering. He was not deceived by the soldiers’ costumes and understood immediately what he had witnessed. Trembling, he crouched in the bushes for an hour before he dared to start back to his village, where he reported the event to his chief. Eventually, word of the massacre was received by Asaid in Germany.

Two weeks later, bulldozers leveled the old village and construction began on the new facility. “Satellite Logistics, Inc.” was stamped on the incoming materials boxes.

A U.S. company—they would pay.

Aboard the DC-10, eight rows back in the economy cabin, 33-year-old NASA scientist, Dr. Randy Brown, sat back pensively in his seat and observed the chaos in the cabin. *Goddammit. First the divorce, now this?*

Wearing brown slacks and a white open-neck shirt, Dr. Brown hardly looked a scientist. He was lean and muscular, with thick, slightly shaggy brown hair. When he wore his reading glasses, he had a studious look, but a self-imposed daily workout maintained the body of an athlete.

It hadn’t always been that way. During the years of his higher education, he had gone soft. It was the divorce two years before that started him working out again, for hours each day, physically trying to subdue the pain and disillusionment. His five year old son was dragged off to Connecticut by his former wife to be raised by her new husband, an investment banker—who was boring and hardly the role model Randy would prefer. *If I die in this goddamned airplane, Danny will be raised by that twerp. Shit!*

A young Asian woman in the seat next to his grabbed his hand, fear contorting her face.

Randy decided to be reassuring. “Hey, the Captain sounds like he has things under control. I think we’re going to be all right.” He squeezed her hand and motioned her to put a napkin over her mouth to filter out the smoke.

This is damned serious, he thought, holding a handkerchief over his own mouth. *Smoke means fire, and planes crash when they are on fire.* He remembered the Swiss Air flight that had crashed, full of smoke, near Halifax, Canada. *The bad part is, I have no control over this. I am trapped in a damaged, pressurized metal*

cylinder five miles high over the Atlantic and there is not a damned thing I can do to help. Randy stared straight ahead as the smoke in the cabin thickened, but his attention was soon drawn to the African man two rows ahead on the other side of the aisle, who was hunched over a small canvas bag on his lap. The man wore a yellow turban and a robe characteristic of a West African. Randy noticed he seemed unaffected by the confusion around him, focusing instead on the contents of the bag.

Perhaps he is digging out an idol. That's handy—carry around your gods with you in case of an emergency.

The plane lurched suddenly and a silver cylinder fell out of the African man's hand and into the aisle. It started rolling toward Randy, but the man spun around furiously and, with an angry look, reached back and snatched back the cylinder.

That's odd...I wonder just what he's putting together up there.

The African hunched over again, intent on his task. It was apparent he was trying to conceal what he was doing, which increased Randy's curiosity. The African suddenly flipped off his seatbelt and stood, then started walking determinedly up the aisle toward the front of the plane.

Immediately, a flight attendant's stern voice was heard: "People, PLEASE remain in your seats so that we can deal with this problem."

But the man in the turban kept moving forward.

Randy had a flash of insight: *Could the man be somehow connected to the disruption? Is he a terrorist?* Randy looked around to see if any of the flight attendants intended to intercept him, but they appeared to be preoccupied. He unsnapped his belt and started up the aisle behind the man.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, PLEASE SIT DOWN," a flight attendant's voice on the PA again ordered.

Randy pointed emphatically at the strange man, trying to draw attention to him, but no one reacted.

The smoke was clearing but the acrid odor remained. A woman started to stand, moving into the aisle in front of the African, but he roughly shoved her back into her seat. He was now nine or ten rows ahead of Randy, near the front of the first class section. He then turned out of sight behind the front partition.

When Asaid turned the corner, he observed the senior flight attendant standing inside the entrance to the cockpit, conversing with the pilots. He reached forward, grabbed her by the arm and yanked her out of the doorway. She stumbled

back, crashing into the galley. Asaid stepped into the cockpit, raising his small gun.

The Flight Engineer was bent over his desk, writing down numbers, but looked up questioningly at the strange young man in the unusual attire. As the plane lurched through turbulence, Asaid shakily aimed the gun at him. It cracked. The bullet struck Zak two inches above the ear, causing blood to spatter from the side of his head. It was a glancing shot and the .22 caliber round lost little of its energy as it deflected off the hard skull bone, lodging itself into the back of the First Officer's neck. The Flight Engineer collapsed, his head falling onto the table, blood pouring from the wound and on to the papers. The First Officer fell silently forward in his straps, his head hanging down and arms loose at his sides. The bullet had hit his third vertebra, smashing it and killing him instantly.

Asaid looked startled. *This mission must be blessed! Two with one shot!* He swung the gun toward the Captain.

Incredulous, Mosley had watched the new development. Anger flashed on his face as he looked into the eyes of the African. Images of his wife's face and his daughter's wedding flashed through his mind as he faced the gun pointing directly at him. As he lunged forward to snatch it, it fired. The small bullet entered Mosley's right eye, tearing through his brain and lodging at the back of his skull. Mosley's head rocked back slightly, then his body sagged, slumping forward in his seat. With a whimper, he slowly started to die. It would take ten minutes for his heart to stop beating while his body closed down system after system in a vain attempt to save itself.

It is done, Asaid reflected. His heart was pounding. He regretted these deaths, but they were necessary. Everyone would soon be dead anyway, when the crewless plane plunged into the ocean.

Amy heard the two shots after she had been pulled out of the cockpit. Shakily, she picked herself up off the floor, steadied herself and then peered around the door, back into the cockpit. The strange man stood, staring at the three pilots slumped in their seats with blood seeping from their wounds.

Amy gasped at the sight. The strange man turned to face her. Frightened, she reached beside her and grabbed a steaming pot of coffee from a burner, dumping it over the man's head. He gasped, eyes wide with astonishment, pain and anger. He lunged toward her but she backed away, avoiding his grasp.

Randy had also heard the two 'pops', and dreaded what they might have been. Turning the corner, he saw the African man approaching Amy, waving the small gun. Leaping forward, Randy grabbed the man by the wrist and flung him as

hard as he could against the galley counter. Already off-balance, the African offered little resistance. He crashed against the counter. His head struck the solid steel frame of the cabinet above the counter and, stunned, he fell heavily to the floor. Dishes clattered down noisily around him.

Two more flight attendants arrived and pounced on the man, causing him to lose his grip on the gun, which fell to the floor while the flight attendants pummeled him, driven by uncontrolled rage.

Randy looked into the cockpit and was shocked by the scene. Blood had splattered everywhere; there were big blotches of it on the windshield. The Flight Engineer was sprawled across his desk, moaning as blood flowed down the side of his head and dripped on the papers below. The First Officer was bent forward over his control wheel and the Captain was slumped back in his seat, blood seeping out of an eye socket, down his white shirt and onto his lap.

Without warning, the control wheels rotated to the left, as if guided by an unseen hand, and the plane tilted. Randy froze, unsure what to do as the plane leaned. Then, it smoothly leveled its wings for the next segment of the flight. He surmised that the plane must be flying on autopilot. Radio conversation blared from overhead speakers, but the tone was dry and professional, giving no hint that anyone was aware of the tragedy that had just occurred.

Adrenaline pumped through Randy's body as he tried to comprehend the magnitude of the events that had transpired. His mind wanted to deny the incredible situation. He felt numbed and unsure. Closing his eyes momentarily, he forced himself to start analyzing the problem methodically.

Obviously, they needed another pilot.

The flight attendants had regained control and were binding the African with neckties, aided by some of the passengers from first class. The man's expression was fierce, but he did not resist. Randy looked over to the lead flight attendant who was directing the operation and asked, "Are there any other pilots on board?"

Amy looked at him darkly. "We'll find out." Addressing a nearby flight attendant, she commanded, "You go down the left aisle and ask for a pilot and I will do the same on the right." She knew it would be better to ask each row of passengers individually rather than make a PA announcement, which would only further aggravate the panic of the passengers. Word of the African man and the shooting of the flight crew was already traveling rapidly through the airplane.

