



THE
LAST HOURS
OF THEIR
LIVES



JOSEPH A WELLMAN

*The Last Hours of
Their Lives*

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Dedication

For all private pilots who have a “Walter Mitty” dream of one day stepping into the captain’s chair and saving the flight.

Prologue

Marist Air Lines Flight 212
Sunday Afternoon, August 12

Midway into their flight from San Diego to Chicago, most of the plane's passengers slumped in their seats. A few of them stood, ready to move, but realized they had nowhere to go. Couples clung to each other for comfort or security. iPads, Nooks and Kindles were open but no longer being read. Headsets hung loosely around peoples' necks or were draped in their laps. Except for the noise of the engines, a silence reigned throughout the plane, only punctuated now and then by an occasional sob or a stifled cry.

Some passengers sat with hands covering their mouths, while others merely stared at the backs of the seats in front of them or out the plane's windows. News from the first class section to the rear of the aircraft was forcing everyone on this flight to deal with a predicament they had never before consciously contemplated. They were probably living the last hours of their lives.

Chapter One

Marist Flight 212

In-Flight

Two hours into the flight, attendants Shari Edgerton and Barbara Janov were finishing with the drink cart and catching a moment or two before heading back up the aisle collecting the trash and cans.

“How’re you feeling?” Shari asked. “Think you’ll make it?”

“Yeah, but I’ll definitely crash once I get home. Nothing worse than losing a whole night’s sleep.” Barbara’s slightly unkempt hair and face without makeup didn’t present a pretty picture. She looked all of her forty-nine years, Shari judged, feeling catty for her thoughts.

“Maybe you can sneak in a quick nap during the last hour. I’ll cover for you,” Shari volunteered.

“Naw. That’d make me feel even worse.” Barbara yawned and shook her head. “I’ll survive.”

Pouring herself a cup of coffee, Shari motioned with the pot at Barbara. “Want some?”

“Thanks,” Barbara said, as she picked up a cellophane-wrapped piece of cake. “I just need a lot of caffeine and sugar to get through the rest of this trip.”

Shari leaned against a wall sipping her coffee. Touching her abdomen, she felt a slight heaviness—or was that her imagination? Probably it was her imagination. She would have to let personnel know about her pregnancy. The twenty-five-year-old bit her lip and frowned, wondering how and when she was going to tell her husband.

A call button interrupted Shari’s thoughts.

“Looks like that cute guy in fourteen C wants some attention,” Barbara said and softly laughed.

“You want him?”

“I think he wants *you*,” Barbara said, poking Shari in the ribs.

“Yeah, but I’m taken and you’re not.” Shari poked her friend back.

“Sorry.” Barbara laughed while she watched Shari head for row fourteen.

As she walked forward, Shari reached into a pocket and withdrew a crumpled appointment card with her gynecologist. It was a week old.

Five minutes later, Shari sat next to Barbara in one of the two unused seats at the rear of the plane. They were both taking a small break. While Barbara nodded off, Shari twisted the crumpled appointment card from her gynecologist.

Shari's pregnancy was bitter sweet. For more than two years she'd been trying to convince her husband that she wanted to have a baby. Six months before, after three years of marriage, she'd discovered he had no intention of ever having a family. Shocked, hurt and angered, she went off the pill, and never told him, and she was glad she took the initiative. It was just the second time in their marriage that she really stood up to him, even though this time she'd done it behind his back. Her insistence on keeping her job as a flight attendant was the first time she'd stood up to him. Now she wondered how he would take the news of her pregnancy. Worse, she wondered about the future of their marriage.

Her thoughts were broken when Barbara snored.

"Can't you go five minutes without your nose stuck in that thing?" the raven-haired woman whispered to her husband. That "thing" was his iPad.

Maria, Dr. Richard Brickman's thirty-three-year-old wife, continued with, "I thought this vacation was for the two of us to be together without any outside interference, including that..." She slapped the iPad. "...damn thing. God knows I'll never see you again once we get home."

Sighing, Brickman tucked the tablet computer into the seat back in front of him.

The couple then sat quietly, ignoring each other, until Maria said, "Still don't know why we couldn't have taken a Mediterranean cruise. It wouldn't have been that much longer."

Brickman frowned. "I couldn't take the time. We're short two doctors and I'm still interviewing replacements. That's why."

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“Well, if this trip was supposed to help our marriage, it sure hasn’t.” Maria spat out the words.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I’ve had you alone for just five days. Five days!” Maria said loudly. “And now it’s already started with you on that damn pad. I’m tired of having to share you...”

Brickman motioned with his hands for Maria to please lower her voice. The last thing he wanted was to let everyone in first class in on their problems.

“I’m tired of having to share you,” Maria whispered angrily. “I share you with your patients. I share you with your kids. For all I know I might be sharing you with your ex. I’m sick and tired of it. I want you to spend your time with me. And I’m also tired of being awakened at night with all those damn phone calls.”

“Look...” He lowered his voice. “I warned you what being married to a doctor would be like.”

“What’re you going to do now? Tell me how your first wife understood because she’s a nurse. If she was so damn understanding, why’d you divorce her?”

“I...” he stopped. They had been over all this before.

The trip was a disaster, as the marriage was a disaster. Maria never understood what it was like to be married to a doctor, nor did she ever understand the medical profession, nor did she care.

“I’m going to take some time and visit my family in Florida when we get back,” Maria said without looking at him.

Good, maybe I’ll get some peace and quiet, he thought. Sighing, he continued thinking he should never have gone to that convention. That’s where he’d met Maria, and after a whirlwind adulterous romance with the raven-haired beauty, he’d impetuously divorced his wife and married her.

Ever since their blowup at the airport, Dan and Susan Everson had said very little to each other. Now, with less than two hours to go

before reaching Chicago, Dan decided to make another try at getting Susan to talk to him.

“Susan, I’m so sorry,” he said in a soft voice, holding both of her hands in his hands. “I didn’t mean to shout at you back at the terminal. It was rude of me, and I do care how you feel.” Dan tried to get her to look at him as he continued. “Look, so far it’s...it’s been a smooth flight the way the captain said it would be. You’ve been doing fine. We’ll be home before you know it, and it’ll all be over.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Susan jerked her hands away from him and sat with her arms crossed across her chest. “You ignored my feelings and what I wanted.” She leaned closer and said in a hurt voice, “It’s always about you and what you want, isn’t it? You never care about what I want, do you? You’re...you’re nothing but an egotistical prick, that’s what you are.” She bit her lower lip as tears began trickling down her cheeks.

“What can I do?” Dan pleaded.

“Nothing.” Susan wiped her eyes and sat quietly, all the while twisting her tissue into tiny pieces. Then she began crying, staring at the back of the seat in front of her. “I wanted to take the train home, not fly, but you wouldn’t let me.” More tears rolled down Susan’s cheeks. “I never wanted to fly, but you made me,” she sobbed.

The young couple—she was nineteen and he was twenty-five—were returning home after honeymooning in California.

Dan stifled a groan, wishing he had given in and taken the train back to Chicago as she’d wanted. He knew she feared flying, but hadn’t realized just how bad her phobia happened to be. On the flight from Chicago, she started shaking the moment they were airborne, and didn’t stop until they touched down in San Diego.

There was no way he’d let Susan take the train home by herself. Needing to be at work Monday morning, they had no choice but to fly back to Chicago. Taking a deep breath, he hoped the next two hours would be as smooth as the previous hours.

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“Ever ride in first class?” Todd, a Marine sergeant asked Robert, a Marine private. Todd didn’t actually know the private. It was just a coincidence that he and Robert were flying together, having hooked up yesterday at the base when they shared a cab and discovered they were both taking the same flight to Chicago. The two were on leave and headed home after each serving a tour in Afghanistan. Having been wounded in a roadside bomb blast, Todd would be home a lot longer than Robert though. He was on extended medical leave.

“Never. And you were going to turn down that couple’s offer,” the private chided.

“Just wanted to be polite. Besides, they were elderly.”

Todd had been surprised and gratified by the older couple’s offer. They were waiting to board when the eighty-year-old man approached him and offered their seats in first class for his and the private’s seats in coach. With his injuries, Todd welcomed the extra legroom.

“Let’s make sure we thank them again when we get to Chicago.” The sergeant’s suggestion sounded like an order.

The private gave him a mock salute.

“Sarge, you ever wonder why the guy next to you catches a bullet and not you? I mean, one minute you’re here, and the next minute you’re gone. Where’s the sense in that?” the private asked.

“I figure when your numbers up...” Todd shrugged “...it’s up.”

“Don’t you ever think about it?” Robert asked.

“I did, but it seemed kinda crazy and a waste of time. Shit happens. You ride in helos dozens of times. Then one day, kaboom, the one you’re on crashes. Or you travel along the same trail for a couple of weeks or months with no problem. Then one day, bam, you’re hit by an IED. Go figure.”

“Like what happened to you and your Humvee, right?”

Todd stared off into space before saying, “Yeah, like what happened to me and my squad. It always bites you in the ass when you least expect it.”

For a moment both men were quiet until Robert said, “Hey, we get free booze, don’t we?”

“Just let the flight attendant know what you want.”

Lynne Michaels shut off her iPod, leaned close, nudged her friend, Carrie Jansen, and asked, “What happened this morning?”

“It’s okay. I’m over it.”

“Sure?”

“What’d I just say?” Carrie hugged her purse tightly against her chest.

Lynne unbuckled her seatbelt and stood up. “Be right back. Too damn much coffee.”

Carrie nodded and breathed deeply hoping that would calm her. Even after several hours, she was still dealing with the emotional residue of overhearing a young man forcing his wife into doing something she obviously didn’t want to do. The conversation had brought back memories of the shock she’d felt when Ted, her now ex-husband, asked for a divorce a year earlier. The divorce and his quick remarriage had left her with deep and bitter feelings about Ted, and indeed all men. That memory, and the sight of the kissing couple this morning, intensified her emotions as it reminded her of what was now missing from her life. Teaching psychology hadn’t helped her one damn bit.

Her therapist warned her she’d go through these types of emotional upheavals.

“Carrie,” Pam, her therapist, had said one afternoon, “adjusting to a divorce is almost like adjusting to the death of a spouse. Some days you’ll feel like you’re finally accepting it, while only minutes, hours or days later you’ll be back in the dumps or ready to smash something. Arriving at an equilibrium is going to take time.”

“I know, I know, but I finally feel ready to accept what’s happened.” Carrie had flashed a quick smile at Pam. “I’m ready to move on.”

“Hmm,” Pam commented, all the while tapping a pen on her notepad.

“That’s why Lynne and I are taking this trip to California. It’s like a celebration.”

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“That’s...that’s good, but just be aware you’re still adjusting. Be careful. A song, a movie, even an odor could produce a reaction you might not expect,” Pam warned.

“I’ll be okay.” She’d said it with confidence.

Now she knew she wasn’t okay, and today’s reaction had really proved it.

Her friends had warned her, in a teasing fashion, that when she turned fifty her husband would start paying more attention to younger women with their flat stomachs and firm bodies.

“And silicone tits,” friend Marjorie would always add.

Nothing like that would happen to her. Not if she could help it. She was going to keep her shape by working out and staying active. Staying fit was an obsession. Physically she was in great shape. At five foot, six inches, she still weighed what she had twenty years ago. She was a fifty-three-year-old woman with a body and face that belied her age. Her strawberry-blond hair wasn’t graying like the hair of some of her friend’s, nor did she have any love handles around her waist. Even after two pregnancies, her stomach and abdomen were still washboard flat. She resembled a woman in her late thirties or at least in her forties. But a lot of good that had done her. Her ex’s bimbo was the same age as their daughters.

Carrie resumed a half-hearted attempt at the novel she was reading. After a couple of minutes, though, she shoved the paperback into her carry-on bag, and once again thanked God for Lynne’s friendship. While her daughter and a couple of other friends helped, Lynne was really the one who provided her with the most support, in spite of the relationship’s unimpressive beginnings start.

The two women had known of each other, but since they worked in separate departments at the high school, they rarely ever talked much beyond the usual pleasantries. Carrie spent most her time upstairs in the social studies department teaching psychology and sociology, while Lynne taught a couple of physical education classes and coached girl’s varsity basketball and track. That distance though had changed when

they had a lunch period together for the first time during first semester last fall—the same period she and Ted were in court.

Carrie was sitting off in a far corner of the faculty lunchroom lost in thought when she heard, “Want some company?”

Lynne was standing next to Carrie’s table with a tray of food and waiting for a response to her question.

After a slight hesitation, Carrie, with a wave of a hand toward an empty chair, said, “Sure.”

“Thanks. How’re things going?” Lynne asked as she sat.

Carrie stopped chewing and looked directly at Lynne. “Meaning...?”

“Carrie, it’s just a polite question. I’m not prying into your divorce.”

“Sorry.”

“On the other hand, how’s it going with the divorce?”

For several moments, Carrie sat quietly, not eating but focusing on the plate in front of her. Lynne waited.

“It’s ripping me apart,” Carrie said at last. “My whole life’s been shattered and I don’t know how to pick up the pieces. My problem is my naiveté. I thought I had the perfect marriage, the perfect family, the perfect world. I was such a damn fool. Know what I mean?”

Carrie paused and Lynne remained quiet.

“You know what really pisses me off? I try to be positive, optimistic and supportive.” She tapped her fingers on the tabletop staring at some spot on a far wall. “Try? I am positive, optimistic and supportive. I ooze the stuff. Can’t tell you how many times that, that...” She took a deep breath before continuing. “...that son of a bitch got down and wanted to quit. Wanted to quit law school, didn’t think he’d pass the bar exam, vacillated about opening his own office, didn’t think he’d pass his CPA exam... You want to know who got him through all those difficult times? Me!”

Carrie jabbed a finger into her breastbone. “I pushed and encouraged him, kept after him to keep studying, told him he could do it—and he did it. I do all that and then the son of a bitch turns around and accuses me of not supporting him. Says that he did everything on his own. He had no idea how I juggled the books to keep our heads

above water while he worked on his CPA, and later when he opened up his own office. I gave up some things I really wanted and a few things I wanted to do. I gave up a helluva lot. God, I sacrificed and sacrificed for that ungrateful demanding bastard. Nothing I did satisfied him. Now that little peroxide bitch won't have to struggle one tiny bit. I did all the ground work for her."

Suddenly Carrie stopped, looked up and said, "Sorry, I...I didn't mean to unload on you like that. I don't know what came over me."

"Feel better?" Lynne asked.

"No, just pissed." Carrie sat with her lips tightly shut.

Lynne nodded. "What you need to do is work off some of that anger. Want to join me in the gym after school?" she invited.

After a moment, Carrie smiled. "Yeah, I would. God, I'd love to hit something." Her right hand was balled into a fist.

"Good, as long as it isn't me." Lynne's comment and small laugh brought another smile to Carrie's face.

For the rest of the meal, they concentrated on other topics. Then, as the period ended, and they both stood, Lynne asked, "Like some company tomorrow?"

"I'd love it," Carrie answered with a broad smile.

That was a start, and it helped especially since some of Carrie's friends sided with Ted, which confused and saddened her. A close friendship developed between Lynne and Carrie as they had lunch together every day, worked out and ran together several times a week. Moreover, Carrie and Lynne were around the same age. Carrie was fifty-three and Lynne was forty-eight. That might have been a factor in cementing their relationship, but whatever it was, Lynne and Carrie seemed drawn to each other.

Returning from the bathroom, Lynne plopped down next to Carrie, leaned closer and said, "Humor me."

Carrie turned toward Lynne and frowned. "Okay."

“You need to get a hobby or become a sponsor of a club at school—you know to keep occupied other than running and working out.”

“How about coaching?”

Lynne laughed. “And what would you coach?”

“Should be something I could do,” Carrie speculated.

After a slight hesitation, Lynne said, “How about finishing your flight lessons and getting your license the way Meghan wanted you to do?”

Meghan was Carrie’s second daughter. The twenty-five-year-old was on duty in Afghanistan as an Army helicopter pilot.

Carrie shook her head.

“Why not?”

Carrie’s look-to-kill didn’t stop Lynne. “How much would you have to do in order to get your private pilot’s license? And don’t tell me to drop it.”

Frowning and with lips held tightly together, Carrie stared at the back of the seat in front of her. Finally she relaxed and said, “I need to study and take the written test, find an instructor to finish my night flying and for a review of the basics, and lastly I need to take the flight test. Why?”

“No reason. Just curious,” Lynne said with a shrug.

“Curious, my ass. Why?”

“Because I think Meghan would be more than happy and proud that you finished what she started.”

“Meghan can go to hell.” But Carrie couldn’t suppress a smile.

“What in the hell crawled up your ass this morning and died. Jeez. At least give me a warning. This keeps up, I’ll be on oxygen the rest of the trip,” Captain Will Nordquist said, wrinkling his nose, and waving a hand in front of his face.

“Sorry,” First Officer Stan Peterson replied, gulping several times, stifling a belch and an urge to break wind.

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“Is this a result of that new restaurant you wanted me to try with you?”

Stan shrugged and placed a hand over his mouth as he fought back another belch.

“What in the hell did you eat?”

“Migas,” Stan said as he reached into a pocket and withdrew several cellophane-wrapped packages containing pink pills.

“Migas? What kind of crap is that?” Will asked, making a face.

“Scrambled eggs with tortilla chips, red peppers, cheese and chorizo, with a side order of rice and beans. And lots of salsa. It was good,” Stan volunteered as he opened one of the small cellophane packages. “I’ll take you there the next time we’re together.”

“No, you won’t. I have a tender stomach.”

Of course Will knew his stomach woes came from his upcoming Federal Aviation Administration mandated physical, and because he was worried about his blood pressure, cholesterol, and his weight. Family history wasn’t on his side. Both of his parents had high blood pressure and cholesterol problems, which more than likely had led to their early deaths in their fifties. Will was now fifty-five.

Working out seemed to keep his blood pressure and cholesterol under control, but lately his weight had been climbing due to his “grazing” throughout the day on crackers, chips and Oreos. At one time in his life, he’d smoked, but had quit on the advice of his doctor that led to his substituting food for cigarettes. Nowadays, when he reached a certain level, he went on a crash diet, then maintained the new weight for a period of time before starting the cycle all over again.

He sighed. What he’d give for a cigarette, just one calming cigarette. He patted a pocket where he’d stashed two cigarettes, but resisted the urge to try one, just one. He knew he couldn’t try even one cigarette. It had happened before. One cigarette became a pack, and then he was back to his two-pack-a-day habit. He knew that one, single cigarette would end up killing him.

Stan squirmed in his seat.

“What’s wrong?” Will asked his first officer. “You don’t look too good.”

“What? No, I’m fine.” Stan chewed several more pink tablets.

“What’re you eating?”

“Uh, nothing.” Stan moved about in his seat and placed a hand on his stomach.

“Breakfast not setting well with you?” Will asked with a sly smirk.

“Yeah, maybe not. Could be the sausage. I’ll be okay.” Stan chewed more pink tablets.

“Sure you’re okay? We probably got some stomach medicine in the medical bag.” Will looked at his first officer.

“No, I’ll be all right. I’ve taken several Pepto-Bismol tablets.”

“Want me to get you a barf bag?” Will snickered.

“You’re funny.” Stan kept swallowing as he seemed to try to control a nauseous feeling.

Will suddenly wrinkled up his nose, exclaiming, “Jesus, can’t you exercise a little control?”

“Sorry.” Stan squirmed, apparently trying not to break wind again. He failed.

“Sorry, hell,” Will complained.

“Hey, said I was sorry.”

“That’s what you get for eating that crap,” Will said, grabbing his oxygen mask. “And don’t go puking on the instruments.” He shook his head. “And you wanted me to go with you to that grease joint.”

A quick glance at his first officer, who kept moistening his lips and swallowing, convinced Will that, more than likely, he’d be finishing this trip by himself.

“Oh, Jesus, I gotta go,” Stan shouted and started unbuckling his seat and shoulder straps.

In the first class galley, Sondra White, the head flight attendant, poured herself a cup of coffee, leaned against the wall and smiled at a passenger who was leaving the bathroom and heading back to her seat. She wrote on a slip of paper, “call Jerry tonight,” and slipped it into a pocket. Jerry was son number two, who was applying for another job. She thought about having something sweet with her coffee, but shook her head, remembering an admonition from her trainer about losing a

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few pounds. She also recalled getting on the scales earlier that morning. She was sixty-one but was sure she looked younger.

Still, Sondra wondered how many more of these flights she had left in her before she joined the same-age flight attendants who were retiring. She wasn't thinking particularly about this flight. She wondered about all of her future flights. The problem wasn't the passengers. She liked most of them, although a group of obnoxious and downright mean passengers from time to time tested her patience and goodwill. No matter what she did it wasn't enough or even right. She hoped they had a special place in Hell reserved for them.

No, the difficulty was her life away from the airlines. But what choice did she have? Her husband was dead and she didn't have a hobby, or something—or someone to fall back on. It wasn't that she didn't have friends. She had lots of friends, but she did not have a best friend. No, she did things with her friends as a group. Sighing, she figured, unlike many of her flying friends who were retiring, she'd be a flight attendant until the day she died.

The ringing of the phone interrupted her reverie.

"Yes?" Sondra answered, picking up the intercom phone.

"Stan needs to use the bathroom," the captain said.

"Okay, we'll get set up."

"Knock when you're ready..." He finished with, "...and hurry, please hurry."

Sondra motioned to Shari who was gathering trash close to first class.

"Yes?"

"The FO's coming out so you need to sit in while he's using the bathroom."

"Okay."

"How're you feeling?" Sondra asked.

"Better."

Sondra had heard Shari throwing up earlier that morning and guessed the reason for it. After an early dinner the night before, she and

Shari had gone back to the hotel and watched a movie. Neither one had anything to drink.

“Have you told your husband?”

“Wanna wait until tonight,” Shari said without any enthusiasm.

As the flight attendants talked, they moved the drink cart across the entrance to the aisle of the first class section, effectively blocking anyone from approaching the cockpit door.

“You’re going to do it by candlelight?” Sondra teased.

“Maybe.” Shari wasn’t sure how she was going to do it. She was beginning to regret going off the pill without telling Mark, her husband.

“I’m happy for the two of you.” This time Sondra meant it.

Sondra knocked, the door opened, and as Stan moved quickly to the toilet, Shari entered the cockpit, locked the door, and sat in the first officer’s seat. She wrinkled up her nose and made a face.

“Phew!”

“I think our boy has a problem,” the captain said and laughed as he started putting on his oxygen mask. “That’s what he gets for trying out some new restaurant. And he wanted me to go with him.”

“It won’t affect our flight, will it?” Shari asked.

“Shouldn’t. Why?”

“No reason,” Shari responded as she rehearsed how she was going to tell Mark. If the flight’s delayed, I’ll have to wait until tomorrow to tell him, she thought, slightly relieved.

“You guys have any aspirin back there?” the captain asked rubbing the side of his head. “Got a damn headache.”

“I have some ibuprofen in my purse. I’ll get it when the first officer returns,” Shari volunteered.

“That’ll be fine.”

Frowning, Shari looked closer at the captain and asked, “What happened to your cheek?”

“This?” He touched his face where he had a large Band-Aid. “Cut it shaving this morning.”

“That looks bad. How’d it happen?”

“Trying to do two things at once,” he replied and touched his cheek again. “Crazy as it seems, I hadn’t even realized I had cut myself until I saw the blood.”

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“Didn’t it hurt?”

“No.” He shook his head and rubbed his cheek. “Even now, it still feels numb. I’ll have the doctor check it when I go for my physical next month.”

A minute later, a message came over the radio into the cockpit. “Marist two-one-two, contact Kansas City on one two eight point three seven. Have a good flight,” the Albuquerque controller radioed.

“One two eight point three seven,” the captain replied, adding—
“Thanks, Albuquerque.”

He changed the frequency on one of the radios to the new frequency and radioed, “Kansas City, Marist two-one-two with you.”

Sid Bauer, the controller in Kansas City’s first sector, replied, “Roger, Marist. For your information, flights are reporting cells topping forty-four thousand and turbulence. We’ll keep you advised.”

“Thanks, Kansas City.” The captain immediately turned on the seatbelt sign.

In the toilet, Stan, who was experiencing an extreme pain from abdominal cramping, didn’t quite make it to the toilet bowl. Most of his explosive diarrhea missed the bowl and splattered against the wall and floor. The smell was horrendous. He started retching, leaned his head over the sink and vomited. His head ached, and his face was flushed. He tried leaning his head against the metal sink, hoping its coolness would reduce the pain in his head. The vomiting and diarrhea continued sometimes at the same time.

Even though at first he flushed the toilet, the smell from the feces adorning the walls and floor began wafting through the galley and into the first class section. Several passengers wrinkled up their faces and made questioning comments about the odor permeating throughout the plane.

Sondra picked up the intercom phone.

“What’s going on?” Barbara in the rear of the plane asked. “And what’s that smell?”

“FO’s in the bathroom with a big problem.”

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“Problem?” Barbara asked looking toward the first class section with her right arm and hand out in a questioning gesture.

“My guess is he has diarrhea, and then some.” Sondra began searching through a cabinet.

“It’s that bad?”

“Apparently.”

“Try to keep it up there, please.” Barbara waved at Sondra who waved back.

After several more vomiting episodes, Stan attempted to stand, but his diarrhea forced him to sit again for whatever was left in him. Rubbing his eyes, he tried to clear his vision, but no matter what he did, his sight remained blurry. He didn’t see the vomit or liquid feces that never made it to the sink or the toilet. Most of it was splattered onto the floor and up against the walls and door. His first attempt to stand failed, and he fell back onto the toilet seat and vomited again, but this time he saw blood.

“Miss,” Francine Scott in the first row of first class said and motioned to Sondra “...what’s that smell?”

“It’s coming from the toilet,” Sondra said, continuing to look for a spray.

“Can’t you do something?” Francine demanded.

“I’m getting a spray.”

“Well, I would think so.” Francine placed a cloth over her nose and mouth, and kept waving her hand in front of her face. “I intend to complain to management about this.”

The seventy-two-year-old woman nudged her husband. “Make a note of this,” she ordered.

Standing, Stan made several attempts before he managed to unlock the door. But instead of stepping out of the toilet, he fell forward, clutching the front of his unzipped pants, landing first on his knees, and then on his face.

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Sondra gasped while Francine squeezed her nose and emitted a small gasp of her own. “For God’s sake, do something,” she ordered Sondra.

As others started to stand, Sondra shouted, “Please stay in your seats.”

Nearly vomiting herself as she glanced at the vomit and feces soiled bathroom, she quickly shut the door and went to Stan and felt his hot head as he started retching. She grabbed a couple of blankets, but before covering him and putting a blanket under his head, she placed a quick call to Barbara.

“Get up here. I need help.”

After placing a pillow under Stan’s head, she covered him with a blanket and reached for the phone to call for medical help. That’s when she heard a voice from near the food and drink cart.

“Miss?”

“Sir, you need to stay in your seat,” Sondra said trying to move the first officer onto his side.

“Richard, what are you doing?” his wife, Maria, demanded.

The man ignored his wife as he neared Sondra. “I’m a doctor. Maybe I can be of help.” He handed Sondra a business card that identified him as Dr. Richard Brickman, a general practitioner. The doctor had seen the first officer fall out of the bathroom. That, and the horrendous smell, must have convinced him something was seriously wrong.

Sondra quickly moved the cart back into its usual place to let the doctor exam Peterson.

“He’s been vomiting and...” She looked toward the toilet. “...appears to have had a really bad case of diarrhea.”

At that moment, the first officer soiled himself with another bowel movement with what was left in him. He retched and blood dribbled from his mouth.

Waving a hand in front of the first officer’s face, Dr. Brickman said to Sondra, “This man needs a hospital. He’s in rough shape.”

“What is it?”

“More than likely a very bad case of food poisoning.”

Sondra immediately called the captain. “We got a problem. The FO’s violently sick with food poisoning.”

“Bad?”

“He’s on the galley floor in and out of consciousness. I got a doctor here if you want to talk with him. He’s the one who said the first officer needs to get to a hospital immediately.”

“I’ll take care of it,” the captain said.

“Miss,” Doctor Brickman said to Sondra, “do you know if there’re any other medical personnel on board?”

“I’ll find out.”

“Good. I could use some help. Also I need the medical bag.”

“I’ll get it after I make the call for medical personnel.” Sondra reached for the intercom.

“Your attention, please.” Sondra waited several seconds before going ahead. “I need to know if we have any doctors or nurses on board. If you’re a doctor or a nurse, I need to see you immediately.”

Norma Wand and Marilyn Peters, two nurses who belonged to a traveling nurses’ group and were returning from a stay in Asia where they’d been needed for an influenza outbreak, rushed to the front of the plane.

“What can we do?” Norma asked.

“Help the doctor,” Sondra said as she retrieved the medical bag.

In the cockpit, the captain who had removed his oxygen mask said, “Hope you didn’t have any plans for tonight.”

“What’s wrong?” Shari asked, suddenly alert.

“First officer’s suffering a bad case of food poisoning. Have to get him to a hospital. That’s what he gets for eating that shit.” As he finished his comment, he squeezed his head and uttered, “Damn, that hurts.”

Ignoring the captain, Shari smiled, thinking she had been given a temporary reprieve. With this delay, she definitely would have to wait until tomorrow night to tell her husband.

A gurgling sound caught her attention. The captain seemed to be struggling to speak. His head slumped to the right and he appeared to be trying to motion with his left hand toward his head. His right arm hung limply to the side.

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For a moment, Shari didn't know what to do, or what the captain was trying to say.

"Captain?"

What came out of the captain's mouth was mostly slurred, but it sounded as if he was trying to say 'head' or maybe 'headache,' or something like that. She didn't know.

"Captain? What's wrong?"

Shari leaned forward. Unbuckling her seatbelt, she partially stood, then leaned toward the captain and touched his shoulder. Struggling, he turned his head toward her. She grunted

"Oh, my God."

She had seen something similar. Once, when she and her husband were having dinner at her grandparents', her grandfather stopped eating, had trouble talking and when he looked up, they all saw his sagging face. Stroke!

The right side of the captain's face was sagging. Spittle drooled out of his mouth.

She didn't bother calling Sondra. She opened the cockpit door.

"Shari, what in the hell do you think you're doing? Shut that door!"

"Sondra, something's wrong with the captain."

Sondra stepped next to the cockpit door before asking, "Whadda you mean?"

"I think he's had a stroke."

Ignoring Shari, Sondra motioned to Dr. Brickman. "Would you take a look at the captain?" she whispered to the doctor, trying not to let anyone in first class hear what she was saying.

Some passengers in first class were staring at the open cockpit door, frowning and looking at each other. Obviously, they knew something was going on.

Dr. Brickman stepped into the small cockpit, took one look at the captain and exclaimed, "This man's had a stroke. We need to get him out of here and to a hospital immediately."

Sondra glanced at the passengers in first class. She'd need two, maybe three, very strong individuals.

She went immediately to the two Marines who were sitting in first class. "Sergeant, would you and your friend come with me, please?"

"Yes, ma'am. What's the problem?" Todd asked.

"I'll tell you when we get to the cockpit."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Miss," a first class passenger asked, "why is the cockpit door open? I thought it had to be locked all the time."

"I'll get back to you." Sondra gestured for the passenger to give her a moment.

At the cockpit door, Sondra leaned close to the Marines. "We have a problem. We need to get the captain out of his chair without touching any controls or instruments."

"What?" The sergeant looked at the captain slumped to the side in his chair, and then back to Sondra. "Why?"

