

CHAPTER 1

Dawn. Sunlight strikes the rows of high-rise buildings lofting toward the clouds covering Victoria Peak. When Dan Swanton opened the curtains to their hotel room, nothing seemed unusual. Seldom are any of us aware of the abyss that waits at the edge of an ordinary day. He looked at the clock next to the bed. Good, his internal clock had awakened him before the alarm. Back in bed, he stretched and felt the warmth of Manalani's body next to him. In spite of that familiar closeness, a sense of unease rubbed against his thoughts. He slipped out of bed and into the bathroom trying to locate the source of that feeling.

It wasn't because this was his first flight out of Hong Kong. He had confidence in his abilities from his years of flying. Maybe it was because of last night's conversation. Manalani had insights that sometimes were foreign to his way of thinking. She got into him again about their son's sexual orientation. Dan couldn't come to terms with it and its implications. Why couldn't she understand that he just wanted to make things easier for Mark? Being a teenager was a tough enough job in any case.

When he first met Manalani, she was flying for Air Micronesia and on her way to Honolulu. To him, she was an exotic, pungent mystery that shunted aside his usual reticence. She

encountered him as a musician, not as a pilot. In those days, when he was home from flying, he played tenor sax in Torrance at a club called Monk's Room, named that because Thelonius Monk played gigs there when he was in the city. On that fateful night, the quartet was in sync and swinging hard and fast. She stepped up to the stand and requested "Round Midnight." Dan was surprised. *Who is this gorgeous lady who knows Monk's tunes? She looks like she dropped in here from some exotic slice of heaven.*

He wanted to impress her and put all of his emotion through the horn, extending the last phrase out to the point it brought a standing ovation. When she again approached the stand to thank him, he felt the spark of frisson between them. He asked her out for coffee when their gig was done. Afterwards, at Chez Mélange, they were not very far into their conversation before she found out he was a pilot. She laughed, tossing her halo of dark hair, but looked into his eyes intently and said, "You're lucky we met this way. I don't date pilots, but a pilot with a musician's soul, I could handle that."

She had maturity and insight, and a personality that complemented his. Because of this, when his infatuation with her began to fade, their relationship became deeper. He became dependent on her in ways he only partly understood. Sometimes she would tease him into doing things he would never have tried on his own.

As he shaved, Dan felt that even though last night's conversation, and the surrounding issue of Mark's problem, were prob-

ably the sources of his unease, it would just have to wait. His focus was narrowing down to the flight coming up. Manalani knew him well enough to understand. She called it getting into his mechanical man act. Twenty-minutes before their pick up time he was down in the lobby with his bags packed. Manalani would follow in a few minutes. The crew slowly assembled. They counted heads, ten flight attendants and four pilots plus Manalani. They were ready to go on the long taxi ride out.

The ride to Kai Tak confirmed Dan's observations from the air on their arrival. The harbor supported a vast flotilla of water born equipment, darting, lumbering, and charging into any open space available. Commerce was the lifeblood of this city, as it had been from the start when the British wrested it away from the Chinese during the opium wars. Hong Kong was now the portal through which billions of dollars in cash and products flowed to and from mainland China. This was one area where the Japanese had no direct entry. Memories in China extended back to World War II, and the hatred generated by the conquering Japanese armies still festered close to the surface in the older generation.

On the way, rain and wind began to beat on the windows of the limo. Dan wondered, *Is the typhoon in the weather forecast moving faster than predicted? Better take a good look at the trend in the forecast.*

At the airport terminal, passengers in the lounge were looking at him. He shrugged it off. They seldom tried to speak to him due to his rank and appearance. The planes of his face all angled forward, dominated by a beak of a nose, with his eyes deeply set beneath bushy eyebrows. Manalani once said he looked like a bird of prey, an eagle or a hawk. She was right;

he could present a fearsome visage, particularly when he was angry. They made an unlikely yet striking couple. She was all soft brown curves, smooth and seal-like; he was all angles and attitude.

As the rest of the crew descended the stairs to the operations level, Manalani and Dan paused. He gave her a kiss on the cheek and squeezed her hand. "See you on board in a bit, angel."

She smiled, "Love you, big boy," and walked out to the departure gate.

Just before Dan started down the long dark passageway to operations, he looked back at her and found her looking back at him. A small tremor passed through him. He stuffed the feeling into the recesses of his mind. He had to get down to work.