Randy heard the Flight Engineer groan behind him. He turned to look and saw Zak slowly sit up in his chair. Zak shook his head and put his hand over the

bleeding wound on the side of his head. He then held his hand in front of his face, blankly examining the blood on it.

Randy asked, "Are you okay?" The big man did not respond to the question. Randy put his hand on Zak's shoulder. "Are you okay?" he asked again, squeezing Zak's blood-soaked shoulder.

"Shit," Zak uttered, then shook his head slowly. "What the hell is going on?" He looked at Randy curiously. "What the hell's going on?" Then he noticed his bloody hand and an expression of comprehension began to appear on his face. He turned to look at the two pilots and grimaced. "What the *hell* is going on!" he demanded this time.

Randy looked at him steadily. "You and the other two pilots have been shot. We have the man that shot you and he's tied up. We're trying to find a pilot. How do you feel?"

The big black man started to rise but fell back into his seat, restrained by his seatbelt. "I feel like shit. I've got a big cut on my head. Did we hit something?"

Randy realized that the man still didn't grasp the events of the last few minutes. "I believe you were shot, but I think the bullet just grazed your head. I see lots of blood, but maybe you are going to be all right." Randy reached forward to feel the gouge on the man's head, but Zak grabbed his hand firmly and moved it away from the wound. From his brief examination, Randy sensed the bullet had indeed grazed the man's scalp, leaving an ugly four-inch gouge above his left ear.

"I've got a hell of a headache," the Flight Engineer stated. "How's the Captain?"

"I think the Captain's dead."

"Oh, shit!" the black man said. He looked at the First Officer, slumped over the control wheel, blood seeping from a hole in the back of his neck. "Oh, shit." He looked earnestly at Randy. "Did you get the son of a bitch?"

"Yes, we got him and he's tied up in the back. No more threat," Randy replied patiently. "Can you fly this plane?"

"Yeah," the Flight Engineer replied before pausing to collect his thoughts. "I was a Captain for fifteen years, until I turned sixty and those assholes in the FAA decided that I couldn't fly anymore. I've been sitting at the Flight Engineer's panel since then, so I am rusty. But I *can* fly this airplane." He shook his head and droplets of blood splattered on Randy's arm.

"We have to get that wound bandaged," Randy said, looking back into the galley for something that could be used as a bandage. He grabbed a handful of white cloth napkins from off the first class counter and tied one around the Flight Engineer's head like a bandanna.

The senior flight attendant appeared, looking at Randy gravely. "We have no jet qualified pilots on board, just a private pilot." Behind her an older man, clearly nervous, stood humbly at the door. He peered into the cockpit and gasped when he viewed the scene. A moment later, he vomited on the floor. The pungent smell mixed with the lessening acrid stink of the smoke.

Randy looked at the man sympathetically. "I don't think we are going to need him right now. Why don't we ask him to sit down and get a grip. The Flight Engineer is groggy but he says he can fly the plane."

Amy looked into the cockpit hopefully and saw Zak sitting up, his hand slowly rubbing the makeshift bandage on his head. She then looked directly into Randy's eyes, as if to measure him. Taking command, she said, "Can you work with Zak? The other passengers are going out of their minds and we have to keep them in their seats or there will be a stampede."

Randy looked at her. "Sure. I'll help out as best I can." She nodded and stepped up to the PA.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I have to ask you to please, please remain seated. We have an extreme emergency in progress and a panic is not something that we can afford right now. Now, if you will please sit down, I will tell you everything I know."

C H A P T E R 2

▼

“CONVERGING PATHS”

North of Ranakdhar, Pakistan, at a border crossing to India, Bharat Bhupesh slowly walked up the dirt road toward the gate. He was dressed as a simple farmer, but in reality he was a terrorist. He, his brother Qamar, and five other men from the Strike Force for Hindu Resolution had blown up the American Embassy in Kulu, Africa, just two days before, killing more than 100 people, many of them Americans.

As always, they had split up before returning to their base in India. In the past, passing through various remote border points like this one had been easy for Bharat. He knew the border well from his earlier days as a soldier in the Indian army. He had used this point twice before and had passed without incident.

Outwardly, Bharat tried to look complacent, but inwardly he was tense.

A lone Pakistani soldier leaned against the guard shack, smoking. Bored, he watched Bharat approach with disinterest. Finally, flipping the cigarette away, he straightened up. “Passport?”

Bharat pulled a Pakistani passport from his shirt that identified him as Rashid Rehman. The soldier examined it perfunctorily before looking closely at Bharat, comparing his face with the picture. Apparently satisfied, he then asked, “Where are you going today, my friend?”

“I am on my way to Sundra to visit relatives.”

The soldier nodded. “I see—and how long do you expect to be there?”

"No more than a day, maybe two," Bharat replied. "Have you another cigarette?"

The soldier nodded again and pulled out a pack, offering him one. "I will need to check your passport—it will only take a moment." He turned and stepped into the small guard shack. There was no door, so Bharat was able to see the man flip open a foot-thick computer printout.

Bharat, who had expected nothing more than a wave through the check point, tried not to appear nervous as the soldier worked his way through the large list. The verification of passports according to the list was a recently imposed security measure, and the soldier seemed even less pleased than Bharat at this new task. He frowned often as he flipped through the pages but kept Bharat in view the whole time he looked.

Bharat knew that border security between Pakistan and India was tightening, but he hadn't expected this level of scrutiny at such a remote border point. Though he was tense, he doubted anything would turn up. His passport was of good quality, purchased two months ago from a reliable source in Karachi. Nevertheless, he flirted with the idea of simply sprinting through the checkpoint. But the roadside beyond the border point was clear for several hundred yards, making him an easy target for the soldier. Also, Bharat was not carrying a weapon, which was an invitation for trouble if the guard decided to frisk him—a common practice when passing through a Pakistani checkpoint. He waited for the next development.

The soldier frowned, holding the passport at arm's length as he compared it to his list. Finally, he stopped, apparently finding a match. He glanced at Bharat with a quizzical expression. Stepping out of the shack, he pulled his rifle from his shoulder. He held it casually, pointing the muzzle at the ground, but obviously at the ready.

"This passport was reported stolen last year. How did you get it?"

Bharat silently cursed. *Those donkeys gave me a stolen passport? Damnation!*

Bharat began to consider how he would disarm the soldier. Capture was not an option. He didn't mind killing the man but it would put people on his trail much sooner than he would prefer.

Bharat examined the soldier, but the man now had the gun partially raised, and seemed alert.

"Please put your hands up where I can see them until we can get this settled. Now answer my question."

Bharat slowly raised his hands, silently watching for an opportunity to attack the man. But then he heard the sound of a vehicle winding up the road from behind. He glanced back and saw a military car approaching.

The soldier uttered a grunt, acknowledging the vehicle. It stopped noisily next to Bharat, creating a cloud of dust. An officer and another soldier got out. The second soldier looked at Bharat carefully, and raising his rifle, aimed it at him.

The officer, a large man with a chubby face and a stomach which hung over his belt, looked at Bharat with an expression of amusement. Speaking loudly, he asked the guard. "What have we caught, Muhammad?"

"I am not sure, but the name on his passport doesn't match the listing and the number itself is reported as stolen."

The officer cocked his head and looked closely at Bharat. "I see," he said. Then, smiling, he nodded. "Well then, perhaps we will have some excitement today."

Bharat was cornered. He had two men with guns aimed at him and no weapon. He tried to think of something that might improve his odds of escaping from this difficult situation.

The officer sneered at Bharat. "I don't suppose that you have been in Africa recently? The Americans are looking very hard for someone who blew up their embassy there two days ago."

Bharat's heart sank.

CHAPTER 3

▼

“CLAMOR”

Some of the passengers were still milling around their seats, unwilling to sit down. Amy, the senior flight attendant, repeated, “I will tell you everything we know, but first you must sit down and fasten your seat belts.” Several other passengers, already seated, motioned angrily to the standing passengers to sit.