Sondra sighed. "He's had a stroke and the doctor said we need to get him out of there and on the floor. Can you do it?"

The two men looked at the cramped quarters and all of the switches and controls.

"We'll need another person or two so we can pass him back," Todd said.

Sondra knew none of the others in first class were strong enough to help lift the captain out of the cockpit. Glancing at the first couple of rows in coach, she quickly volunteered two more young men.

"I'll get another just in case we need a fifth," Sondra said to the two Marines.

It took more than five minutes of struggling as they slowly lifted the captain, making sure no controls were touched in the process. The captain's headset was hung over the yoke, the control column. No one heard the controller's voice coming from the headset.

"Marist two-one-two, contact Kansas City on one three three point four."

Picking up the headset, Sondra looked around the cockpit trying to figure out how to use the radio. She reached for a large button on the yoke but stopped. Replacing the headset on the yoke, she left the cockpit and stood off to the side near the first row of first class.

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First class passengers watched in astonishment as the captain was carried out of the cockpit and placed next to the prone first officer.

“I need blankets and pillows,” Dr. Brickman shouted. “We need to elevate his head and shoulders,” he ordered as if he thought he was in the ER. Dr. Brickman and Norma Wand, one of the two nurses who had come forward when Sondra made a call for medical personnel, rolled the captain onto his left side positioning the pillows and blankets so as to elevate his head and upper body.

“Sondra, what’s...” Barbara started to ask as she stared toward the empty cockpit. “What’re we going to do?”

“Don’t worry. We’ll handle it. Okay? The doctor’s got every thing under control.”

“Yeah, but...” Barbara kept eying the open cockpit door.

“You need to keep an eye on the passengers in the rear of the plane. Okay?”

“Yeah, but keep me informed.”

“I will.” Sondra squeezed Barbara’s arm in reassurance.

Shari stared at the two prone men and didn’t say a word.

Sondra joined Shari in staring at the two men and felt a chill. She didn’t know what to do. With all of her training, no one ever said, ‘this is what you do should you lose both of your pilots.’ No one ever talked about losing both of your pilots. Such an occurrence was unthinkable. Besides, on international flights they always had two crews. But now...

Todd, together with Robert and some other guy whose name Todd couldn’t remember, watched as the doctor ministered to the captain.

“Is the captain okay?” Francine, who was standing behind Todd, asked.

Without looking at her, he merely shrugged. He didn’t know, but he knew from experience when people were in trouble.

“Pardon me, but who’s flying the plane?” an older woman in first class politely asked as if she were inquiring for the time of day. Todd heard the underlying fear in her voice.

He glanced at the cockpit with its open door in violation of the current security standards.

“Sergeant?” the elderly woman persisted.

Todd knew the flight attendant named Sondra heard the woman. But one look at Sondra told him the situation. He had seen that look before. He’d seen it on the face of green lieutenants experiencing their first taste of combat. The expression made plain the realization they were in charge, along with the question what in the hell they were going to do about the mess they were in. He glanced at the two pilots on the galley floor and realized that his earlier comment to Robert about when your number was up, might be coming true.

“Sarge,” Robert whispered. “What’s gonna happen?”

Todd shrugged.

Seeing the crew on the floor, an empty cockpit, and knowing there had no deadheading crewmembers on board, Sondra fell against an exit door and inhaled deeply. She no longer had any sensation in her arms and legs. She felt completely numb as if nothing would be able to move her. Dark spots of perspiration began growing under her armpits. She tried to stop the shaking that started with her legs and moved upward. She was doing what she swore she would never do again.

In her first year as a flight attendant with a small regional airline, Sondra was petrified when, after losing an engine, they’d had to make a belly landing since the gear wouldn’t come down. As passengers slid out the emergency chutes, she’d remained seated, afraid to move. She quit her job and didn’t return until two years later, swearing a paralysis like that would never happen to her again. Over the years she’d gone through various unpleasant incidents with passengers and malfunctioning planes. Each time, she’d handled these emergencies as skillfully as she could, but today was different. Was she going to freeze again—or act?

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“Miss,” John Scott stood next to Sondra and questioned, “who’s flying the plane?” It wasn’t said in a panic, but she heard a sound of nervousness and concern.

Sondra didn’t answer. She had no answer. What was she going to say? ‘No one’s flying the plane?’ She didn’t want to panic the passengers by asking for help.

Shari moved closer to Sondra and asked, “We don’t have any flight crew on board, do we?”

Sondra shook her head.

Shari inhaled deeply and moved back against a bulkhead for support, no doubt fearing she might fall to the floor in a faint.

“If both pilots are on the floor, who’s flying the plane?” a male passenger shouted from where he stood in the last row of first class, and pointed to the open cockpit door.

Seeing the open cockpit door, Sondra quickly tried to shut the door, but it remained ajar.

As Sondra neared Dr. Brickman, he grabbed her arm. “We need to get both of these men to a hospital now, especially the captain. Both of their lives are in danger, and the longer we stay up here, the greater the risk. You’ve got to do something and now. Please.”

“We’ll get them to a hospital as soon as we can,” Sondra said in a subdued voice.

“You don’t understand. This man...” He pointed to the captain and said in a low tone, “...is going to die unless we can get him to an emergency room within the next hour.”

The doctor looked at Sondra, then Shari and finally the empty cockpit. He shook his head. “Can’t you call for help?”

“No.” Sondra said in a quiet voice.

“Why not?”

“I...” She looked at Shari before continuing. “I don’t know how to use the radio.”

“Jesus Christ.” The doctor uttered the words more as a prayer than as a curse. “Don’t they teach you that in your flight attendant’s school?”

“What’s going on?” Carrie asked Lynne who was standing and looking toward the front of the plane.

“Don’t know, but something’s happened in first class.” From row nineteen, she couldn’t see much with all the people standing in the aisle or at their seats.

“How do you know?” Carrie asked trying to peer around the person in front of her.

“Heard someone say one or both of the pilots are sick,” Lynne replied.

“Is that why they called for medical personnel?” a woman across the aisle asked.

“Apparently,” Lynne said.

“What’s going on up there?” a passenger in the last row shouted to those in front of him who were standing in the aisle.

“Where’s our flight attendant?” a man behind Carrie asked.

“She’s up front. Went up right after or before they called for medical personnel,” another person answered.

“No she’s not. She came back. I saw her in the galley when I went to the bathroom,” a male passenger answered.

“Miss,” a woman closer to the rear of the plane said to Lynne, “did I hear you say both pilots are sick?”

Before Lynne could answer, a man closer to the front of the plane stood and shouted back, “That’s what people further up are saying.”

“Has this ever happened before?” an elderly woman asked.

No one could answer her.

“What do they do if both pilots are sick,” Lynne wondered aloud.

Carrie wondered, too.

Barbara finally emerged from the bathroom with reddened eyes and was immediately besieged with questions. She put up her hands as if to ward off an assault. “I...I...don’t have any answers, but we’re going to be all right. We’re going to be all right.”

Susan Everson, hearing all of the comments being shouted back and forth began to shake. Dan held her tightly. “It’s going to be all

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right. Don't listen to those people. They don't know what they're talking about. It's going to be all right."

Susan never said a word, but continued shaking and staring at the back of the seat in front of her.

People throughout the plane were standing, talking in small groups and trying to peer into the first class section. They kept asking questions about the condition of the pilots, but at the moment no one had an exact answer. In the rear of the plane, people were especially alarmed when Barbara's answer satisfied no one.

"Oh, my God! We're going to die," a woman shouted.

Sitting in the middle seat in row seven, Kevin Fisher had taken a keen interest in the events occurring at the front of the plane. He understood the dire situation they were in, and immediately regretted returning to Illinois.

Kevin, a handsome, slim, five-foot, six-inch, baby-faced blonde, had vowed never to return to Payson Heights, a suburb northwest of Chicago, when he'd left there eight months earlier. However, a need to get to a safety deposit box was forcing him to do exactly what he said he'd never do. He was tired of running and thought about turning himself in to the police, but he knew he'd never survive in prison. He'd be dead within a week, and most likely it'd be a suicide. The authorities wanted him because he'd made an error in judgment.

Marilyn Thacker, the woman next to Kevin by the window, sat on the edge of her seat and asked, "What did that woman say?"

"Something about we're going to die," Jonathan Fuchs, who occupied the aisle seat next to Kevin, replied as he leaned forward and directed his answer to her.

"Is there a problem?" Marilyn asked.

"I don't know," Jonathan answered. "Did you hear what that woman said?" he asked Kevin.

"No, I wasn't paying attention," Kevin lied.

A passenger across from Jonathan on the aisle volunteered, "Both pilots are sick, very sick. I heard one of 'em had a stroke."

"Stroke? What...what are we going to do? What do they do when both pilots are sick? Can one of them still fly the plane?" Jonathan asked no one in particular.

"Who's flying the plane now?" Marilyn asked looking at Jonathan and ignoring Kevin.

"Autopilot," Kevin mumbled.

"What?" Jonathan asked.

"The plane's on autopilot," Kevin said, staring straight ahead.

"How do you know?"

"All these planes fly on autopilot," Kevin assured Jonathan.

"Oh, but how's it going to land?" Marilyn asked with a hand starting to cover her mouth as she suddenly realized the situation they were in.

Shaking his head, Kevin said, "That I don't know." He only knew it would be impossible for anyone to land this plane and keep his name out of the news.

If only he could go back to a year ago, when he might have been able to help.

A piercing scream caught most people by surprise. "Get me out of here! Get me out of here! Now! We're gonna die. I'm not gonna die. GET ME OUT OF HERE, NOW!"

Susan Everson beat on her husband's chest and face, forcing him out of her way. Once she was in the aisle, Dan couldn't stop her as she started for the front of the plane. When he grabbed his wife's arm, she turned and hit him once more in the face, broke free and started toward the front again. That was when Sondra motioned for Todd to help Dan control and calm his wife.

"It's okay, dear, it's okay," Dan pleaded as he followed Susan up the aisle from row seventeen.

“Stay away from me, you bastard. I didn’t want to fly, but you made me. I hate your guts. You’re trying to kill me,” she yelled, ending it with another scream.

“Miss,” Todd started to say as he stood in front of Susan helping Dan force his wife back into her seat.

“Don’t touch me! Don’t touch me!” Susan yelled and spit at Todd.

“Sorry,” Dan apologized for his wife’s behavior as Todd wiped spittle from his face.

“It’s okay. She’s just excited,” Todd said.

Sondra went to Dr. Brickman who was kneeling next to both pilots. “Can you give her something?”

The doctor rummaged through the medical bag looking for a mild sedative. Not finding anything, he yelled at Sondra, “Jesus, don’t they put sedatives in here?”

She just shrugged and shook her head.

He continued rummaging, but not finding anything, he stood and thought for a moment. “Got an idea. I need a glass of water.”

While Sondra got a glass of water, the doctor went through Maria’s purse.

“Richard, what do you think you’re doing?” she demanded.

“I need one of these.” He held up a small capsule.

By this time Todd and Dan had managed to get Susan back to her seat, but she still refused to sit.

Coming up next to Dan, the doctor asked her husband, “What’s her name?”

“Susan.”

Brickman moved in front of her. “Susan, I’m a doctor. I’m going to give you a mild sedative to help calm your nerves for the rest of the trip. Okay?”

She glanced at the doctor, and then the pill in his hand. She shut her mouth tightly and shook her head.

“Please, it’ll help you relax,” the doctor begged.

“Susan, please take...” Dan started to say.

“Shut up, you bastard,” Susan said, glaring at her husband with a look of hatred.

Finally she turned back to the doctor, grabbed his hand and asked, "I won't get sick, will I?"

"No." He shook his head for emphasis.

With a side-glance at her husband, she took the pill and swallowed it with some water.

"Give it a couple of minutes to take effect," the doctor advised.

Susan nodded and sat down.

"Thank you, doctor," Dan said, apparently not sure if he should sit or remain standing.

Before returning to first class, Sondra whispered to the doctor, "What did you give her?"

"One of my wife's vitamin pills. Think it's flax seed."

"Why? Wasn't there anything in the medical bag?" Sondra asked.

"Couldn't find anything," the doctor said, shaking his head.

"Will it work?"

The doctor shrugged. "Placebos have a tendency to work. We'll find out."

Both he and Sondra glanced at Dan who gave a thumb up as Susan stopped shaking and sat hugging a pillow to her chest.

"How many of those pills does your wife have?" Sondra asked.

"We might need a lot more before this flight's over."

While Sondra and the passengers were preoccupied with the events taking place in coach, Francine Scott nudged her husband and nodded toward the partially open cockpit door.

"What?" the seventy-five-year-old man responded in irritation.

"Look, the cockpit door's open." She nodded again toward the front of the plane.

"So?"

"So you flew many times with Craig in his Citation. You know how to use the radio."

"I..." John didn't look at Francine. He had no idea how to use a plane's radio. He had lied to her.

“You said you used his radio many times when you flew with him. So why can’t you do it now? We need help and these flight attendants don’t know their ass from a hole in the ground.”

“I don’t think...”

“Damn it, John,” Francine hissed. “Don’t you understand? They aren’t calling for help because they don’t know how to use the radios. You do. So do it!”

She squeezed his arm. “Save us!”

He couldn’t tell Francine the truth; he could stand up to everyone except his wife. Seeing the two nurses tending to the captain and the first officer, and the doctor and Sondra busy with Susan Everson, he felt now was his best chance to get into the cockpit. It should be easy for him since he and Francine were in row one of first class. He stood, after being nudged again by Francine, and began sidling around the four people in the galley. So intent were the nurses working with both pilots that neither one noticed John’s furtive movements as he inched his way toward the cockpit. He glanced back at his wife who nodded with a glare that he should continue.

Shari, who had been watching Sondra and the doctor work with the hysterical passenger from the first rows of coach, happened to turn around just as John was about to enter the cockpit. She quickly moved through first class.

“What’re you doing?” Shari shouted.

“I...”

“Sir, you need to get back to your seat, now.”

“He knows how to use the radio,” Francine said, rising from her seat and stepping in front of Shari.

“You know how to use the radio?” Shari asked trying to look past Francine at John.

“Didn’t I just tell you that?” Francine stopped Shari from moving any further.

“Sir, you need to get back to your seat, and you, madam...”

Hearing a scream in coach, Shari turned her head to see what was happening. That’s when John stepped into the cockpit and pulled the door shut behind him. With a glance around the cockpit he spotted the

captain's headset, picked it up and listened. Not hearing anything, he changed the radio's frequency and listened, but heard nothing.

Seeing a second radio, he again changed the frequency thinking he might come across someone speaking. Unfortunately, he had no idea how to call out even if he did hear a voice on the radio. He glanced at the transponder and turned a knob, never realizing he had just turned it off. That's when he heard, "What in the hell are you doing in here?"

He spun around and faced an angry Sondra.

"I said, what are you doing?"

Behind Sondra stood Todd.

"Get him out of here!"

Todd grabbed John by the collar and yanked him from the cockpit as Sondra yelled, "Did you do anything to the radios?"

Shaking his head, he mumbled, "No, never touched them."

"Get in your seat and stay there. You had better be right."

Seeing Todd pull John out of the cockpit, Francine yelled, "Let him alone. He knows what he's doing. He knows how to use a radio."

"That true?" Sondra asked.

Without looking at Sondra or Francine, he said softly, "No."

"John, tell her..."

"Francine, shut up."

Chapter Two

Kansas City Air Traffic Control Center

Olathe, Kansas

2:00 p.m. Local Time

“Marist two-one-two contact Kansas City on one three three point four,” Ted Norton, an air traffic controller in the Kansas City Center in Olathe, Kansas, radioed. He waited several seconds for a response. Hearing none, he went ahead and electronically “passed” Marist two-one-two to the next controller as the flight moved out of his sector into Greg Snyder’s sector.

“Greg, passing you a flight,” Ted said and immediately dealt with another airliner.

As the flight was passed, appearing on Greg’s screen was Marist’s squawk code two four eight eight, the plane’s number identification assigned by air traffic control, and the plane’s altitude of thirty-three thousand feet. Kansas City’s computer filled in the rest of the information that was provided when the Marist dispatcher filed two-one-two’s flight plan with air traffic control. Among other things, Greg would know that this was Marist Flight two-one-two, a Boeing seven-thirty-seven inbound to Chicago, and was flying at four-hundred-and-thirty knots.

Greg quickly glanced at his monitor and continued with other traffic there.

“Citation two-two-seven, descend and maintain one-eight thousand,” Greg radioed to the Citation. “Current barometric pressure is two niner point nine five.”

“Citation two-two-seven out of two-five thousand for one-eight thousand,” came the response from the Citation. The pilot of the Citation also repeated the current barometric pressure

“Did Marist ever confirm?” Ted asked.

“Negative,” Greg replied and asked, “Did they respond when you passed them?”

“No,” Ted said.

When Marist didn't acknowledge a change in controllers, Greg decided to call Marist instead. "Marist two-one-two, Kansas City."

Silence.

Greg made a face, uttered a small oath and thought, *Are they asleep?* It had happened before.

"Kansas City, United one-four-two-seven with you."

"Roger, United one-four-two-seven," Ted acknowledged before again asking Greg, "Marist ever respond?"

"Not yet. I'll give them another minute and..." Greg stared at his screen. "What the hell? They're gone."

"What?" Ted glanced at Greg's screen.

"They're gone," Greg said again.

"What do you mean, they're gone? Who's gone?" Ted asked before working with another flight.

"Marist two-one-two, they're gone. Here one minute and gone the next." On his screen all that appeared was a moving line of + signs.

Greg waved his hand at Joe Bradley, the floor supervisor.

"What's going on?" Joe asked as he stood next to Greg and his radar screen.

Before answering Joe, Greg continued with information for another flight. "Southwest seven-eight-seven, you are cleared to flight level three four, turn left to a heading of zero six zero until clear of the cell."

"Southwest seven-eight-seven to flight level three four and a heading to zero six zero."

"Two-one-two is gone. See..." He pointed to a moving line of +s.

"Everything okay when you passed it?" Joe asked Ted.

"Yeah, except I never got a confirmation."

"Marist Airlines two-one-two?" Greg tried again.

"How long's it been?" Joe asked.

Greg glanced at a clock. "It just happened."

"No radio contact?" Joe looked from Greg to Ted.

"No radio," Greg said replying to Joe's question.

"Ted, did you have radio contact with two-one-two," Joe asked.

"Yeah, when he entered my sector, but no acknowledgement when I passed him to Greg."

“Crap.” Joe headed for the Watch Desk and Terry Carpenter. DEN, the Domestic Events Network, had to be notified. A plane with a disappearing transponder code and no radio had to be dealt with immediately.

“Keep an eye on it. Let me know if anything happens or doesn’t happen.”

“Yeah,” Greg replied not really listening to Joe. “Thought he’d be calling me about tracking around that cell.”

Joe stopped and glanced back at the radar screen that showed all Greg’s contacts with the exception of two-one-two. The +s were tracking close to a thunderstorm cell.

“Looks like he’ll be giving his passengers a bouncy ride if he keeps the heading he’s on. He’s getting awful close to that cell.”

“Jesus, this isn’t making any sense,” Joe said over his shoulder as he left for the Watch Desk.

“Marist two-one-two, Kansas City.”

Greg’s call was followed by silence.

He continued. “Marist two-one-two, with your present heading, you’ll be flying within two miles of a cell that’s topping at forty-five thousand to your right. Marist two-one-two?”

Silence.

At the Watch Desk, Terry said, “I’ve been watching it”

“What do you think?”

“No transponder and no radio? Definitely not good. How long’s this been going on?”

“Couple of minutes at the most,” Joe said checking a notation he’d made on a notepad.

Terry watched for several seconds. “This isn’t right. We got a rogue plane out there and no idea what’s going on.” With that comment, Terry picked up the phone and placed a call to DEN, the Domestic Events Network. “We got a situation here.” An emergency had just become a potential terrorist threat.

“Is it possible they had a total electoral failure including the transponder?” Joe asked after Terry finished with his call to DEN.

“Doubt it. They got backups for backups. Besides, even if for some reason they can’t contact us, they sure as hell would be deviating around that cell.”

“True. And an experienced crew would know in minutes if they were having problems with their radios and be squawking it. We’d know by now. Unless...”

“Unless it’s deliberate.” Terry finished Joe’s speculation. “What’s the first thing they did with the planes on nine-eleven? They killed the transponders.”

“Jesus.” Joe was quiet for a couple of seconds lost in thought. “Shit!”

“What?” Terry asked.

“You know what’s going on in Chicago this afternoon? The air and water show. Even with a heavy overcast, thousands of spectators will be lining the beaches.”

“Jesus,” Terry murmured before relaying the message to DEN.

“What do you think DEN’ll do?” Joe asked.

“Don’t know, but I’m sure glad I’m not making that decision.”

“Amen,” Joe said, agreeing with Terry.

A couple of seconds later, Joe added, “Shit! You know what else is going on in Chicago? The Cubs are playing the Cardinals this afternoon at Wrigley Field. Jesus.”

“How do you know that?”

“My neighbor’s from Chicago and a Cubs fan. Told me he was going back for the game. Sort of a family ritual. Think of it. Forty-thousand people packed in that place.”

“Makes a helluva target, doesn’t it?” Terry said as he placed another call to DEN.

After a moment, Joe added, “But how’s he going to get through that cloud layer and head for the beach or Wrigley Field? If that’s their aim, they sure as hell picked a bad day. He’d have to get through a heavy cloud layer, find his target, and head for it. Think of the odds.”

“Joe, you’re assuming he’s like the others. Knows just enough to steer the plane where he wants it to go. He could be an experienced instrument rated pilot.”

“Never gave that a thought. How much time does DEN have? ”

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“Not much at all,” Terry speculated.

“Any idea how many souls on board, or anything else about two-one-two?”

“No.” Terry said as he picked up the phone. “Calling Marist right now and finding out. Maybe two-one-two made contact with their dispatcher,”

“Yeah, but why hasn’t the dispatcher called us?”

“Same reason we don’t know what’s going on. They probably don’t know either.”

“How’re they going to keep this quiet?” Joe asked.

“You mean...”

“Yeah.”

“Quiet? How can they? Once it happens, if it happens, it’ll be major news.” Terry said as he stared at the large screen showing nothing but moving +s for two-one-two’s track.

“Jeez, but to sacrifice...” Joe started to say.

“You got an alternate plan?”

Chapter Three

Marist Flight 212

In-Flight

The news quickly spread to the rear of the aircraft that both of their pilots were no longer able to fly. No one was flying the plane.

“Miss,” an elderly gentleman stood and said to Sondra, “can’t you use the radio to call for help?”

“No.”

“Why not?” The elderly man asked looking surprised and upset.

“I...” Sondra looked away.

“Dear God, how...how in the hell are we going to get down?” Maria, the doctor’s wife, asked.

For a moment, dead silence held as the nearest passengers to Sondra realized the one way the plane might get down. Several passengers who had been standing sat or fell back into their seats.

Those not close to Sondra strained to hear what was being said and relayed it to the other passengers.

Several rows back in coach, an older man who was flying for the first time asked, “What’ll happen if they don’t find a pilot?”

“What do you think?” the woman next to the window replied.

After a moment the old man said with seriousness, “They won’t let that happen, will they?”

No one answered him.

“Oh.” He clasped his hands in a prayerful gesture. “But...but can’t we call for help?”

The woman next to the window turned on her cell phone and showed it to the old man. “We’ve got no signal up here. And this plane’s doesn’t have WiFi, so we can’t use our laptop computers. I asked. It’s an older model.”

The old man sat back and stared at the seat in front of him.

Hearing the old man and the woman who were seated behind her ask about using their cell phones to call for help, the woman next to Kevin asked, “Why don’t our cell phones work up here?”

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“Phones only work to ten thousand feet. Besides we’re moving too fast between cells. You’d probably end up with nothing but dropped calls.”

“Yeah, but...”

“And we don’t know what effect the use of a phone would have on the plane’s navigational or communication systems. It could have a disastrous effect. At this moment, that’s the last thing we need.”

“Oh.” The woman quietly sat back.

“Miss?” Joyce Kraft, a coach passenger, shouted at Sondra, “What about a military pilot?”

“Sondra,” Shari said taking hold of her arm. “She’s right. Get on the intercom and ask for a military pilot.”

“Ask for anyone who can fly,” Joyce said, as she looked around.

“Shari,” Sondra whispered, “I can’t do that. It might cause a panic.”

Her explanation came from an irrational thought that seemed rational to Sondra. Behind the paralysis was a fear that this might be the day she died, a fear now shared by many of the passengers.

Sondra also regretted doing her friend a favor. Normally, she flew the international routes, but her friend wanted to attend a wedding, so Sondra had agreed to fill in for her. This trip was supposed to be a snap, out on Saturday and back on Sunday. Now the snap trip was turning into a nightmare.

“Sondra?” Shari begged.

Sondra returned to the cockpit and picked up the headset. She just shook her head. She had no idea what to do. She feared touching anything might send the plane crashing to earth.

Sondra picked up the intercom.

“May I have your attention? May I have you attention, PLEEZE!” Sondra shouted.

Some passengers sat up, others stood in the aisle or at their seats. She had their complete interest except for Kevin. He scrunched in his seat.

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“I need to know if there are any military pilots on board.”

Everyone looked about waiting for someone, anyone to stand or raise his or her hand.

“Mommy, why are they asking if there’re any pilots on board,” seven-year-old Amy Whiting asked. “Don’t we have pilots?”

“Idiot,” Mitch, who was standing and looking about, leaned across his mother and yelled at Amy, his younger sister. “Didn’t you hear? Something’s happened to the pilots. Idiot.”

“Mitchell, be quiet.” Margaret pushed him back into his seat. “Honey,” she leaned close to Amy, “there’s nothing to worry about.” She bit her lip and embraced Amy and Mitch. The eleven-year-old boy shrugged her arm off of him.

She dreaded this trip home to Peoria to visit her sick mother. Sick mother, my ass, she thought. More than likely the ‘illness’ was just a ruse to get her back home so her mother could harangue Margaret about her husband and their move to California. Her husband was more than upset with the money they didn’t have being spent on this trip so her mother could pester Margaret until she agreed to move back to Peoria to take care of her. But now Margaret had a much worse worry, a flight with no pilots.

No one stood or waved a hand. No pilot volunteers came forward. A few of the passengers fell back in their seats as if their fate had been decided. Some began silently crying. A few passengers were praying.

Robert, the Marine, leaned close to Todd. “We’re in deep shit, aren’t we?”

Todd just nodded.

Robert downed his beer in one gulp.

Lynne bent close to Carrie and whispered, “What about you?”

Carrie stared in amazement at Lynne and shook her head.

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“But...”

“No,” Carrie’s whisper was almost a shout.

After several quiet moments, Sondra again keyed the phone and asked in desperation, “Are there ANY pilots on board?”

From one of the passengers was heard, “Please, God, let there be a pilot.”

Passengers again looked about hoping someone, anyone, would stand.

Kevin Fisher realized he could land the plane, but he wasn’t sure he wanted to try. He was dealing with his own sense of panic. His name and face would be plastered on every television and newspaper throughout the country. He never would be able to escape. He’d be more than trapped. Instead of being lauded as a hero, he’d be hauled off to court and then to jail.

Kevin stared out the window at the billowing clouds and wondered what the passengers on the nine-eleven planes had thought about before they crashed into the buildings or the ground. At the last moment would he regret not taking charge and flying the plane to a safe landing? A more important question was, could he safely land this plane?

The answer was yes, definitely yes. He had the training, the ratings and the experience. Even though he had never flown a seven-thirty-seven, he was positive he could fly it to a safe landing with help from a seven-thirty-seven pilot on the radio. He was sure he could do it because he had flown comparable aircraft for several regional airlines.

Several years ago, he’d had such high hopes of grabbing a job with a major carrier when he’d interviewed the first time for a position with a regional airline.

“Hmm, everything looks good. How did you get all this training so fast? Must’ve been expensive,” Ralph Lohmann, the head of a small regional airline, asked the twenty-five-year-old Kevin. “Don’t see anything here about military training.”

“Insurance settlement. Some guy in a semi ran a light and killed both of my parents when I was eight.”

Lohmann recoiled in surprise. “Sorry about that. At least you didn’t have to borrow the money and go into debt.” He glanced a little more closely at Kevin’s college transcript. “You majored in English?”

“The university’s flight school suggested I get a major I could fall back on just in case I couldn’t find a flying job. Although from what I hear, it might be just as difficult finding a teaching job as an airline job.” Kevin smiled.

“Unfortunately, that’s probably too true. Welcome aboard,” Lohmann said decisively, extending his hand.

Kevin had hoped to build hours and then apply to one of the major carriers, but things didn’t work out exactly as planned. No sooner had he started with Lohmann’s regional airline, than he was furloughed. After two months, he was called back, only to face another furlough six months later. His future in aviation was going nowhere.

That was when Charlie Hoebing, a flight student of his and the head of the English department at Payson High School, came to his aid.

One day out of curiosity Charlie asked Kevin, “How come all you’re doing is flight instructing?”

“It’s all I can do. I just lost a job with a regional airline that declared chapter eleven. And I’m not hearing from the major airlines or the regionals. So it’s flight instructing, flying charters, or nothing.”

“Can you make enough just by doing that?” Charlie asked.

“No, I’ve been dipping into my savings, something my financial advisor told me not to do.”

“What’re you going to do?”

“Get another job, I guess,” Kevin said and shrugged.

“Got a degree?” Charlie asked.

“Yeah.”

“Send me your resume and transcripts. Maybe I can be of some help.”

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Two weeks later, Charlie arrived at the airport with good news. “I have a teacher who’s going on medical leave. She’ll be out the whole year. Interested?”

And that’s how Kevin got the job teaching English at Payson High.

Now, he tried to remain oblivious to the panic going on around him. Of all the passengers on the plane, he knew he was visibly the calmest. He had made a decision. Someone else would have to land the plane. Volunteering wasn’t worth the risk of jail and being sodomized.

As Shari and most of the passengers waited for a pilot to raise his hand, Sondra again asked over the plane’s PA, “Are there ANY pilots on board? PLEEZE!”

Suddenly from row nineteen, Lynne stood, shouted and waved her arm, “My friend’s a pilot.”

“Lynne, what’re you doing?” Carrie yelled.

“She needs a pilot, and you’re a pilot,” Lynne said as she continued waving her hand.

Carrie pulled on Lynne’s arm trying to get her to sit down. In a loud whispered voice, she said, “Lynne, I can’t fly this plane.”

Before Lynne could respond, Sondra and Barbara were next to them.

“Are you a pilot?” Sondra asked, leaning across Lynne and addressing Carrie, who sat in the middle seat. Other passengers stood, watched and listened to the conversation.

“I’m...I’m...not a licensed...”

“Can you fly a plane?” Barbara asked in a loud voice.

“Yeah, but...”

“Listen to me. Do you know how to use the radio?” Sondra pleaded.

“Well...yeah, but...” Carrie leaned closer to Sondra. “You don’t understand. I only have about forty hours.”

“Oh, my God.” The female passenger next to Carrie cried with a hand covering her mouth. Then she buried her face in her hands.

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Muffled cries and sobs came from many of those closest to Carrie and Sondra, who had heard.

“Mommy, are we gonna die?” Amy Whiting asked, pulling on her mother’s arm.

“You’re gonna die, Amy, you’re gonna die,” Mitch teased, but without the usual sibling rivalry intensity.

“Mitchell, shut your mouth,” Margaret yelled.

“You heard her. She’s not even a pilot. How’s she gonna fly this plane? I could do a better job than her.” Mitch crossed his arms and sat back, trying to hide his trembling lower lip.