In the briefing room, he and his three crewmembers began their preflight briefing, surrounded by route charts, weather faxes, special procedures, and notices to airmen (NOTAMS). During their discussions, Dan received some compliments that pleased him. Greg Allred led off. "Dan, I was impressed when you let me fly the first leg. A lot of captains would insist on flying it themselves, just to show they could do it. I've seen some pretty hair-ball approaches by new captains on this route because of that."

"Well, like I told you then, I could learn a lot by observing you. Besides, I haven't given up my captain's prerogative."

Dick Borman, the relief captain, chimed in, "Yeah, and I appreciate your asking for my views. I can tell some of the guys new to this route get their feathers ruffled when I try to give advice."

"Well, I figure I need all the help I can get, stumbling around

through the skies in a giant airliner.”

They spent the next fifty minutes checking navigation points on the plotting chart, discussing fuel burn, minimum acceptable fuel over destination, and weather conditions. That done, they gathered their flight bags, and strode through a maze of corridors leading out to the planes.

At the gate, there was a jetway that required the use of a magnetically striped authorization card followed by a coded PIN. None of the pilot’s cards would work. Dick grumbled, “Great security, huh? Can’t even get through to go to work. Someday when this happens, I’m just going to turn around and go home; let them call me when they’re serious about letting me get to my airplane.”

Dan looked at him while he was commenting. He had his head and shoulders thrust forward and had approached the subject with his usual bulldog tenacity. His short compact body and swarthy face complemented an aggressive stance that he said was the best way to avoid fights in the tough neighborhood where he grew up. At that moment, a gate agent came through the door from the other direction. They slipped on through.

At the door to the MD-11 cockpit, they ran into another delay. A ship cleaner, working on the lavatories that were next to the door, had left her trash cart in the aisle. Two mechanics in the cockpit were running byte checks on the computers, and one was writing in the logbook. A flight attendant was making a change to the passenger service panel facing the cockpit area.

“That’s it,” Dick exploded, “I’m going home. Now they will blame us if we don’t get out on time, even though we can’t get to our seats until fifteen minutes before departure. Lucky you, Dan, you get to rush through the cockpit set up on your first

flight home.”

They all laughed, but Dan replied, “There won’t be any rushing in my cockpit. If you rush or skip around through the checklist, the feds got you cold because it’s on the voice recorder.”

The crew settled into the routine of preflight checking. Dan and Greg cross-checked the flight plan and ICAO clearance. Dick verified fuel burns and fuel loading, and carefully checked weight and balance and performance data since they were close to maximum weight for take-off.

Dan turned to the pages of the meteorological report.

Dick asked, “How does the weather look on the charts? Think we should be worried about the typhoon?”

Dan replied, “No, it’s not a problem. It’s drifting in from the China Sea, but it won’t arrive until tomorrow. We will have to use wet runway data though for take-off. We’ll have a lower V_1 speed, but the quartering head wind will help to compensate.”

Twelve flight attendants were on board. Though Dan encouraged them to visit the cockpit during slack periods, he often did not meet those working aft in tourist class until they were on the bus going to the hotel or back to the parking lot. Everyone had duties that would keep them busy until they had been in cruise for several hours. Dan took advantage of a boarding delay to have a short briefing with the lead flight attendant. To avoid towering over her, he sat on an armrest. “Ann, it’s going to be rough on climb-out. I want you to remain seated. When Manalani boards, I want to know her seat number.”

“No problem. So you want us to stay seated until the seat belt sign is turned off?”

“This time, I think that would be best.”

“Thanks for letting us know.”

“I try to keep the crew happy. Don’t want Manalani getting on my case.”

Back in the cockpit, he could see Greg, his lanky frame folded awkwardly in his seat, typing the flight plan information into the Flight Management System (FMS) computer keyboard. When programmed correctly, this computer, through the autoflight system and autothrottles, would set engine power, control airspeed, and could navigate the MD-11 all the way to a landing. Only half-jokingly, Greg said that typing skills were as important as flying.

From his left side seat, Dan checked the logbook for write-ups. He placed his charts and pencils on a clipboard on top of his flight bag, sunglasses hung from a clip on the side window. He called it, “Making my nest.” The familiar glow of the panel, the hum of the gyros and fans, the slight smell of old leather, oil, and ozone, helped Dan in this process. Each pilot had a routine that was part of the process of settling in. In this day of standard procedures and enforced conformity, it was one way of stamping his identity in the cockpit. Then he looked over the instrument panels to be sure that each switch and gauge was correct for the before-start checklist.