Finally, when everyone was seated, Amy began her announcement. “Thank you for sitting. If you will remain seated, I will tell you everything,” she bargained. “This will not be pleasant, but here are the facts.” She paused. “First, we are NOT about to crash. I repeat, we are NOT about to crash. Is that clear? We are NOT ABOUT TO CRASH.” She paused again. “We have had some sort of explosion in the cargo hold. The crew extinguished the fire using the airplane’s fire extinguishing system. Please notice that there is no more smoke.”

The passengers looked around and could see that, indeed, the smoke had cleared. There were encouraging looks and nods of acknowledgment.

Amy continued. “We have a crazy man on board but we have restrained him. I think that he may have set off the explosion. He tried to kill the crew just a few minutes ago, but the third pilot (she intentionally didn’t say ‘Flight Engineer’) is okay and can land the plane.” There was a pause as this information sank in, followed by some restrained clapping and cheering. “It is very important that you all stay in your seats and remain calm so we can continue to deal with the situation. Now, I need to know if we have a doctor in the plane.”

A middle-aged man sitting nearby tentatively raised his hand.

Amy nodded at him. "Please come here and help me. Everybody else remain seated unless we ask for your help or you have to use the lavatory. I am not sure where we are going to land, but I will let you know as soon as I know. Now I will make you all a deal—if you stay seated and remain calm, I will not hold back any information and will tell you everything as soon as I know it. I know you are frightened. So are we, but we are going to get this plane on the ground and walk away from it." *Dear God, I hope so*, she thought. "The DC-10 is a wonderful, strong airplane and it is going to take us to safety."

The passengers looked at each other gravely but remained in their seats. Some of them turned to their neighbors to discuss the announcement, forming small groups. The candor of Amy's speech worked, and the passengers took their roles seriously. A sobbing woman was comforted by other passengers, who spoke softly to her. At the same time, they were prepared to restrain her if she tried to leave her seat.

The doctor followed Amy to the cockpit. "My God," he said as he viewed the carnage. He stepped inside and briefly examined the two pilots, shaking his head. "They are dead." Noticing the makeshift bandage on the Flight Engineer's head, he said, "How about letting me take a look at that?"

The Flight Engineer, with one hand holding his bandage in place, was examining his instrument panel for malfunctions. "Later, Doctor, I have work to do." He bent over and critically examined a gauge. "Uh oh. We have lost the hydraulic fluid in system three."

"How does that affect us?" Randy asked.

Zak looked sternly at the instruments on his panel. "Well, it's not really a big deal. Hydraulic system three is used to operate the landing gear, but we can free-fall it down. We have two other systems to operate the flight controls so it shouldn't be a problem as long as those two systems hold up. Are you a pilot?"

"No," replied Randy, shaking his head. "There is a private pilot on board, but when he saw this mess he threw up. I don't think he'll be any help right now."

Zak shook his head ruefully. "We *always* have another commercial pilot on board hitching a ride, but not on this flight. Looks like you're it then. What's your name and what do you do?"

Randy stuck out his hand. "Randy Brown. I am a physicist for NASA. It's a pleasure."

Zak frowned. "Well, it's no damn pleasure to meet you, at least not this way, but let's see what we can do to get this big mother on the ground in one piece." Randy found his hand engulfed in the big paw of Zak Richardson. Zak studied Randy's face. "The first thing we gotta do is get these pilots out of their seats so

we can fly this airplane. The number one rule in an emergency is to fly the plane and that's what I need to do. Can you help me with them?"

Randy looked apprehensively at the two lifeless, bloody bodies. "Yeah, sure. Let's get it over with."

The Doctor offered to help, but it was still no easy task for the three men to extract the two dead pilots from their seats. The limp, heavy bodies were difficult to maneuver. Their main concern was to remove them without damaging any switches and instruments; but this seemed unavoidable, since they were so slippery with blood. The cockpit was foul with the excreted matter of death, occasionally making Randy gag. He had to pause and close his eyes momentarily to regain his composure.

They pulled out the co-pilot first. At one point his foot fell down onto the center console, mashing some switches. "It's okay," said Zak. "Those operate the radar and transponder, not a big problem—but we're going to have to be more careful with the Captain because the radio switches are right next to him. We don't want to lose our ability to communicate."

The three men had to twist the Captain's body several times to avoid more damage, but they finally extracted him without further incident. Randy noticed that his own hands were not only covered with blood, but were slippery with urine. *This is a nightmare: a genuine goddamned nightmare.*

They laid the two bodies out on the galley floor behind the cockpit, out of view of the passengers. Zak was anxious to return to the cockpit, but he let the Doctor briefly examine his head wound. As the Doctor re-wrapped the bandage around his head, Zak stared at the African who was tied up in the first row of first class.

When the Doctor finished, Zak walked up to the small African and, leaning down, put his face three inches from the African's nose. He spat, "You son of a bitch; I will see you in goddamned hell." The man remained still, staring straight ahead.

* * * *

Zak had never been one to mince words. In 1968 he had said to his mother, "Momma, I'm going to enlist and learn to fly." Zak had been 28 and still living at home when he made that statement. His father had left when he was five years old and his mother had barely been able to provide for Zak and his sister. After graduating from high school, Zak went directly to work. There was no question of college and he felt a great responsibility to care for his mother and sister. He

hated the menial jobs he had to do but worked hard, paying to put his sister through a secretarial school. Finally, she graduated, secured a job of her own and was able to relieve some of the financial pressure on the family.

Zak’s mother encouraged him to save some money for technical school. He still didn’t have the resources to attend college, but Vietnam was warming up and he heard of an Army program that would train high school graduates to become helicopter pilots. All the applicant needed was a high school diploma and ‘aptitude’.

Zak saw the opportunity as a reprieve, and serving his country appealed to him—so he enlisted in the program. After taking a battery of tests, he qualified; and eighteen difficult months later he was an Army helicopter pilot. They sent him straight to Vietnam.

There, he saw his comrades get shot down, and he lost a helicopter of his own to ground-fire while hovering during a troop drop. He took advantage of his size and power to pull several young soldiers out of the burning machine before the flames became too intense. He would never forget the image of the young men he had to leave behind in the burning craft.

He managed to survive the war and, when it was over, used his GI bill to take fixed-wing flying lessons. With 2,200 hours of helicopter time and a fresh commercial license with instrument rating, he applied to several major airlines. It was a good time to be a member of a minority group and he was immediately hired by Global Overseas Airlines. Some people said that blacks, Hispanics and women were hired ahead of more qualified white male pilots, but Zak felt no remorse over the situation. As far as he was concerned, he had earned his job in Vietnam. So he jumped at the opportunity.

Zak was an instinctive pilot, which made him something of a rarity. He found that his color made little difference in the cockpit. His first assignment was on the Flight Engineer’s panel—‘flying sideways’, as it is known in the trade. He spent his first three years in that position. Zak did his work professionally, complained little, and laughed at the Captains’ jokes.

Zak was then given the opportunity to upgrade to First Officer on the Boeing 727, where his natural talent for flying became apparent. He developed a reputation as “a good stick”.

Zak married another pioneer—an attractive woman who was one of Global’s first black flight attendants—and together they raised a family. He was promoted to Captain at the age of forty-four and flew in that position until the ‘age sixty rule’ stopped him. FAA regulations, ignoring age discrimination and having no regard for his years of experience, physical condition or flying ability, designated

him no longer fit to fly a commercial airliner. Zak had the choice to retire or move back to Flight Engineer duties, since there is no age discrimination for that position. With his last two children still in college, he opted for the indignity of “flying sideways” for a few more years, until they finished school. After years of being in command, he was bored, resentful, and ready to retire as soon as the last tuition payment was in the mail.

* * * *

Zak re-entered the cockpit and sat down in the Captain's bloodied seat. Randy walked in and settled into the Flight Engineer's seat.

“We have to tell somebody what's happened here,” Zak said, picking up a microphone. “Mayday, Mayday, Mayday. Gander radio, this is Global 234, over.”