“Aren’t you scared, Mitch?” Amy asked.

“No. Maybe. Shut up.”

Dan Everson, overhearing Carrie as she said she was a pilot, leaned close to Susan. “Did you hear that?”

“What?” Susan asked suspiciously.

“There’s a pilot on board. We’re saved.”

Susan looked at him in disbelief.

“I heard a woman say she’s a pilot.” Dan said with emphasis.

Susan looked across the aisle at a female passenger who nodded with a smile.

For the first time since boarding the plane, Susan smiled. “Really?”

Dan cringed, hearing another passenger say loudly, “But she’s only got forty hours.”

“What did that man say?” Susan asked.

The woman across the aisle leaned closer and said, “He said she knows how to use the radio. She can call for help.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Susan replied and sat back.

Dan nodded thanks to the woman, exhaled and tried to relax, hoping Susan’s sedative would last until the flight was over.

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Sondra grabbed Carrie's hand. "Come on." She pulled her toward the front of the aircraft.

Kevin paid particular attention to Carrie, but he had no way to determine anything about her ability to land this plane. That's when he heard the people behind him talking.

"Can she do it?" someone asked.

"What do you mean?" another passengers put in.

"Heard she's only got forty hours of flying" was said as if the person knew what he was talking about.

"Is that enough hours to land a plane?" Jonathan, the man next to Kevin, asked the people across the aisle.

The woman next to Kevin asked no one in particular, "Can she do it?"

Kevin didn't answer her, but imperceptivity he shook his head—no.

As Carrie passed by Kevin, he couldn't resist sneaking a peek at her. Then he blanched, slid lower in his seat, and looked out the window, hiding his face. He lifted his head and watched as Carrie and Sondra walked through the first class section. He vacillated, trying to decide his next move.

Images of the past when they'd met shortly after school had started almost a year earlier raced through his head.

He and Carrie had been assigned lunchroom duty together during the school's first quarter.

Carrie approached Kevin on the first day of school with an outstretched hand. "I'm Carrie Jansen and you're..."

"Kevin, Kevin Fisher."

"You're new, aren't you?" Carrie asked.

"Taking Mrs. Freitag's place while she's on a maternity leave."

"Yes, I heard. Welcome aboard. Nice meeting you."

Each day they'd talk for a while before the lunchroom would begin to fill, then they'd separate and roam the room looking for possible trouble and making sure the students got rid of their trash.

Three weeks into the semester, Carrie asked Kevin, "Going to the game tonight?"

"No, I'm flying a charter to Iowa."

Carrie cocked her head with a frown. "You're flying..."

"I'm the co-pilot."

"You're a pilot?" Carrie asked in a surprised voice.

"Yeah, I'm a pilot," he said and nodded.

"But..."

"What am I doing here?" He laughed as he explained his situation. "Hopefully, by next year this time I'll be back with a regional carrier or even with one of the big guys."

"Well, good luck with that. Good luck in making it."

They'd lost contact after the quarter ended and their lunchroom duty was over. Besides it wasn't too long afterward that when Kevin beat a hasty retreat away from Payson Heights.

Now Kevin watched as Carrie moved past the downed pilots toward the cockpit. He knew her. Worse, she knew him, and more than likely she knew about him. How could she not know when he'd hurriedly left Payson Heights because he'd had a sexual relationship with a student of his, a seventeen-year-old girl? The police wanted him. Kevin's only thought was to stay hidden.

In the first class section, Francine Scott grabbed Sondra's arm. "My husband and I need a drink. Now!"

"What?"

"We need something to settle our nerves. We want a drink," Francine demanded.

Sondra couldn't believe what she was hearing. In the middle of a crisis these two wanted their regular service.

"Listen to me, before this is over you're going to need a clear head. There'll be no alcohol for anyone. Am I making myself clear? So forget it," Sondra said forcefully.

“But...”

“No buts and no alcohol. Period,” she shouted.

“Who the hell do you think...” Francine started to say.

“Lady...” Sondra went face to face with Francine. “...we got a crisis and the best you can do is keep your mouth shut for the rest of the trip.”

Francine glared at Sondra but remained quiet.

Sondra’s comment was followed by applause from some of the other passengers.

While Sondra was dealing with Francine, Carrie stopped and stared at the two prone figures on the galley floor. Stepping over the two flight officers, she stopped by the entrance to the cockpit.

“Do what you have to do, but get us on the ground,” Sondra said.

Carrie hesitated. “I can’t do this.”

“Why not? Your friend said you’re a pilot.”

Carrie glanced into the cockpit with all the controls, buttons and knobs. “This...” She made a sweeping motion with her hand. “...this is out of my league. Are you sure no one else can land this thing?”

“You’re all that we have,” Sondra said squeezing Carrie’s hand hopefully.

“Yeah, but...”

“Do you know how to use the radio?” Sondra asked.

“I think so.”

“Then you can call and ask for help, can’t you?”

Her answer of “yeah” was said with a hesitant voice and a lack of confidence.

Sondra leaned closer and lowered her voice. “Don’t you understand what’s going to happen if you don’t get in that cockpit, get help, and land this plane? We’ll keep flying until we run out of fuel. That’s when the plane will nose over and...”

“I know, I know.” Carrie took one step into the cockpit, looked back toward Sondra and said, “I’ll do what I can.”

“That’s all we want.”

At that moment Carrie remembered a scene from an evening newscast of a United Airlines flight that had lost its hydraulic controls. It was attempting an emergency landing when it flipped and burst into

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flames killing over a hundred of its passengers. She could see that happening to their flight, and she would be the one responsible.

Carrie's fear was partially a fear of failure.

Failure had never been an option for Carrie growing up with a mother who wouldn't allow it. Anything Carrie started had to be successfully finished, or her mother considered it a failure. As a result, Carrie was very selective in whatever she chose to do, in order to avoid a lack of success. So it was when she married Ken. She never saw the marriage ending except by death. Which was why her reaction to the divorce was so traumatic, and why she'd endured her husband's emotional abuse for so many years. She had failed, something she was never allowed to do. Now she faced the greatest test she had ever encountered. A failure now meant the loss of life—for all of them.

Taking a deep breath, she moved toward the captain's chair.

Meanwhile, Kevin held his head and tried to imagine Carrie landing the plane. He knew she couldn't do it, but he remained seated.

Chapter Four

Marist Airlines Dispatch Office

2:00 p.m. Local Time

Sam Aschmann finished with a captain who approved his flight plan, then glanced at his screen showing the flights he was responsible for. He started to check another flight when he stopped and stared again at his monitor. He tapped the screen several times as if that would bring back Marist two-one-two. For several seconds, he just stared in amazement. All he saw were some + signs moving through Kansas. The ringing of Sam's phone broke his momentary paralysis.

"Aschmann."

"Mr. Aschmann, Terry Jackson at Kansas City air traffic control. Are you in contact with two-one-two?"

Sam glanced at his screen showing nothing but the moving + signs.

"Negative."

"You have any idea what's going on?"

"None."

"For starters, he's NORAD. We haven't had contact for some time. Now there's no transponder code. This doesn't look good."

"Understand. I'll try contacting him, but if he has a problem I don't understand why he hasn't tried to contact me."

"If you hear anything, let us know immediately. DEN has been notified."

"Understand."

Biting his lip, Sam grabbed his phone and called his supervisor. Might be too early to call the old man, but sooner or later he'd have to know.

"I sure as hell don't want to be the one who disturbs his golf game," Aschmann, said to his screen.

Chapter Five

Kansas City Air Traffic Control Center

Olathe, Kansas

2:05 p.m. Local Time

Back in the control room, Greg watched as two-one-two's +s moved closer and closer to a large storm cell. He decided to try one more time to contact the plane.

"Marist two-one-two, Kansas City."

The call was followed by absolute silence.

Ted, the controller next to Greg, asked, "How close are they?"

"I'd guess they'll fly within two to three miles of that cell."

"What's the tops?" Ted asked.

"Forty-five, but it's a small one. They should be past it within a couple of minutes, but it'll be a long couple of minutes for the passengers."

"Maybe they're planning to fly around it," Ted ventured in an optimistic tone.

"Yeah? Doesn't look as though they have any intention of moving away from that storm. They're on their original track. See." Greg pointed to two-one-two's + tracking.

At the Watch Desk, Terry looked at the spot on his large screen where two-one-two was tracking by following the line of +s. With him was Joe, the floor supervisor. "I sure hope to hell it's something simple like an electrical problem, and they'll contact us before too long."

"If it is, why aren't they deviating from that cell? Doesn't make sense. An experienced crew would never put their passengers through the turbulence they're bound to get. Doesn't make sense. Unless..." Joe looked at Terry. "...it's been hijacked."

"Yeah," Terry said, "but even that doesn't make sense. If they've been hijacked, wouldn't the terrorist move away from that cell, especially if it's flown by an experienced instrument pilot?"

"But what if it's not flown by an experienced pilot? We don't know that. It's mere speculation." Joe frowned and shook his head. "Nothing about this flight is making sense. No radio, no transponder,

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and no call to their dispatcher. Nothing. What in the hell's going on in that plane?"

Flight controller Greg decided to try one more time. "Marist two-one-two, Kansas City."

Silence.

Chapter Six

Marist Flight 212

In-Flight

Standing at the doorway to the cockpit, Carrie stared at the vacant seats, and then the controls and the dials.

“I don’t think you can fly the plane from here,” Sondra said in a reassuring voice.

Carrie didn’t answer.

“Carrie?”

“I...I can’t do this. Nothing’s familiar. This is pure idiocy. I can’t fly this plane. Where do I start?” She raised her hands in despair.

“Please. You’re our only hope. There’s no one else,” Sondra pleaded.

Slowly, Carrie stepped into the cockpit, wriggled her way into the captain’s seat, and again stared at all the instruments. That was when she remembered the last time she’d piloted a plane.

Meghan, home on leave before another deployment to Afghanistan as a helicopter pilot, had talked her mother into learning to fly. That was in May when Carrie was home on medical leave, dealing with the aftereffects of her divorce. Daughter Meghan thought learning to fly would be good for her, and now she had to wonder.

“Meghan, I can’t do this. I can’t fly,” she’d protested to her daughter while they were walking around the plane as Megan checked and explained the various flight controls as a part of the pre-flight.

“Mom, can you drive a car?”

“You know I can.”

“You can fly a plane.”

“But why?”

“You’re helping me. I need to keep active, involved in flight instructing. Haven’t done any fixed wing instructing since leaving Southern. So really, you’re just helping me. How about it? We’ll split the cost of the plane. Okay?”

In reality, Carrie knew Meghan's goal was to get her mother's mind off the loss of her asshole father. And Carrie thought maybe learning to fly would be a little therapeutic, convinced that her counselor sure wasn't helping her.

Reluctantly Carrie agreed to take flying lessons. "Okay. But no funny stuff."

"Funny stuff?" Meghan smiled. She knew what her mother was talking about.

"None of that aerobatic stuff I saw you demonstrate at Southern when you graduated."

"Don't worry, Mom. No loops or barrel rolls, or any of that aerobatic stuff."

"Good." Carrie hated and feared roller coaster rides. She would be a reluctant student.

The flying lessons didn't always go smoothly.

The first time Meghan introduced her mother to stall recognition and recovery, Carrie almost quit when the left wing lost lift, stalled and dropped, leaving her looking straight down at the ground from her door's window. She screamed and let go of the controls. Meghan had to recover by lowering the plane's nose, adding power and regaining lift.

"Get me down, now. I can't do this," Carrie screamed.

"Yes, you can do it. Let me demonstrate it again."

The training was slow going, but eventually Carrie was able to recognize stall situations and recover, at least without screaming.

One day as they were practicing take-offs and landings, Carrie kept flaring too high or waiting too long to flare so that Meghan had to save the landing and the plane's undercarriage. Finally, after a particularly hard landing that jarred both of them, a frustrated Meghan yelled, "I think you're trying to kill me."

Carrie was dumbfounded. Then she started laughing. Within seconds, Meghan, who recognized the ludicrousness of her comment, joined her. After that, Carrie's landings improved to Meghan's satisfaction.

The flying lessons were going smoothly until one day when Carrie wasn't making the necessary corrections as they were practicing crosswind landings at the DuPage Airport. After three landings in

which Meghan had to either make serious corrections, or she had to take over and land the plane, Carrie's daughter finally had it. She took over, stopped the plane after turning off the runway and blew her stack.

"Two, two golf, taxi back and stay with me" came the voice from the tower.

"Two, two golf," Carrie replied and started to apply power.

"Stop." Meghan pulled the throttle back to idle cutoff. "What in the hell's going on?"

"What...what do you mean?"

"You're not flying the plane. You're going through the motions and you're constantly behind the aircraft."

"I don't..."

"Bullshit. Listen, if you don't fly the plane, the plane sure as hell will fly itself. You have to be constantly aware of what's going on. Take charge and make the plane do what you want it to do. You're lining up with the runway and expecting that it'll land itself. It won't. You have to make it land. Get your head out of your ass and start flying the plane."

Carrie glared at Meghan furious over the way her daughter had spoken to her. "This was your idea, not mine. And what's all this crap about taking charge? Are you talking about the plane, or are you talking about me?"

"I was talking about the plane, but if you want to apply it to your life, then let's apply it to your life. Take charge of your life, or by God, life will take charge of you and who knows where you'll end up."

"Listen to me, you little piece of shit. I am in charge of my life." Carrie said it with a finger shoved in Meghan's face.

Moving her mother's hand out of her face, Meghan yelled, "You sure as hell aren't acting like it. From all angles, it looks as if you'd rather feel sorry for yourself instead of doing something about it. Get on with your life."

"I am getting..."

"No, you're not. So Dad shit on you and gave you a rotten deal, but is that any reason to quit? Take charge, Mom, take charge."

"I am..."

"You got your head up your fucking ass..."

The slap caught Meghan by surprise.

“You know that’s one word I hate, and I will not tolerate it, especially from my own daughter.”

“I’m your adult daughter, Mom, adult daughter.”

“Two, two golf, is there a problem?” the male tower controller asked.

“Two, two golf, negative!” both boomed.

“Oh, taxi back when ready.”

They met halfway and embraced with tears running down their cheeks.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Carrie sobbed.

“It’s okay, Mom, it’s okay. Let’s call it a day.”

“No, I’m going to land this thing if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Good. Let’s do it.”

As she taxied the plane back, Meghan said, “Mom, I’m sorry for what Dad did. He’s an asshole. How do you think Carole and I feel with Dad marrying a girl who’s about the same age as we are? But that’s no reason to crawl into a shell and play the pity game. Move on with your life.”

“Is that what you’re trying to get me to do by teaching me to fly?”

“In a way. Besides it gives us an excuse for spending some time together.”

“Thank you,” Carrie said. Smiling she leaned over and hugged her daughter again. “I love you.”

“I love you, too. Okay, let’s get airborne and try another landing?”

After that session, everything had seemed to go smoothly. Meghan knew Carrie probably would have to finish with another instructor, but wanted her to do her long cross-country flight before Meghan headed back to Afghanistan.

Two weeks later, Carrie prepared for her long cross-country flight. Just before taking off, Meghan had a few last minute checks and comments.

“Okay, everything looks good,” Meghan, said handing back Carrie’s flight plan. “You’ve got good visual landmarks so that should keep you on course. Don’t forget to keep checking your directional

gyro against the compass and reset it when necessary. And refuel at each stop. That's an order."

"Yes, sir," Carrie said with mock seriousness as she saluted.

"Mom, I'm serious."

"Okay, okay."

"One other thing," Meghan said as she stretched out her hand palm upward.

Carrie shrugged and gave her the cell phone she had in her pocket.

"And..." Meghan said her hand still extended.

"I wasn't going to use it," Carrie objected as she gave Meghan a handheld GPS that her friend Lynne had given her as a birthday gift.

"Really, I just wanted it as a backup, if I got lost."

"Let's just say I'm removing all temptation." Meghan smiled.

"I know."

"And if you should get lost, what's the frequency you can call for help?" Meghan asked and waited for an answer. "Is it on your flight plan?" She tapped her mother's flight plan.

Carrie gave her flight plan a cursory glance. "One two one point five zero. There it is." She pointed to the frequency.

"Good. Let's hope you don't have to use it. Give me a call when you get in. I want to hear all the details."

"I will."

Carrie watched Meghan walk away before getting into the smaller two-seater Cessna one fifty she'd be flying on the cross-country. Though Carrie preferred the four-seater one seventy-two, which was roomier and faster, someone else was flying it today. She wasn't a happy pilot, in fact. The last thing Carrie wanted to be doing was spending a beautiful Sunday afternoon in July bouncing around the sky in a little plane under the fair weather cumulus clouds. She was only doing it to keep her daughters happy.

Thirty minutes after taking off from DuPage Airport, Carrie was on course, making slight corrections as she passed to the left or to the right of her visual landmarks instead of over them. Everything was going smoothly.

Then she got a text from Dana.

Removing the phone from her other pocket, she felt a little regret at having lied to her daughter, stashing her regular cell phone there. She glanced at the screen. She barely finished reading Dana's text when she got another one, this time from Kathy.

Before she could respond to any of the texts or vocal calls, her first destination airport came in sight and she concentrated on the landing the plane.

Seething with anger and hurt, she reacted atypically of a woman who had been dumped. She immediately took off, heading toward her second destination and violating several of Meghan's instructions. She failed to refuel or make a note of her departure time. She also failed to have someone sign her logbook, and she failed to do another recheck of her engine that would have indicated a loose alternator belt. Most importantly, she didn't take a few minutes to relax before getting back in the plane. Her goal was to get back home as soon as possible.

The moment she was in the air again, she was on her phone as she headed in the general direction of her next airport, but she wasn't paying attention to anything except for the texts and voice calls.

She knew why Dana'd had to go to her ex's marriage to that peroxide blonde bitch with her silicone tits. And she knew the real reason Meghan wanted her as far away as possible when her father married a woman not much older than she. What hurt was the bimbo was having the wedding Carrie herself had been denied. Carrie and Ted were married in a small ceremony with just their family and close friends. She would have loved a large wedding, but her mother couldn't afford it, and she and Ted had large debts from college. Besides Ted had been headed then to law school. So they'd settled for just a small wedding, promising each other they would have a blast on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Their twenty-fifth had never happened. The bimbo was getting the wedding Carrie'd always wanted and that Carrie felt she deserved. Another failure.

Finding out some of her best friends were at the wedding both angered and hurt her. Why were they there? Not one of them ever said they'd been invited. They'd lied to her when she'd asked if they'd been invited. They knew all along they were going to the wedding.

She wondered, too, if Meghan and Caroline were at the wedding.

As Carrie thought about the wedding, she glanced at the terrain, looking for her next airport when she realized all was not going well. She had no idea where she was. Searching the ground ahead of and below the Cessna one fifty while she flew west at an altitude of three-thousand feet, she uttered the words most pilots at one time or other in their flying lives have uttered. *Where in the hell am I?* Banking, she turned first one way and then another, trying to find something, anything that would give her an indication of her location. Biting her lip, Carrie scanned left and right searching for an airport that was supposed to be there. At this moment any concrete, asphalt or grass strip would do. Glancing at the sectional chart didn't help her either. Nothing made sense.

"Carrie?"

The voice from her iPhone was a mere distraction and growing weaker.

"Yeah?" she absently replied.

"What's wrong?" Ginny asked.

"Uh, what?"

"Carrie, what's wrong?" Ginny's voice was growing faint.

"Ginny, I got to go. Call you later."

She ended the call, jammed the phone in a pocket while searching vainly for any indication of an airport or identifiable landmark.

She swallowed and wet her lips with what little saliva she could muster. She glanced again at her instruments, and then at the ground. She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand and tried to swallow again, but her mouth was dry and her water bottle was empty.

For the past hour or longer, she didn't know, she hadn't been paying attention to anything except her texts and phone calls. Every now and then, she'd made a cursory check to be sure she was flying the planned heading needed to reach her second destination on her three-legged cross-country flight. All three legs of her flight were to be by dead reckoning. She was flying a compass heading, checking every so often with a visual landmark to make sure she was on course and on time. The entire trip was to be without the use of any other navigational aid except in an emergency. What navigational aid? The plane was equipped with only one com-nav. It was a basic trainer.

“Mom, instruments fail. Learn to fly using your compass, your chart and your sight. You’ll survive,” she remembered Meghan preaching on more than one occasion.

Nothing was right. She checked her directional gyro against the compass. The gyro was off by more than fifteen degrees. She stared at the instrument, trying to remember when she’d last checked it. She shook her head, as she couldn’t recall. Glancing at the attitude indicator, she stared in amazement. It indicated she was banking more than twenty degrees, but all her visual references told her she was flying straight and level. Looking to the right side of the instrument panel, Carrie noted both the oil pressure and temperature were in the green. Then looking at the fuel gauges, she froze. Empty!

She tried to remember if she’d refueled at her first destination as Meghan had insisted. She hadn’t, but she was still flying. She turned up the radio’s volume that she had turned down immediately after taking off from her first destination. The chatter on CTAF—common traffic advisory frequency—was annoying and interfered with her responding to all the texts and calls she had received. Turning the volume to the maximum, she heard nothing. She leaned over and checked the ammeter. It was pegged to the left, showing discharge. She had a dead battery and no radio.

She knew why this was happening. She, ordinarily a levelheaded woman, had let her emotions get the better of her. She was in a jam because she’d told what she rationalized was just a little white lie about the cell phone. And she had lied to herself about the wedding. She knew before taking off that Ted and the bimbo were going to be wed while she was in the air.

During the last ten minutes, Carrie’s anger about the wedding had given way to fear. Normally a rational person, she had been reacting irrationally. Now she was paying for her lapse in judgment. She had no radio to call for help, and her iPhone’s battery was dead. Worse, she hadn’t any idea how much fuel the plane had left.

Carrie looked at her watch and then her log. She figured that she had been flying for at least two or more hours, but unfortunately she hadn’t leaned the engine, nor reduced power for cruise flight to reduce fuel consumption. And truthfully, she had no idea how long she’d been

flying. She had been burning more fuel than she should have. If she hadn't taken her phone...she started to rue—but stopped. Beating herself up wouldn't solve her immediate problem.

That's when she saw the river.

Glancing at her flight plan and her chart, she was puzzled as she flew over a river. Peoria was supposed to be on her right. There was no city on her right. Then Carrie panicked when she realized she was supposed to call Peoria approach control for permission to transition their air space.

Then in the distance, Carrie spotted a city on her left. She did everything to keep from panicking further. She talked to herself as a way of keeping calm. As she flew closer, she knew the city wasn't Peoria. It wasn't large enough and she spotted no airport south of the city. She looked below at the river and began wondering if that could be the Mississippi. She was further south and west than she realized.

As Carrie flew over the city, she couldn't find anything that indicated its name other than one sign on a building's roof that read, *Gem City Business College*. That's when she spotted a plane flying east of the city at a lower altitude. As she flew above and behind the other airplane, she saw it—an airport with three runways. She didn't know if it had a tower or not, and didn't care. All she wanted to do was get on the ground and safety.

She lined up with one of the runways that appeared to be in a southeast direction and made a straight-in approach. Carrie couldn't call nor could she use her landing light to indicate her intention. Meghan would have rated her landing an F. She merely flew into the concrete, then bounced several feet in the air before settling down. She didn't care.

An hour later, Carrie was ready to fly back to DuPage, regretting how she'd deceived Meghan after all the years of preaching she did to her daughters about honesty and truthfulness. Later that evening, she finally told her daughters what had happened.

"Oh, Mom, I'm so sorry," Caroline said shaking her head after hearing her story.

"Bullshit." Meghan shouted. "If you hadn't taken your cell, you wouldn't have gotten into trouble."

“Okay, I did, so what? At least I found out what a bunch of assholes I have for friends.”

“Sooner or later, you would’ve found out, but it would’ve been better if you had found out later when you weren’t a threat to any one, or to yourself,” Meghan insisted.

Carrie saw the quick look Caroline gave Meghan. She went white. “Oh, my God.” She looked from one daughter to the other. “You two were at the wedding, weren’t you?”

“Mom...” Caroline started to say.

“Answer me!” Carrie stood with her hands at her side made into fists.

“Yeah, we were.” Meghan admitted it in a matter-of-fact voice.

“Why?” Carrie continued looking at her daughters, stunned.

“Mom...”

“Shut up, Caroline. You want to know why, Mom? Because he’s our father and he asked us to be there, that’s why.”

“I don’t believe this. You sent me off on that...that...that wild good chase just to get me out of town. You got me out of the way. What did you expect me to do?”

“Truthfully, we...no...” Meghan shook her head. “Not we, I...I didn’t know what you’d do.”

Carrie fell into a chair. “I...”

“Mom...” Caroline said in a soft voice. “...you really haven’t been yourself ever since Dad walked out. The school even asked you to take a medical leave.”

“You expected me to cause trouble?” Ignoring Caroline, Carrie stood and faced Meghan. “He asked you to do this, didn’t he?”

“Mom...” Caroline started to say and moved back.

“Didn’t he?” she shouted and stepped closer to Meghan.

“You’re a loose cannon, and today’s action proved it,” Meghan shouted in return.

“I don’t believe this.” Carrie stepped to the other side of the room. “My own daughters turning against me.”

“Not daughters, Mom, daughter. Caroline wanted no part of this. It was just me and Dad.” Meghan’s jaw jutted out in defiance.

Joseph A Wellman

“Dear God, after all I’ve done. First my husband turns against me, and now my own daughter.”

Carrie sat quietly for a moment before jumping up and slapping Meghan in the face.

“Get out! Get out!”

“Mom...” Caroline started to say.

“Pack your bags and get the hell out of my house!”

Meghan hesitated.

“Did you hear me?”

Meghan started for the door.

“I never want to see your face again. You’re no better than that asshole father of yours. Get out.”

“Mom,” Caroline pleaded, “She’s leaving next week for Afghanistan.”

“I don’t care. Get out! Get out! Get out!”

Three days later Meghan stood at the door. “I came to say goodbye.”

Carrie slammed the door in Meghan’s face.

Chapter Seven

Marist Flight 212

In-Flight

Carrie settled herself into the captain's chair and adjusted the safety belt and shoulder strap as best she could.

"Is there anyone you'd like to have in the first officer's chair? It's standard airline operating procedure that two people are always in cockpit. Either you choose someone, or I'll appoint someone," Sondra said.

"Get my friend Lynne."

"I'll get her."

Carrie found the head set, but before putting it on, she began examining all of the instrument dials. Even if she had put on the headset, she wouldn't have heard the latest warning from air traffic control about flying too close to an approaching cell. She had no idea that a passenger had altered the plane's frequencies.

As she inspected the control panel, she began doubting she could land this plane. An image of the Lockheed Tri-Star crashing at Sioux City, Iowa, flashed through her mind. Is that what my landing will be like? Is that how we'll end up?

"Where do you want me?" Lynne asked as she stepped into the cockpit.

"There," Carrie answered, pointing to the empty seat.

"What are you going to do?" Lynne sat and adjusted her seatbelt and shoulder harness.

"As soon as you're set, I'm declaring an emergency. And put on that headset. I want you to hear everything's that's being said."

"Okay. Carrie?"

"Yeah?"

"You okay?" Lynne asked.

Carrie responded with a firm, "I have to be."

"Carrie, I trust you, and I know you can do it. I know it."

"Thanks. Wish I..." She stopped. "I'll do my best."

As Carrie settled into the cockpit, Sondra, in the plane's cabin, keyed the phone to make an announcement.

"Ladies and gentlemen, give me your attention."

She waited and within seconds everyone was listening.

"First of all, get in your seats and buckle up," Sondra instructed. After several seconds, she continued with, "Do we have any police officers on board?"

The only hand that was raised belonged to Marty Watts. "I'm a former Chicago detective."

"Thank you. Just in case we need some form of security, I am designating the two Marines and Mr. Watts as air marshals."

"You can't do that," John Scott yelled.

"As a matter of fact, I can. As of this moment I'm the ranking, active, senior aircrew member, and I can act in the absence of the captain. Any questions?" Honestly, Sondra didn't know if this was true or not, but in an emergency someone had to take charge, and she was going to do it. She would do everything she could to save the passengers except fly the plane.

After she asked for questions, several hands went up. Sondra pointed. "Yes."

"Will we still land in Chicago?" a coach passenger asked.

"I don't know." Sondra shook her head as she answered.

"Will we be landing soon?" another passenger asked.

"I don't know that either, but we need to be prepared. We'll let you know just as soon as we know anything."

"Is she calling for help?" an elderly man asked.

"Yes."

"What can we do?" It was a question that most of the passengers wanted an answer to.

"Just stay in your seats, and keep those seatbelts buckled. And no bathroom breaks unless absolutely necessary," Sondra said.

None of her answers were reassuring, but then again she had no answers.

"We'll be using the escape chutes when we land. All those sitting next to an emergency exit onto the wing, if you feel you can't open that door, please let me know now. If I don't think you can do it, I'm

moving a person into that seat who'll be able to open the door. If you're sitting next to an emergency exit onto the wing, start reading those directions. Don't wait until it's needed. If you have questions, raise your hand."

Sondra stopped and motioned for a couple of passengers to buckle up.

"Every child will have an adult accompanying him or her to and down the emergency chute. We'll also make sure all senior citizens will have a younger person assigned to them. If you think you're going to need assistance, let one of us know. That's all for now. Thank you."

Looking at the passengers, Sondra saw on their faces the fear of what was awaiting them.

"Look!" One of the passengers on the left side of the plane pointed to something outside of his window.

"What?" another answered.

"There, off our wing. There're jets out there."

Passengers simultaneously looked out their port windows. Those on the other side stood and tried to find the jets.

"We're saved," someone shouted.

"How's that?" another passenger asked. He received no answer.

"Mommy, why are the jets out there?" seven-year-old Amy Whiting asked.

"So they can shoot us down if we get too close to a big city," eleven-year-old Mitch teasingly answered.

"Mom, is that true?" Amy asked.

"No, dear, they're here to help."

"How? What can they do?" Mitch countered.

"I don't know," Margaret said quietly. "I don't know."

Many of the other passengers wondered the same thing.

Marty, the former police detective, leaned close to his neighbor and whispered, "That boy may be closer to the truth than he realizes."

Frowning, Marty's neighbor glanced at Mitch and whispered back, "They wouldn't do that, would they?"

"Yeah, I think they would."

The man made the sign of the cross.

Shari ran toward the forward galley area where Sondra stood checking with the doctor and his patients.

“Did you hear? There are fighter jets out there.” Shari pointed out the window.

Sondra moved back into first class and glanced out a window at the jets. Seeing most of the passengers on both sides of the plane standing and trying to get a look at the accompanying aircraft, Sondra boomed into the overhead PA system, “Everyone, back in your seats and buckle up. Now!”

Most of the passengers settled back into their seats. Some were more hopeful now, but they weren’t sure why. What could the jets do?

“Dear,” Anne Koster said to her husband. “Could those jets really help us?”

“They might be able to help our pilot land by giving her instructions,” Harvey answered.

Anne squeezed Harvey’s hand. “That’s good to know.”

The eighty-year-olds were the passengers who had traded seats with the Marines, in appreciation of the military men’s service to their country.

Sondra rushed back to the cockpit. “Carrie, you need to do something, now! We have fighters along side of us. Use that radio,” she urged.

“Are there fighters out there?” Lou Musolino’s overweight neighbor asked, pushing his fleshy body against Lou as the man leaned over and tried peering out the window.

Lou glanced out the window seeing the fighter far off the seventy-three’s wing.