From his hermetically sealed cockpit, Dan peered down to the ramp filled with charging trucks and buses, taxiing airplanes, and towering buildings. This disrupted his feeling for the larger world outside and produced a sense of dislocation. He realized, with a sense of longing, that he preferred the small airports he used to fly into on the Lockheed Electra and the Boeing 737. Places like Bozeman, pervaded by the smell of new mown hay in the summer; Jackson Hole, marked by the huge valley,

Grand Tetons, and pine trees. Tucson exuded the ozone and creosote-sharp smell of the desert, often accompanied by towering cumulus build-ups in the afternoon. At all of these small airports he could step out on the ramp and get a sense of the weather that went beyond the symbols on charts and weather faxes. He realized this intuitive knowledge came from his years on the farm. Observing the weather and predicting its whims were part of the lessons of survival if you were a farmer. At Kai Tak and all of the big hubs, the fumes and chaos on the ground prevented him from gaining any of this innate feeling.

The relief first officer, Tom Spanger, returned with his usual announcement, “Walk around’s done and everything’s okay.”

Dan noticed that Tom had done the check without putting on his coat. When he threw his hat into the overhead bin, his hair dangled over his ears and collar. Dan knew he was one of those pilots who pushed the dress code. Sort of a dandy too, always primping a bit before he went aft into the passenger cabin. Dan didn’t really care; he was a good pilot, but Dan warned him again, “Tom, someday a check pilot will nail you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tom replied, “but I’m going to see how long I can push it. Then maybe I’ll get a buzz cut. See how they like that.”

Just as they finished the checklist, an agent appeared at the cockpit door. “Sorry guys. There’s a power outage or computer glitch. Your final flight release and weight and balance papers are delayed.”

Dick said, “Typical. Hurry up and wait. I’m going back to the galley. You guys want something to drink?” He took their orders and left.

Tom made an observation. “Have you seen how they run

their utilities here? Wire bundles and conduit strung across streets between buildings supported by bamboo frames. Sewage barely contained. Water running everywhere. It's a wonder anything works and that people aren't electrocuted every day."

"It probably does happen and nobody cares," Greg replied. "Have you even peered into some of the rat warren slums here? No streets, just dark tunnels and alleys diving into eight-story high piles of rooms. No law, the police won't even go in there. Gangs set the codes and make their own justice. How do ordinary people survive? Why would they even live there or move there?"

Dan said, "If they came here from the villages and are willing to live like this, can you imagine what kind of condition they left? Makes me really appreciate what we've got."

"You're right," Greg said. "Flying here or to Bombay or Delhi is a real eye opener. Do you know the three real signs of civilization?"

"No, tell me."

"Hot showers, cold drinks, and flush toilets. And most of the people in the world are missing one of those."

"Which one would you give up first?" Dan asked.

"Flush toilets," Greg replied. "I can take a dump anywhere, but I sure love my cold drinks and hot showers."

Tom changed their train of thought with a new comment. "Do you know what my girlfriend said is wrong with pilots?"

"Wrong with pilots?" replied Greg. "There ain't nothing wrong with pilots. Let me set you straight on this. Didn't anybody tell you? We are livings gods, sent down by Zeus as gifts to this planet."

“Yeah, I know. I gave her a line like that and she said, ‘You guys all think you hit a home run, but you started on third base.’”

At the cockpit door with their drinks, Dick replied, “No offense, but that’s bullshit. I paid my dues more than once, Korea and Viet Nam. Lucky to get out with my ass in one piece. Flying with the non-scheds wasn’t much safer. What she doesn’t appreciate is that this is one of the few jobs where you can die in your seat, sitting in your office, and take a bunch of people with you.”

“Hey, you’re preaching to the choir,” Tom replied. “But I sure wouldn’t want to live here.”

“No arguments there. I’ve lived in a lot of shit holes since I was a kid. I love my wife, home, and kids, except for my stupid second son.”

“What’s happening now?” Dan asked.

“Well, you know he didn’t want to go to college. Now he just quit another job, or got fired. I’m not sure which. He’s got no drive, no ambition. I think he’s been on easy street too long. I should have kicked him out of the house.”

“Let me ask you a couple of questions, Dick, then see if your outlook changes.”

“Okay, shoot.”

“Does he do a lot of drugs? Does he like girls?”

“No, he’s clean. Scared himself bad with drugs a few years ago. Too many girls are part of the problem. Spends too much time and money on them.”