An irritated voice responded. “Global 234, you are 20 minutes overdue on your last position report. Is there some problem?”

“You bet your ass there is, Gander. We had a bomb go off in the forward cargo compartment and an attack in the cockpit on the Captain and First Officer. They're both dead. This is the Flight Engineer. I am declaring an emergency, over.”

There was a pause—then a more contrite voice said, “Global 234, we understand that you are declaring an emergency.” Following standard emergency protocol, the voice continued, “Who is in command of the aircraft and how many souls do you have on board?”

Zak looked at Randy and then pointed to a clipboard on the Flight Engineer's desk. “Give that to me.” He looked at the figures on the blood spattered papers before again speaking into the mike. “Gander, Global 234 has 278 souls on board, including the dead Captain and First Officer. I am the Flight Engineer and I am in command of the airplane. We have one terrorist tied-up, and as far as we know, he is the only one. I am a retired DC-10 Captain but I haven't flown this aircraft for more than three years. I have no other jet transport qualified pilots on board.”

Gander responded, “Roger, Global, please come up on HF frequency 6642. If you can't get us there, come back on this frequency.” Zak looked at Randy. “They want to get us off this frequency so we won't interfere with regular air traffic control. That way, we'll be able to talk to them on our own private frequency.”

Zak tuned a radio on the panel above his head and was soon talking to Gander on the new frequency.

Gander asked, "Global 234, state your fuel remaining and the condition of the aircraft?"

"Roger, Gander, we have 58,000 pounds of fuel remaining and the aircraft seems to be flying okay. I have lost hydraulic system three and I'm not sure what else at this point. I want to get this plane on the ground as soon as possible. What is the Gander weather?"

"Not good, Global," the Gander controller admitted. "Gander presently has only one-half mile visibility in fog, two hundred feet overcast variable to zero, zero. The whole East Coast is down. Stephenville is closed with zero zero and so is Halifax. We don't forecast any improvement at Gander for six more hours. Your closest open airport is Bangor, with ceiling 800 and visibility two miles in light rain and fog. Your company has been advised of your situation, over."

Zak looked at Randy darkly and shook his head in frustration. "Roger Gander, I request clearance direct to Bangor. We should be able to make it with approximately 30 minutes of fuel reserve. Any other possibilities?"

"Negative," Gander replied, "but we will keep looking and if anything opens up we will advise."

Randy looked at the Flight Engineer's panel. It was a bewildering collection of gauges, switches and lights; but analyzing it, Randy found it to be a logical description of the various aircraft systems. He noted that there were three hydraulic systems diagramed on the panel, each having its own fluid quantity and pressure gauges, with green arcs to show acceptable levels. The needles for system three were both on zero and two bright yellow lights between the gauges declared 'Hydraulic Pressure Low'.

While Randy examined the panel, another light, marked 'Fuel Schedule' illuminated.

"Zak, you have another light on over here."

Zak looked over. "Oh, shit. We have a bad fuel transfer in the right outboard tank. Dammit to hell, we now have about 5,000 pounds of fuel that we can't use in the right wing tank." He shook his head. "What makes it worse is that I will have to keep almost the same amount of fuel in the left outboard tank to keep the airplane in balance if we start getting low on fuel. That's 10,000 pounds of fuel we can't use because there's no way to transfer it. Fuck. To add to that, I have had to descend the plane. There is a pressurization leak somewhere. We're flying un-pressurized at 10,000 feet, which uses gobs more fuel than we would at a higher altitude. I don't know if we even have enough fuel to make it to the Cana-

dian coast!" Zak looked up as if to implore God why this was happening. He picked up the mike. "Gander, this is Global 234."

Gander replied instantly. "Go ahead, Global."

"Gander, we have a bad fuel transfer indication. I now have approximately 48,000 pounds of fuel remaining. I have descended to 10,000 feet due to a pressurization problem. Please ask my company to determine my range based on 48,000 pounds of fuel at 10,000 feet. I'm too busy here to calculate it."

There was a pause, then Gander replied. "Standby, Global. We are contacting your company." Approximately five minutes passed before Gander came back. "Global 234, your company advises that you should be able to make Gander with about 7,000 pounds of fuel remaining if you climb to 12,000 feet. They recommend a speed of 220 knots for the best endurance at that altitude."

Zak frowned. "Roger. I will climb to 12,000 feet and will maintain 220 knots. You gentlemen work on improving that weather for me."

The Gander controller came back and said gravely, "We'll do our best, Global."

Amy appeared at the doorway to the cockpit. "How's it going, guys?"

Zak looked back at her. "Not good, Amy. We only have enough fuel to make it to Gander and the weather stinks. The plane is still flying all right, but I don't know how many systems are screwed up. I guess we'll find out as we go along. What about that asshole you have tied up in the back? Has he said anything? I want to make sure he's the only one."

Amy shook her head. "I don't know. He hasn't said anything, but we will keep our eyes open." She paused. "Zak, it's making the passengers nervous having him up there in first class. I have no way of tying him to the seat securely, so a couple of men are holding him down. Do you think we could just tie him up and lock him in a lav?"

"That sounds fine, Amy."

She nodded. "I have a very badly hurt flight attendant—Suzie. The Doctor is looking at her. He says that she has lost a lot of blood and needs to be put in a hospital as soon as possible."

Zak shrugged in reply.

Amy turned to Randy with a sympathetic look. "How are you doing?"

Randy looked down at his blood stained clothes, then forced a smile. "I'm okay, but I'll never fly this airline again."

She smiled briefly back at him.

Zak looked back at her. "How is that private pilot doing? Any chance he can come up here and help me?"

"He's a basket case, Zak. I don't think he'll be of any use to you. Can you get along without him?"

"Looks like I'll have to. Randy here is a good man and he's going to help me," Zak said, nodding at Randy.

Amy smiled again at Randy. She turned to Zak and asked, "Anything that I can tell the passengers?"

"Tell them that we're going to land in Gander, Newfoundland. That's all I can think of for now."

Amy nodded and left the cockpit.

Zak looked at Randy. "Okay, Randy, here's the situation. We have about two hours of fuel. We are about an hour and a half from Gander. The weather there is the pits but we can probably land...we will *have* to land. This plane is equipped with an advanced instrument guidance system. Before we come down, though, we have to lower the landing gear. Now, ordinarily we lower the landing gear using hydraulic system three. It's dead at this point, but that shouldn't be any problem because we can simply free-fall the gear down. The control systems still seem to be working fine. The auto-pilot has started tripping off every once in a while so I'll have to hand-fly the rest of the way, including the approach into Gander. I'm rusty, so I don't promise a smooth landing, but we should walk away from it. That's the situation as far as I can tell for now. If we discover any more damaged systems, that may change the picture. Right now, I'm going to do some testing to see if, in fact, there *are* any more damaged systems. In the mean time, why don't you go see how Amy is doing in the back and ask her if there is any decent coffee on this airplane."

Randy nodded and stood up. As he left, Zak was carefully examining gauges.

The cabin was in a shambles. The aisles were covered in newspapers, blankets, movie headsets, and food trays. The passengers seemed to have settled down, however. They gave Randy curious looks as he passed. It didn't occur to him that he was still covered with blood stains. He found Amy hovering over Suzie in the middle galley. She looked up at Randy and said sharply, "Hey, you get back in the cockpit and help Zak."

"Zak asked for some coffee, if you have some. I think that he needs the diversion."

Amy nodded. "Okay, I'll bring you some. Just get back up there and help him get this damned airplane on the ground."

When Randy returned, Zak was fuming. "Well, Randy, my boy, we have more problems. I just did a self test on the ILS, the instrument landing system,

and it's tits up." He grimaced. "This is getting really hairy. Pass me my flight bag. It's over there by your right knee."

Randy dutifully passed over the black leather pilot's flight bag. "Here you are. What else can I do to help?"