“I only see one,” Lou responded.

“What does it mean?” Lou’s neighbor asked.

“It’s a sign,” someone shouted.

A sign? A sign of what, Lou wondered? Irrationally, he wondered if this was his punishment as foretold by his grandmother.

Lou wanted to get up and run, but he couldn't have moved even if he wanted to. His overweight neighbor hemmed Lou in as he sat next to the window in row sixteen. Besides where was he going? He not only wanted out of his seat, he wanted out of the plane—but he was trapped.

He had no one to blame but himself. He could've made some excuse as to why he couldn't come home for his parents' fiftieth anniversary party. As it was, he feared the reception he would face. The one he feared the most was from his grandmother. She would probably spit on him and call him a lot of Italian names that he wouldn't understand. Yet, she was the one who was responsible for the predicament he was in.

Louis's grandmother had wanted a priest in the family. When he was born, his grandmother swore he had a birthmark in the form of a cross on his body.

"Look. There, right there on his body's a cross. That's a sign from God. This baby is blessed and destined to be a priest. God has chosen him," his grandmother preached to all who would listen. From that moment on she babied and spoiled him.

However, when Lou was twelve he changed his mind after being kissed romantically by a thirteen-year-old girl at a birthday party. That night at the dinner table he made a grand announcement.

"I'm no longer going to be a priest. I'm going to date girls and someday get married."

Slowly his grandmother left the table, went into the kitchen and returned carrying a large butcher knife. She placed the knife in Lou's hand and put the point on her chest.

"Now, plunge the knife into my heart. You already killed me with your declaration, so you might as well finish it. Kill me and put me out of my agony." Lou's grandmother closed her eyes and made a sign of the cross.

"Grandma, no! I don't want to do this." He threw the knife on the floor and hugged her. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'll be a priest."

"You are a good boy. You will be a good priest," his grandmother said returning the embrace and blessing his decision.

Two years after Lou's ordination, his grandmother was damning Lou for leaving the priesthood and marrying a woman he loved.

“She’s nothing but a slut. A jezebel. A whore. You are not welcome in my sight. I spit on you. I curse you. I curse her.”

She spat on Lou getting most of it on his shirt since she was too short to reach his face. “God will punish you for this! He will. You just wait.” She again spat on Lou. “May you rot in hell.”

Lou wondered if this trip on a doomed airliner was his punishment as foretold by his grandmother. Punishment for what? Leaving the priesthood? Disappointing his grandmother and his family? No, he felt it was about what happened two days before he left San Diego.

“Lou, I think you’re making a mistake,” Janet said while she folded shirts for Lou to pack in his suitcase.

“This isn’t the right time for you to meet the family,” Lou insisted.

“Why? Because it’s a happy time and I’ll spoil it, is that it? Are you ashamed of me?”

“Oh, my God, no.”

“Then what is it?” Janet asked as she faced Lou with arms crossed across her chest.

“There’ll be a big fight, a lot of yelling, and...and it’s supposed to be a happy time,” he said walking away from Janet because he knew she was right.

“Will there ever be a time for me?” Janet got in front of Lou and stopped him from ignoring her. “I think your family means more to you than I do. I think you’re sorry you ever left the church and married me.”

Janet started out of the bedroom, stopped, turned and faced Lou. “Are you sorry you married me, Lou?”

She didn’t give him a chance to answer.

Glancing out the plane’s window, he realized now he loved her more than he loved...more than he loved...more than he loved his family. He finally admitted it. She was right. She should’ve been with him. But he was glad she wasn’t.

Chapter Eight

Kansas City Air Traffic Control Center

Olathe, Kansas

2:10 p.m. Local Time

“Kansas City, Air Guard five-twenty-five.”

“Go ahead, Guard five-twenty-five,” Greg replied.

“There doesn’t seem to be anyone in the cockpit.”

“No one?” Greg asked dumbfounded.

“No one...wait, it looks as if someone is there. I see movement.”

“Stand by, Air Guard,” Greg radioed and tried the airliner again.

“Marist two-one-two, Kansas City.”

Yet again, he received no response. What the hell is going on? Greg wondered.

“Kansas City,” Air Guard radioed, “we’re getting too close to that cell. We’re moving away. Has the airliner been warned about being close to that cell?”

“Air Guard, they have been warned, but they’re not responding.”

Chapter Nine

Marist Flight 212

In-Flight

“Carrie, you’ve got to call someone,” Sondra shouted.

“Give me a chance, Sondra, will you? They’re not going to shoot us down, are they?”

The words were barely out of Carrie’s mouth when she heard the sound of a thousand hammers pounding on the plane.

“What the...” Carrie blurted out, looking frantically at Lynne.

“Hail!” Lynne yelled.

Without warning the plane lurched upwards at least a thousand feet. The passengers’ screams could be heard in the cockpit.

Sondra was thrown backward, tripping over the two prostrate pilots and landing on her back momentarily stunned.

“What’s going on?” Lynne shouted holding on to the arms of her chair.

“I don’t know...” Carrie’s comment wasn’t finished as the plane dropped almost a thousand feet or more and thumped as if it had hit a hard object or the ground. Then it lurched upward again, whiplashing the plane’s contents at the same time.

In the cabin, those passengers who hadn’t followed Sondra’s instructions to take their seats and to buckle their safety belts were tossed about, hitting their heads, arms and bodies against the ceiling, the bulkheads, or other passengers. Overhead storage bin doors popped open when the plane suddenly stopped after dropping more than a thousand feet. Luggage flew out of the overhead bins knocking into passengers and filling the aisle with debris.

Sondra, unable to move, was hit in the face by a heavy briefcase, which broke her nose and left huge gashes on her cheek and head. Trying to stand, she was thrown to the floor as the plane lurched upward—only to be slammed down again. Her face and chest were covered in blood. She decided to stay on the floor until the plane settled down.

The Last Hours of Their Lives

During the first updraft, Dan embraced Susan and held onto her while the plane gained altitude, only to be slammed downward. She buried her head on his chest and held him tightly. At no time did she scream or say a word.

But other passengers screamed, shouted and cried when the plane lurched upward, only to lose as much altitude as it had gained, slamming once again against an invisible hard surface.

Doctor Brickman, who was monitoring the captain and hydrating the first officer, fell across the two pilots when the plane lurched upward. A coffee pot flew off a burner narrowly missing the doctor but hitting the captain in the head, causing a gash that bled profusely when the plane lost altitude and slammed down against that invisible wall.

Two passengers who were in the bathrooms were severely injured. One passenger received a fractured jaw and cheekbone when she was slammed against the sink. The other passenger received injuries when her head smashed against a sidewall and the door, forcing it open. She was found unconscious partially out of the bathroom. Other passengers received arm and head injuries from suitcases flying out of the bins, or their heads hitting the armrests.

Several passengers reported neck injuries from a form of whiplash as the plane was tossed about in heavy turbulence. Bloody noses and lips sprouted everywhere. When the plane finally stabilized, all that could be heard were moans and crying. The uninjured attempted to help those in need. The plane reeked of vomit, blood, flatulence, and soiled underwear.

Shari, who had been in the aisle checking on a passenger, was thrown to the floor on the first updraft, but ended up on the ceiling when the plane lost a thousand feet—only to be slammed to the floor. There, she was hit in the face by a brief case that came flying out of an overhead bin. For a moment, she lay dazed on the floor of the plane.

In the rear of the plane, Barbara tripped over a suitcase lying in the middle of the aisle and twisted an ankle. She tried getting up, intending to help the women who had been in the bathroom, but decided to stay where she was until the plane settled down.

As soon as the plane passed by the thunderstorm cell and was no longer responding to the up and down drafts, Dr. Brickman wrapped

the captain's head with several cloth napkins. Seeing one of the nurses tending to Sondra, he said to the RN, "When you're finished with her, redo that bandage on the captain's head."

Then he headed to the main cabin and those passengers who needed medical help the most. Passing his wife, she screamed, "Richard, where're you going?"

"Where do you think?" he shouted.

"You can't leave me. Who'll take care of me?" Maria cried.

Richard never answered as he headed into the coach section of the plane.

Kevin started to move out of his seat to see what he could do to help, but he stopped and slid back. He feared if he did anything, sooner or later his name would be mentioned, and that would bring the real police. He stayed in his seat.

"My wife!" a passenger shouted. "She's stuck in the bathroom." He got out of his seat and started for the rear of the plane.

Barbara, hearing the man's shouts and seeing him walking toward her, yelled, "Sir, stay where you are. I'll check on her. Stay in your seat and keep your seatbelt buckled." She limped toward the bathrooms, favoring her right leg.

Norma, one of the nurses who had gone immediately to Sondra's aid, had grabbed a towel and was trying to stem the bleeding from Sondra's nose and the gashes on her cheek and head.

"I've got to check on the passengers," Sondra said, trying to get off the floor.

"Not until I take care of these cuts and that nose. Looks like you broke it, too."

Sondra continued struggling.

"Stay put until I take care of your injuries," Norma, the nurse, ordered.

"No, I need to make another announcement. Help me stand," Sondra said as she made a great effort to pull herself upright.

Norma helped Sondra stand up, and gave her the handset for the PA.

"Give me your attention. If you need help, please wait for one of the nurses, the doctor or one of the flight crew. If you can, assist those

who need help. And clear the aisle so the doctor and nurses can move about.”

“Get that bitch out of the cockpit,” John Scott screamed as he started to move toward the cockpit. “I could do better than what she’s doing.”

Marty Watts grabbed John’s arm and forced him into his seat. “And stay there,” ordered Marty. John sat and held his wife’s hand.

“We don’t need any phony heroics.” Marty glared at John.

“Sorry” was all John said without looking at Marty.

“Good.”

Marilyn, the woman next to Kevin, wiped the tears from her face and asked, “What happened?”

“More than likely we flew too close to a cell,” Kevin ventured.

“A what?” She looked out the window.

“Cell, thunderstorm.” He mumbled his answer.

“How do you know?” Jonathan asked. “You’re not a pilot, are you?”

“What? No. I just happen to know a little about the weather.” Kevin stared straight ahead, cursing himself for opening his mouth.

“Is that what those are?” Marilyn indicated large towering cells off on the side of their plane.

Kevin glanced out the window. “Yeah.”

“What do planes do about them?” Marilyn asked.

“Stay as far away as possible.” Kevin answered.

Jonathan looked hard at Kevin. “You sure you aren’t a pilot.”

Shaking his head, Kevin refused to look at either Jonathan or Marilyn as he responded. “I have a couple of friends who’re pilots. They told me what it was like flying in or too close to a thunderstorm.”

He thought about that time over Memphis when he ran into a thunderstorm ferrying a Mooney to the new owner. Luckily, it only lasted about five minutes, but he couldn’t hold altitude nor could he control the plane. He’d thought he was going to die.

“Oh,” Jonathan said, but he didn’t seem convinced.

Amy Whiting pulled on her mother's sleeve. "Mommy?"

"Yes, dear."

"Mommy, I..."

"You okay?"

Amy shook her head and looked as if she was about to cry.

"Oh, my God. Did you get hurt?" Margaret started checking Amy, who shook her head.

Without looking at her mother, the little girl said in a low voice, "Mommy, I peed in my pants."

"Oh, honey, it's okay." Margaret pulled Amy onto her lap as the girl began softly crying.

"What's wrong with her?" Mitch asked.

"Mitch, for once in your life, shut up."

Mitch's head snapped up, but he remained quiet.

The doctor and one of the nurses were tending to the most seriously injured with a number of passengers helping out. Norma patched up Sondra as best she could.

"That'll hold for now, but those gashes will need stitches. Your nose will have to be reset once we're on the ground."

"I'm okay. Got to get back to the passengers," Sondra said and stood. With her blouse and jacket covered in blood and her head wrapped in gauze, she moved down the aisle consoling the passengers.

"What do we have?" Sondra asked Shari who sported a large lip, the result of a briefcase hitting her in the face.

"Nine serious injuries. The others are mostly bumps, bruises and scrapes. The doctor's in the back of the plane with the two seriously injured women who were in the bathrooms at the time of the turbulence. He says they need to get to the hospital. Barbara's been hurt, too."

"What's wrong with Barbara?" Sondra asked.

"Something or someone fell on her leg," Shari said opening a first-aid kit. "She's having a hard time walking."

"After I talk with the doctor, I'll see how she's doing."

The Last Hours of Their Lives

Sondra took stock of the plane. The cabin and passengers were a complete mess.

In the cockpit, the first thing Lynne said was, “Carrie, what happened?” Her face was still ashen and her hands shook.

Looking about and seeing the towering thunderheads, Carrie guessed what it was. “I think we either flew through or got too close to a thunderstorm.”

Carrie remembered Meghan pointing to an approaching storm while they stood next to the Cessna trainer. Meghan had said, “Stay away from storms. Best bet is to stay on the ground or get on the ground. You’ll live longer.” She and Meghan had stayed on the ground.

Lynne looked ahead and saw more thunderheads that appeared to be in their flight path. “What are you going to do about those?” She pointed to the towering cells dead ahead.

Carrie didn’t bother to answer. First thing she did was reset the transponder code to seven-seven-zero-zero, the emergency code that would set off alarms at air traffic control. Then she pressed the microphone button on the yoke.

“Mayday, mayday, mayday. Marist...” she stopped. She didn’t know the plane’s number. “Marist Airliner declaring an emergency. Please, we need help.”

She waited and heard nothing.

“What’s wrong?” Lynne asked.

“Don’t know. Thought I’d get an immediate response. There’s nothing.”

She tried again. “Mayday, mayday, mayday. Marist Airlines declaring an emergency.”

“Are you on the right frequency?” Lynne asked.

“I think so. That’s the frequency that was there when I sat down. It must be the one the pilots were using so it has to be a good one.”

She looked at both radios but couldn’t figure out which radio was active. She tried again with no success.

“We should at least have had a reaction to my transponder change.”

Carrie was puzzled. Worse, she was becoming frenzied. Without communication, how was she going to land the plane, and where?

“Carrie, that fighter is getting closer,” Lynne warned.

The fighter was still a safe distance away, but it appeared to be looking them over. *Damn it*, she thought, *what am I going to do? I’ve got to do something*. She felt frantic.

Sondra’s bloodied appearance shocked both Carrie and Lynne when she stepped into the cockpit. “Have you contacted anyone?”

Carrie merely shook her head.

“For God’s sake, Carrie, get help. We need help. We need to get on the ground. We have a lot of injured people back there. Badly injured.”

“Sondra, we’ve got a problem.”

“A problem?” Sondra stepped closer. “What kind of a problem?”

“I can’t raise anyone. Something’s wrong with the radios.” Carrie threw up her hands in frustration.

“That bastard...” was all Sondra could say before she turned, heading for John Scott, grabbing his shirt and yanking him off his seat. “What did you do to the radios?”

“Nothing...”

“Let him alone,” Francine yelled at Sondra.

Ignoring Francine, Sondra screamed at John. “You son of a bitch.”

As she raised her right hand, John cringed, and placed his hands in front of his face in anticipation of Sondra’s slap. Before she could slap him, Todd was at her side.

“Ma’am.”

Sondra stopped, relaxed her grip on John’s shirt and stepped back.

“Sir?” Todd said to John. “What did you do?” Todd placed his arms on either side of John on the seat’s armrests.

“Nothing.”

“Sir, I’ll ask you again. What...” Todd lowered his head until his nose was inches from John’s nose so that John could clearly see the day-old stubble and scabs adorning Todd’s face. “...did you do to the radios?”

John didn’t look at Todd as he mumbled, “I changed the frequencies.”

“You bastard. You really screwed us,” Todd shouted.

“But I was trying to find someone. Really, I was.”

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“So you say.”

For a moment, Sondra didn't move. She knew what changing the frequencies meant. Todd was right. They were more than screwed. They were royally fucked.

“We got a big problem,” Sondra said at the cockpit door. “The frequencies were changed.”

“What does that mean?” Lynne asked.

“It means I have no idea what frequencies the pilots were using. I don't know what they were, or how to find them. I don't have any way of contacting anyone.” Carrie's voice cracked.

“What are we going to do?” asked Lynne.

“I don't know,” Carrie said.

Chapter Ten

Kansas City Traffic Control Center

Olathe, Kansas

2:15 p.m. Local Time

“Kansas City, Air Guard five-twenty-five, they appear to have survived a tremendous amount of turbulence, up and down drafts. Have you had any contact with them?”

“Negative,” Greg replied. “No transponder and NORAD.”

“We’re moving in again to get a better view of the cockpit,” the Air Guard officer said.

After several minutes had passed, Air Guard radioed, “We do see what appears to be people in the cockpit, but we can’t tell any more than that.”

“Air Guard, continue your escort.”

“Will do.”

Chapter Eleven

Conference Room

Washington, D.C.

3:35 p.m. Local Time

Around a large conference table in an undisclosed location, several men and women sat in a range of varied attire, indicating the meeting was the result of an emergency summons. Those in attendance were representatives of the various federal, security and military agencies. Almost all of them had received the same phone call or text message about thirty minutes earlier.

We have a situation that requires our immediate attention. Attendance is mandatory.

After the last person had rushed in and was seated, Lucas Hanson, a tall, white-haired man of about sixty-three years of age rapped the table and cleared his throat. He was a member of the NSA, the National Security Agency.

“All of you have been briefed as to why this hasty meeting was called. All attempts to establish contact with Marist flight two-one-two have failed. In addition, the transponder has been shut off. At no time has Marist Flight two-one-two made contact of any nature with air traffic control or even with their dispatch center. It continues on its way toward Chicago. One speculation is it may be headed for the beach area along the North Shore where thousands of spectators are gathered to watch an air and water show, or it may be headed toward Wrigley Field where more than forty-thousand fans are watching a Cubs game. Hanson stared at those around the room, making sure he had impressed them with numbers cited.

They were suitably concerned. He continued. “It would be catastrophic should that plane crash into either one of these two places. That cannot and will not be allowed to happen, if indeed the aircraft has been taken over by a hostile force. A second speculation is that the plane, if it has been taken over by a hostile force, is being piloted not by an amateur, such as those who attacked the twin towers, but is piloted by a professional who will be able to descend through cloud

cover and attack his target. However, a dissenting view is that this may not be true. They cite as evidence the plane's failure to avoid flying close to a thunderstorm cell, leading them to believe something has happened on the plane that's not a terrorist activity. Comments or questions?"

The questions and comments came from around the table.

"Did ATC lose radio and transponder contact at the same time?" Colonel Meyer of the US Air Force asked.

"No. Radio contact was lost first, then some time later transponder contact was lost," Judith Kapinski of ATC—air traffic control—answered.

"The fact that the transponder was turned off is suspicious. It's exactly what the nine eleven terrorists did," said Special Agent Anderson of the FBI.

"They could've had a major electrical problem. It happens," suggested Colonel Meyer.

"Mr. Hanson, you said there has been no contact with the airline's dispatch center, right?" Tompkins, a security advisor to the president, asked.

"Yes. They are as much in the dark as we are."

"Have the pilots been investigated?" Karen Walters of the TSA—Transportation Security Administration—asked.

"They are currently being investigated, but so far no flags have been raised," said Anderson of the FBI.

"Any thing suspicious about any of the passengers?" Tompkins inquired.

"Nothing that showed up during their screening," Anderson replied.

"Any activity in San Diego, Agent Anderson?" Tompkins asked.

"Negative except for thirty people who are in various hospitals as a result of an apparent food poisoning at a restaurant. It's being investigated. Two elderly gentlemen and a child have died as a result of the poisoning. That's how serious it is."

"Is it possible both pilots ate there and are now suffering food poisoning?" asked Colonel Meyer.

"It's being investigated," Anderson replied.

“What if we’re wrong? What if both pilots are suffering from a catastrophic food poisoning and can’t fly the plane? What if no one on board is capable of flying the plane or using the radios?” Tompkins suggested as he looked around the table.

Hanson regained control of the meeting. “Even so, we can’t wait, because if the flight has been compromised, by the time we make a decision it may be too late for us to avert a strike on either of the two possible targets. That we cannot allow. If we’re to exercise an extreme measure, it has to be done sooner than later. And we have to be considerate of the debris. We can’t down the plane near a metropolitan area. It has to be done over an area with minimal population.”

“Mr. Hanson, what if we’re wrong?” Tompkins asked.

“We pray and hope we aren’t, and that’s why we’re here today.”

“Colonel Meyer, are forces ready to carry out the order if it comes?” Special Agent Anderson asked.

“A stealth fighter is moving into position.”

“Is the flight being monitored in the air?” Karen Walters asked.

“Two National Guard fighters are shadowing the plane in addition to ATC radar,” Judith Kapinski answered.

“Mr. Hanson, what about repercussions?” Anderson asked.

“That’s not our responsibility.” Hanson glared at the FBI agent. “We’re here to offer the best possible advice, based upon dependable evidence that this flight represents a definitive immediate threat. Once a decision has been made, it is our responsibility is to carry out the order, if and when it comes.”

“Wouldn’t a terrorist, especially if the plane were being piloted by a professional, try to maintain this as a normal flight until the very last moment?” Tompkins asked, looking around the table at each of the participants. “Isn’t he giving away his intentions? Personally, I find too many ifs in this situation. I say let’s wait and not make a hasty determination. I would hate to sacrifice one-hundred-and-thirty-two lives unless we’re absolutely sure that this plane is a definite threat.”

“There’s another factor to consider. If the plane was compromised, wouldn’t the terrorists be jeopardizing their own mission by subjecting the plane to thunderstorm turbulence? I agree with whomever came up

with that idea,” Walters of the TSA put in. “I think we should be very cautious.”

“Are you suggesting that we not act on any order that comes?” The colonel appeared shocked.

“I’m saying, Colonel, something’s not right. I mean there’s a possibility both pilots ate at the same restaurant and can no longer carry out their duties,” said Walters, shaking her head.

“If that’s the case, why didn’t they notify their dispatcher, or more importantly air traffic control. Why didn’t they indicate through their transponder the difficulty they were in before they were struck down?” Kapinski ventured.

“But if both became sick at about the same time, how could they call?” Tompkins countered.

“Then who turned off the transponder if both pilots became sick at the same time?” Colonel Meyer asked, looking directly at Tompkins.

“Perhaps one of the sick pilots inadvertently turned off the transponder when they were trying to let ATC know they had a problem” Tompkins countered.

The colonel dismissed Tompkins’ theory with a wave of his hand.

“Mr. Hanson, what about the flight attendants? Don’t they know how to use the radios?” Anderson asked.

“We discovered that most flight attendants don’t know how to use the radio,” Hanson admitted. They all looked at one another in dismay.

“Mr. Hanson, aren’t deadheading pilots usually on board most flight?” Anderson asked.

“Not necessarily, and definitely not on this plane.”

“What about military or private pilots?” Tompkins asked.

“We don’t know,” Hanson answered.

“Are there any indications that an act of this nature was being talked about in or out of the country? Were there any warnings, Mr. Hanson?” Tompkins asked.

“The CIA says no.”

“Colonel, were the monitoring fighters able to discern anything about the plane?” Walters asked.

“Only that there seemed to be activity in the cockpit.”

“What do we advise?” Hanson asked as he looked around the table.

“Any of you remember the Korean airliner that was shot down by the Russians?” the Air Force colonel asked.

“But that was because the Russians thought the Koreans were flying in their airspace. It’s not the same thing,” Hanson explained. “Besides it happened during the Cold War when tensions were high.”

“Without getting into all the politics of that event, the Russians considered the plane, real or not, a threat. At this moment, Marist two-one-two is a threat, and we can’t ignore it,” Colonel Meyer stated firmly.

“But over two hundred innocent lives were lost because of that Russian misread,” Tompkins emphasized. “Let’s wait at least another ten or fifteen minutes before recommending any type of action.” He signed deeply.

“Okay, we’ll wait ten minutes before advising immediate action. Do you concur?” Hanson asked. He looked at each of the participants as they all nodded their agreement. “If, after ten minutes, nothing has changed, we’ll recommend immediate action.” This time they all verbally agreed.

Meanwhile, at thirty-three-thousand feet, a stealth fighter moved into position behind two-one-two and locked onto the plane. The pilot waited for the word that he hoped wouldn’t come. But if it did, he would carry out his orders. At this moment, he was waiting for two separate orders: one to arm his air-to-air missiles, and the second to employ them. He could visualize the scene as the missiles tore into the seven-thirty-seven’s engines. Once the explosion tore open the wings, the plane would be engulfed in a massive fireball as the fuel ignited. Debris, both human and metal, would litter the ground, spread over a wide area.

After ten minutes had elapsed without any change in the plane’s behavior, Mr. Hanson forwarded their recommendation onto that person or those persons who would be responsible for ordering that the plane be shot down.

“How much time do we have?” Colonel Meyer asked.

Joseph A Wellman

Hanson looked at his watch before answering. "Ten minutes or less to carry out the order if it should come."

Chapter Twelve

Marist Flight 212

In-flight

“Carrie, the fighters are moving away from us. Is something going on?” Lynne asked.

“Don’t know. Besides, we have more important problems than worrying about those fighters.”

In her gut, she feared what might be happening. She remembered once when she and Meghan were discussing the possible hijacking of another airliner. That’s when Meghan said, “Mom, if it ever appears that a plane’s been hijacked and is heading for a major metropolitan area, they’re not going to play around. It’ll be shot out of the air.” Meghan’s response had shocked her.

“Damn it,” she muttered in frustration as she reexamined the radios. “I’ve got to find a way to let ATC know what’s going on.”

“Carrie, will those fighters do something, like shoot us down if we don’t contact them?” Lynne asked with a worried frown.

“I don’t know. All I know is I got to find some way of contacting air traffic control—or somebody.”

“Will they do something?” Lynne persisted at a most inopportune time.

“Yes! Damn it, they will.”

“I don’t...”

“Lynne, listen to me!” She faced Lynne and jabbed the air with a finger. “If they send up fighters in Chicago to escort a little two-seater Piper Cub plane back to its airport for violating a presidential restricted zone, they sure as hell will do a lot more with a seven-thirty-seven that’s not communicating with them. We’re a threat, and we’ll stay a threat until I can get hold of somebody to tell them just how screwed up we are. Anything else?” she asked as she reexamined the radios for the umpteenth time.

Lynne had nothing more to say, so Carrie turned her attention to the transponder.

“The numbers are correct,” Carrie said, talking mostly to herself. “Seven-seven-zero-zero means an emergency.” She looked closer. “Son of a bitch. Did someone turn it off? Why would they do that? Maybe it happened when they carried the captain out of the cockpit.” She turned on the transponder and crossed her fingers. “Oh, God, I hope it works. It has to work.”

Looking at the radios, she suddenly slapped her head, and yelled, “Idiot.”

“What...” Lynne asked in surprise and shock.

“I just remembered. Meghan made me write an emergency frequency on my cross-country flight plan. She told me if I couldn’t raise anyone in an emergency, call one two one point five zero. It’s monitored throughout the country.” She shook her head adding, “We might be saved after all.”

Lynne remained quiet, but looked hopeful.

Carrie changed both radios to one two one point five zero because she didn’t know which radio was active. Keying the microphone she began as calmly as she could.

“Mayday, mayday, mayday, Marist Airlines declaring an emergency. Please, can anyone help us? Is anyone hearing this? Mayday, both of our pilots are unconscious. We need someone to help us. Mayday. Help!”

At a flight service station in Wichita, Kansas, Cliff Anderson, an attendant who was monitoring the emergency frequency, couldn’t believe his ears. Usually the emergency calls came from small planes, not from an airliner. *Wait a minute*, he thought. *This could be a hoax. Need to check this out.*

“Aircraft calling Guard. Say again.”

Hearing the response, Carrie made a fist and punched the air, shouting, “Yes.”

Carrie had gotten Marist’s flight number from Sondra and was ready when a response came to her emergency declaration.

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“Marist flight two-one-two is declaring an emergency.” She said it as forcefully as she could.

“Marist, why aren’t you contacting air traffic control?” Cliff asked warily.

“Because they aren’t responding to any of my calls. The plane’s frequencies were changed. I don’t have any idea what frequencies were being used when I took over.”

“What’s wrong with the pilots?” Cliff asked.

“They’re unconscious.” She was beginning to lose her cool dealing with Cliff and his suspicions.

“You say they’re unconscious?”

“Yes, both of them. Listen! We’re in desperate need of help!” She explained their situation tapping a finger on the yoke as she looked ahead at a towering thunderstorm. They had to get help. She didn’t want to fly through that cell.

“Marist, I need more information. What’s the captain’s name?”

“I don’t know his name. Goddamn it, he’s unconscious. The first officer’s unconscious. We need help.”

“Can you ask someone?”

“What in the hell’s wrong with that bastard?” Carrie yelled before keying the microphone. “Sir, we need help,” she shouted. “We need immediate help. We don’t have time to waste. We’re flying close to a thunderstorm, and if we don’t get help we’ll fly through it. We need help now. We have many people onboard who are hurt. Please, please help us.”

“Marist, stand by.”

“Carrie, what if he doesn’t believe us?” Lynne asked.

Carrie stared straight ahead for several seconds before responding. “He’ll believe us. He’s got to believe us.”

Cliff explained the situation to his boss, who at first said, “You’re shittin’ me.”

“No, she sounded serious and scared. I think we need to check this out,” Cliff told him.

“Okay, let me call Kansas City.”

“Miss, stand by—we’re checking with Kansas City,” Cliff radioed.

“Hurry,” Carrie said, staring ahead at a huge thunderstorm cell.

Joseph A Wellman

Five minutes later, Cliff's boss was back with him. "You still have her on the line?"

Cliff nodded.

"Tell her to call Kansas City on one two five point seven five. They've been looking for her. Apparently, the whole damn country's been looking for her."

"You mean this is for real?"

"Big time."

"Holy shit."

Chapter Thirteen

Kansas City Air Traffic Control Center

Olathe, Kansas

2:40 p.m. Local Time

Greg had watched the movement of the + signs as Marist two-one-two reacted to the turbulence and finally settled and resumed flying on its original heading.

“Jesus, glad I wasn’t on that plane,” he commented to no one in particular before adding, “American Airlines contact Kansas City on one three seven point five.”

“American Airlines contacting Kansas City on one three seven point five.”

An alarm sounded. Flashing on Greg’s screen were the numbers and the word 7700 EMRG. Marist two-one-two appeared to be back with them, or at least partially as the +s were replaced by the emergency code.

“What the hell...”

“We saw it, too. Any contact?” Joe asked as he stood next to Greg.

“Negative.”

In the Stealth fighter, the pilot heard, “Stand down! I say again, stand down!” The announcement was followed by an identification code. The Stealth dropped back, but still maintained a watch on two-one-two.

“Thank God, I hope,” the Stealth pilot mumbled.

At the Watch Desk, Terry shouted to Joe, “We got contact with Marist. They should be calling within seconds.”

“What! How?” Joe asked.

“A woman called using the emergency frequency.”

“Wonder why?”

“Wonder why what?” Terry asked.

“Why the emergency frequency?”

“Better that one than none at all,” Terry said relieved that contact had been re-established with two-one-two.

Greg finally heard Carrie's emergency call and responded. "Marist two-one-two, Kansas City, state the nature of your emergency."

As Carrie reported, the controller sat with an open mouth while Joe merely uttered an oath.

"You're a pilot, aren't you?" Greg asked.

"Barely," Carrie said.

"Marist, I don't understand your answer," Greg responded with a frown.

"I only have forty hours."

Greg stared at his scope before gawking in shock at Joe.

"How many hours did she say she had?" Joe asked.

"Forty."