“Dick, in this day and age, if your son doesn’t do drugs and he likes girls, you are halfway home. Appreciate him for what he is. You can’t run his life for him. I lost my oldest son, Lyle.

It seems like I fought with him since he was a kid. He and I never got along, but when he died, man, it hit me real hard that I never really appreciated him. I loved him, but I never liked him, and then I lost him, and that hurt double hard.”

Dick paused, his face creased in a scowl. Then he smiled. “I know you are right, Dan, it’s probably a good warning to me. He’s not really a bad kid. Just rubs me the wrong way. If I lost him, how would I feel?”

The paperwork arrived, and Dan and Greg covered the fifty-six items of the before-start checklist. The agent closed the entry door. The tug pushed them back, engines started, taxi permission was received from ground control, taxi checklist completed, and they rolled out along the taxiway to Runway 13. On the way, after they had done the control surface checks, Dan reinforced one final instruction. “Since we are at max weight, if we get to V_1 minus ten, we are going on unless the airplane is coming apart. Dick, since you are in the center jump seat, monitor us for screw-ups, and if we lose an engine, you are pre-commanded to dump fuel. When we get up to three-thousand feet, you can read the appropriate checklists to us. Are we all together on this?”

Everyone agreed. They were cleared into position on the runway and ran the last few items of the before take-off checklist. As they waited for their take-off clearance, the mood was one of quiet anticipation. With the engines far aft of the cockpit, and everything sealed up tightly, the sound level was very low. The period from brake release, until the wheels were in the wells and the flaps and slats were up, was their most vulnerable state. In a sense, they weren’t really flying until the plane was all cleaned up and they were accelerating and climb-

ing away. If anything went wrong in that three-minute period, they would all earn their whole year's pay in a matter of seconds. At the weight they were flying there was very little margin for error.

"I'll hold on the lights until we're on the runway and cleared for take-off," Dan said. He turned on the radar to see if he could separate the rain showers from the ground clutter of the surrounding terrain. After a Cathay Pacific 747 loomed out of the rainy mist and touched down, the tower cleared them, "Intercontinental 80, line up and wait."

As they moved out onto the runway, Dan asked Greg, "Can you clean up the radar returns?"

Greg said, "Don't think so Dan. Even with ten-degree tilt, we seem to be getting ground returns. Dick, when we get in the air, would you keep working on it. Should clear up pretty quick. It looks like some rain out there, but at this time of year, there is always some around."

The typhoon in the China Sea, though no direct threat to Hong Kong, was gathering its energy and sending out waves of rain from its expanding core. One of these waves contained a strong rain cell moving out from the hills toward the end of the runway two miles away, but the pilots could not separate it from the ground returns reflecting off the mountains on each side of their flight path. In the office of the Royal Meteorological Society, the weather radar, spinning out its lonely sweep, detected this cell, but there was no repeater scope in the tower to make this information immediately available. The radar operator, on a short break from his duties, was talking to an attractive secretary a floor below. That eliminated the human element in the warning chain.

The rain cell resembled an ugly black cauliflower shouldering its way thousands of feet into the humid air, but its mass was hidden in the mists and rain surrounding it. Driven by the high altitude winds, and fed by the heat and water vapor of the sea, it sucked in energy and eased its way into the projected path of Intercontinental 80. The cell now reached the mature stage where the uplift energy could no longer hold all the water in its upper levels. The mass of water droplets in its core began to fall, gathering more water and momentum as it continued. This formed what meteorologists call a microburst, a downdraft of air and water less than a mile in diameter. People on the ground receive this as a blast of cold air and pounding rain. To a pilot, it is a column of negative energy pushing his airplane toward the ground.

As this was happening, they received their clearance, "Intercontinental 80 is cleared for take-off. Wind is 105 at 20."

Dan said, "Okay, that gives us a quartering left headwind. Shouldn't be a problem. I'll keep some rudder in. Okay, here we go. Looking for 1.60 on the EPR gage."

"Airspeed's alive on both sides."

"Eighty knots, take-off clamp, power looks good."

A long pause followed as the airplane gathered itself and accelerated at an increasing rate toward its V_1 commit point. The cockpit insulation muted the scream of the turbines to a single buzzing tone. Vibrations transmitted by bumps in the runway created the sensation of speed. As speed picked up, the initial wallowing sensations became sharper, until at take-off they were distinct jolts. Since Dan's attention was entirely devoted to the instruments and the remaining runway, he had very little visual perception of increasing speed.