"Nothing for now," Zak said as he rummaged through his bag. He pulled out a small black instrument with a 2" LCD screen. "This is a Garmin III GPS," he explained. "It's a portable Satellite Positioning System for small planes. I carry it around for emergencies. It can navigate a plane anywhere in the world. It's amazingly accurate, but it's not designed for a low instrument approach. It's our only hope, though, to line up this damned airplane with the runway at Gander, unless the weather lets up." He shook his head in frustration and pressed the power button on the device. "The Feds don't like us to have these in the cockpit because they're 'not approved' for airline navigation, but most of us carry one around anyway. To hell with the Feds—right now, I'm glad I have it."

He set the device on top of the instrument panel, then strung a wire from it to a small antenna, which he stuck on his side window with suction cups. Three minutes later it showed their exact position: 670 miles east of the Canadian coast.

"All right, at least this damn thing is working," Zak muttered. He picked up the mike. "Gander, this is Global 234. How's the Gander weather now?"

"Global 234, still down—indefinite ceiling, with RVR of 1200 feet."

Zak shook his head and explained to Randy, "RVR is the 'Runway Visual Range', the distance they can see on the ground. Twelve hundred is less than a quarter of a mile. That stinks." He shook his head gravely.

"What do we do if the weather is too bad to land?" Randy asked.

"We land anyway," Zak replied solemnly. He reached up for the GPS. "Now I have to program this thing for the approach. As I said, it's not designed to guide us through an instrument approach, but I can put some 'way points' in it to line us up with the runway."

Randy smelled the comforting aroma of coffee and turned to find Amy standing in the cockpit door, coffee pot in hand.

"Coffee to the rescue," she said.

C H A P T E R 4

▼

“WINGS, BORNE OF TIME.”

Randy had noticed Amy when he boarded the DC-10 earlier. Although he had been greeted by a male flight attendant, he had seen her in a galley adjacent to the entry door. She had smiled at him as she finished putting up her long blond hair. He had smiled back. *Now there is a pretty woman*, he had thought. He guessed her to be in her mid-thirties; she was slender, with great blue eyes. An emblem on her uniform identified her as the senior flight attendant.

Attractive as she was, Randy wasn't looking for romance. He was still trying to get through the failure of his marriage to Melissa and had lost interest in the whole romance process. Still, he missed female companionship and hoped he might find someone—one day. This woman was very attractive, and he had momentarily pictured how she might look with him at breakfast. It was an appealing thought, but he quickly dismissed it and found his seat.

* * * *

Amy had noticed Randy's boyish good looks as he boarded the plane; but she was to be married, again, in six short weeks. It would be her second attempt, and she hoped this time she would find herself the wife of a best friend, companion, and lover. Her first marriage had failed after she discovered she could not bear

children due to a childhood disease. The discovery was devastating for her, but even more so for her husband. Several months later he filed for divorce. It had taken her several years and some counseling to recover, but she had. She was determined to make her next marriage her last.

The man she had observed board the plane was not only handsome, he looked intelligent and carried a NASA briefcase. She decided she would try to talk to him during the flight. Amy considered it a benefit of the job to meet interesting passengers during her trips. Throughout her nine years at Global, she had shared conversations with a range of people—from diplomats who felt destined to change the world, to handcuffed prisoners guarded by stern looking air marshals, their only prospect more time in a different prison.

Now, as she stood in the cockpit door and watched Zak conversing with the NASA man, she was grateful he was there to help. Randy nodded his understanding while Zak described the aircraft systems, their functions and the problems they faced.

The scientist looked up at her and smiled. Amy sensed that he realized he was helping Zak by simply listening to him analyze their situation. The man also had a positive quality that Amy found comforting. She announced to the men that she had coffee.

* * * *

The wounded airliner crossed the Canadian coast at 2:30 in the afternoon. Gander was still reporting low ceilings with poor visibility. Randy listened as Zak, fuming, cursed the airplane, the weather, the instruments, the hydraulic system, the fuel system, the terrorist, and the FAA. Randy wondered if the approach and landing could be successful with so many obstacles, and he briefly pondered his life and what it had meant. If he were to die, he would be leaving a wonderful five-year-old son to make his own way through the world. He did not consider investment banker Thackery Edwards, his ex-wife's new husband, the right kind of role model—but what choice did he have?

Zak turned to Randy. "Okay, let's drop the landing gear. Climb into the co-pilot's seat and I'll tell you what to do."

Randy carefully stepped over the center console, with its multitude of knobs and switches.

After he was seated, Zak looked over. "This is how it works. The landing gear is heavy and, usually, is prevented from falling out into the down position by hydraulic pressure, which keeps it held in the wheel wells. We lost that hydraulic

system, so the wheels are actually resting on top of the landing gear doors, which are now being held closed by a mechanical lock, sort of like a dead bolt door lock. To lower the gear, all we have to do is to pull out that bolt on each gear door. They will fall open and the wheels will fall out after them and extend into the slipstream in the landing position. They will mechanically lock and can't be retracted. To pull the bolts out, there is a cable that is attached to a lever on the left side of your seat. We just pull the lever up and the gear should fall. Nothing to it..." He forced a grim smile.

Randy looked down to his left and noticed a long, narrow red door marked 'Emergency Gear Extension'. He reached down and opened it to reveal a long handle. "Okay, I see the handle, do I just pull it up?"

"That's right," Zak replied. "It should come up almost to the vertical. We will know the gear is down when those four red lights in front of you turn green."

Randy grasped the end of the handle and pulled up. It seemed very stiff and he was unable to move it beyond a 45-degree angle. He noticed the sound of the wind change outside of the plane as the nosewheel door opened. Then there was a *thunk* and he felt a bump.

"That handle should have gone higher than that," Zak muttered.

The two middle lights in front of Randy turned green, but the two outside lights remained red, indicating the outside wheels had not been lowered.

* * * *

Bharat Bhupesh was handcuffed and sitting uncomfortably in the back of the green military vehicle as it bumped its way over a rough road toward the American Consulate in Karachi. He knew that he was in very serious trouble. His one attempt to escape the soldiers at the border point had resulted in a large bump on the side of his head where the officer had clubbed him with his pistol. The blow had dazed Bharat, but when he had shaken it off he had overheard the officer talking on the phone in the guard shack to his superiors in Islamabad.

"Yes, I think he may very well be one of the terrorists the Americans are looking for," the officer had said. "If so, this should be worth a lot to us." The man had occasionally glanced at Bharat while he spoke. "We will bring him to the American Consulate for identification."

Bharat knew that he might be in the custody of the Americans within the next 24 hours. Pakistan was anxious to please the Americans, and to prove to the world that it does not support terrorism. And there was no way to get word to his brother, Qamar. The situation was indeed bleak.

* * * *

Zak looked at the landing gear lights intently. His facial expression conveyed an ominous message. He reached over and tried to pull the handle higher, but it wouldn't budge. "Pull that handle straight up, Randy—put your shoulder into it. Don't worry about breaking it—you won't." Randy put both hands on the handle and pulled as hard as he could, but still the handle wouldn't budge.

Zak shook his head and declared, "Son of a bitch!" He studied the view in front of the airplane, mentally searching his knowledge of the landing gear system for a solution.

Randy looked at Zak. "I assume that not all the wheels came down. Isn't it better to have some of the wheels than none at all?"

Zak turned to the scientist. "Randy, this is a cluster fuck. One set of wheels is positioned at the center of the airplane. It was that set of wheels, and the nose gear, that came down. The two main landing gears—the outside wheels—*didn't* come down. Now, what that means is that when I land this airplane, assuming that I do land this airplane, the entire weight will be concentrated on the nose and center gear. Most of it will be imposed on the center gear. That gear sits right under the main fuel tank, and *no way* will it support the entire weight of the airplane all by itself. The strut will puncture straight up into the fuel tank and we will have an instant fire. Our chances would have been better with all the gear retracted. We *have* to get the main gear down or we are just not going to survive the landing. Let's try that gear handle again. The cable must be snagged somewhere near the compartment where the bomb went off." With that, Zak unbuckled his seat belt and braced his foot directly against the foot guard on the instrument panel to obtain maximum leverage. With both of them in position, their hands on the lever, he counted, "One, Two, Three—Go!"