"Dear God." Joe's comment sounded like a prayer.

"Amen to that," Greg agreed, shaking his head.

"Jesus, we're going from the pan to the fire," Joe uttered.

"Marist two-one-two, are you sure neither one of the flight crew can fly and land the plane?"

"Neither one can fly the plane. I think both of them are unconscious."

Greg mouthed 'shit' before asking, "No other flight crew is on board?"

"No."

"Marist two-one-two, how many souls on board and how much remaining fuel do you have?" Greg asked, standard questions when an emergency was declared.

For a moment he heard no sound except for "Kansas City, American fifteen forty with you."

"American fifteen forty, stand by."

"American fifteen forty, standing by."

"Tim, I'm passing two-one-two to you."

"Okay," Tim answered.

"Marist two-one-two, you're leaving my sector. You need to contact the next controller on one three two point eight five. Please write that frequency down."

"Frequency one three two point eight five," Carrie responded and motioned for Lynne to write down the frequency.

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“Correct. That’s one three two point eight five,” Greg repeated for emphasis. “Good luck, two-one-two.” Greg crossed his fingers and felt somewhat relieved.

“Thank you,” Carrie said.

“Here.” Lynne handed Carrie a slip of paper with the new frequency written on it. “I double-checked the numbers when he repeated them.”

“Thanks.” Carrie changed the frequency on both radios and called, “Marist two-one-two on one three two point eight five.”

“Marist two-one-two, stand by,” Tim said as he finished with another flight.

“Marist two-one-two,” Carrie acknowledged.

After dealing with another airline, Tim returned to Marist two-one-two.

“Marist two-one-two, you have declared an emergency. How many souls on board and what remaining fuel do you have?” Tim repeated Greg’s earlier question that Carrie hadn’t answered.

After a moment’s hesitation Carrie responded with, “I don’t know.”

“Stand by,” Tim said. “What do we do?” he asked Joe, the floor supervisor.

“We’ll call Marist’s dispatcher for all the information we need,” Joe said.

“Kansas City, we need help,” Carrie cried. “We need to get on the ground. We have many people who are hurt including the pilots.”

“How many are injured?” Tim inquired.

“I don’t know. Let me check,” Carrie said.

After a moment’s hesitation, Carrie radioed, “In addition to both pilots, we have nine serious injuries with fractures and head traumas or concussions. We have more than a dozen minor injuries. We have a doctor on board who says we need to get all the sick and injured to a hospital as soon as possible. The doctor says it’s extremely critical that the captain, who’s suffered a stroke, get medical help immediately.”

“Marist two-one-two, stand by.”

“Marist two-one-two...” The voice belonged to a pilot on one of the flights being monitored by Tim in his sector. “Don’t touch

anything, especially the radio, until you're advised by a Marist pilot or air traffic control."

"Okay," Carrie said looking at the instrument panel and thinking, *I wouldn't know where to begin.*

"I need to talk to Terry," Joe said as he started away from Tim's station.

"Joe..." Tim shouted before Joe had a chance to go too far. "...we got a bigger problem right now. Look." He pointed to the screen and the plane's flight path headed for a towering cell that topped at least forty-five-thousand feet. Marist two-one-two was flying at thirty-three-thousand feet.

"Jesus" was all Joe said.

"Kansas City, Air Guard five-twenty-five. They're headed straight for that cell."

"Air Guard, we're working on it."

"If they fly into that cell they'll never make it. I doubt even a professional could make it. We got to get her to go around that cell," Joe said.

"Joe, how in the hell am I going to do that?" Tim asked.

"Tell her to change the plane's heading."

"You think she can do that? Good God, she's just got forty hours in a small plane."

"Tim, you're a pilot. Tell her she's got to change her heading or we got one lost plane."

"How? I don't know a damn thing about a seven-thirty-seven." Tim sighed. As a single engine, instrument-rated pilot, he felt the pressure building. Christ, don't screw this one up, he thought.

"I got to see Terry," Joe said leaving Tim.

"DEN's still declaring this a national emergency," Terry said. "Just got off the phone with 'em. They want her on the ground as soon as possible."

"Jesus, what do they want us to do?" Joe asked. "Perform a miracle?"

"First things first," Terry answered, adding, "Get her away from that cell. I'll get a hold of Marist and find out how much fuel and how

many souls they have on board. And we need to get a pilot to talk her down.”

“How are we going to get her around that cell? She doesn’t know how to work the systems.”

“Tell her to take it off autopilot and fly it around the cell. What other choice does she have?” Terry said.

“Jesus, you think she can do it?” Joe asked.

“Doesn’t have much choice, does she?”

Joe went back, stood next to Tim, and told him what he had to do. Tim mouthed the word, “What!”

“I’ll tell you what Terry told me. She doesn’t have much of a choice, does she?”

“What if she loses control, then what?” Tim asked.

“What’s going to happen if she enters that cell?” Joe asked.

“Okay.” Taking a deep breath, Tim radioed, “Marist, you need to avoid that thunderstorm cell in front of you.”

“How?” Carrie answered, fully aware of the cell in front of her.

“You’ll have to take it off autopilot.” Tim radioed.

“How?” Carrie’s voice sounded plaintive.

“Two-one-two, stand by,” Tim said, staring at the scope wondering what his next move should be.

Meanwhile, Joe returned to the Watch Desk.

Seeing Joe, the first thing Terry said was, “Once she gets past that cell, we have to find a place for her to land.”

“Where?” Joe asked.

“Away from any populated area that’s for sure. And she’ll need a lot of runway.” He shook his head. “She has to have at least ten thousand feet of runway. Maybe more.”

“Where can we put her? I mean, take a look at the weather chart. She can’t make an instrument approach. We need something that’s definitely visual. Do you see anything?” Joe asked, pointing to the large monitor.

“Start looking,” Terry yelled as he grabbed a phone. “Talk to Sandy Oehl. That’s why we have a meteorologist.”

At the Marist dispatch center, Sam, the dispatcher who handled Marist two-one-two, still didn't know the situation with his plane except it appeared contact had been re-established with air traffic control. Before he had a chance to make a call to Kansas City, though, they were calling him. With an incredulous look, he listened while Terry explained what was happening with his flight. Once finished with ATC, Sam placed another call. He realized the head of Marist would want to know what was happening to one of his planes. He would want to be in direct control.

"Carrie, I'm seeing lightning in that cloud," Lynne said looking at Carrie and back at the looming thunderstorm in front of them.

"I know."

"Marist two-one-two, Kansas City," Tim called.

"Yes?"

"Do you know anything about changing the plane's heading with the autopilot?"

"I'm sorry, I don't have a clue," Carrie answered looking at the instruments and controls.

"Marist, stand by," Tim radioed.

"Carrie, what are you going to do?" Lynne asked.

"I don't know." She shook her head in dismay as she continued searching the various controls and instruments.

"Can't you fly around it?" Lynne asked, looking first at the towering cell looming in front of them, and then at Carrie.

"I don't know. I don't know anything about this plane." She threw up her hands in frustration.

"Marist, you need to take the plane off autopilot and fly it around the cell, now," Tim radioed.

"How...how do I do that?" Carrie asked as she glanced again at the controls.

An unidentified voice from a pilot in another airliner in Tim's sector said, "On the yoke there's large button. Push down on it and that'll disengage the autopilot."

“Thank you.”

“Whatever you do,” the voice continued, “make shallow banking turns. Once you’re finished with your turn, use your attitude and heading indicators to keep your wings level.”

“Okay.”

“Use and trust your instruments to stay level,” the unidentified voice cautioned.

“Thank you.”

“Marist, did you copy that?” Tim asked, feeling relieved that someone had come to two-one-two’s aid.

“Yes.”

“Good. You had better act now,” Tim said. He added, “Thanks to whoever gave the advice.”

Tim’s comment was answered by several clicks as someone keyed his microphone button several times.

Carrie spied the button on the left side of the yoke. At first she tried moving the yoke without disengaging the autopilot, but nothing happened. Taking a deep breath, she pushed down on the switch and turned the yoke to the left. The plane was banking. The plane was turning. It was changing direction.

Oh, God, what have I done? I’m flying the plane, she thought and panicked. All of her training was visual, using the horizon as a reference, even though the plane had an attitude indicator. The attitude indicator was basically unnecessary as long one could reference the horizon. At thirty-three-thousand feet with a cloud layer and towering cells all around Carrie didn’t see much of a horizon. Without the horizon as a reference, she wasn’t sure if her wings were level or if she was descending. She could be turning, even though the wings appeared to be level. She could be climbing or descending.

Lynne gripped the armrests on her seat and stared straight ahead as the plane began turning. “Carrie...”

“I’m busy.”

“Sorry.”

Use your instruments, Mom. Use your instruments, Meghan had screamed at her. Which instruments? Then she remembered a time Meghan had put her under an IFR training hood. Want to know if

you're turning? Look to your attitude indicator, the directional gyro, and the altimeter. Don't trust your body or your senses. Use all of your instruments. Trust your instruments. *It's up to you, Carrie, it's up to you. Everything's in front of you. Use it!*

It was as if Meghan were next to her instead of Lynne. She could hear Meghan talking to her, sometimes yelling at her. She remembered Meghan telling her about a problem some pilots had departing over the lake from Meigs Field in Chicago on a hazy day, losing the horizon and crashing. "If they had relied on their instruments, more than likely they would have survived."

For a moment, Carrie felt nothing but guilt as she remembered all that Meghan had taught her, and the acrimonious way she had treated her daughter when she'd departed for Afghanistan. With the help of her therapist, Carrie had eventually realized and accepted, partially, that her daughters had a right to attend their father's remarriage wedding.

With everything happening so fast, Carrie didn't have time to acclimate herself to the seven-thirty-seven instrument panel. Everything was right in front of her. She found the instruments she needed. The attitude indicator, an instrument used to inform the pilot of the orientation of the aircraft relative to the horizon, indicated she was still banking about five degrees, which she corrected. She then checked the heading indicator, noting that her heading remained constant for several seconds—she was flying with the wings level. She was flying on a more northerly heading. Good. *So far, so good. Check the altimeter. It's remaining constant. How about airspeed?*

"Oh, my God."

"What?" Lynne shouted and re-gripped her armrests.

"We're doing four-hundred-and-thirty miles an hour. No, that's wrong. It's knots, idiot, it's knots." She shook her head. "Doesn't make any difference. I'm flying a plane that's going four-hundred-and-thirty miles or knots an hour."

"Is that good?" Lynne asked, alternating looking toward Carrie and outside the plane.

"Yeah, I think it is. Lynne..." She pointed out the window to her right, "...let me know when we're past that thunderhead."

"How far past?" Lynne asked.

“Further than the last time when we were hit with that turbulence,” she suggested.

Lynne peered out the side window. “How do I know when we’re far enough away from the storm?”

“Guess!” After a moment she added, “Sorry.”

“I think...I think you can go back to your previous heading,” Lynne said while staring toward the cell.

“Shit!” Carrie yelled.

“What?” Lynne asked as she gripped the armrests.

“Didn’t write it down. I’ll check with Kansas City.”

She wiped her hands on her slacks before calling Kansas City. “Kansas City, I did as you told me. I took the plane off autopilot to fly around that thunderstorm ahead of us.”

“Marist two-one-two, you need to turn right to a heading of zero five zero.”

“Zero five zero.”

“Do you know how get it back on autopilot?” Tim asked.

“No.”

“Marist two-one-two, stand by.”

“Lynne, from now on be ready to write down what I tell you or anything the controller tells us to do.”

“I’ve been doing that...” Lynne stopped, realizing the tension Carrie was under, and just confirming what she wanted her to do. “Okay.”

As Carrie turned to the new heading, she felt herself on the verge of a panic. The plane wasn’t flying itself; it wasn’t on autopilot. She was flying it. Sweat rolled down her sides. She wiped an arm across her brow and inhaled deeply, trying to get her heart to slow down. *Don’t panic. You panic and all is lost*, she thought.

“Lynne, I don’t know what to do,” she confessed.

Lynne wasn’t sure what to say or do for Carrie. Lynne didn’t have a clue as to why she was in the cockpit or what she could do to help her friend.

“You’re going to do it. They’ll send help or at least tell you what to do. Carrie, I’m confident you can do it. You’re doing great.”

Joseph A Wellman

“Glad you’re so sure. You have any idea the speed a plane like this is doing when it touches down?”

“You mean when it lands?”

“Yeah.”

Lynne merely shook her head.

“I don’t either, but it sure as hell will be doing a lot more than the sixty-five knots I was doing when I landed the planes I flew.”

“Carrie...”

“Yeah, I see it. Guess we got to get around another one. Kansas City...”

Chapter Fourteen

Salt Creek Country Club

Wood Dale, Illinois

2:40 p.m. Local Time

Bob Johnson, the head of Marist Airlines, and three friends were getting ready to tee off on the eighteenth hole at the prestigious Salt Creek Country Club. This afternoon Bob was unusually reflective. Normally he'd be chomping on his cigar, frustrated at the way his game was going, moaning about all the bad breaks he was getting, and how the golf gods hated him. Actually, he was a lousy golfer, but today Bob was playing a game he always dreamt about.

He felt entitled to take some time off and play golf. After all, he was the president of Marist Airlines, a position that suited him and his dynamic alpha personality. A former Navy fighter pilot, he'd left the service when, because of age, they moved him from the plane to behind a desk. After leaving the Navy he got an MBA from the University of Chicago and started work with Marist Airlines. Within a short period of time he'd worked his way up the ladder and eventually he was picked to head the airline that had been having all sorts of labor and FAA problems. After five years, he'd managed to turn around the airline so they were beginning to show a small profit. Bob Johnson was the talk of the airline industry.

Ten minutes after teeing off, the foursome stood on the eighteenth green waiting for Bob to putt for a birdie, a rarity for him. As he started to stroke the ball one of the rangers drove up in his cart and stopped almost on the green, shouting, "Mr. Johnson, Mr. Johnson!"

Distracted by the shout, Bob hit the ball too hard and it went flying more than eight feet past the hole.

"You son of a bitch," Bob screamed at the ranger. "You just cost me the game of my life."

With the putter raised over his head, Bob charged at the ranger.

"Mr. Johnson, Mr. Johnson, there's call for you," the ranger yelled, keeping the cart between himself and Bob. "It's your wife and she says it's an emergency."

“My wife?” His wife was never to call him while he was on the course.

“Yes, sir, your wife,” the ranger said, holding the phone toward Bob while he stayed behind the cart ready to run for his life. “She said it’s an emergency and you’d want to know.”

The Marist head snatched the phone out of the ranger’s hand and yelled, “This better be damned important.”

As he listened, he fell against the side of the cart. “Say that again.” He wiped his head. “Where?” He dropped the putter. “Jesus.” He jumped into the cart and headed for the clubhouse.

As Bob drove his BMW toward Marist headquarters, he made four quick calls.

“Jim, Bob. Want to give you a heads up.” Bob then preceded to let James Sparks, head of the legal department, know what was taking place over the Kansas and Missouri skies.

“Jim, what do you think?”

“You mean how bad will it be?”

“Yeah.”

“If she craters it, bad, very bad.” Said the legal expert. “If she manages to land safely, not too bad. We’ll have lawsuits, but probably not as many. It all depends upon if there are any fatalities, and the number and seriousness of injuries. And they’ll go after the captain for sure and his medical condition, trying to prove this was preventable. We’ll have our work cut out for us.”

“What about the FO?” Bob asked.

“Depends. If he’s one of several who got sick at the restaurant, they probably won’t go after him, but hell, you never know what they’ll do. It’s a crapshoot.”

“Yeah, just what I thought. Thanks, Jim.”

“Keep me informed.” After a moment’s hesitation, Jim said, “Bob?”

“Yeah?”

“What are their chances?” Jim asked.

“Truthfully, Jim?”

“Yeah.”

Sighing, Bob said, “Like a snowball in hell.”

“Major fatalities?”

“Total.” He shook his head as he imagined the fiery crash.

“Jesus.” It wasn’t said as a prayer.

Bob’s second call went to Sarah Willer who headed their account with a public relations firm. “Sarah, you need to get on this right now. I don’t hear anything’s on the news yet, but be prepared. We’ll let you know where they’re going to land, but sooner or later, the news is going to get out and we need to be all set. In fact get a statement ready to go as soon as it’s decided where they’re going to land. Let’s be on top of this. Let’s be ready for the vultures.”

“We’ll get right on it,” Sarah promised.

After Sarah called in her staff—even though it was a Sunday afternoon—one of the first things they did was to cancel all radio and television advertising. The next thing Sarah did was put her staff to work trying to figure out ways to stem the bad publicity that was sure to hit Marist.

Bob’s third call went to Randy Mickelson, his chief pilot. “You heard?”

“Yeah, and I’m heading in.”

“Randy, can she do it?” Bob shouted.

“Long enough runway it’s possible, but...”

“But what!”

“Anything shorter than ten thousand it’s very doubtful. Too many things can go wrong. Hell,” Randy lamented, “even the professionals have been known to screw up a short-runway landing.”

“Exactly my thoughts. Christ, we don’t need this, not at this time. We were just beginning to pull our cojones out of the fire. Damn!”

“Sort of ironic that it’s two-one-two, isn’t it?”

“Why’s that?” Bob wanted to know.

“This was two-one-two’s last flight. It’s being retired. It’s the oldest plane in the fleet.”

“Oh shit. They’ll use that in their lawsuits, won’t they?” Bob asked.

“More than likely.”

Bob placed a fourth call to Heather Stark, vice-president of operations. First he filled her in on the emergency, then he said, “Get

Joseph A Wellman

your people together and be ready to handle the relatives and friends who'll be showing up at O'Hare regardless of what happens. They'll want answers and I want them to have answers.”

Fifteen minutes later, Bob stormed into the dispatch office and went straight to Sam, the dispatcher who was handling two-one-two.

“What's the latest and how do we get them down safely?”

Chapter Fifteen

Kansas City Air Traffic Control Center

Olathe, Kansas

2:55 p.m. Local Time

ATC and Marist were in a quandary.

On a conference call involving Bob Johnson and Randy Mickelson of Marist Airlines, and Terry Jackson and Joe Bradley of air traffic control, the main question was, “How do we get her down?”

Joe, the floor supervisor, added, “And where?”

“We’ll need one helluva long runway, preferably twelve- to fifteen-thousand feet,” Randy, the chief pilot for Marist, said.

“That may not be available,” Terry, who headed Kansas City’s Watch Desk, commented. “Let’s get a weather update. Sandy?”

Sandy Oehl, who was the meteorologist for the center, joined the conference call.

“You’re looking at basically instrument conditions throughout the whole area, including, as you know, Chicago. There is one bright spot. In western Illinois and eastern Missouri we have a temporary clearing but it won’t last long before it’ll be hit again by another round of thunderstorms. A band of thunderstorms has moved through the area and on east toward Jacksonville and Springfield, Illinois. There’s a glimmer of hope in that area and only that area.”

“How much time do we have?” Bob asked.

“An hour or less, and I’d say it’s more on the less side. The new round of thunderstorms looks even worse than some of the others that went through the area earlier today.”

“So what do we have?” Bob asked.

“We have an airport. It’s in Quincy, Illinois, and it meets one of our criteria. It’s away from any populated area, but...” Joe hesitated.

“But what?” Bob demanded.

“Its longest runway is only seven-thousand feet.”

“No way!” Randy shouted, causing Joe and Terry to hold their phones away from their ears. “You can’t have a forty-hour pilot land on a seven-thousand-foot runway. More than likely she’d land long

leaving only three-thousand feet or less to bring the plane to a stop. No, it won't work."

"Then where in the hell does she go?" Terry demanded.

"If you're going to get her in Quincy," Sandy stated, "you better start getting her down now."

"Why the hurry?" Bob asked.

"If she starts down now she can do most of her descent visually, but if you wait, she'll have to fly through several-thousand feet of clouds. Can she fly on instruments?" Sandy asked.

"No," Terry replied.

"What about another airport?" Randy asked.

"Any other airport means descending through heavy clouds and rain, and making an instrument approach and landing," Sandy said.

"And if we have her fly west, we have the problem of fuel and weather," Randy commented.

"Look, people on that plane are seriously sick and injured. They need medical attention now, especially the captain. The longer you wait with a stroke, the worse the consequences will be. We don't have time or a choice. We have to take what's available. Let's go to Quincy," Bob Johnson said emphatically.

"Gentlemen," Terry asked, "what are your suggestions?"

For a moment, they all remained quiet before Bob said, "As I just told you, it's Quincy. We have no choice. Let's go for it."

"Can you patch me through so I can talk her down?" Randy asked.

"Sorry, but we can't do it," Terry said. "The systems aren't compatible."

"How are we supposed to get her down if you can't patch me through?" Randy insisted with a slightly open mouth.

"We have a controller who's a pilot. He could relay your instructions..."

"No way!" Randy shouted. "First of all, is he rated for a seven-thirty-seven? If not, it's more than useless. It's a case of the blind leading the blind. Utter disaster. How in the hell could he relay instructions if he has no idea where anything is located in the cockpit?"

The others could hear the apprehension in Randy's voice.

“All he would have to do is get her through a layer of clouds, that’s all. What other choice do we have?” Joe asked.

“Terry, what about one of the fighter pilots?” Bob asked.

“Once we established the plane was no longer a threat and we had things under control, they went back to base.”

“Damn, at least they would’ve been able to coach her down by watching her movements. Were they regular or reserve?” Bob asked.

“Reserve, and they don’t fly commercially,” Joe, the floor supervisor, answered.

At that moment, Sam, the Marist dispatcher, approached and waved at Bob and Randy, indicating that he had a possible solution.

“Kansas City, can you give me a minute?” Bob requested.

“Make it fast,” Terry said.

“Okay, Sam, what do you have?” Bob asked.

“We have a flight that’s ready for boarding in Kansas City. We could cancel the boarding and get the plane in the air with just the pilots. If we get two-one-two to slow down and descend, allowing three-seven-four to catch up, they could visually talk her down.”

“Jesus, that might work,” Bob said.

“It’s our only chance,” Randy concurred.

“Randy, any danger three-seven-four could be compromised?” Bob asked.

“Not if they maintain clearance.”

“What about the passengers?” Sam asked.

“Get our people together and come up with a solution, but at this moment I’m not too concerned with those Kansas City passengers. Once they find out why they were bumped, they’ll understand.” Bob looked from Sam to Randy. They nodded their approval.

“Okay, let’s run it by Kansas City.”

Two minutes later, the group decided Marist flight three-seven-four would be launched immediately and vectored along side two-one-two, allowing one of the pilots to talk Carrie to a landing.

“All right, let’s get busy,” Terry said. “As soon as three-seven-four is airborne we’ll vector it next to two-one-two.”

“Two-one-two has to lose altitude and airspeed. Who’s doing that?” Joe asked.

“Thought we decided Tim would do it by relaying information from Marist’s chief pilot. You set Tim up, and I’ll alert the Quincy airport and the local authorities about the emergency landing. Questions?” Terry asked.

“Yeah,” Joe said. “Think Quincy can handle it?”

“Why not? They must have an emergency plan available. That’s an FAA mandate.”

“But for something like this?” Joe persisted.

“With a heads-up alert, my guess is they’ll be more than ready. Okay, let’s get busy,” Terry said as he grabbed a phone.

Joe stopped next to Tim. “We’re moving you to another station so you can work just with Marist two-one-two.”

“Okay, what’s going on?” Tim asked.

Joe explained what was happening. Once three-seven-four was in position next to two-one-two, Tim would be dealing strictly with Marist Flight three-seven-four.

“What did you say? I’m relaying information from Marist’s chief pilot?”

“Yeah. Here’s his number. He’s waiting for your call.”

“But...” Tim started to protest.

“Tim, this is their only chance. We got to get her down so three-seven-four can get next to her. We don’t have much time.”

“Yeah...” But as Tim reached for the phone, he couldn’t get an incident out of his mind and his pledge he would never do this again.

Tim, a single-engine instrument-rated pilot, was monitoring his section of low altitude flights when he received a distress call from a woman who said her pilot-husband was unconscious, and they were flying above the clouds. While Tim attempted to talk the woman—who wasn’t a pilot—through the overcast sky, she panicked, lost control and crashed, killing her husband and herself.

Tim berated himself for not giving her better instructions, but others told him he had done the best job possible. Tim swore he’d never talk another pilot down.

Chapter Sixteen

Kansas City International Airport

3:10 p.m. Local Time

Captain Keith Wright and First Officer Nancy Erickson were heading toward their gate for a flight to New York's Kennedy Airport when a Marist executive caught up with them.

"Keith, hold up. Need to talk to you and Nancy." Kirk Venverloth pointed to an office off to the side.

Keith frowned but stepped into the office.

Nancy nudged Keith and made a face that basically asked him what was going on. He shrugged and shook his head.

"We got a problem and you two are going to help us solve it."

Keith and Nancy exchanged glances, both of them wondering if they were being furloughed?

"Here's what's going on."

For the next ten minutes, Kirk explained the situation with two-one-two and how Keith and Nancy were going to help solve the problem.

"You mean..." Keith stopped as he tried to fathom two-one-two's predicament.

"Exactly," Kirk said.

"How are we going to help? We have a flight," Nancy said, glancing at her watch.

"You had a flight. Look, you need to get going. The plane's being prepped and all luggage has been offloaded. You've been given a priority clearance for takeoff, which is why you need to get on the runway."

"And you're sure we can do this?" Keith asked.

"Randy Mickelson says you can do it. Besides, you're our only hope."

Chapter Seventeen

Marist Flight 212

In Flight

“Marist two-one-two, Kansas City,” Tim radioed.

“Kansas City, Marist two-one-two,” Carrie replied.

“We have further instructions for you. You’ll be changing your frequency. Please write this down before changing the frequency. Let me know when you’re ready.”

Lynne held up a pen and a small notepad.

“Good...” Carrie said, adding, “...write down everything he says, will you?”

Lynne nodded and waited.

“Thanks.” After a moment’s hesitation, Carrie responded to the controller. “Kansas City, go ahead.”

“Change your frequency to one three five point seven five.”

“One three five point seven five,” she repeated as Lynne wrote down the new frequency.

“That’s correct,” Tim radioed back.

“Kansas City, Marist two-one-two is switching to the new frequency,” Carrie said as she changed the frequency.

Several seconds later Tim heard, “Marist on one three five point seven five.”

“Marist, we have some information for you. Another Marist flight will soon be joining you and you’ll be receiving instructions from them on landing. Until they catch up to you, I’ll be temporarily issuing instructions that come from the Marist head pilot. We need for you to slow your speed and begin a descent. You’ll be landing in Quincy, Illinois. Unfortunately, their longest runway is just seven-thousand feet. You’ll need to warn and prepare your passengers.”

“Did you say we’ll be descending?” Carrie asked with a slight tremor.

“That’s affirmative,” Tim replied.

Carrie and Lynne glanced at each other and then at the front of the plane and the blanket layer of clouds below them.

“Kansas City,” Carrie started to say as she stared at the cloud layer below them. “I can’t do that. I can’t fly through clouds.”

Back in the control room, Tim shook his head and uttered a small oath.

“Ma’am, you got around that large cell and you’ve been flying the plane ever since. You’re holding your course and speed. You just need to follow my instructions.” Tim thought for a moment before calling Marist again. “Ma’am, I’m sorry, but this is the only way it can be done. If you want to get to a place of safety, you’ll have to get through those clouds. I’m sure you can do it. You’ll be out of the clouds before you know it.”

Carrie swallowed, but at this moment her mouth was dry with very little spittle. “Okay.” Her response wasn’t spoken with confidence.

“We’re going to start descending through those clouds?” Lynne asked looking again at the layer of clouds under them.

“Have you ever flown through clouds?” Lynne said, glancing at Carrie and fearing the answer.

“No. Yes, one time Meghan had me fly through a large cloud without talking to ATC. Dangerous and stupid, Meghan said, but she wanted to give me an idea what it’d be like.”

“And?” Lynne asked with a worried look.

“Scary.”

“Marist, Kansas City,” Tim radioed.

“Yes?” Carrie said distracted by the blanket of clouds beneath them.

“What is your name? Mine’s Tim, Tim Scottsdale. Rather than constantly calling you Marist, I’d prefer to use your name. We’re basically on our own frequency now.”

“Carrie, Carrie Jansen. Thank you, Tim.”

“I’ll have instructions for you in just a minute.”

“We’ll be ready.” She really wanted to lay her head down on something, anything and forget about what she was about to do.

“I need to talk with Sondra. Would you call her?” Carrie said to Lynne.

“Sure.” Lynne picked up the phone, pressed a button hoping it was the right one and called for Sondra.

Within seconds, Sondra was in the cockpit, asking, “What’s going on?”

“We’re going to start descending soon, and we’ll be landing in Quincy, Illinois. I’ve been told it has a short runway so you better warn the passengers.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of them.” As Sondra responded, she, too, turned to look at the cloud layer below them. “How soon?”

“I don’t know.” Carrie shrugged and shook her head, adding, “As soon as I know, I’ll call you.”

“Thanks.” Before leaving, Sondra squeezed Carrie’s shoulder. Then she moved back into the interior of the plane and motioned to Shari and Barbara.

“Start checking all of the overhead bins again and make sure everything is secure, and I do mean secure. Check for anything that’s loose and could go flying about. And make doubly sure everyone’s belts are secured. More than likely it’s going to be a hard landing.”

“Soon?” Shari asked looking out a porthole that showed nothing but clouds underneath them.

“I don’t know how soon, but I do know we’re going to start descending, and it might get bumpy going through those clouds.” Sondra glanced out a window.

“Can she do it?” Barbara asked, clutching Shari’s arm.

“I pray she can. Besides what other choice do we have?” Sondra said in resignation.

Both Shari and Barbara swallowed, but showed no other emotion.

“Okay, get busy.” Sondra ordered.

“What are you going to do?” Barbara asked Sondra.

“I’m going to start moving people around and arranging partners for those who’ll need them.”

“What about the captain and the first officer? Where’re we going to put them?”

“We need to move four people out of first class. We’ll put the Scotts in those two empty seats in the rear of the plane, and move the Marines to the nurses’ seats. We’ll move the captain and first officer into first class seats with a nurse next to each one. We can’t have them

The Last Hours of Their Lives

blocking the emergency exits,” Sondra explained. “The nurses’ll be able to monitor them on the way down.”

“Won’t the Scotts object? I mean...” Shari started to say.

“Screw the Scotts. This is an emergency,” Sondra scoffed.

“Sondra, what about the Marines?” Shari asked.

“I’m sure they won’t mind. Besides I have a feeling they’ll be needed more in coach than up here if we have problems.”

“You’re doing what?” Francine Scott shouted. “No you’re not. We paid for these seats, and we’re staying.”

“Ma’am, this is an emergency,” Sondra said and motioned to Todd. “You have to move.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then the sergeant will assist you to the rear of the plane.”

Francine looked at Todd, then at her husband who had already stood up in the aisle and finally at Sondra.

“You’ll hear from our attorney,” Francine huffed as she stood and deliberately bumped into Sondra.

“Sergeant, escort her to her new seat,” Sondra said.

“With pleasure, ma’am, with pleasure,” Todd said with a smile.

“Ms. Jansen, Marist’s head pilot wants to know if you understand using pitch to control airspeed?” Tim asked, relaying Randy’s question.

“Pitch?” Carrie questioned. She immediately flashbucked to a time she and Meghan were practicing takeoff and landings. On the downwind leg, Meghan suddenly pulled the power and yelled, “You just lost all power and your battery’s dead. Land.”