“V₁”

“We got an overheat on number two.” This came from Dick Borman who was monitoring the engines.

“That’s all right,” Dan replied. “We’re going on. We can fix it in the air.”

“Rotate”

“V₂”

“Positive rate”

“Gear up”

“Hey, number two is spinning down, we’re losing power.”

Dan was shocked. “What the hell! Give me max power. What’s going on? Start dumping fuel.”

“You’ve got the power; can’t tell why it shut down. No fire. I’m hitting ignition override.”

“Fuel dumps are open. You should see all the failure messages I’m getting!”

“Screw that,” Dan said. “But go through the memory items.”

Dan was concerned about their situation, but it was under control. They were climbing four-hundred feet-per-minute. That was all he could expect with an engine out at this heavy weight. Dan’s attention focused on scanning his flight instruments, but Tom Spanger, sitting behind him, could see the dark mass of rain ahead of them. “It looks like we are about to get dumped on.” Immediately, the view outside turned black. Rain pounded on the surface of the plane with an intensity that the pilots felt and heard inside. The MD-11 shuddered as it encountered the wind shift in the rain shaft. Dan saw his vertical speed indicator start a deadly trend downward to zero.

A loud synthesized voice broke into his concentration:

WINDSHEAR WINDSHEAR WINDSHEAR.

“God damn it! Firewall those engines!”

“You’ve got it already.”

He knew what was happening, but his options were limited. They were penetrating a mass of sinking air in the core of the rain shaft. On the far side of this core, the outflow was producing a tailwind component. This combination robbed the airplane of energy needed for climb. This would make the situation critical if all engines were operating. With one engine out it could be disastrous.

Following the movement of the flight director bars, Dan pulled the nose of the MD-11 upwards. The sophisticated sensors and program of the windshear guidance system confirmed his instincts and training. It was designed to lead the airplane through the event by conserving the maximum amount of energy. In this case, Dan already knew what had to happen. He had to trade off airspeed for altitude, and he didn’t have much left to use. The engines were now at their maximum output. Except for the callouts of the emergency checklist and the concern on each of the pilots faces, a casual observer in the cockpit at this moment would have little clue as to their desperate situation.

As the plane began to sink toward the water, the ground proximity warning system gave out another warning: DON’T SINK DON’T SINK.

“I know! Damn it! I’m trying,” was Dan’s response. The last thing he wanted was superfluous advice from a machine.

“Stickshaker!” Greg called out. The control column vibrated a tactile warning to the pilots that they were within twenty knots of stall speed. Dan now was in a tight box that was

shrinking. If he released the backpressure on the yoke to stay out of the stick shaker, the usual response, the airplane would sink toward the water. He had to stay at that fine line between stall and sink.

“Fly it, Dan, fly it,” came from Dick in the jump seat.

By now, Dan had pitched the nose up to eighteen degrees. He was talking to himself, as he always did when things became critical. “Steady, steady. Keep it there. Come on baby, we can do it.” The airplane was wallowing around in turbulence forcing him to vary his control inputs just to hold the airplane where he wanted it.

“100 feet” Greg called out, reading from the radio altimeter. For a few seconds they held their altitude. The airplane now was occasionally shuddering as the gusts of air caused the airplane to nibble at the edge of a stall. Then quite noticeably, like a huge animal, which had given everything it could, and now was resigned to its fate, the airplane began to settle.

For the first time, all the pilots in the cockpit faced the incomprehensible possibility that they were going into the water. Until now, it was as though a simulator exercise had gotten out of control. If they just came up with the right actions, the right moves, they could pull it off. Each pilot searched desperately for one more thing that could save the day. Nothing was left. Their only hope was that they would make it out to the other side of the windshear before they hit the water.

Tom Spanger raised himself up in his seat behind Dan, partly as an unconscious effort to lift the airplane, and also to see out. Forward visibility improved, and he was shocked to see boats and ships flashing by them in the mist. Suddenly a tanker loomed up on their left. Its superstructure was above them!

He thought, “Oh God, if we hit one of those, it’s all over,” but he didn’t say anything because he knew they had no room to maneuver, and any comment from him about ships would just distract Dan.

“50 feet...shit! We are still sinking.”

“20 feet...damn it! Climb, damn it!”

Without being commanded, Greg reached up and hit the ditching switch that would close all the external openings in the fuselage to help keep it watertight. It was an overt admission on his part that he felt they were about to go in.