The lever snapped in two and Zak tumbled backward through the cockpit door, crashing into the galley behind the cockpit. Randy remained in his seat, holding the broken handle. The two lights in front of him were still red. He shook his head and looked back at Zak, who was slowly getting up. Without saying a word, Zak climbed back into the Captain's seat, a grim expression on his face.

Randy looked at him. "Is there any other way to get the gear down?"

"Nope," was the frosty reply. After a moment, Zak looked at Randy with a serious expression. "Listen, Randy, there is a maintenance tunnel down to the main gear compartment. I could go down there and see if there is anything that

could be done, but I need to stay here in the cockpit and fly the plane. The autopilot is barely working now. Perhaps you can take a look. How is your mechanical aptitude? Did you work on cars as a boy?"

Randy nodded. "Good in the mechanical aptitude department. As far as working on airplanes, we'll see. As I understand it, we need to pull out the pin that holds up the gear doors so the main wheels will fall out and lock into position."

"That's it. There's a small access door behind my seat. Pull it open and climb down the ladder into the avionics compartment. You will see a bunch of radios in racks down there. There should be a light, but you'd better take a flashlight with you. In the back of the compartment there is another maintenance door that will give you access to a small tunnel. You climb through that tunnel to the main accessory compartment, located in front of the main landing gear well. Go in there and see what you can do." Zak then looked at Randy intently. "Now look. Here is the plan. I am going to attempt to land this screwed-up airplane, and I am going to assume that you, somehow, are going to get the main gear down. If you don't, we will probably burn up. Remember, we have 10,000 pounds of fuel that I can't use and that I can't dump, either, just waiting to burn this plane to a fucking crisp. *We have* to get the gear down." He pulled a flashlight out of his case and handed it to the scientist. "I don't know much about you, but for the few minutes I've known you, you've been a good man to have around in an emergency. God help you with this."

Randy nodded solemnly. "If I can get to that pin, I will get the gear down. Count on it."

He located the hatch behind Zak's seat and pulled it open. It was dark below. A wisp of smoke came up through the opening. Tensing his jaw, he gingerly started down the ladder. Just before he took the final step below the cockpit floor, he noticed Amy watching him from the cockpit door. She nodded gravely, giving him a tight smile. He smiled back, then took the final step into the darkness below.

He reached the floor on his next step, pausing to allow his eyes to adjust to the low light. There was, indeed, a small bulb that illuminated the compartment. There was an acrid odor and some smoke, but he would manage. He aimed the flashlight at the back of the compartment and saw the small access door that Zak had described. Reaching over, he turned the handle and pulled it open. Normally, this door could not be opened in flight, since the pressurization system would hold it closed with many thousands of pounds of pressure, but now it swung open easily. More smoke wafted in from the tunnel, then cleared. He could hear the howling of wind emanating from the other end. He peered into it

and saw there was a narrow crawl space underneath several pipes that passed along the top.

Randy crawled in and started to wriggle his way through the narrow passage, but he soon encountered a constricted section. It was so small he could pass through only by pointing his arms straight forward as though he was about to dive into a pool. The explosion had distorted the passage at this point, pushing the floor up and crushing the pipes and wires together, creating a bottleneck. His belt became stuck but eventually he struggled through the constricted area. On the other side, the wind howled so loudly that he had a hard time concentrating.

Finally he reached a compartment that was brighter, being lit from underneath. He was inside the main landing gear compartment. There was a large opening in the floor directly in front of him where the center gear had dropped into the landing position. He could see clouds rushing underneath the airplane. On the other side of the opening, toward the back of the compartment, two enormous landing gear wheel assemblies rested on their sides on latched gear doors. The doors were hinged on either side and held up the heavy wheels.

A three-inch pipe, waist high to Randy, spanned from his position across the opening, to a bulkhead on the back of the compartment. It was almost eight feet above the temporary floor formed by the gear doors on the other side of the compartment.

Randy examined the doors closely. His task was clear. He could see the long pin that held them closed in the seam where they met. It was attached through a mechanical link to a cable, which was designed to pull out the pin. The cable was slack, *probably pinched further forward where the explosion had occurred*, he thought. *How to pull the pin out?*

He would have to cross over the opening to the back of the compartment and climb down to the pin somehow. The only way he could see to do that would be to walk out on the 3 inch pipe that crossed the opening, then somehow swing down onto the main gear doors. Suddenly, the plane jerked. It had encountered turbulence, and he was thrown from his feet. He fell back into a sitting position as the plane rocked. *Please be seated*, he thought sarcastically.

It was time for Randy to troubleshoot like he had never done before. *This is a problem with the mechanics*. Randy closed his eyes and mentally focused on the problem, tuning out the noise and picturing himself at the latch. *I have to remove that pin so the doors will open. To do that, I either have to pull it out with the cable, or somehow knock it out.*

He could see no way to pull on the cable. It was so slack that he couldn't use a bar to pry it up, either. His only choice would be to knock the pin out.

Back to the first problem. *How do I get over there to knock it out? I will have to crawl over on that pipe. Holy shit, it's almost ten feet across with that huge opening in the floor directly underneath. Can I actually manage that?*

Second, assuming that I make it over there, how do I knock out the pin? It is supporting the weight of the gear, which must weigh thousands of pounds. I need a hammer of some kind. Nothing on hand here.

Third, how do I survive? If I am standing on the doors when the pin comes out, I fall out with the gear, sort of like sitting on a tree branch and sawing it off. I need a safety line to tie around myself.

He sat for several more minutes trying to conceive alternate solutions but could think of none. *Time is running out and I need tools. I need a hammer and rope. I have to get back to the cockpit and see what we have. I can't imagine that there is a rope on this airplane, maybe some electrical cable? I don't know.*

As he turned to start the trip back to the cockpit, the plane lurched again; he grabbed on to the pipe to brace himself, dropping the flashlight. It bounced on the floor by his feet before rolling over and falling directly into the large opening. The wind whipped it back, sending it smashing against the center gear strut with a clank—and then it was gone. Randy grimaced as he pictured himself taking that same plunge. Then he felt his hand starting to burn. He realized he was holding on to the 3" pipe—and it was hot. He let go and cautiously started the slow trip back to the cockpit.

As Randy climbed out of the access hole behind Zak's seat, he overheard him talking to Gander. "You say the airport is closed?" Zak said incredulously. "I've got news for you. We are landing there, closed or not!"

"Roger, Global 234," the controller patiently replied. "The airport is closed to all other traffic. We are below weather minimums, but you can attempt to land. We will have the fire equipment standing by. The hospital has been alerted."

Zak noticed Randy and gave him an inquisitive look.

"I need a rope and a hammer," said Randy.

Zak pondered for a moment. "Randy, we're just about 20 minutes from our one-and-only try at landing. Do you think that you can get the gear down by then?"

"I honestly don't know but I need a rope and hammer to find out."

Zak turned in his seat and, reaching back into a small compartment, pulled out a fire axe and handed it to Randy. "Now for a rope." He frowned for a moment. "Ah, I know!" He reached over his head and unlatched a small door. Out fell a coil of rope, stored there for the crew to escape through a cockpit window in an emergency. Zak reached in his flight bag, pulled out a Swiss Army

knife and quickly cut the rope where it attached to the top of the compartment. The resulting piece was about 15 feet long. "Will this do?"

"Better than I expected." Randy took the two items and turned back to the access door.

As he made his way back through the tunnel, he had to push the rope and fire axe ahead of him through the constriction caused by the detonation. He then pulled himself through, and once again faced the roaring wind and stark opening in the main gear compartment. He carefully pitched the axe over the gaping hole and onto the shelf holding up the main gear doors. It bounced off one of the huge rubber wheels, and for a moment he was afraid it would ricochet back through the opening. Instead, it clattered onto the shelf, two feet from the edge.