She’d freaked, let the nose drop too far, increasing speed that she didn’t need as she headed toward the runway’s threshold. With no power, she couldn’t use her flaps to slow down. Everything was going wrong. She was moving too fast and would land too far down the runway to make a successful landing. Meghan eventually took over and demonstrated how to use the plane’s pitch to control airspeed.

“Too much speed, raise the nose—speed decreasing, lower the nose. Any time your power setting is constant, control airspeed with pitch. Understand?” Meghan had said.

Carrie understood as Meghan had drilled it home many times while Carrie practiced emergency landings at airports or from an altitude.

“Yes, Tim, I do understand how to use pitch to control airspeed,” Carrie responded.

“Good. I have instructions for you. Ready to copy?” Tim radioed.

“Ready,” Carrie responded and motioned for Lynne to start writing it down.

After Tim finished with the relayed instructions from the Marist’s chief pilot, he said, “Carrie, you can descend at your discretion, but I’d do it sooner rather than later.”

“Tim, are there any thunderstorms in the clouds we’re going through?” Carrie asked with apprehension as she looked at the blanket of clouds.

“Negative, but you will encounter some rain.”

“Thank you, Tim.”

Carrie wet her lips, inhaled deeply and said a short prayer. Afterward she berated herself for being a hypocrite—she had no God.

“Here we go,” she said to no one in particular. “You’ve got only one chance. Make it the right one.”

“What?” Lynne asked in slight puzzlement.

“Sorry. Talking to myself again.”

Carrie reduced the power setting according to the instructions she’d received from Marist’s chief pilot via Tim, and held the plane level, letting the air speed bleed off until it reached the speed she was to maintain during descent. Then she slowly lowered the nose and began descending from their height of thirty-three-thousand feet at fifteen-hundred feet per minute, using pitch control to maintain her airspeed.

Sweat ran down the sides of Carrie’s body, and she rubbed first her right hand on her slacks and then her left hand. She kept scanning the airspeed indicator, heading, rate of descent and the altimeter. *Keep scanning and stay on your instruments, but don’t fixate*, she kept telling herself. For some reason she felt Meghan was again with her. Oh, how she wished she had paid more attention when they were flying together.

“Carrie, we’re entering the clouds.” Lynne sounded fearful.

“I know.” She bit her lip. It was now just she and the instruments. That’s when she remembered a news story of a pilot taking off from an uncontrolled airport west of Chicago and flying into a low, overcast sky. Minutes later, the plane came spiraling out of the clouds, out of control, crashing and killing the pilot and his passenger. *Stay on your instruments, Carrie, stay on your instruments, or you’ll end up the same way.*

“Ladies and gentlemen, please give me your attention.” Sondra started her announcement just as the engines’ power settings were reduced, and it became evident to most passengers they were beginning to descend. For some passengers it marked the beginning of the end.

“Oh, my God, what’s going on?” a passenger screamed.

“We’re going down!” another passenger yelled.

“Please, stay in your seats. We’re descending to a lower altitude so we can begin preparation for a landing,” Sondra shouted.

“We’re in the clouds. Does she know how to fly in the clouds?” another passenger asked.

Several people had their rosaries in hand and were praying. Others held on to each other and cried, or sat numbed. Some passengers were reading their Bibles or prayer books.

“Somebody’s got to stop her or she’ll kill us,” a middle-aged man yelled and headed for the cockpit before Todd grabbed him and pushed him back into his seat.

“Stay there.”

“But...”

“Listen to me,” Todd said with his face inches from the man. “We can stay up here where the sun shines, but eventually you know what’s going to happen, don’t you? The plane’s going to run out of gas and then what? If we want to get home, we have to go down through these clouds. We’re going through these clouds one way or the other. I prefer this way. Understand?”

The man nodded, but his mind was elsewhere.

Susan gripped Dan’s arm and held on.

“It’s okay, we’re just descending so we can land,” Dan said evenly, hoping his reassurance would keep her calm.

She nodded and rested her head on his shoulder.

“Miss,” a grey-headed man said to Sondra. “May I offer a prayer? I’m a minister and it might help...”

“I...” Suddenly Sondra felt light headed and began sagging to the floor.

“Are you okay,” the minister asked.

Seeing Sondra sagging to the floor, Kevin jumped up, moved past Jonathan, the large man on his left, and together with the minister stopped her fall.

“Move over, so we can put her in your seat,” Kevin said to Jonathan.

Jonathan hesitated.

“Now!” Kevin yelled.

The man moved to Kevin’s seat, and Sondra was placed in his seat.

After a quick examination of Sondra, Dr. Brickman said, “More than likely she’s has a concussion. Probably caused by her hit on the head from that heavy briefcase.”

“What can we do?” Kevin asked.

“Put an ice pack on it and keep her active. Don’t want her going to sleep,” the doctor said.

“I’ll be okay,” Sondra muttered. “I’m feeling better already. I’ve too much work to do.”

“You’re going to stay right here for awhile,” Dr. Brickman insisted.

“But the passengers...”

“The other attendants will have to take care of them,” the doctor said with finality. “You have to stay put.” Looking at Jonathan and some of the passengers on the other side of the aisle, the doctor said, “Keep an eye on her.”

“Miss,” Kevin said to Shari, “do you have an empty seat in the back of the plane?”

“We did, but now the Scotts are occupying those seats.”

“Can I use one of your seats?” Kevin asked.

Shari hesitated. “I don’t know why not. Use the one in back for now. Tell Barbara I said it was okay.”

The Last Hours of Their Lives

Kevin moved toward the back of the plane, berating his vacillation. He had flown through clouds many times. He knew how to do it. He cursed his hesitation and labeled himself a damnable coward! But then a horrible image of being sodomized in jail flashed through his mind.

He knew from research he'd done for a term paper in college that he had all the characteristics that would lead to a sexual assault. He was white, blonde, slim built, and even at twenty-nine, still young looking. As long as he was in prison, he'd always be someone's sexual partner.

"Shari..." Sondra said as she grabbed Shari's arm. "...get Barbara. She's got to take over until I stop feeling lightheaded."

"I'll get her."

Shari found Barbara in the back of the plane, huddled against a bulkhead, her hands visibly shaking.

"Barbara, you have to take over."

"I can't. I just can't. You can't make me," she whispered. "I can't do it. You can't make me."

For a moment, Shari stared at Barbara. Then she reached out and hugged her. "It's okay."

Back with Sondra, Shari asked, "What do you want me to do?"

"Where's Barbara?" Sondra asked, looking past Shari.

"Says she can't do it."

"Oh." Sondra said it as if Barbara's response wasn't a surprise to her. "Prepare them for an emergency landing. Pair everyone up especially the elderly and the young, and make sure only able-bodied persons are manning the wing emergency exits, and they know how to open the doors. I'll help out as soon as I feel better. Sorry it's all up to you. If need be, designate some passengers to help you. Get that Marine sergeant or that former cop."

"Okay, I'll take care of it."

"Shari," Sondra took Shari's hand saying, "I know you can do it." She finished by squeezing the other woman's hand.

In the cockpit, Carrie kept focusing on the instruments. *Ignore the outside. Don't let that speed creep up. Watch your heading, damn it. Keep your wings level. Watch it, watch it, you're drifting. Speed's increasing. Damn it.* The questions and doubt started as the plane continued descending.

"You doing okay?" Lynne asked, glancing at Carrie.

"Yeah. Peachy keen," she said, wiping the sweat from her brow.

"Good." Lynne smiled and gave her a thumb-up.

"Marist..." Tim radioed, "...you're doing great. It won't be too much longer and you'll be out of the clouds."

"That's good." She frowned, thinking, *What happened to the first name basis?*

"Ladies and gentlemen, I need your attention," Shari said, using the plane's public address system. "Within the hour we'll be landing. I have no other way for me to put this, but we need to be geared up for the worst. More than likely, it's not going to be a smooth landing. We want everyone prepared, and everything, and I do mean everything, secured." She stopped and looked around the cabin. The passengers were all watching and listening. "Once I'm finished moving people around the cabin, I'll give instructions as to what you're to do before and during our landing."

As Shari moved about the cabin, she came upon Mrs. Whiting and her two children.

"Ma'am, I want you to take charge of your daughter when we move toward the emergency exits. Mr. Morgan," Shari indicted a tall, broad shouldered young man, "will take charge of your son."

"I can take care of myself." Mitch puffed out his chest and crossed his arms.

"Young man, you'll do what I tell you to do. Is that understood?" Shari said squatting and looking directly at Mitch.

Mitch avoided looking at Shari, but he knew she meant business.

"Yeah."

"What?" Margaret Whiting said, popping Mitch on the head.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Thank you."

Shari stopped next to Anne and Harvey Koster. “I’ve just informed the two Marines that they’ll be assisting you two as we exit the plane after landing. Okay?”

“I don’t think...” Harvey started to say when Anne interrupted. “That’s perfectly fine, isn’t it, dear?”

Harvey nodded.

One of the last things Shari did was to brief the four passengers next to the emergency exits on the wing.

“Tell me, how do you open the exit?” Shari asked each of the four passengers.

Satisfied that each passenger knew how to grasp the door controls and open the exit, she said to them, “Make sure whatever you do with the door, put it where it won’t interfere or be in the way of passengers exiting onto and off the wing. Understand?”

All four nodded and said yes.

“And don’t open the doors until you’re ordered to do so. Understand?” Shari asked making sure each of the passengers gave a verbal response.

Most of the passengers didn’t cause any problems for Shari. It could’ve been Shari’s firm demeanor. On the other hand, the positive response might have been due to the presence of Todd and Robert—the two Marines—and Marty Watts—the former police detective—who followed Shari throughout the plane. By the time she reached the rear of the aircraft, they were ready for the landing except for any last minute instructions.

As Shari moved up and down the aisle, rechecking the passengers, she stopped and sniffed. Smoke, she smelled smoke. Glancing around, she spotted a man and a woman puffing away on their cigarettes to the amazement of those passengers sitting close to them.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Shari yelled and motioned to the former police detective.

“Whadda you think I’m doing?” the woman with stringy hair replied blowing smoke in Shari’s face.

“You can’t smoke on the plane.”

“Why not? It may be my last cigarette.”

Joseph A Wellman

“Put it out, now,” Shari demanded as she leaned into the row and attempted to grab the cigarette from the woman’s hand.

The woman jerked her hand back and laughed. “Even a condemned man gets a final cigarette.” She again blew smoke in Shari’s face.

With a quick movement that surprised the woman, Shari reached in and snatched the cigarette away from the smoker, burning several of her fingers in the process.

“If you light up another cigarette, I’ll put you in restraints.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Try me.”

The woman’s companion immediately snuffed out his cigarette and mumbled, “Sorry.”

“Thank you,” Shari said with one last look at the woman.

The woman gave Shari the finger.

Chapter Eighteen

Quincy Baldwin Field
Manager's Office
3:10 p.m. Local Time

“Mr. Davis? I’ll see if he’s still here. One moment, please.”

Jerri Holthaus, assistant airport manager, ran outside hoping to catch Vern Davis, Quincy’s airport manager.

Seeing him by his car, Jerri jumped and waved at him. “Mr. Davis! Mr. Davis!”

Vern, hearing Jerri’s screaming, stopped and waited for her to come closer.

“There’s a phone call for you. It sounds important. He’s calling from the Air Traffic Center at Kansas City.” She stopped and took a couple of deep breaths. “He really needs to talk to you.”

“Did you get his number?”

“No, he’s on the phone now.”

Vern looked to the southwest and the darkening clouds beginning to show up on the horizon indicating another round of storms. Damn it, he wanted to get home and find out what was wrong with his sump pump. His wife had called while the previous storm was going through the area, saying the sump pump wasn’t working and water was starting to flood the basement. He wouldn’t have been at the airport on a Sunday at all, but he had a report to finish and get in the mail today.

“Mr. Davis?”

Slamming the car door shut behind him, he followed Jerri into the office and picked up the phone.

“Vern Davis.”

Vern listened, and the more he listened, the closer he moved toward his chair. Replacing the phone, he sat and did nothing for several seconds.

“Mr. Davis, is anything wrong?” Jerri asked.

“What?”

“Is...”

Vern motioned for Jerri to hold on for a minute as he grabbed the phone and made several quick calls before jumping up and heading for the door. "Get Schramm and Proctor on the phone."

"The mayor and sheriff?"

"Yes," he shouted as he ran out the door.

"What do I do when I..."

"I'll be right back."

Vern went looking for Bernie, his ramp worker and all-around handy man. He found him securing the doors to a large hanger.

"Bernie, get all those planes off the ramp."

Vern explained why he wanted a couple of planes temporary tied down moved further away from runway four two-two, then he headed back to his office, seeing Jerri standing at the door waving at him.

"Davis here."

"Vern, what's going on?" Charlie Proctor, sheriff of Adams County asked as he headed to the airport in his squad car. "I just had a call from Kansas City. They couldn't get hold of the mayor, so they called me. Something about an emergency landing?"

Vern explained the situation.

"Jesus. What a time for John to be on vacation. Has the fire department been notified?" Charlie asked.

"They're on their way."

"What about the Quincy police, and the volunteers?" Charlie asked.

"On their way, too," Vern said.

"Any idea how many fire trucks and ambulances we'll need?"

"More ambulances than fire trucks if she craters the plane," Vern answered.

"Vern, how many passengers are on a plane of that size?" Charlie asked.

"Can't say for sure, but about one-hundred-and-twenty to one-hundred-and-thirty. Could be more."

"Any idea when it's supposed to land?" Charlie asked, glancing toward the southwest. "That storm looks as if it could hit fairly soon."

"As yet they didn't have any definite time, but I suspect I'll hear in the next fifteen to twenty minutes."

“Think Blessing will be able to use the medavacs?” Charlie asked.

“Doubt it. Not with that thunderstorm moving in.” Vern also looked to the southwest and the blackening skies.

“Which runway will they be using?”

“There’s only one runway they can use. They can make a straight-in approach to runway four, or circle around and land on two-two. Unfortunately runway four two-two isn’t going to be long enough,” Vern said. He shook his head.

“Doesn’t matter,” Charlie said. “I’ll get ahold of the state police to shut down route 104. We’ll shut down all the other roads and get the people out of their houses that are on the four and two-two approaches just as a precaution. I’ve already called in all my off-duty deputies.”

“Good.”

“I’m almost at the airport now,” Charlie said. “See you in a few minutes.”

As fire trucks and ambulances sped to the airport, off-duty nurses and doctors were alerted as well as hospitals in Hannibal and Keokuk, although with the encroaching weather, their use might be curtailed.

“We need to find out whether they’ll land on two-two or four,” Vern said.

“What’s your guess?” Bernie asked as both he and Vern stood outside the terminal building.

“If it was up to me I’d have her land on two-two. She could use the VASI, the visual approach slope indicator. No way she could use the ILS—the instrument landing system—on four. Hell, I’ve got some instrument pilots who still have a problem using the ILS.”

Vern looked to the southwest at the darkening clouds and occasional lightning. “Sure hope to hell they make it soon. From all indications, that’s a bitch of storm coming in.”

Chapter Nineteen

Marist Flight 212

In-Flight

Carrie had no idea how long they had been descending through the clouds. It seemed as if it had gone on forever. All Carrie could do was focus on the instruments keeping a constant speed and heading. Her arms were getting tired. She didn't know how to use the trim that would ease the pressure. The process was nerve wracking, and she wondered how the passengers were doing. Her instructions had been kept to a minimum, and just enough to have her safely descend to a lower altitude.

“Carrie, we're breaking out of the clouds. I can see land.”

“Until we're clear of all the clouds, I'm staying on the instruments.” However, Carrie looked up and out the side. The plane was clearing a cloud layer, although she could see plenty of clouds ahead of them. She hoped the airport was in a clear area.

“Marist,” Tim, the controller called, “current barometric pressure is two niner point four five. You'll need to reset your altimeter to the current barometric setting.”

“Two niner point four five,” Carrie acknowledged looking at the altimeter that was and wasn't similar to the one in the Skyhawk. She found the knob and reset the altimeter to the current barometric pressure. She was now flying at seventeen-thousand feet, but she let her speed increase when she was looking for and resetting the altimeter. *Raise the nose just a little and you'll be okay. What had Meghan told her? Use pitch to help control your speed. Just stay on top of it. What do the commercial pilots do? Bet it's all auto and computerized. Keep your scan going. Don't fixate and don't go outside until you're clear of all the clouds.*

“Marist, three-seven-four will be joining you shortly on your right. However, we now need for you to get down to five-thousand feet. You'll also need to reduce your airspeed to two-hundred knots.”

The Last Hours of Their Lives

“Continuing my descent to five-thousand feet and reducing my airspeed to two-hundred knots,” Carrie radioed her acceptance of Tim’s instructions.

“Turn to a heading of zero one zero,” Tim radioed.

“Zero one zero,” she radioed back. “Lynne, please write those numbers down.”

She was feeling the strain of concentrating on flying the plane and being constantly on guard lest she slip up somewhere along the way and not be able to recover. She needed to reduce power. Glancing at her notes of information Tim had relayed from the Marist chief pilot, she slowly pulled back the throttles the required amount, waited with the nose level, and then let the plane begin descending at two-hundred knots.

Carrie wiped her face with the back of her arm and wiped her hands several times on her slacks. “Wish I had a towel.”

“Want me to call Sondra?”

“No, they probably have their hands full back there.”

“Two-one-two, from now on all of your instructions will come from one of the Marist pilots on three-seven-four. They’ll be coming up on your right and at a slightly higher altitude. They’ll be calling you on one two two point eight five. Please write that frequency down. I’ll be dealing with them as far as instructions from air traffic control. It’s been a pleasure. Good luck and God be with you.”

“Thank you, Tim, for all your help,” Carrie said, and changed the frequency as Lynne recited the numbers.

Lynne began looking to her right, hoping to see a large plane. “I don’t see it.”

“It’s probably flying higher and behind us as Tim said.”

“Got ’em,” Lynne shouted.

“Two-one-two, three-seven-four’s with you and we have you in sight,” Keith radioed.

“Glad to see you,” Carrie radioed back feeling slightly relieved.

While two-one-two was descending and changing course, seeing land brought both a sense of relief and apprehension for most of the passengers.

“Oh, my God, land,” Marilyn Thacker yelled as she looked out the window and uttered a quiet prayer.

“Where are we? There’s nothing but farmland, timber and hills,” one of the passengers commented as he peered out the window. “I don’t see an airport.”

“Oh, my God! My cell phone’s working,” Denise Mast screamed as she made a call to her dad.

Right away, all the passengers began checking their phones and started making calls. Seeing everyone starting to make calls, Shari went to Sondra’s side. “Shouldn’t I stop them? They can’t use ’em on regular flights.”

“What? They can’t be on their phones. Get on the PA and stop ’em,” Sondra yelled, squeezing Shari’s arm for emphasis.

Before Shari could make her announcement, Denise made contact with her father.

“Daddy?” Denise shouted, amid tears running down her cheeks. Her friend Julie was also making a call.

“Denise? My God, are you on the ground? Has the plane landed?”

“No, we’re still in the air. Daddy, hold on, they’re making an announcement.”

“Give me your attention,” Shari shouted. “Turn off those cell phones, now! You can’t use them until we’re on the ground. Please, turn them off now! You could be causing problems for our pilot.”

Shari couldn’t tell if those who had initiated calls were still connected.

“If I or one of our crew sees anyone using a phone, it will be confiscated. Am I making myself clear?” She motioned to Todd, Robert and Marty to start checking the passengers. “Our designated marshals will be checking to make sure everyone is complying. Please, get off your phones now.”

“For God’s sake, this may be our last chance to talk with a...a...a loved one. Jesus, lady, have a heart,” a passenger yelled at Shari.

The Last Hours of Their Lives

“I’m sorry, but the answer is still no. No cell phones until we land,” Shari shouted.

She watched while most of the passengers reluctantly appeared to be turning off their phones as the three designated air marshals began stopping at each row and checking.

“Young lady,” Marty said to Denise.

“Daddy, I’m sorry, but I’ve got to shut off my phone. I’ll call you when we’re on the ground.”

“Stay safe, and I love you,” her father sobbed.

“I love you, too. Bye.” She snapped her phone shut and wiped away the tears flowing down her cheeks.

“Thank you,” Marty said, and moved on.

When one passenger kept on talking after Todd told her to turn off her phone, he reached across and snatched it away.

“You’ll get it back when we land” was all he said.

By now many of the passengers were crying because they wanted to talk with a loved one, or they had to end their calls.

Elle Snyder, sitting toward the rear of the plane, crouched lower with her head against the window. Every now and then she glanced toward the front of the plane, watching Todd and Marty checking to make sure no one was using a cell phone. She was talking with a friend who worked for one of radio stations in Chicago.

“Elle, you back all ready?” her friend asked.

“No,” Elle whispered, “we’re still in the air.”

“Why’re you whispering?”

“I’m not supposed to be using my cell. Listen...” She glanced at Marty and Todd who were coming closer. “Do you have your TV or radio on?”

“Elle, what’s wrong?”

“We’re making an emergency landing.”

“Where? O’Hare?” her friend asked.

“No, some small airport...”

“Elle, I just turned on the TV. They’re talking about a plane making an emergency...”

“Listen. The pilot’s who’s flying our plane has only forty hours...”

The woman in the middle seat leaned over and said loudly, "You can't do that. You can't use your cell phone."

The woman waved at Marty. "She's still using her cell phone," the woman shouted and pointed to Elle.

"Is she using her cell?" another passenger asked.

"Elle, what did you say?" her friend back in Chicago asked.

Marty moved quickly to Elle's row.

"What's wrong," Marty asked the woman.

"She's using her phone." The woman pointed to Elle who kept her back to everyone.

"How come she gets to use her phone?" a passenger across the aisle asked.

"Miss..." Marty said as he leaned into Elle's row.

With her back to everyone, she continued talking, but she was no longer whispering. "Tell your news people she's only got thirty or forty hours of flying..."

"Miss, give me your phone," Marty said in a louder voice and extended his hand.

When Elle kept talking, the woman in middle seat reached around and grabbed the phone out of Elle's hand and gave it to Marty. "Here."

"You bitch, you can't take my phone," Elle yelled at the woman.

"You'll get it back when we land," Marty said, and he continued on checking other passengers.

Elle turned her back to everyone when passengers began applauding amid shouts of, "Who in the hell does she think she is?"

"Oh God," a passenger sitting behind Tom and Theresa Dawson lamented. "I wanted to forgive her, and now I might never have another chance to tell her how sorry I am for the way I treated her this past year. Why can't I make just one call?" He held his head in his hands and wept.

Hearing the man wanting to get something off his chest, Tom decided that unlike that man, he had a chance to ask for forgiveness.

The Last Hours of Their Lives

He was flying on to New York for a bit part in an off-Broadway play, while Theresa was staying in Chicago and getting ready for a major role in a play at the Goodman Theater. She had the time, and wanted to see Tom in his play, but he'd insisted she get an early start on her play.

He didn't look at Theresa. Instead, he kept his head down and spoke in a soft voice.

"I got a confession," Tom said taking Theresa's hands in his. "I have to make it because I don't know how this flight is going to turn out. And I feel so terrible, so guilty."

"Go on." She frowned and bit her lip in anticipation.

"I didn't want you going to New York because..." Tom hesitated. "...I'm meeting someone there."

Theresa withdrew her hands from Tom as she asked, "Who?"

Tom gulped. "Jennifer."

"Jennifer..." She stared at Tom. "You mean...Jennifer, my friend?"

"Yes."

She turned away from him for several seconds before asking, "Why?"

"To get even with you for your success. She sympathized with me and one thing led to another and..."

The slap surprised everyone close to them.

Tom and Theresa weren't the only ones making amends that afternoon on two-one-two.

Lou, seeing and sensing all the passenger frustration and tension over not being able to use their cell phones, decided he had to do something. He pushed his call button. Several seconds later, Barbara was next to his row.

"Yes?"

"Miss, I used to be a priest. Would it be possible for me to offer a small prayer for a successful landing? It might be comforting for some people."

“Let me check,” Barbara said and headed to the front of the plane where Sondra was seated.

“You’re a priest?” Lou’s large neighbor asked.

“Was.”

“But you can still hear a confession, can’t you?”

“No. I’m no longer a priest.”

“Please, you don’t understand. I need to go to confession. We could be killed. I need to confess.”

“Confess your sins to God. He’ll forgive you. You don’t need me.”

“Please, can’t you do one last thing for me?” The man grabbed Lou’s arm and with pleading eyes begged, “Hear my confession.”

“I...”

The man grabbed Lou by his shirt and pulled him close. “Once a priest, always a priest. Isn’t that so?”

“That’s...”

“You have an obligation to hear my confession, don’t you? I don’t care what you’ve done with your life, you have an obligation. I want to confess.”

The man’s face was inches from Lou’s. Lou could smell the garlic on the man’s breath. “You have to hear my confession.”

What the man said was true, regardless of what he had done. Married or not, Lou was under an obligation. He sighed and leaned toward the man. “Whisper it in my ear.”

Afterward, he offered the man absolution but no penance.

As he finished with the man, Barbara leaned into his row and said, “Sir, another minister’s already volunteered to offer a prayer. Thank you anyway.”

“That’s okay.”

Lou glanced at his neighbor, who leaned close to him and said, “Thank you.”

Chapter Twenty

The Merkel Farm

3:10 p.m. Local Time

Gus Merkel studied the sky and the storm moving eastward. Looking toward the west, he saw that the weather appeared to be improving as the last series of storms headed to the east. He pulled another can of beer from the cooler, popped the tab and walked out to his grass strip and checked the firmness of the ground. With the grass cut as short as that on a golf fairway, the ground felt firm, not soggy from the latest storm that had swept through the area. The three-thousand-foot runway appeared in good shape and it satisfied him. Finishing with his drink, he tossed the empty can off to the side and headed back to the house. Inside, he found his wife working on a quilt and watching television.

“Hey, I’m taking off for Quincy to get some gas for tomorrow’s trip,” he told her.

Sarah frowned. “In this weather?”

“What do you mean? Storm’s moving eastward and it looks a little clearer to the west.”

“You sure? I just heard they’re calling for more storms, some of them supposed to be severe. Can’t you wait until tomorrow?”

“Nah, it’ll just take more time. I’ll pop over and be back before any storms can hit, if they’re coming back which I doubt.”

“I’d just as soon have you wait. You’ll get caught in Quincy and I’ll have to drive over and get you. Then tomorrow, you’ll want me to drive you back, and I got that meeting in the morning.”

“All the more reason for me to go now. I got to get those radios fixed before our trip later this week. Right now both radios are kaput and I need ’em. We’ll be flying into a couple of tower-controlled airports, and you can’t do that without radios. And I need to get them fixed tomorrow. If I have to fly to Quincy in the morning for gas before flying on to Thompson, I’ll end up having to spend the night. And I don’t want to spend the night at a cockroach infested motel.”

Sarah grunted. “Suit yourself. You’ll do what you want to do like always. You’re sixty-two, and you’ll never change. Doesn’t matter what I say or want.” She shook her head. “Call me when you’re on your way home.”

Gus waved goodbye and headed toward the shed where he housed his Skyhawk. It’d be a quick trip. He’s done it many times.

A self-made man, Gus tended to do things his own way, even if it wasn’t the right or legal way. Several of his friends marveled at his ability to keep from working himself to an early grave or signing up for a jaunt in prison.

When Gus finally had the time and money to realize his dream, he bought a Cessna one seventy-two and learned to fly. Unfortunately, he could never pass the written test. Three times he’d tried, and three times he failed. Finally, he forgot about getting his license, said to hell with it and flew. It also meant he flew without insurance, figuring as long as he never had an accident, he was ahead of the game. Besides no one ever stood at the end of a runway and asked to see his license. And since he didn’t have a license, he never bothered with biennial flight reviews. Gus flew whenever he wanted to fly without what he called ‘big brother’ watching over his shoulder. He figured he had enough of the federal government to deal with, with his farm.

Gus wasn’t a good pilot. And not only was he a poor pilot, he was a stupid pilot who took unnecessary risks. The more risks he survived, the more he became convinced he was invincible. He rarely bothered with a preflight, walking around the aircraft and checking the engine and all of the controls. Most of the time, he never bothered with a weather briefing. Today was no exception.

With a glance and wave toward his house, Gus fired up the Cessna, taxied to the grass strip and took off. Climbing for altitude, he glanced to the west and shrugged, seeing the beginning of another storm. He would beat it as he always did. Reaching into the cooler on the passenger’s seat, he pulled out a beer, took a long drink and threw the can out the window.

“Quincy,” he belched, “here I come.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Marist 212

In-flight—The Landing

First Officer Nancy Erickson, flying from the right seat, leveled three-seven-four above and to the right of two-one-two.

“That’s good,” Marist Captain Keith Wright said while he examined two-one-two and the land ahead of them. The fifty-six-year-old captain bit his lip as he searched ahead of his plane toward an object off in the distance.

“One thing’s in our favor,” Keith said. “It’s clear right now—though it won’t be for long.”

“You taking her straight in on four?” Nancy asked, and glanced at the approach chart for Quincy.

“Too risky. Besides there’s no way she knows how to use the ILS. No, I’ll have her circle around and come in on two-two. At least then she can use the VASI. Besides, if the wind picks up, which more than likely it’s going to, she’ll be flying into it.”

“How many hours does she have?” Nancy asked.

“Forty or so,” Keith replied.

“Jeez, Louise.” It was her favorite expression, much to the annoyance of the captains she flew with.

“Amen,” Keith added, hoping he wasn’t encouraging her.

“Wonder if I could’ve landed this plane with just forty hours? Doubt it. No, I know I couldn’t have done it. God, I hope she doesn’t crater it. That would haunt me for some time.”

Keith couldn’t tell if she was talking to him or to herself.

“Will you have her use the thrust reversers?” Nancy asked.

“No way. She’ll have her hands full just landing and keeping it on the runway. Provided she makes it to the runway.”

“And if she’s not aligned with the runway...” Nancy didn’t finish her comment as she thought of an airliner whose right wheel brakes failed and the plane veered off the runway to the left, crashing into an embankment just short of several buildings.

“Yeah.” Keith agreed with Nancy’s unfinished sentence.

“Keith, what are their chances?”

“Honestly?”

“Yeah.” Nancy glanced at Keith.

“I’d say twenty, eighty, and that’s probably optimistic.”

Nancy gulped and remained silent.

Keith checked his radio to make sure he was on the right frequency. Sighing, he shook his head and said a silent prayer. He wasn’t in favor of this, but he had no idea how to get two-one-two down any other way without finding a VFR airport with more than fifteen-thousand feet of runway. Even with a long runway, he doubted if the pilot flying two-one-two could make the landing, especially if she didn’t keep the plane on the runway. Everything was against a successful landing. *Well, miracles do happen, so they say*, he thought.

“Good luck,” Nancy said, motioning to Keith with crossed fingers.

“Here we go.” Keith keyed his microphone, saying, “Two-one-two, who am I talking to?”

“Carrie.”

“Good. My name’s Keith and I’ll be directing you to a landing. Just be aware that everything you do is going to be faster, a lot faster than you’ve ever flown before for an approach and landing. You’ll be landing at one-hundred-and-forty knots. So keep that in mind. Okay? This is not a Skyhawk, and it’s not forgiving as the Skyhawk. It’s a damn good plane though. Just do what I tell you and we’ll get you safely on the ground. And that’s our goal, to get you on the runway, and to keep you on the runway.”

“Okay.”

“You know how to brake the plane, correct?” Keith asked.

“On the toes.”