On the jump seat Dick reached down for the public address microphone to give the command, “Brace—brace for impact.”

At this moment, Dan felt the tail contact the water. A few seconds earlier a small part of his mind had said, “You’re going in. You’re not going to make it.” He immediately squashed this thought with a response of, “No, we’re not going in. I’m not giving up. I won’t let it happen. Fly the airplane, fly the airplane.” Simultaneously, at a more subtle level of his mind, part of Dan was pulling back, becoming an impartial observer of all the chaos and tension that was occurring. This part had no vested interest in the outcome and acted only as a witness.

At this speed, when the MD-11 contacted the water, it was solid, not the soft medium that most humans encounter. The fuselage aft of the wing fractured. The airplane began to pitch downward. Next, the wing engines hit. In two seconds, they went from full speed to zero as water rushed through them. The combination of gyroscopic loads and impact tore them loose from their pylons. The pylons dug in. The sudden deceleration and impact loads caused the fuel tanks in the wing to

rupture. The right wing contacted the water slightly ahead of the left causing the airplane to lurch to the right. This made the fuselage forward of the wing break off to the left when it hit. The downward angle also made the nose penetrate the water first and then break upwards.

Inside the plane, the forces involved were enormous. Rows of seats broke loose and collapsed on each other. Lucky passengers ejected outside the airframe into the water through openings. The only portion of the fuselage left relatively intact was the center section above the wing and main gear. No fire erupted, but Jet A-1 fuel spread over the surface of the water from the ruptured tanks.

The plane impacted one small fishing boat and obliterated it and its occupants. When the family turned up missing at their usual dock site in Aberdeen, that was the first clue that they were involved. Several other small fishing boats and one tug narrowly missed the same fate.

In the cockpit, as the airplane began to break up on impact, Dan grappled with an event that was too monstrous to comprehend. As the nose of the airplane hit, the sound and forces involved were so great that his mind snapped inward to that secret place all humans have when shock becomes so great the brain and senses cannot encompass it.

His first conscious awareness was of sounds—hissing, crackling, gurgling, and a low groaning sound like an animal in pain. He could see; light was coming from the emergency cockpit lights, powered by their own batteries.

For the first time, he realized he was alive. He looked to his right where he could see Greg slumped in his seat. His posture and lack of movement indicated he was dead. In the debris

covering the center pedestal he could barely recognize Dick's head and shoulders. He was shocked to see the blood pooling there and running down to the floor of the cockpit. He realized that when Dick had reached for the mike, the impact had twisted him out of his harness and driven his head into the power levers. He called out to Tom Spanger but received no reply. He looked down to his left and saw the upper half of Tom's body twisted and jammed between Dan's seat and the sidewall. When he reached down to touch him, he received no response.

Dan now was dimly aware of pain in his own body but had a hard time locating its source. Finally, he centralized it to his chest and his left leg. A cold numbness spread upwards toward his chest. Suddenly, his mind jerked in fear. Of course! They were in the water and sinking slowly. He reached down to unbuckle his harness. It took three tries before he felt it release. He attempted to raise himself out of his seat, but his left foot was pinned in the wreckage under and ahead of the rudder pedal.

Now, the metallic taste of panic began to fill his mouth. He pulled, jerked, and twisted in desperation. The pain became inconsequential. The idea that he would survive the impact only to be dragged to his death in the wreckage was unacceptable.

And yet, it was happening.

The water was up to his neck; his breath came in rapid gasps.

That was good; hyperventilation would allow him to hold his breath longer.

But what difference did that make? He was going to die anyway. It would just take longer. As the water closed over his

head, he gave another series of jerks on his leg.

He felt overcome by an immense sense of loss. The fear of death was not the fear of the unknown; it was the loss of everything he knew. His entire life, every act, every thought, was disappearing into the void. That void surged up toward him, an immense empty otherness; his death rising to meet him.

CHAPTER 2

He blacked out for a short period. Then, inexplicably, he found himself floating on the surface of the water. The smell and taste of jet fuel were everywhere. He was holding onto a piece of the wreckage that jutted up through the surface of the water. His mind, numbed by the cataclysmic events of the last few minutes, hardly questioned this revelation. It was impossible, though no more so than everything else that had happened, but there was no time for reflection, only time for survival. Later, he would realize that a mystery, hidden in that blacked-out period, would change his life.