Next the rope. *Should I try to loop it over the pipe and swing over the hole to the other side? No, I don't think I could swing far enough and I might just wind up suspended over the hole with no way to move.* Decision made, he coiled it and threw it across. It landed safely on the shelf between the wheels.

He examined the pipe that would be his bridge. It was greasy and so hot that he could only hold it for a few seconds before his hands started to burn. His only option seemed to be to walk over it as if it were a tight rope and balance himself by pressing his hands against the roof of the compartment. He hoped the soles of his shoes would protect his feet from the heat. If he was successful getting across, he would have an eight-foot drop on the other side to reach the floor. He had no plan as to how he would perform that maneuver. It was enough of a problem to get across the span of pipe. He started to regret having thrown the rope across. He might have used it as a safety line, but that was history. *Poor planning*, he thought.

He took a moment to firm his resolve. His co-workers at NASA regarded him as having an unassuming nature, but Randy had all the grit he needed when he was determined. In his high school football days they called him 'The Badger' because he had been so tenacious a linebacker. In his heart, he still thought of himself as an educated jock. The next few minutes would test the Badger's resolve against a new opponent, the fear of falling through thousands of feet of air, his body eventually plunging into the freezing north Atlantic.

He carefully climbed up on the pipe, burning his hands again in the process, and balanced precariously, holding the top of the compartment. He had to stretch to his body's full length to reach the ceiling and he felt awkward and unbalanced. He slid his left foot out on the pipe over the opening, but his shoe slid off the greasy surface. He gingerly put it back on the pipe in the same position and, testing, put some weight on it. It stayed this time. He slowly shifted his

full weight on it and pulled his back foot forward. His hands were pressed hard against the greasy ceiling of the compartment. He was now precariously positioned over the opening and, glancing down, all he could see were clouds rushing underneath the airplane with the ocean far below. Randy's stomach tightened. The plane shifted slightly and he nearly toppled off the pipe.

You can't do this, his brain informed him. The air swirled around his body and the roar of the wind was deafening. There were nine more feet to traverse. He put weight on his back foot and moved his front foot six more inches out on the slippery pipe. *You can't do this*, his body said to him. He shifted his weight forward onto his front foot again and carefully slid his rear foot forward. Crossing the pipe was going to be a slow process. He was now suspended well over the gaping hole, with his hands up as though he were the victim of a robbery. His arms were shaking and his body was swaying slightly as the plane lumbered through the air. *You can't do this*, his brain insisted. Adrenaline surged through his body: he had never been more frightened in his life. As his brain, body and all of his reasoning resisted, the Randy moved another six inches out over the abyss.

An image of his mother reading him *The Little Engine That Could* flashed before him, but his brain kept demanding, *You can't do this!* He took another small step. Randy defied his fear and made his body obey his will.

You can't do this! his brain continued to scream. But he pushed forward another six inches.

The plane lurched slightly again, causing his forward foot to slip off the pipe and swing out over the opening. He was fully stretched, supported on just one foot. He could barely keep pressure against the roof with his finger-tips, and for a precarious moment he was sure he would fall. He hung there, waiting for the last little shudder that would throw him off the pipe. But the aircraft steadied and after a million years he slowly worked his forward foot back on the pipe.

You can't do this! He moved six more inches.

Half foot by half foot he traversed the pipe. He knew that one solid lurch of the plane would be the finish of him. His body was producing so much adrenaline he felt as if he could spit it out. It seemed as though he had been balancing on the pipe for hours, and the soles of his shoes were becoming painfully hot, but Randy was finally within range of the other side, almost over the main gear doors. He moved another few inches, then realized he was over the edge—the gaping hole was behind him. His feet burned.

How to get down from here? But the decision was made for him. The plane lurched, both feet slipped off the pipe and he came crashing down on it. He felt the heat of the pipe against his thigh, then he toppled over and, flinging out his

hands, instinctively grasped the pipe. He swung down, suspended precariously next to the gaping hole. His hands started to burn and he involuntarily released his grip and fell in a heap—landing on the main gear doors.

When he opened his eyes, his face was six inches from the opening. Heart pounding, he struggled back on the shelf, then closed his eyes and leaned back against one of the wheels to regain his wits. He felt drained, incapable of further action.

I have to get that pin out. Opening his eyes, he stood up shakily. His body was tingling.

The locking pin was at his feet.

He heard a grinding sound. *Zak must be extending the flaps.* The landing was close at hand.

* * * *

At that same moment, in Bombay, India, the United States Consul General sat in his office, on the phone with the Indian Foreign Secretary. “Yes, I quite understand your point. The man who came running up to us today is a convicted murderer. Nevertheless, he is a British citizen and we are obligated to grant him temporary asylum. We will certainly be glad to return him to your custody as soon as we can have the required certifications from you. We have no desire to harbor a criminal, but you know as well as I do, Nasim, that I have to observe protocol. I *must* receive the required documentation from you before I can release the man back to your government. Believe me, I will gladly release him to you the very moment I receive it.”

The voice on the other end of the line replied heatedly. The American diplomat held the phone away from his ear, grimacing at the anger of the other man.

Interrupting the tirade, the Consular General pleaded, “Nasim, please! I understand, believe me I do, but you know that my hands are tied. I am sorry to repeat myself but the sooner you get me the documentation, the sooner you get him back. You know what we need, just have your people get on it!” He shook his head as he listened to the irritated reply, thinking *Damnit to hell, why did they even let the man in here?*

* * * *

In the cockpit, Zak was immersed in concentration, staring at the small screen of his tiny GPS as he navigated the DC-10 down the final approach to Runway

22 at Gander Airport. The plane was at 3,000 feet and he was committed to land. There was less than 5,000 pounds of usable fuel—enough for this one approach, but no more. The landing gear still wasn't down, but he had decided that he would not allow that to distract him from his approach and landing. There was nothing that he could do about it and there was no safer way to get the plane on the ground. He would simply have to make the smoothest landing he could, and deal with the consequences.

Zak didn't notice the African standing behind him.

After more than an hour of working on the knots of the neckties holding him, Asaid had freed himself. Slowly opening the door to the lavatory, he peered out but could not see anyone in the galley. He slipped out into the corridor behind the cockpit. It was concealed from the passenger cabin by a curtain. He looked into the cockpit. The black pilot was in the Captain's seat, concentrating on his instruments. He was alone.

Asaid scanned the cockpit for anything heavy he could use to smash the pilot on the back of the head, but he didn't see anything he could use. He was afraid of the large man and knew the only way to defeat him would be to crush his skull with something heavy. Then he spotted the open hatch in the floor. Carefully watching the black pilot, he silently let himself down the hole into the compartment below. Somehow he would get this plane to fall out of the air.

Moments later, Amy entered the cockpit. Zak had asked her to help with the landing. The private pilot was sobbing and incapable of providing any assistance. Amy seemed like the coolest head available and Zak needed someone to help him try to spot the runway through the fog. She had reassigned her duties to prepare the passengers for a crash landing to another flight attendant. She had brought a blanket, which she placed it over the co-pilot's seat, still moist with blood. Sitting down, she looked at Zak gravely.

"Amy, let me know if you see any lights, any trees, anything at all, okay? I have to keep my attention on the GPS and the instruments so I am relying on you to tell me when we can see the ground or the runway."

"Okay," Amy said tensely. "Believe me, you will be the first to know. I wonder how that guy is doing with the landing gear."

Zak didn't reply.

Randy had flung the rope up over the pipe and, using a loop in the other end, pulled it through to secure it. He had then tied the free end around his waist. He

heard more grinding as Zak deployed additional flaps. He knew that they had to be close to landing. He hadn't planned what he would do after he knocked the pin out. He supposed that he would try to climb the rope while the gear dropped, but suspected this was wishful thinking. The rope around his waist was the best he could do for now. *However, he was determined to get the pin knocked out.*

Randy examined the pin and saw that it had a protruding edge at one end which would accommodate removal by hammering. The head of the fire axe wasn't designed for hammering, though. It had a blade on one side and a sharp point on the other. He would have to use the pointed end. Randy took an experimental swing at the target, but it simply clanged off when it struck. The pin seemed unmoved. He took another, heavier swing. This time there was a more solid clink and the pin appeared to move slightly. He started swinging as hard as he could, hammering the pin again and again. It was frustrating work. If he did not hit the pin perfectly flush, the axe would clang and try to wrench itself out of his hand. He had to take aim slowly and deliberately so the point would strike the protrusion at a 90 degree angle. But with each solid blow, still the pin only moved fractionally.