“Good. Now we need to get you to slow down and to a lower altitude. Reduce your power, lower your speed to one-hundred-and-eighty knots, and we’ll descend to two-thousand feet.”

“What speed?”

“One-hundred-and-eighty knots,” Keith replied.

“When I reach two-thousand feet and level off, will the airspeed stay at one-hundred-and-eighty?” Carrie asked.

“No, you’ll have to add some power to maintain that speed. When you get to two-thousand feet I’ll tell you what to do.”

“What heading?” Carrie asked again.

“Keep the heading you’re on,” Keith responded.

“Okay.”

Wiping her hands on her pants, Carrie inhaled deeply, reduced the power setting, and watched the airspeed indicator until it showed one-hundred-and-eighty knots, and then she lowered the nose. As the plane began descending, she maintained a watch on the airspeed indicator and the altimeter.

“Carrie, do you know anything about an ILS?” Keith asked even though he knew what the answer would be.

“No,” Carrie replied.

“Figured. We’re going to fly a wide downwind for runway two-two. It has a VASI. Are you familiar with the VASI?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“What’s a VASI?” Lynne asked.

“Visual approach slope indicator. It tells me if we’re on the correct glide path. There’s a set of lights. If it’s red over white you’re all right.”

“Huh?”

“It means you’re on the correct guide path. You’ll land on the runway and not before it on grass or whatever’s in front of the runway,” Carrie explained. “And it helps you to avoid obstacles that might be in your flight path, especially at night.”

“Oh. What if it’s different?” Lynne asked.

“You mean like red over red?”

“Yeah.”

“It means you’re dead,” Carrie said watching her airspeed.

“What!” Lynne gripped her armrests.

“That’s just our little saying about what could possibly happen if you land before the runway. It keeps you honest. If the lights are showing white over white, it means you’re too high and will probably end up landing too far down the runway.”

“And we need a lot of runway in front of us, don’t we?” Lynne asked.

“Yeah, a lot of runway.”

Carrie remembered the story of a flight that had come into Midway a couple of years before. It either landed too long or came in too fast, but whatever the reason, it ran out of runway and ended up on a Chicago street, hitting a car and killing a child. *Why did I think about that now? Are we going to run out of runway and hit a car or truck?*

“Carrie,” Keith continued, “as I said, we’re going to use the VASI on two-two for your approach. After flying a wide downwind for runway two-two, I’ll call your turn to base and then final. Once on final, we’ll be more than thirty miles out. That’s when we’ll start lowering your flaps and gear. On your right you’ll see the flap control. Do you see it?”

After glancing to her right and seeing the flap control, she replied, “Yes.”

“Good. I’ll have you lower the flaps in increments of ten, twenty-five, thirty and forty.”

Carrie glanced at her altimeter that now indicated she was down to twenty-two-hundred feet MSL and flying at a speed of one-hundred-and-ninety knots.

“Understand one thing,” Keith stressed. “Don’t try to flare the plane. Fly it onto the runway. Once you’re above the runway, pull the power. You’ll drop, and it’ll land hard, but the plane can take it.”

“Okay, no flaring,” Carrie responded.

“Carrie, what did he mean about not flaring?” Lynne asked.

“Basically it means stopping your rate of descent by leveling, and slowly letting the airspeed bleed off until you touch down.”

“Oh.” Lynne still didn’t understand.

“Ever see pictures of a plane landing on a carrier?” Carrie asked.

“Yeah.”

“We’ll be doing one that’s similar, except there’ll be no arresting cables.” Carrie explained.

“Carrie, what’s your current speed?” Keith asked.

“One-ninety.”

“Good,” Keith responded.

“Give me your attention,” Shari said over the plane’s public address. Sondra stood next to her, but still felt woozy enough to let Shari handle the landing. “We’ll be landing soon, and we need to get you prepared.”

“When you hear the words, ‘brace, brace,’ I want you to cross your arms on the seat in front of you, and place your head on your arms. Or you may wrap your arms around your legs and put your head down, as far it will go. Do it now so we can check to see if you’re doing it correctly.”

Shari and Barbara began checking the passengers, making corrections as they went.

“Once we land,” Shari continued, “wait for my signal. I’ll tell you when to release your seatbelts.” Shari was aware that according to Marist regulations, it was the captain who gave the signal to evacuate, but she figured Carrie wouldn’t know this. “When I give the signal, those who have been selected will open the emergency exits onto the wings. Barbara and I will open the other exits. The first one down will secure the chute. On my command, you’ll move to the exits with your partner and proceed down the chute or the wings. No one, and I mean no one, is to open an overhead compartment, or take anything out of an overhead compartment, or take anything with you. We want to evacuate the plane as fast as possible. When you’re on the ground, move away from the plane and head to an area of safety. If you see someone who needs help, for God’s sake, help ’em. If you need help, ask for it.”

As Shari began checking the passengers who were next to the wing exits, a man grabbed her arm and begged with shaking hands, “I need a drink, please. I’ve got to calm my nerves. I’ll never be able to get off the plane the way I am now. Please.”

What? My God. Shari had heard ridiculous requests before, but this topped all of them. *Just what I need,* she thought. *A drunk making an emergency exit.*

“Good God, man, we’re making an emergency landing.”

“But...”

“You can’t have a drink. No alcohol’s allowed. You have to have a clear head.”

Hearing the commotion, Marty and Todd came down the aisle and stood next to Shari. "Problem here?"

"No," Shari said, walking away. "No problem at all, is there, sir?"

She received no answer from the passenger, but several other passengers clapped.

As Shari headed for the first class section, Dr. Brickman stopped her.

"Miss, you have to make another announcement. We have people with concussions and serious fractures. Only the paramedics should take them off. They can't walk off the plane on their own, and anyone who tries to assist them may do further damage. Please, let the professionals remove the severely injured from the plane."

"But..."

"Please."

"I'll make an announcement," Shari said, "but what if they feel they can walk off the plane, and they want to get out of the plane fast and not wait for the paramedics?"

"If they feel they're ambulatory, they might be able to do it, but let me recheck all the injured. If I feel they should wait, I'll tell 'em to wait."

"Doctor, you're assuming there's no fire, right?"

He hesitated for several seconds before saying, "Yes."

"Because if there's a fire, we're getting them out of here as best we can. Understand?" Shari questioned.

"I do," the doctor replied.

"Okay, I'll make the announcement." Shari grabbed the handset for the PA.

"Are we set?" Charlie asked as he and the airport manager, stood outside the terminal building and looked at the storm gathering in the southwest. Lightning streaked downward and a distant rumble of thunder could be heard.

"Yeah, but we're keeping everyone far back and out of the way. Last thing we need is to have some of the volunteers taken out before

they even have a chance of getting at the plane. Except for us, the airport's been cleared. How about you?" Vern asked the sheriff.

"Blessing's ready. They're activating their disaster plan. All nurses and doctors are being called in. Hannibal's hospital is standing by in case we need them. Too bad weather won't let us use the medavacs, but at the moment we have seven ambulances and more on the way. State police have stopped all traffic on the state route, and we've evacuated all the people on the approach to runway two-two. I think we're ready. Oh, the Red Cross is sending a crew as well as the Salvation Army."

"That's good," Vern said and thanked him.

As the sheriff finished with his report, Dr. Karl Broeker approached, and shook hands with the two men. "Vern, where do you want us to set up?"

"Right now, we'd like for you to stay out on the highway until the plane lands. After that, you can use the terminal or a hanger for your triage station, if it's needed."

"Good. We'll be ready. Are there any injured passengers on the plane now?" Dr. Broeker asked.

"All I know is one of the pilots had a stroke and the other's suffering from severe food poisoning, but let me check with Kansas City," Vern said.

Several minutes later Vern motioned to the doctor. "Kansas City says Marist two-one-two reported at least nine passengers with serious injuries, including varying types of fractures, and some with possible concussions. That's in addition to the pilots."

"If there's no fire, I'll set up by the plane so we can get the more serious injuries on their way to the hospital immediately. The minor injuries we'll take care of in the terminal building before sending them on to the hospital," Dr. Broeker said.

With binoculars, the airport manager searched the sky looking for both Marist planes.

"See anything, Vern?" Charlie asked.

"Nothing yet."

"Which runway are they using?" Dr. Broeker wanted to know.

"I was just told by Kansas that they'll be using two-two because she can use the VASI to put her on the correct glide path."

“Vern, what are their chances?” Dr. Broeker asked.

“Truthfully, I don’t know. It doesn’t look good. All we can do is hope and pray. I only smelled burnt flesh once. I sure as hell don’t want to smell it again.”

At the sound of a distant crash and rumble of thunder, all three men looked to the southwest. The rumble of thunder was followed by more streaks of lightning and more thunder.

“I hope to hell she beats that storm,” Vern said.

Gus kept looking toward the southwest and the blackening sky with streaks of lightning. That’s when he decided it was time to return home.

As he started turning to head back to the farm, he glanced at his fuel gauges. They were bouncing off empty. He hadn’t even looked at the fuel gauges before taking off, assuming he had plenty of fuel. Now he had no choice. He had to head on to Quincy. He even began wondering if he would even have enough fuel to reach the airport. Glancing at the approaching storm, he began wondering if he would even beat the storm.

He started gaining altitude knowing he was using fuel he needed to reach the airport, but he figured if he got some altitude he might be able to glide to the airport should he run out of fuel. No problem, he thought. He had been in worse predicaments. He popped another can of beer.

In Kansas City, Terry and Joe watched as both Marist planes circled wide of the Quincy airport.

“Wonder how many miles he’s going to give her for the approach,” Terry said.

“Didn’t hear, or he didn’t say” was Joe’s reply.

“What the hell’s that?” Terry added, pointing at the screen. Off to the right and close to the bottom, a + showed up every so often. It appeared so seldom that it wasn’t leaving an identifiable track.

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“We got a plane heading for Quincy. That bastard’s not squawking. Shit,” Terry said loudly, “we don’t have any idea of altitude. Even if he’s not landing at Quincy, he could fly into them.”

“What in the hell is he doing flying in this weather? Is he crazy?” Joe asked.

Terry grabbed a phone and placed a call to the airport manager.

“Are you making announcements that the airport is closed?” Terry demanded.

“Yes, every two minutes,” Vern explained. “Why?”

“Because it appears you have traffic northwest that’s headed in your direction.”

“Are you sure?” Vern asked as he scanned toward the northwest.

“Damn sure. Have you had any calls from him?” Terry asked.

“No calls at all.”

The manager focused his binoculars toward the northwest, but failed to see anything.

“What’s wrong?” Charlie asked.

“Kansas says we’ve got a plane headed in our direction.” Vern looked off to the northwest.

“You mean someone’s flying in this shit? Is he crazy?” Charlie asked as he, too, looked to the northwest.

“Appears to be,” Vern said, still searching to the northwest.

“But we don’t know if he’s landing here, do we?” Charlie asked.

“We don’t know shit,” Vern lamented.

“Would flares help?” Charlie asked.

“Might, especially if we see him setting up to land. Jeez, I hope he doesn’t choose two-two or one three for that matter.” Vern continued scanning the skies to the northwest of the airport.

“Can we stop him from landing till after Marist lands?” Charlie asked.

Vern shook his head. “Impossible if his radio’s not on.”

“Why wouldn’t his radio be on?” Charlie asked.

“No idea,” Vern answered. “If he had it on, he’d know the airport’s closed.”

“We’re basically screwed, especially if he lands when Marist is landing.”

“That’s about it, Sheriff,” Vern concurred.

Back in Kansas City, Tim, the controller, working with three-seven-four, told them about a possible incursion.

“We’ll keep our eyes open,” Keith replied, looking to his left but seeing nothing.

“Are you telling Carrie?” Nancy asked.

“No, she’s got enough on her hands. Telling her would only add more stress.”

“There they are,” Vern said as he pointed to the Marist planes flying east of the airport on the downwind. “They’ll be landing soon.”

As the sheriff and the airport manager stood on a ramp watching the storm and the two Marist planes—and looking for an unidentified plane—they both spotted a woman and a cameraman approaching them.

“Wondered when they’d get here,” the sheriff said. “Want me to handle it?”

“Sure, go ahead. You have an election coming up,” Vern said, volunteering the sheriff.

The sheriff wasn’t sure if the manager was joking or serious.

“Sheriff Proctor,” Donna Bergmann, the young reporter, called. “You have time for a few questions?”

“Just a few.”

“What’s going on?” Donna asked as the cameraman began taping. While the sheriff was explaining the situation to the reporter, the media in Chicago were at Marist headquarters waiting for Bob Johnson to clarify what was happening with one of his planes.

“One of our planes is having some difficulty...”

“Difficulty? We got it from several sources that a woman who’s not even a pilot is flying the plane. Is that ‘some difficulty’?” a reporter from a television station asked.

Another radio reporter shouted, “I heard from a reliable source the pilot has only forty hours of flying.”

Bob ignored the questions.

“No, and you’re right. Marist two-one-two is making...” Bob Johnson proceeded to tell Chicago media the plight the plane was in. After finishing, he was bombarded with questions for which he didn’t have answers.

“Do you know anything at all about the pilot?” Sue, a reporter for the *Daily Herald* asked.

“No.”

“Is it true that she only has forty hours?” a *Sun-Times* reporter asked, outshouting a *Tribune* reporter.

“I don’t know how many hours she has.” He disliked lying, but it was necessary, and he could always claim he was misinformed.

“Do you really believe she can land the plane?” the *Tribune* reporter asked.

“If she follows the directions of the pilot who’s flying next to her plane, she has a very good chance of safely landing the plane.”

“How much of a chance?” a WBBM reporter asked.

Bob glanced at his PR person, who shook her head.

“A fair chance.”

“You know of any case where a passenger had to take over and land a commercial airliner?” the *Herald* reporter asked.

“No. There have been instances where passengers have taken over for a stricken pilot in smaller planes, but as far as I know, it has never occurred in a commercial airliner.”

“Will the runway be long enough?” the *Tribune* reporter asked.

“Unfortunately, no.” Bob hated admitting that a crash was likely to happen.

“Do you mean they’re likely to run off the runway and crash?” a reporter from WGN asked.

“I can’t answer that.”

“Why can’t they use a longer runway?” a reporter from a television station asked.

“Almost all the other airports require an instrument approach, which the pilot is not qualified to do. This airport has an opening so she can make a visual approach.”

“Will the storm we’re hearing about be a factor?” the *Herald* reporter asked.

“Yes, but from everything we’re hearing, she should beat the storm.”

“Do you know anything about the emergency equipment at Quincy?” a radio reporter asked.

“No, but we’ve been informed by the sheriff they have over eight fire trucks, seven ambulances with more on the way. Also we’ve been informed that medical personnel are already on site.”

“Isn’t that airport located in the sticks?” Bob couldn’t tell who asked that question.

“It’s several miles from Quincy, but it’s not in the sticks.”

“Will the control tower be able to help in the landing,” a suburban newspaper reporter/photographer asked.

“Quincy is an uncontrolled airport,” Bob answered.

“What are you doing about relatives who are waiting for the plane to land at O’Hare?” the *Sun-Times* reporter asked.

“We have personnel standing by at O’Hare.”

More hands went up, but Bob had decided he had no more answers. “Ladies and gentlemen, I need to get back inside to monitor events. As soon as anything happens we’ll let you know. Thank you.”
And go to hell.

“Flight attendants,” Lynne said over the plane’s PA, “prepare for landing.”

Barbara and Shari began checking and giving last minute instructions to all coach passengers.

“Lynne, when we land I want you to help me with the brakes.”

With a brief glance at Carrie, Lynne said a quick, “Okay.”

“But you have to realize the braking part of the pedal is at the top. The bottom part controls the rudder and the nose wheel on the ground. You understand what I’m saying?”

“I think so.”

“It’s important, Lynne. If you push hard on the rudder or lower part you’ll be turning the plane, and we don’t want that, not at a

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hundred miles an hour. Just push on the top, the brake part of the rudder pedal. Okay?"

"I'll try."

"Lynne, you have to do more than try. Test it now."

Lynne depressed the top part of the rudder pedal. "I see what you mean."

"Make sure you depress the top of both brakes at the same time, like with a tractor. Ever drive a tractor?"

"Sorry, no," Lynne confessed.

"The right brake controls the right wheels, while the left brake controls the left wheels. That's why you have to apply them evenly. Understand?"

Lynne nodded, but only half-heartedly.

"We have to keep the plane on the runway. Last thing we need is for a wheel to go off the runway and into the soft ground. God only knows what would happen then."

The sheriff and the airport manager watched as two-one-two turned toward the airport and began making its final approach. Landing lights were on.

"Here we go," the sheriff said. Keying his microphone, he spoke to all his units, "They're on final approach. Be ready to go when I give the word."

Vern and the sheriff moved off the airport to the state highway where fire fighters and paramedics stood on top of their vehicles scanning the sky to the northeast, watching as two-one-two made its turn for a final approach.

"Flaps at ten degrees, Carrie."

"Flaps to ten," she replied.

"You're about twenty-five miles from touchdown. Just remember, it'll go fast. Do your best to keep the plane aligned with the runway. It's crucial. And keep it on the runway."

“I understand,” Carrie said and tried to wet her dry and cracked lips.

“What’s your speed?” Keith asked.

“One-eighty.”

“Good.”

Northwest of Quincy, Gus was flying his Cessna at three-thousand feet, figuring if he ran out of fuel he might have a chance of making runway one three by gliding toward it. He was within a couple of miles of the airport, and so far the engine was still running. He glanced once to the blackening southwest and the streaks of lightning. He realized it was going to be a bitch of a storm. He could see the airport with the runway lights on for two-two. He couldn’t figure out why that runway was lit. That’s when he saw all the blinking and rotating red lights of the fire trucks and ambulances along route 104.

The plane’s engine sputtered once but kept on running. He knew it was only a matter of minutes or seconds now, and he’d have to make an emergency landing.

“Gear down and look for the three green lights.”

Carrie lowered the gear and waited until she saw the three green lights Keith said would appear.

“I have three in the green,” Carrie said.

“Speed?” Keith asked.

“One-seven-five.”

“Lower flaps to twenty-five degree,” Keith ordered.

“Twenty-five degree,” Carrie responded.

“What’s your speed?” Keith asked.

“One-sixty.”

“Thirty-degree flaps,” Keith radioed.

“Thirty-degree flaps,” Carrie responded.

Shortly after that, Keith said, “Flaps all the way down.”

“Flaps all the way down.”

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“Speed?” Keith asked.

“One-fifty.”

“Are you aligned with the runway?” Keith asked.

“I think so.” Carrie sounded unsure.

“Carrie, are you aligned with the runway?”

“I’m trying...”

“You’ll have to use more force, Carrie. This isn’t the Skyhawk. Okay?”

“It’s coming around,” Carrie said as she realigned the plane with the runway’s centerline.

“Carrie, what happens if we’re not aligned?” Lynne asked, staring straight ahead at the runway.

“A lot of stuff and all bad.”

In the cabin, everyone had assumed the brace position. Some couples held hands. From somewhere within the cabin, someone started with, “Our Father...” Before long the entire cabin was reciting the Lord’s Prayer.

“Mommy, I’m scared,” Amy Whiting said to her mother as she sat with both of her arms around her legs and her head on her legs.

“It’s okay, dear—everything will be fine,” Margaret said, adding, “I’ll take care of you.”

“Mitch,” Amy whispered to her brother, “are you scared?”

For several seconds Mitch didn’t respond until he mumbled, “Yeah.”

Anne Koster whispered to her husband, “If I don’t make it, I’ll see you on the other side.”

“Don’t talk like that. We’re going to make it. I got that feeling I had in Korea. We’re going to make it.”

Anne squeezed his hand.

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“Susan, I’m sorry. I...” Dan shook his head, “...I don’t know what else to say for all the trouble I caused you.”

“Why don’t you say you love me?” Susan said and pulled his head toward her in order to kiss him.

“I love you,” he whispered.

After they kissed, she smiled at him and said, “I love you, too.”

“We’ll get through this, I know we will,” Dan said as they resumed bracing for the landing’s impact.

Theresa Dawson hadn’t spoken to Tom since his confession. Now with both of them in a brace position, she turned her head toward him. “I’m sorry I slapped you. I don’t want it to end like this.”

“No, I’m the one who’s sorry. I’ll do whatever I can to make up for what I did. I love you.”

“And I love you.” She clasped his hand in hers.

“Sarge, ever on a copter that crashed?” Robert asked.

“Nope. How about you?”

Robert shook his head.

Todd grabbed Robert’s hand and shook it. “Then let’s hope our luck doesn’t run out today.”

“Semper Fi, Sarge. Semper Fi.”

“Brace!” It was a final command from Shari.

Carrie was approaching short final. Off to her right and unknown to her, Gus was making his final approach for runway one three.

In three-seven-four, Nancy, the first officer said, “Traffic, two o’clock low.”

“Shit,” Keith swore.

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On the ground, somebody finally spotted the landing light on Gus's plane.

"We got traffic coming in from the northwest," a paramedic shouted.

Several deputies and firemen left the highway and started for the airport, carrying glowing flares.

In the Cessna, Gus still couldn't figure out why all the equipment was out on the highway unless they thought he was going to crash, which was possible, but that didn't make sense. Why wasn't equipment on the airport or near the runway? *What the hell? Why are those guys running out there with flares?* At that moment his engine quit and Gus began gliding the plane in for a landing. Shit, he thought, now he'd have to push the damn thing to the gas pumps. Maybe he could get those idiots with the flares to help him.

"Stop that son of a bitch," someone yelled as the deputies and firemen ran onto the airport waving their flares. Unfortunately, they were too far away to have any effect. From all appearances, he was going to land.

"What's happening?" Terry at Kansas City asked the airport manager.

"We got a plane landing on one three," Vern shouted.

"Oh, shit!" Keith in three-seven-four shouted. "That traffic from the northwest is landing."

"Will it be out of the way before she lands?" Nancy asked.

"God, I hope so."

"Are you warning her?" Nancy asked.

"No, she's got enough on her hands now. It would be too much of a distraction."

"Jeez Louise."

Keith frowned but said nothing.

Traveling now at one-hundred-and-forty-five knots and headed for the runway, Carrie kept thinking of her instructions. *Fly the VASI*, then as she crossed the threshold, she was to reduce power all the way off. Keith had warned her that the landing was going to be a hard. She hoped the plane wouldn't sustain damage that would cause her to lose control and veer off the runway.

The VASI indicated she was on the correct glide path for landing near or beyond the VASI. That's where she wanted to be, and didn't want to be. Landing near the VASI or beyond meant they would probably run off the end of the runway. Probably? They sure as hell would run off the runway. No doubt about it. She had no idea what was beyond the end of the runway. It could be a big drop-off. Huge dark spots stained her blouse and sweat ran down the sides of her face. She alternated wiping the sides of her face and wiping her hands on her slacks.

As the airspeed dropped to one-hundred-and-forty knots, the VASI's colors changed to red over red. *Oh, God. What happened? Red over red you're dead!*

DEAD, DEAD, DEAD, a voice screamed inside her, as both the VASI's sets of red colors blazed up at her. Seeing the red lights, she had a momentary picture of United's flight hitting the runway, splitting into pieces and ending in a massive fireball.

Fly the plane, Mom, fly the plane. You can do it, she heard Meghan screaming in her head.

"Shit, goddamn it, we're going to land short. Do I add power? What do I do?"

Lynne swallowed and stared straight ahead.

"Lynne, call the threshold," Carrie shouted.

Lynne merely nodded.

"Lynne!" Carrie shouted.

"Yes."

"Good."

"How's she doing?" Nancy asked, as she couldn't see two-one-two from the right seat she occupied.

“She’s low, but she might make it,” Keith answered. “Thank God, I think she’s going to beat the storm.”

Keith glanced again at the storm. “Nancy, as soon as she brings the plane to a stop, we’re out of here and fast. Understand?”

Glancing at the pitch-black sky, Nancy had the same thought. *Get the hell out of here.* “Give me the word and I’ll firewall it.”

Lynne bit her lip as she watched several lightning strikes streaking downward from the massive black clouds filling the skies to the south and west.

“Carrie, we got...”

“I can’t worry about that storm. I got problems.”

“Sorry.” Lynne was focusing on the threatening storm.

Carrie keyed the microphone. “I’m low, too low. It’s red over red!”

“Power! Add just enough to stop your descent. You’ll make it. Just hang on,” Keith radioed.

Carrie added power, but the lights still shouted, *you’re too low, you’re too low!* The lights remained red over red. *Don’t raise your nose without adding power, Mom,* Meghan yelled in her head.

“Power, Carrie, power,” Keith screamed into his microphone.

“Oh shit, my nose is too far left of the centerline. Use the rudder. Use the rudder. Keep your wings level. Don’t flap your wings like a bird, idiot. Steady, steady.”

Lynne didn’t know if Carrie was talking to herself or to her.

“Five hundred,” the automated radar altimeter callout announced.

“Oh, God, we’re too far from the threshold.”

Kevin lifted his head and glanced out the window. He started to utter an oath but stopped. Lowering his head back on his arms, he knew he’d made a big mistake. *We’re going to crash.* He braced for the impact.

Gus, with his prop wind milling, set up to glide from his altitude to a landing on one three. He knew he could make it. *Hah,* he thought,

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cheated death again. He watched as people were running toward the airport waving flares and flashlights. He flew the plane into the runway, bouncing several times before the Cessna finally settled down and rolled to a stop in the middle of the intersection of runways one three and two-two.

At Kansas City, Terry still with his phone to his head said, “Vern, what’s going on?” He heard the manager say, “Oh, God.”

“That damned plane just came to a stop in the middle of the intersection. We got men running onto the airport, but...”

“But? But what?” Terry shouted.

“They won’t reach it in time.”

Silence from the other end of the phone until finally Terry asked, “Where’s two-one-two?”

“Almost touching down.”

The airport manager watched as people raced onto the airport. Then he glanced to his right as the airliner was about to touch down. No way anyone would be able to reach the little plane in time. Even if they reached the plane, they would have no time to push it out of the way. He had to call back the men rushing forward. He saw no sense in sacrificing eight lives.

“Will they...?” Charlie asked.

Vern shook his head.

“What about the Skyhawk pilot?” Dr. Broeker asked. “And the passengers?”

“All we can do is hope he sees what’s happening and gets everyone out of the plane.”

“What about the airliner? What happens when it hits the little plane?” Dr. Broeker asked.

The question went unanswered.

All three attendants yelled “BRACE, BRACE, BRACE,” again.

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“One hundred,” the automated radar altimeter seemed to shout at Carrie.

“Oh God,” Carrie prayed.

On short final, Carrie was still below the glide slope even though she had added power. The VASI was still “screaming,” *low, low, you’re too low.*

“Carrie, aren’t we too low?” Lynne asked gripping the armrests.

“God damn it, tell me something I don’t know. Shit, damn it! I didn’t add enough power.”

“Fifty,” the automated radar altimeter called out. Carrie checked her speed. The seven-thirty-seven’s speed had dropped to one-hundred-and-thirty knots, not where Keith wanted her. And she was still short of the runway. *Oh, God, I screwed up. We’re landing short. What’ll I do? Don’t raise your nose. Add power. Power!* She shoved the throttles forward. The speed began increasing.

“Forty.”

Carrie had her hand on the throttles ready to pull them when she glanced again to the southwest and saw the massive black clouds forming for a major assault on the area. Lightning streaked to the ground.

As Gus stopped his plane, eight police and fireman were still far away, but instead of continuing toward Gus’s plane they stopped and kept pointing to the north and the landing seven-thirty-seven.

Watching them, Gus kept thinking, *What in the hell is wrong with those bastards? What are they doing? They’re pointing to the north. What for? Why aren’t they coming out here to help me? What’s that guy shouting? North? North?*

Gus turned and looked north and to the end of runway two-two.

“Thirty,” the enunciator said.

Shit, I goofed royally. I'm going to be way short of the runway. Oh, shit. Now I'm too fast. Her speed now registered one-hundred-and-forty-eight knots.

Twenty quickly followed thirty, and finally the enunciator said, "Ten."

Shit.

"Where's the threshold?" Carrie shouted, all the while thinking frantically, *Where's the runway! We're going to be in the dirt. It'll snap off the nose wheel and we'll cart wheel down the runway. No, it'll snap off the mains and we'll skid down the runway with sparks flying all over the place. If a wing splits spilling fuel, it's all over. God, help us.*

"Threshold!" Lynne screamed.

Carrie pulled the throttles back all the way, held the nose up just a little and waited for the plane to make a carrier landing. That's when both she and Lynne saw the small plane at the intersection.

"Oh, my God. That little shit stopped in the middle of the intersection," Keith in three-seven-four shouted.

"Go around?" Nancy asked watching the massive storm off to her right.

"Good God, no! No way in hell can she do a go-around. Oh, God, people, move that plane," Keith pleaded.

"What's she going to do?" Nancy asked.

"She's got no choice. She's going to hit it. Unless she runs off the runway first."

"Mother of God." Nancy crossed herself.

"What in the hell..." Carrie started to say as she stared at the Skyhawk parked on her runway approximately four-thousand feet or less away.

Lynne screamed.

Carrie didn't have time to do anything as she waited for the impact of the seven-thirty-seven hitting the runway.

The plane smacked into the runway blowing two tires and sending shredded rubber against the underside of the wing and the fuselage.

“What’s that noise?” a male passenger shouted.

“We’re crashing!” another passenger shouted and started to stand.

“Stay in your seats!” Shari shouted, adding, “Brace, brace.”

Overhead compartment doors sprung open; briefcases and other articles spilled into the aisle.

“Mommy, Mommy,” Amy Whitman screamed as the plane’s jerking snapped her out of her mother’s grip. Her body was forced partially into the aisle where her head was hit by a falling suitcase.

“Mommy!” she screamed.

Her mother finally pulled Amy back into her seat and held on to her, but with all the jerking and whiplashing, keeping the little girl with her was proving difficult.

As the passengers were jostled, whiplashed and jerked around, there was very little screaming—mostly sobs and prayers.

As soon as the nose wheel hit the pavement, Carrie yelled, “BRAKE, BRAKE, BRAKE!”

In her headset, she heard Keith shouting, “Keep it on the runway, Carrie. Keep it on the runway.”

When the plane swerved toward the right, Carrie screamed, “Brake, Lynne, brake. You’re on the rudder. Use the top of the pedal.”

“I don’t know what to do,” Lynne confessed.

“Too much rudder, Lynne, too much rudder. Let me handle the rudder. Use the brakes when I tell you.”

“Okay.” Lynne shook her head in frustration and fear and having no clue as to what she should be doing.

“We’re going left, we’re going left. God damn it, I’ve got to stop this swerving,” Carrie shouted.

From above Keith could see what was happening and shouted to Carrie, “Keep it on the runway. Don’t go off the left side of the runway at all costs.”

“Oh shit,” Carrie yelled as the plane swerved to the left, and she overcorrected to the right.

“Damn it, damn it,” she shouted as she stomped on the left rudder keeping the plane’s right wheels from moving off the right side runway.

“Ease up, Carrie, ease up,” she shouted out loud.

“What do you want me to do?” Lynne yelled.

“When I yell, I want you to brake, understand?”

Lynne nodded anxiously.

“Goddamn it, I overcorrected again. Ease up. Ease up. You’re jerking it. Anticipate.”

Lynne glanced at Carrie not knowing if Carrie was talking to her, or to herself.

Carrie stepped on the right rudder, but not as much and immediately followed it by stepping on the left rudder. The plane’s swerving eased as the seven-thirty-seven sped down the runway. The plane was off the centerline, but at least it had stabilized, even though it was heading straight ahead to the end of the runway.