His rational mind clicked back into operation. The checklist called for him to organize his crew and passengers to await rescue, but all he could see was chaos. His eyes hurt; his vision was blurred, but he could make out people amid the debris in the water, some moving, some not. He tried to call out, but his chest hurt so much that all he could do was gasp. What could he do? He could not swim over to help them. Then it hit him like a hammer blow between the shoulder blades—Manalani. Manalani was on board. How could he forget? He was not used to her being on his trips. In his shocked state, he didn't remember. Oh God, she had to be alive. It couldn't be any other way. Things like that didn't happen, couldn't happen. Where was she sitting? Business class, seat 19C. That would be over the

wing. That was good. That area was the strongest structurally. He had to find her.

To his relief, he could hear the sound of engines approaching and saw powerful searchlight beams sweeping the water. He realized that they had hit the water a short way out from the end of the runway. This must be the rescue crew arriving.

He was hearing the sound of the twin diesels of Thunderbird, the rescue catamaran that had set out within one minute of impact. Shift commander Aaron Drang was on duty at the auxiliary fire station located eight hundred feet from the end of the runway. He had observed thousands of heavily laden airplanes take-off on Runway 13 and had an instinctive feeling of the rotation point, the engine sound, and climb rate of a normal take-off.

When Intercontinental Flight 80 went by, he knew it was in trouble. It didn't sound right, and it wasn't climbing as it should. He snatched up his field glasses to observe it as it flew into the rain shaft. The plane was not climbing at all; in fact, it appeared to be sinking. He hesitated a few seconds considering his options. He glanced down at his men that he could see on the tarmac inside the station. Some of them were looking up at him questioningly. They also could sense trouble. He made his decision to hit the crash bell. He had a gut feeling, that short of a miracle, this airplane was going in. Wrong, and he would be criticized for causing disruption and thousands of dollars of expense on a false alarm, but if he guessed right, precious seconds would be saved.

The second he hit the bell, his men jumped into their gear and rushed toward the catamaran. The rest of the men at the station who were on duty would supplement the eight men

who manned the cat. The main station received the crash signal. The men on duty there immediately ran to their positions from which they would organize the recovery operation and triage process. Commander Bei Duck Chan, from this position, could relay requests for support equipment and personnel as needed.

In the tower, the relay of the crash signal prompted the tower chief to hit a single button on a computer-controlled phone. This phone automatically dialed a series of numbers alerting hospitals, ambulance services, the navy, police, fireboat stations, and others to initiate their crash procedures and await further orders on clear radio or telephone channels. Since this was a water impact outside the airport boundaries, they initiated a separate plan for that contingency.

In spite of the efficiency of these operations, the rescue crews were not the first at the accident scene. The tugboat captain, when he recovered from the shock of the near miss, turned his boat into the area. Though a tug might not appear to be big when viewed from a large ship, it's very big compared to the survivors in the water and also not designed to pick up people out of the water. Knowing this, the skipper put his drive in neutral and drifted in. He gave his men orders to help those survivors that could swim to the tires hanging over the sides and stern or could grab the poles that the men extended to them. He knew his crew would not go into the water to rescue anyone. He had rescued seven passengers when he could see and hear the catamaran approaching. Now his only problem was transferring them without running over anyone enroute.

On his small fishing junk, Sai Ho, had other considerations. In his mind, the crash was a sign that the wheel of life and

death had finally turned in his favor. He was no stranger to violent death. Some of his earliest boyhood memories were of the bombing and subsequent occupation of Shanghai by the Japanese in World War II. Except for one sister, his entire family was killed or lost in that event. When the Maoist revolution swept into the area, his sister disappeared into a forced commune, and he escaped to Hong Kong. Through hard work and a good sense of timing, he was able to gain his own boat and establish his own family. Though fishing was a precarious living, he had moderate success. Just a few months ago though, he lost a son-in-law. He had been drinking beer while cleaning fish, lost his balance, and fell overboard into the waiting jaws of one of the sharks that often follow the boats.

Sai Ho looked upon the crash as a gift from the gods. It was fate that people would die in the crash, and it was fate that he would be there to pick up the booty that would be floating on the surface. The dead would no longer have need of their possessions. He quickly turned his boat into the chaos and ordered his two sons to use the gaffs to retrieve anything of value. His wife and daughter had a sharp eye for these things and could quickly decide those to keep.

Two bodies and a dismembered arm yielded up rings and watches and some cash. A briefcase was a disappointment, but two suitcases contained a treasure trove of jewelry. All of this they accomplished before the catamaran arrived on the scene. Rather than risk trouble by being greedy, Sai Ho slipped away in the opposite direction. No passengers had approached his boat so he did not need to worry about their ghosts affecting his future luck. He took this as a sign that the gods were truly with him.