Asaid heard the clanging above the wind and engine noise as he pulled himself through the tunnel leading into the main gear compartment. Standing at the edge of the opening, he saw Randy bent over the pin, swinging the axe. He quickly deduced the man was probably trying to free the large wheels so they would drop down for a landing. Asaid was enraged at his failure thus far and vowed fiercely to stop the man. First, however, he would have to cross the gap.

He touched the pipe with his hand, quickly removing it after feeling the heat. He then looked around for anything that might help him get across. He spotted a twelve-inch steel rod that looked like a big hat pin stowed in a rack marked 'Gear Pin' beside him. It had a two-foot long red banner attached to one end and a point at the opposite end. It would be a good, perhaps perfect, tool.

Asaid was agile. Looping the strong fabric around the pipe, he held the banner firmly with both hands and pushed himself out over the opening, swinging his feet up to hook them on the pipe in front of him. He hung under the pipe like a sloth from a branch, enduring the heat he could feel burning the flesh around his ankles as he used his feet to pull himself across the pipe. The fabric slid easily across the slick surface. He then allowed his feet to fall and he swung back, momentarily relieving the burning heat, then lurched forward again to get a new purchase with his feet. It was strenuous work but it took him less than a minute

to complete the crossing. Nearly exhausted, he dropped down, six feet behind Randy.

Randy, intent on hammering, hadn't noticed the African man crossing the opening. He did feel a bump, however, as the man dropped onto the gear doors behind him. Glancing back, he saw the African standing behind him, raising the long steel pin like an ice pick.

Startled, Randy dropped the axe and grabbed the man's wrist. Randy was the stronger of the two, but he was tired from swinging the axe—and the African had the strength of a man obsessed. The two men deadlocked for several seconds, then the African kicked Randy in the legs. Randy fell backward but hung on, pulling his assailant down with him. They rolled over next to the opening and for a moment Randy thought they would roll out.

"No you don't, you little son of a bitch," Randy growled, forcing them both to roll back from the opening. He then smashed his knee into the groin of the African. The small man gasped, grabbed his stomach and grimaced.

Randy heard a rumble as Zak extended the remaining flaps. Releasing his grip on the smaller man, Randy jumped up, snatched up the axe and took a savage swing at the pin. It clanged off but the pin moved—it was almost out. Looking down, he noticed tree tops starting to appear through the fog. They were so close they looked as if they were about to brush the bottom of the plane.

Behind him, the African slowly recovered. He stood up shakily and raised his weapon with both hands, preparing to plunge it into Randy's back. Randy felt his presence, but ignored it and swung the axe with all of his strength, hoping that this would be the final blow.

There was a loud clang and the pin went flying out into the opening. The gear doors dropped open and the two men fell into the air below the airliner.

CHAPTER 5

“GANDER”

Zak’s face contorted as he concentrated on guiding the plane with the GPS. They were down to 300 feet and Amy had yet to say a word. Gander was reporting that the sky was obscured, with visibility nil. Suddenly there was a rumble and the plane’s nose shifted downward slightly as the main gear fell into place with a loud clunk.

“Holy Christ,” Zak muttered, “he got the gear down!”. And after a moment there were four green lights in front of Amy.

At the same time, Amy started to make out some lights through the fog. “Zak, I see some lights on the ground!”

Zak’s head snapped up. At first he saw nothing but gray clouds, but then he spotted dim runway centerline lights, just ten feet to the left. He was actually over the runway! *My God, we might make it.* He pulled back on the wheel as the surface of the concrete runway just came into view. “God, please give me a break,” he pleaded as the plane made contact with the runway.

God gave him all his brakes. It wasn’t a smooth landing, but it *was* on the runway. Zak steered the airplane using the white centerline lights that appeared out of the fog as a guide. He pressed the top of the rudder pedals and they engaged, slowing the big airplane. But it wouldn’t be a perfect landing. One thousand feet before the end of the runway, the steering on the nose gear failed and, no longer in Zak’s control, the plane swerved to the left, lumbering off the concrete onto soggy grass.

It came to rest 200 feet off the runway. The flight attendants sprang from their seats to open the doors and direct the passengers down the inflatable escape slides.

Of the five doors that were opened, two of them were mistakenly *disarmed* so the escape slides did not deploy. At those doors, the crew and passengers found themselves looking at a 25 foot drop to the ground. Fortunately, the three doors that were opened properly to deploy the slides were sufficient to evacuate all the passengers within three minutes. There were the inevitable broken legs, collar bones and sprains as people pushed their way out of the plane, falling off the sides of the slides and landing in piles at the bottom. By and large, however, it could be considered one of the more successful evacuations in airline history.

Zak and Amy were the last to get off the plane. After Zak had made it to the bottom of the slide, he stumbled several feet away from the airplane, then, completely spent, sat down heavily next to Amy on the grass. The two of them looked back at the plane through the fog.

Zak observed the bulge around the first class section. Apart from that, the plane looked serene, as if it could have been refueled and sent out on another trip later that day. Amy reached over and put her hand in his. They held hands like this for some time—her small white hand in his big black one. She was crying quietly as they looked back at the plane.

The firefighters had heard the plane land but, incredibly, it took them several minutes to locate it in the heavy fog. Finally they arrived, their light beams slicing through the murk.

Zak and Amy were both so disheveled that no one realized who they were. Eventually, a fireman walked over to them. "You people all right?"

"Yes," Zak replied quietly.

Amy just nodded.

The fireman paused, noticing their disheveled uniforms. "Are you the Captain?"

"No, but I'm the guy who landed the plane."

"Oh," the fireman said, flustered. "You did a hell of a job."

Zak nodded tiredly.

"We found someone hanging down underneath the plane, on a rope," the fireman said. "Is he the hijacker?"

Zak's eyes opened wide and he jumped to his feet. "Is the man alive?"

"Don't really know. We figured that he was the hijacker, so we've left him there until the police can get to him."

Zak ran toward the plane. A yellow tape barrier now surrounded it, but he flipped it over his head and charged underneath the fuselage. "Hey!" cried an angry voice. "You get back behind this barrier."

"Not on your life," Zak muttered.

He found Randy hanging like a flour sack, suspended five feet above the ground by the rope tied around his waist—his body was limp and inanimate. A flash from a camera briefly illuminated Randy's lifeless figure. Two firemen stood looking at the form before them but seemed in no hurry to help.

Zak grasped Randy and, lifting him, shouted, "Cut this man down." After the rope was severed, he gently laid Randy down on the grass.

Randy moaned, turning his head.

Zak looked at him with concern. "Don't you die on me, Randy." He cradled Randy's head in his lap as the firemen ran to get a stretcher. Randy's eyes opened. Dazed, he looked up at Zak.

"Did we make it?" he asked quietly.

"You bet we did," Zak said. "You bet we did."

Randy's eyes closed.

*The adventure is just beginning for Randy,
Amy Edwards and Zak Richardson!*

Order the complete novel online today!

Ghuri's Sword

Copyright © 2005 by Bruce James Sylvester

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

iUniverse books may be ordered through booksellers or by contacting:

iUniverse
2021 Pine Lake Road, Suite 100
Lincoln, NE 68512
www.iuniverse.com
1-800-Authors (1-800-288-4677)

ISBN-13: 978-0-595-33646-3 (pbk)

ISBN-13: 978-0-595-78448-6 (ebk)

ISBN-10: 0-595-33646-9 (pbk)

ISBN-10: 0-595-78448-8 (ebk)

Printed in the United States of America