“Now, Lynne, now. Brake, brake, brake,” Carrie shouted.

Carrie glanced at the airspeed indicator and shouted, “Oh shit, we’re going too fast, too fast. Brake. Oh, God, please stop.”

The seven-thirty-seven was still moving in excess of one-hundred-and-twenty miles an hour as it moved down the runway.

Seeing the seven-thirty-seven screeching, and the plane’s initial swerving back and forth as it started down the runway, the police and firemen ran for safety, fearing it would eventually head in their direction. One fireman started for Gus’s plane but another fireman pulled him back. “Don’t.” Both of them ran for the safety of the highway, not knowing where the airliner was going to go next as it swerved down the runway.

In the cabin, passengers screamed when the plane swerved back and forth, violently jerking and whiplashing them from side to side. What was left in the overhead storage bins flew out, landing on passengers and on the aisle.

Carrie and Lynne were so busy with the plane’s swerving and braking, they weren’t aware Gus’s plane was still at the intersection until Lynne looked up.

“Carrie!” Lynne screamed.

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“Oh, dear God!” Carrie prayed.

Gus, wide eyed and open mouthed, stared in horrified fascination as the airliner touched down and sped, swerving at first toward him. He wet his pants when he screamed.

From above, Keith watched helplessly while Carrie’s plane bore down on the hapless, unmoving Skyhawk.

Carrie could do nothing except keep the plane on the runway. That was one of the things Keith stressed. “Carrie, if you do nothing else, keep the plane on the runway.” As the airliner sped down the runway, Carrie hoped somehow those in the small plane would see the danger they were in and move. She knew she couldn’t veer left to avoid the plane or she’d end up going into the buildings she had seen when they were on the downwind.

“Carrie!” Lynne screamed.

With no idea what was off to the right of the runway, she felt it might even be worse if she veered in that direction. Even though she had no idea how much damage would be done to the seven-thirty-seven, or if hitting the small plane would send them speeding off to either side of the runway, she decided the best place to keep the plane was on the runway.

“Carrie!” Lynne screamed again. “We’re going to hit...”

“I have no choice,” Carrie said, shook her head and headed for the Skyhawk.

Mesmerized as the seven-thirty-seven bore down on him, Gus never moved.

The seven-thirty-seven’s nose-wheel assembly crashed into the Skyhawk just behind the passenger compartment, spinning the plane so that its nose was now facing the airliner. As the seven-thirty-seven’s nose hit the little plane’s tail assembly, pieces of the seven-thirty-

seven's nose cone flew up and smashed into its windshield. Carrie and Lynne screamed and hung on as the massive seven-thirty-seven crushed the Skyhawk between two-one-two's fuselage and the port engine and wheel assembly into a mass of mangled and splintered metal and debris.

With the bulk of the Skyhawk trapped under the seven-thirty-seven's body and port wing, the grinding metal against the concrete runway set off a shower of sparks igniting the little remaining fuel from one of the ruptured Skyhawk's gas tanks. Flames engulfed the airliner's wheel assembly and engine while the plane continued toward the end of the runway.

As the Skyhawk was ripped apart, debris slammed up against the seven-thirty-seven's fuselage with some of it being sucked into the port engine causing a high-pitched squealing noise.

"What was that?" a passenger shouted.

Hearing the impact noise, several window seat passengers looked out and saw part of the Skyhawk's wing sticking above the seven-thirty-seven's port wing in the center of a stream of sparks and flames.

"We're on fire!" several passengers shouted. Immediately others also looked out and screamed.

"We're going to die!"

"Get us out of here!"

"We're going to be burned alive!"

Several passengers began unbuckling their seatbelts and standing.

"Stay in your seats!" Shari yelled. "We're still rolling." All three flight attendants shouted "Brace, brace, brace,"

Most of the standing passengers sat, but they continued to stare at the flames.

The seven-thirty-seven swerved as it hit Gus's plane, but Carrie managed to control airliner. As she got the plane under control, the end of the runway loomed closer and closer. Hitting the Skyhawk had barely slowed the plane. No matter what Carrie did, she felt as if the plane would never stop until it had run off the runway, down an embankment and ended up on the highway that ran past the airport.

Emergency crews could only watch when the seven-thirty-seven smashed into Gus's plane.

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“Oh, my God. Fire!” Vern, the airport manager, yelled seeing the sudden flash and eruption of flames.

“We got a fire. Move! Move! Now!” the sheriff shouted over his radio. It was a wasted comment as everyone out on the highway could see what was happening. Most of the responders were in motion before the sheriff gave the order.

At Kansas City, Terry asked, “Vern, what’s happening?”

“We got a fire and it’s going off the runway.”

“Fire? How?” Terry asked.

“Happened when it hit the Cessna,” Vern said as he ran onto the airport.

“Bad?”

“Don’t know yet. Crews are moving in now.” Vern ran toward runway two-two.

“What about two-one-two?” Terry asked.

“It’s going off the runway.” Vern watched as the seven-thirty-seven went off the end of two-two.

“What about the small plane?”

“Crushed.”

“Were there any survivors?” Terry asked.

“Not likely.” Vern said looking at some debris on the runway.

“Avoidable?”

“Definitely negative.”

“Dear God, please stop this plane,” Lynne prayed out loud.

“Brace for another impact,” Carrie shouted as the plane neared the end of the runway. Moving at a considerable speed, two-one-two went off the end of the runway, snapping off the nose wheel. The nose of the plane dropped and plowed through the rain-soaked ground, heavy grass and weeds. Lynne screamed and Carrie placed both of her hands on the dash and held on. Still moving with speed down the embankment, the plane snapped off approach lights as the mains plowed into the soft

ground, finally losing speed, with the engines and embedded remains of the Skyhawk under the wing and fuselage plowing into the ground. The plane skewed to the left but still moved until all inertia finally ended with the plane's wheels and engines mired deep in grass-filled mud.

At the moment the plane finally stopped moving, firemen were already rushing forward and spreading foam over the port engine and wheel assembly. By the time the first passengers were exiting onto the port wing, the fire was extinguished. Buried beneath the seven-thirty-seven's wing and fuselage, the remains of the Skyhawk were barely visible.

As the plane went off the runway, passengers screamed and clung to each other while the attitude of the plane dropped and passengers were thrown forward against their seatbelts. Then the mains and the engines hit the soft ground, eventually bringing the plane to a violent stop. More debris flew forward and about the cabin of the plane.

After a moment, once the forward momentum stopped and the engines were either forced to shut down because of the mud and dirt, or because of the pieces of the Skyhawk embedded in the engine, all was quiet except for a creak and squeal of metal against metal.

The seven-thirty-seven came to a halt with its nose just a few feet from the state highway and a county road intersection. Over her radio Carrie heard Keith shouting, "Shut down your engines, now."

Carrie found and flipped the switches, shutting down the engines although the motion was wasted as both engines, filled with debris, mud, dirt and weeds, had quit on their own.

"Are you okay?" Keith radioed as three-seven-four turned, climbing and heading east and away from the storm.

"Yes, I think so."

"Nice work, Carrie. We got to get out of here," Keith said.

"Thank you, thank you. We all owe you a great deal of thanks."

"You're welcome. Gotta go." Keith said.

As the seven-thirty-seven slid to a stop down the embankment, the airport manager yelled into his phone, "They're down and off the runway. I think they're safe. The fire's out and the fuselage appears to be intact. Crews are on the plane."

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At the very moment that plane skidded to a stop, a tremendous crack seemed to split the air when lightning struck near an airport building. And as if the lightning strike were a signal, the storm struck with the wind whipping sheets of rain punctuated every so many seconds by the loud crack and crash of thunder.

“Damn storm just couldn’t wait,” a rain-soaked sheriff said, and he headed toward the plane.

Inside the plane, Sondra was jerked out of her seat and thrown to the floor when the seatbelt’s coupling snapped. The plane’s violent stop slammed her against a bulkhead, but once the plane’s movement finally stopped, she struggled to stand. Todd, seeing Sondra trying to stand rushed to her side and lifted her to her feet.

“We’ve got to get the passengers out of here.” Because of the plane’s downward angle, she found maintaining her balance difficult.

Sondra didn’t have to worry. As soon as the plane came to a stop, emergency exits were popped open and the chutes deployed, but walking in the cabin proved tricky with the plane at an angle tilted downward toward the nose. At first, the passengers exiting the plane hesitated because of the storm.

“It’s just water, people. Move!” Shari shouted, urging passengers to vacate the plane.

“Mrs. Koster,” Todd said to Anne as he took her hand. “Let’s go.”

“Don’t worry. I’m with you,” she replied pulling her husband out of his seat. Immediately Robert took Harvey’s hand, and together they followed Todd and Anne toward an exit.

“Start moving toward the exits the way you were told,” Shari shouted. “As soon as you’re on the ground, move toward the terminal building or to wherever they tell you to go.”

No one shoved or pushed. The exit was orderly, with passengers helping each other and helping those who were injured or shaken up in the landing. As the escape chutes were deployed, emergency workers rushed forward and secured the flapping chutes. Passengers approached the chute, and hesitated because of the driving rain, lightning and loud

cracks of thunder. Finally, at the encouragement of emergency workers, the passengers jumped, slid down the chutes to safety and were directed toward the terminal building. Passengers exiting onto the wings found emergency workers already on the wings helping them evacuate to the ground. At first, those passengers exiting on the port wing hesitated, but seeing no flames, and at the firemen's urging, they began leaving the plane.

Some passengers took shelter from the driving rain as best they could under the wings. However since most of them were already soaked, they trudged up the hill and toward the terminal building in the midst of lightning strikes and the loud crash and boom of thunder.

Dr. Broeker, when the last passenger had exited onto the wing, immediately entered the plane with several paramedics, looking for anyone who was too injured to leave the plane on his own. Stepping into the plane, the first person Dr. Broeker met was Dr. Brickman.

"We have nine passengers who need to get to the hospital immediately," Brickman shouted.

"We'll handle it," Dr. Broeker said, shaking Dr. Brickman's hand.

After exiting the plane, Kevin headed for the highway and stopped next to a car that was last in line waiting for the highway to reopen. He knocked on the car's driver-side window.

After lowering his window, the driver asked, "Yeah?"

"I..." He wondered what ruse he could successfully use. "...need to get to the hospital, but my car's hemmed in on the other side of the airport. My wife's in early labor at the hospital. Could you give me a lift?"

"Early labor?"

"The baby's a month early."

The driver scratched his head. "Guess I could."

"I'll pay for the gas, and...and give you another twenty or thirty on top of that. Please," Kevin begged.

The driver looked about before saying, "Keep your money. Hop in." The driver reached across and opened the passenger-side door.

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“Thank you.”

As they were heading toward Quincy, the driver asked, “Did you see the plane land?”

“No.”

“Man, you missed something.”

Within ten minutes the plane was completely evacuated except for the removal of the captain and first officer and the nine more seriously injured passengers. These required a great deal more time and care to take off the plane since the emergency crews had to lift the injured off the plane on stretchers and to the waiting ambulances on the highway during the heaviest part of the storm. By the time the last of the injured had been removed from the plane, the storm had begun to slacken.

After the badly injured were on their way to the hospital, Dr. Broecker set up a station inside the closest hanger and began checking all the other passengers. Some were sent immediately to the hospital, while others were simply treated on site. Within an hour, the doctor and his crew had checked all the passenger—whether they had requested it or not.

At Quincy’s terminal, the wet and cold passengers milled about, trying to keep warm in their drenched clothing. Most of them were also talking on their cell phones. A few were talking to reporters while others sat quietly contemplating what they had just gone through. Red Cross and Salvation Army workers circulated among the passengers offering towels and blankets or any other assistance.

“Daddy!” Denise Mast shouted, tears running down her cheeks. Her friend Julie was also making a call.

“Denise? Are you okay?”

“Yes, Daddy, I’m okay. Oh, Daddy, it was awful, terrible. The plane smelled. People were hurt and scared. I can’t wait to get home. I’m never flying again.”

Joseph A Wellman

“Stay where you are. I can be there in five hours. I don’t want you getting on another plane or a bus or whatever they’ll use to bring you to Chicago. I’m picking you and Julie up. As soon as you can, let me know where they take you. I love you. Stay safe. Don’t forget, I’m picking you and Julie up. Gotta go because I wanna get on the road. I’ll call you later when I’m on the road.”

“Love you, too, Daddy.”

Dr. Richard Brickman found his wife, Maria, in the terminal talking on her cell phone. Seeing him approach, she held the phone off to the side.

“What?”

“I...” He hesitated, sighed, and shook his head. “Not much sense in going on, is there?”

“Not when you put it like that, there isn’t.”

“I’m going to see if they need help in the hangar where they’re checking passengers for injuries.”

“Figures.”

“I’ll see you later.”

“Don’t bother.”

Maria waited until Richard was gone before returning to her call.

“I’m dumping this guy as soon as I take him to the cleaners.”

The minute she got in the terminal building, Susan Everson immediately called her mother.

“I survived, Mom, I survived.” She hesitated. “We survived, Mom, we survived.” She squeezed her husband’s hand.

“Who you calling,” John Scott asked his wife.

“Our attorney. We’re suing. We paid for first class and they stuck us back in the last row. They’ll pay for this.”

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Shari finally got a chance to call her husband. After telling Mark about the ordeal of their emergency landing, and assuring him she was all right, she finally said, in a subdued voice, "Honey, I can't keep this from you any longer. I'm pregnant."

Her announcement was followed by a moment of silence.

"Dear?"

"I know. You left your instruction sheets from the doctor on the dresser." She heard a sigh. Then he said, "I'm just so glad you're alive."

Margret Whiting waited until the kids were finished talking to their father. Finally Mitch handed her the phone. "Here, he wants to talk to you."

Margaret took the cell. "Hi, honey."

"Is Amy okay?"

"Yeah, the doctor said it's just a slight bump."

"Was it as bad as Mitch says it was?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Is your mother worth this?" For a long moment, neither one spoke until he said, "Forget I said that. I'm sorry you had to go through such a nightmare."

"Lou, oh, my God, are you okay?" Janet asked. "I just heard what happened."

"Yes, I'm fine. Janet, I've had some time to think this over. I was wrong, terribly wrong. I made a big mistake."

"Wha...what?"

"I put my family ahead of you. That was wrong, very wrong. I want you with me for my parents' party. You're my wife and should be at my side. Sooner or later, they have to meet you, and what better time. And if they don't like it, well, to hell with them."

"Lou, you don't mean that."

Joseph A Wellman

“I do. We should’ve done it when we married instead of sneaking out of town.”

“Hey, my parents’ weren’t exactly jumping up and down for joy,” Janet insisted.

“Yeah, but they finally accepted me.”

“What about your grandmother?” Janet asked.

“Don’t worry about my grandmother. I’ll handle her.”

“Lou, are you sure?”

“Yes. I want you with me. Make the arrangements.”

“I’m glad. I’ll start making reservations right away,” Janet said, adding, “Lou, I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

In Chicago at Marist headquarters after a quick call from Vern, Quincy’s airport manager, relief was universal, Marist staff knowing no passenger fatalities had occurred when the plane ran off the runway. Their satisfaction was brief, however, since they knew the ordeal was far from over for the passengers. The injured had to be taken care of, relatives and friends had to be notified and the passengers would have to be gotten back to O’Hare, together with their luggage. Then the lawsuits would commence. But Bob Johnson was just happy to have the plane on the ground without loss of life. Now he’d let the others take over and get the passengers home. His job would be taking care of the aftermath and seeing to Marist Airlines’ survival.

In the terminal building, Lynne looked about for Carrie. She had been talking with her but Carrie had suddenly disappeared.

“Sondra, have you seen Carrie?”

Sondra, looking about, said, “No.”

The terminal was packed, so trying to find Carrie wasn’t easy. Shari, who was standing by a window, pointed and shouted, “There she is. Oh, my God, what’s she doing?”

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Carrie stood outside at the end of the runway two-two as the storm, while abating, still filled the air with lightning, peals of thunder, and wind-driven wind. She stared at the plane with the escape chutes flapping in the wind.

Lynne ran out of the terminal and grabbed Carrie's arm. "Are you crazy? You want to get hit by lightning?"

Ignoring Lynne, Carrie looked at the plane with water running down her face. Her hair was soaking wet and her drenched clothes clung to her body. Because of the pelting rain, Lynn had trouble telling if she was crying.

"I did it, Lynne. I did it!" Clenching her hands and shaking them at the plane, Carrie shouted, "I did it! I did it! I did it, Lynne, I did it."

Lynne hugged her. "Yes, Carrie, you did it!"

Suddenly Carrie pulled away from Lynne and looked toward the plane. "I didn't do it, Lynne, I didn't do it." She shook her head as she continued saying, "I didn't do it."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"It was Meghan who did it. Without her, I never would've landed this plane. And I feel so bad for what I did to her. She went off in harm's way, and I didn't even tell her goodbye, or that I love her. Oh, God, Lynne, what have I done? What kind of a mother am I? I'm such an egotistical ass."

By now more tears than rainwater were flowing down Carrie's cheeks when Lynne embraced her. Her body shook as she sobbed.

The moment they re-entered the terminal, the room erupted with wild applause and cheers from the passengers. Immediately, the television news crews' bright lights highlighted Carrie.

Carrie, ignoring the applause, the news crews' bright lights and requests for an interview, headed for a small corner of the terminal and placed a call.

After several minutes she heard, "Captain Jansen."

"Meghan, it's Mom."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Aftermath

August 23, 2012

Carrie set her tray on the table on the first day of school and sat, catching stares from all the other teachers in the faculty lunchroom. A couple of teachers waved, a few smiled, but most in some way acknowledged her in a quizzical way as if to question what she had done. She simply nodded and smiled back.

“So?” Lynne asked anxiously.

Carrie sighed. “Lots of questions from my students...” She glanced around the lunchroom, “...and from the look of our colleagues, there’re more questions coming. Getting a little tiresome.”

“Uh huh.”

“It is.”

“Including all those marriage proposals?” Lynne asked, trying to swallow and laugh at the same time.

“Including those wild proposals.” Carrie joined Lynne in laughing before adding, “But I’m getting a little tired of reporters. Don’t want to talk to another one.”

“Really? Why?”

“Some of them want to know if I regret hitting that plane. Apparently the pilot was quite an influential person. Hell, if he was so damn important, why didn’t he have a license? What was I supposed to do? Sacrifice one-hundred-and-thirty people because of some jerk?”

“Do you regret it, you know, hitting him?”

“I’m sorry he died, but hell no, I don’t regret it. I only had seconds to make a choice, and I’m staying with it. Period.”

“Good for you,” Lynne said, reaching across the table and squeezing Carrie’s hand.

After a moment, Carrie calmed down and said, “Got a call from Bob Johnson.”

“Who?”

“Bob Johnson, the head of Marist Airlines.”

“What did he want, other than to thank you again?”

“Seems he’s throwing a big party for all those involved in helping land the plane and wants us there.”

“Us? No way. Only one person’s responsible for that, and that’s you,” Lynne said and pointed at Carrie.

“You’re forgetting a number of controllers and Keith who had a lot to do with my landing the plane safely.”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“And you’re forgetting the most important person Meghan.”

“Will she be there?” Lynne asked.

“No, her tour won’t be over until later this fall.”

“I assume you two are talking now?”

“Almost every day,” Carrie said with a smile.

“That’s great. Have you heard from anyone else?”

Carrie appeared puzzled. “Anyone else?”

“Yeah, you know. Have you heard from any of the crew or passengers? Like Sondra?”

“I did. Heard from Sondra last night. She’s on furlough until her face heals. Apparently Marist doesn’t want passengers thinking she’s the victim of spousal abuse or any other type of abuse.”

“Really?”

“No, that’s just Sondra’s little dig at the airline for not letting her go back to work until her face heals. She’s going crazy just sitting at home.”

“Anything else?” Lynne asked.

“Shari and Barbara will go back to work in another two weeks.”

“Heard from any passengers?”

“Some letters and cards and a few calls thanking me. That’s all. Most of the passengers thanked me back in Quincy or on the way home.”

Carrie put down her fork and leaned across the table. “Now for some real news. Yesterday afternoon I was served with a summons. I’m part of a lawsuit against Marist Airlines brought by a couple, a John and Francine Scott. The suit says I unnecessarily flew the plane too close to a thunderstorm. As a result, a number of passengers suffered severe physical injuries, or were traumatized by the turbulence. In addition, they said that my landing was too hard and was made during

threatening weather when I should have selected a safer airport with a longer runway. And a lot of other stuff.”

“You’re kidding. Have you talked to an attorney?” Lynne asked.

“Not yet, but several people told me any competent judge will throw out the suit.”

“Get an attorney. I know a good one.”

“I know one, too,” Carrie said, with a bitter smile, “but she’s a divorce attorney.”

“Anything else?”

“Got a nice note from the captain’s widow who said the doctor told her even if he had been on the ground when he suffered the stroke, he probably wouldn’t have survived.”

“How about the first officer?”

“Sondra said he’ll be out of commission a little longer. Apparently he has some lingering issues as a result of his food poisoning.”

“Too bad. Hope he gets better. Did they ever identify the source of the poisoning?”

Carrie shrugged. “Not that I know of.”

“Jeez, three dead and more than thirty sent to the hospital. Hope they find out what caused the food poisoning. Remind me never to eat in that restaurant if we ever go back to San Diego.”

Carrie nodded and laughed before adding, “Now for the best one. Got a call from Kevin.”

“Who?” Lynne asked, with a frown.

“Kevin, the former teacher from here who’s also a pilot and was on our flight.”

“Him?” She lowered her voice. “That son of a bitch? You heard from him? What’d he say?”

“He apologized, and told me his reasoning for not taking charge and landing the plane. Told me I did a good job, considering my inexperience.”

“Did you accept his apology?”

“No, I couldn’t anymore than I could accept his treatment of Cindy.”

“Did you have her in class?” Lynne asked.

“No. Did you?”

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“Yeah. One of those girls who’s sixteen going on forty.”

“Still, that’s no excuse for what he did.”

“You knew him, didn’t you?”

“We had lunchroom duty together until he disappeared.”

“Where is he now?”

“Didn’t say, and I didn’t ask. Felt weird talking to him. Wanted to get rid of him as fast as I could.”

“Good, and good riddance. Hope they catch him and send him to jail for a long time.” Lynne laughed. “Bet he stays hidden for the rest of his life. The media really excoriated him for putting his own hide ahead of the other passengers. He’ll never live that down, even if he never goes to jail.”

“He could’ve been a hero. Now...” Carrie shrugged.

“Any more comments from Dr. Meyer, our illustrious principal?”

“No, he just congratulated me. Marge did his dirty work. He wanted to know if, considering my most recent event, I was ready to face one-hundred-and-fifty kids.”

“And...”

“I asked what she thought. She laughed and said welcome back.”

For a moment there was a pregnant pause while Lynne waited for Carrie to give her more information. When it wasn’t forthcoming, she said, “Well?”

“Well what?”

“None of my business, but...”

Carrie leaned back and crossed her arms across her chest. “You want to know if I heard from...him?” She made a face when she said the word ‘him.’

Lynne pushed her plate away, leaned on the table and nodded anxiously.

Carrie sighed, bit her lip while wishing she didn’t have to answer. She, too, sat forward with her arms now crossed on the tabletop. “Yeah. Congratulated me. Said he wasn’t surprised. Asked how I was doing.” She shrugged, picked up her fork and played with a piece of meat.

“What did you tell him?”

“That I was doing fine.”

“Did you ask how he was doing?”

“No. Why should I care how he’s doing?” Carrie paused while still playing with the piece of meat. She pushed it first one way, and then another before positioning it as if she were going to send it flying off the plate into space. Lynne waited as if she knew something else was coming. “Hope the bastard’s suffering from erectile dysfunction.”

Carrie smiled and Lynne erupted in loud laughter. “Every jilted woman’s dream of revenge,” Lynne choked out.

“No, I don’t wish that on him.”

“Yes, you do,” Lynne said while still laughing.

After a moment, Carrie started giggling. “Yeah, you’re right. Hope it’s like a wet noodle.”

“And she’s like a tiger in heat.”

After a moment both women wiped the tears from their eyes, and their breathing returned to normal.

“That felt good.” Carrie pushed her plate away and continued saying, “One more announcement. I’m finishing my flight training.”

“That’s great.”

“Got a good instructor, too. Tom Starke. He’s the owner of one of the planes I flew.”

“So now you’ll be legal.”

“Only for the small stuff.”

“None of my business, but you know me. Still seeing your psychologist?”

Carrie shook her head. “Not any more. After our session yesterday, she figured my episode landing the plane was like a cathartic experience. Made me realize I could get on with my life. Although I figure I’ll still see her from time to time.”

“That’s terrific news.” Picking up her tray, Lynne stood. “Well, it’s back to the salt mines.”

Carrie stood as well, and together the two of them headed back to the cafeteria to dump their trays.

“I almost forgot,” Carrie said. “Remember when I said Quincy’s airport looked familiar?”

“Yeah?”

“Checked my logbook. I was there in July.”

“How...”

The Last Hours of Their Lives

For the next five minutes Carrie explained the afternoon she got lost while flying a cross-country flight.

“A little bit of *deja vu*, huh?”

“I guess. Hey, are we running after school?” Carrie asked.

“Sure.”

“Good—see you then.”

In a seedy area of Los Angeles, Kevin entered a diner that catered to those individuals who weren't too particular how their food was prepared or where it came from. Sitting in a booth, he reread an old newspaper story about the emergency landing and how the authorities were still looking for the only person not accounted for in the crash. The story identified him as wanted by the police, but his whereabouts were still unknown. Shoving the clipping into a pocket, he re-examined a copy of *Time* magazine with a picture of Carrie on the cover. Inside the magazine was a picture of him and a sidebar of why the police wanted him. As much as he'd hoped to remain hidden by not volunteering to land the plane, his face and story were now plastered all over the country. He knew it was just a matter of time before he was captured.

Chapter Twenty-Three

DuPage County Airport

October 2012

10:30 a.m.

“Two-two golf is off one five and going to the north ramp,” Carrie said as she glanced at Rudy Zimmermann, her flight examiner. Except for telling her what he wanted her to do, she couldn’t read him and had no idea if she’d passed her flight test or not.

“Two-two golf, taxi to the north ramp” came the reply from the tower.

She taxied to the ramp, parked the plane in its usual location, shut down the engine and nervously waited.

“Okay, young lady, let’s go inside and do all the paper work,” Rudy said, closing his notebook.

“Does that mean I passed?” she asked looking tensely at the examiner.

“What do you think?” Rudy asked and smiled.

“Well...” She hesitated because she didn’t want him to think she was conceited or overconfident.

“Are you a good pilot?” Rudy asked.

“I think I am.”

“Miss, I didn’t ask you what you thought. I want to know if you’re a good pilot.”

“Yes, I am a good pilot.”

“Good, because you are a good pilot. Now you’re a licensed private pilot. Congratulations. Looks as though you got a cheering crew waiting for you.”

He motioned to the fence by the parking lot where Lynne alongside Caroline with her two young children waited for Carrie. Meghan was still in Afghanistan.

Later, after all the paper work was finished, Carrie stood alone with Lynne in the parking lot. Caroline had to get the kids back for their afternoon naps.

“So what do we do now?” Lynne asked.

The Last Hours of Their Lives

“How about lunch?” Carrie suggested.

“Sounds good. Where?”

“How about Lake Lawn?”

“Lake Lawn? That’s quite a way just for lunch, isn’t it?”

“Not if we fly. How about it?” She nudged Lynne. “You’ll be my first passenger.”

Laughing, Lynne responded with, “I think you’re forgetting something.”

“Doesn’t count...” Carrie stopped in mid-sentence as she watched a Bonanza departing on runway one five. Listening to the deep-throated sound of its engine, Carrie seemed lost in thought. The Bonanza sped down the runway, slowly lifting off, climbing and eventually turning and heading west.

With a quizzical look on her face, Lynne observed, “You’re really into this flying business, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, guess I am.” Still watching the Bonanza, Carrie continued. “Remember when you suggested I get a hobby to keep me busy? You know, something more than just running and working out. I think I found it. I’m going to become a flight instructor.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really. And you’re going to be my first student.”

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Author's Notes

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Several persons contacted for this story were unable to answer any of my questions due to security regulations.

Any errors or omissions in procedures are mine either unintentional or in some cases deliberate.

To my knowledge there has never been a situation in which a passenger has had to take over and land a commercial airliner. There have been situations where a flight crewmember became ill and required emergency treatment. In that case the other crewmember took over and safely landed the plane. Could a situation similar to the one depicted here ever happen? Anything's possible, but it's highly improbable. There have been situations, as reported in the media, where in a private plane a passenger has had to take over and land the plane. In those cases the "pilot" usually received instructions from an ATC

controller or from another pilot on how to land the plane. In most cases the landing was successful.

Could it possibly happen for both crewmembers of a commercial airliner to become medically incapacitated at the same time? Anything is possible, but more than likely it would be very improbable for both crewmembers to become medically ill at the same time. But if it did happen, would it be possible for a low-time passenger-pilot to land the plane? That would depend upon the pilot's experience and training, the size of the plane, the runway on which it would land, and weather conditions. Almost everyone I talked to said a runway of more than twelve thousand feet would be needed. Also the weather would definitely have to be VFR. It's very unlikely that a low-time pilot would be able to make a successful instrument approach and landing. Would it be successful landing? Hopefully we will never find out. Realistically speaking those on a passenger-piloted plane have a fifty-fifty chance of surviving. Or even less. It would not be very promising.

There is one way a low-time pilot would be able to land the plane. Many of today's planes are capable of landing themselves. In this case the substitute pilot would follow directions, flip a few switches and the plane would land itself. That's according to a couple of airline captains. However, air traffic controllers told me if such a scenario actually happened, they would want the plane to land at an airport in a sparsely populated area. Under those conditions the airport might not be equipped to handle that type of plane.

It is a fact that many flight attendants do not know how to use the radio.

The Boeing seven-thirty-seven I used for my story is an older model that hadn't been updated with newer avionics.

The use of cell phones, according to an airline captain, goes only to ten thousand feet. Even at that altitude most calls would be dropped as the plane sped from tower to the next tower. In addition another source said the beam of radiation from the towers are tilted down not up, making a phone call in a plane very difficult.

A transponder is a receiver in every plane that picks up and responds automatically to an incoming radar signal with an identifying signal. With a transponder, air traffic control has information on every plane that's flying, whether the pilot's out for a joy ride or flying in instrument conditions.

The identifying signal the transponder responds with depends upon whether the pilot is flying under visual flight regulations, or under instrument flight regulations. Pilots flying under visual flight regulations must have the numbers 1200 in their transponder (popular term is squawking) that identifies the plane to air traffic control as a VFR flight. With the transponder's mode C, it also lets the controller know the plane's altitude. Planes flying VFR are not in contact with ATC unless they're at a tower-controlled airport or transitioning airspace requiring contact with air traffic control.

All planes flying IFR, whether in meteorological conditions or in good weather, must have filed a flight plan and be in contact with air traffic control. Their squawk code identifies their plane with its own unique set of numbers. As with VFR flights, the transponder for IFR flights also identifies the plane's altitude. All other information about the flight is in the ATC's computer and was entered when the pilot filed a flight plan. The additional information lists items such as the plane's call sign, airspeed, and type of plane. This information is available to the controller.

Any plane flying at eighteen-thousand feet and above must be on an IFR flight plan even if the weather is clear. Many private pilots choose to fly IFR even in good weather for the experience or for separation in high-traffic areas.