He would have to sell these items to the broker, Hao Lam, who would claim his too large share. Even so, there should be enough to buy a bigger boat, put his number one son into school, have enough left over for pleasure, and buy his wife some of the silly things she was always badgering him about. Ah yes, he would definitely need to improve the family shrine and possibly go to the Man Mo temple to make an offering to Kovan Kung, the family patriarch.

As the catamaran made its way toward him, Dan could see there were water level ramps extended at the sides. When they came near, the catamaran slowed almost to a stop, and divers leaped off to assist survivors. He slipped down into the water to cover the few feet remaining. Someone reached for him and said, "Okay captain, we have you now." On board, he temporarily forgot his damaged leg, and when he tried to stand, he almost fainted from the pain.

A firefighter said, "You had better lie down, captain. You are hurt and in shock. We will take care of things."

"How bad are things?" Dan asked. "I have to try and keep my crew together."

"We will keep you posted. Haven't picked up any crew members yet."

Dan started to shake uncontrollably. He felt his energy slipping rapidly away. Hard to concentrate. Couldn't remember...in the cockpit...Greg...Greg was dead, but what about everybody else? What about the flight attendants? What about Manalani?

He pulled himself upright, holding on to a stanchion. He could barely stand; no way could he walk. Confusion, noise, firemen rushing about. He gave up; sat back down. He would

talk to them; explain when they were under way.

He must have blacked out. Not only were they underway, he could see the fire station looming up ahead. Someone, an officer, was standing over him. He had to explain, "My wife, my wife, Manalani, she was on board, in business class, 19C. Where is she? Is she all right?"

The officer looked at him grimly, "I'm sorry, sir. There weren't many survivors. I'm not sure about your wife. We recovered two flight attendants alive. No pilots. Don't know how many passengers yet. We'll be docking in one minute. They will help you find your wife there. Sorry about all this."

Dan was staggered. He didn't know how to respond. He was responsible for his crew. Two flight attendants, which meant ten were missing. "Is there any chance there might be more survivors?"

"Almost none, sir. We are fairly certain we picked up everyone that was floating. Anyone under water this long would be dead. But we do have divers still checking out there now with the boats."

They reached the dock. Immediately, more personnel swept over the catamaran. Firefighters carried passengers off. Another officer came down to speak to him. "We will have you out of here shortly, sir. I think that..."

Dan cut him off. "No! No! I don't want to leave until all the passengers are taken care of. I want my crew isolated if possible, and I must find my wife; she was on board, seat 19C. I want her with us."

The officer blinked several times. "Sorry, sir; so far we have only found two flight attendants. We didn't know about your wife. Your senior agent has sent us a copy of your manifest.

Most passengers that can talk have been identified. Everyone will be taken to Queen Elizabeth Hospital. You will need to go too; your leg looks bad, and you are obviously in shock.”

“Hell yes, I’m in shock, but I’m not going anywhere until I have found my wife.”

“What I’m trying to tell you, sir, is that she is probably already on her way to the hospital.”

“But you don’t know; you can’t be sure.”

“We have not been able to identify everyone, but they’re all on their way. No one is remaining behind.”

Dan looked around and realized that he was almost the last person remaining on board. “All right. Take me up there, but I tell you, I’ve got to find my wife.”

The officer replied, “We’ll do our best, sir; we really will.”

But Dan noticed that he looked away as he said it.

At ground level, amidst all the noise, glaring lights, and seeming confusion, Dan could see there was a group of stretchers set aside with blankets over them. The significance was obvious. There was no hurry to move them. He asked again about Manalani and the two flight attendants. The guarded reply was that they were checking for him, and that she would probably turn up at the hospital.

Temporarily he gave up. He was overwhelmed, could not concentrate, shaking. The pain now flooded his body, each breath a short painful gasp. He could not spit out the taste of jet fuel. As they lifted him into the ambulance, it became the predominate smell. He thought he might throw up. He felt the prick of a needle in his arm. The ambulance was warm. He was losing focus. The trip to the hospital was a nightmare of drifting into unconsciousness and then suddenly snapping out into

the dread and anxiety of reality. There was part of him that just wanted to stay in that warm, dark, empty place forever.

But he couldn't.

He had responsibilities for crew and passengers.

And he had to find Manalani.