

Airless

A Novel

By Amanda Cox

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I. A-Attendants

“You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them.”

— Maya Angelou

"In life you're either a passenger or a pilot; it's your choice."

— Amelia Earhart

In the star-speckled skies over the U.S. continental divide, a Southland Air 737-400, registration number N310SL, was cruising through the icy and nearly-airless regions of 38,000 feet. Flight number 269 was still an hour away from Denver when Chrissy Cooper, the A-attendant, or lead-flight attendant who supervises the cabin crew, was making her way down the aisle with a garbage bag to collect the last few cups and napkins after beverage service. The flight was full, most of the window shades had been down since departure, and many of the passengers were either snoozing or distracted with their electronic devices. With the cabin cleaned and secure, Chrissy thought make one final inspection before

taking a must needed rest in her first class, forward jump seat. It was the third and last leg of a long day of flying, and like her two exhausted co-workers assigned to the main cabin, she couldn't wait for the relaxing comforts of their Denver International Airport hotel. Near the middle of coach, Chrissy had to lean into over a passenger to let Heidi, a freckled junior-flight attendant from San Diego, pass on her way forward.

"I need to grab a few nips from first," Heidi said, quietly; "They're pretty thirsty back here."

"I'll stay in coach while you're restocking," Chrissy offered.

Approaching the aft galley, Chrissy noticed that Ricardo, the other junior flight attendant working the back of the plane, had just entered the lavatory. She removed a plastic cup filled with wet trash off a tray table, thanked the occupant in the seat and then continued down the aisle toward the back of the plane. It was there that she noticed an unidentified female flight attendant sitting in one of the aft jump seats. To Chrissy, that was quite odd, considering there were only two attendants working coach; one was presently in the first class galley and the other was using the aft head.

Chrissy approached the woman with a guise of curiosity. "Are you deadheading this flight?" she whispered, as to not alert nearby passengers. The woman kept her head down, making it impossible for Chrissy to determine her age or identity. "I must have somehow missed you on the trip manifest." Still, there was no response. Then, as Chrissy studied the woman more closely, she noticed that her uniform was wet and there was a pool of liquid on the aircraft carpeting near the woman's bare feet.

"Miss, are you alright?" Chrissy inquired once more. "Have you been airsick?" Still, there was no response. "Listen, I'll need you to go back to your assigned seat. We'll be descending within the hour," she said more assertively. The air near the woman was freezing cold and the moisture created a chilly vapor. "You need to move," she insisted more audibly. As Chrissy then reach down to touch the mysterious intruder, the woman raised her head, sharply. Her face was stark-white, with death; her blondish hair was frozen straw; her lips were slits of chapped-purple-leather; her glowing gray-blue eyes were sunken back in their sockets. "They pushed me!" the horrifying entity shrieked.

As Chrissy leapt back with stark terror, the aircraft made a sudden and dramatic dive. Like a Boeing rollercoaster on invisible fiendish tracks, it then pitched up, leveled off for a moment and then commenced an even more terrifying dive. The violent drop in altitude caused Chrissy to be slammed headfirst into the cabin

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ceiling. Passengers without their seatbelts fastened were jostled around as if they were ice cubes in an aluminum shaker. There were shrieks and screams of abject terror.

A chime signaled from the cockpit and the seatbelt signs illuminated. "Return to your seats and fasten your seatbelts," one of the pilots ordered; his tone was firm but without detectable alarm.

Shaken and sore, but somehow uninjured, Chrissy was able to climb to her feet using the armrest from a nearby seat in the backrow. "Fasten your seatbelts! Now!" she ordered to the surrounding passengers.

While the aircraft continued to plummet, seconds felt like hours for the people on Flight 269. It dropped from the sky like a pelleted-pheasant, then, when the oxygen masks suddenly fell from overhead panels, prayers filled the cabin like a Sunday sermon in a southern Baptist church.

"Oh, Lord save us!" on woman lamented.

One man began quoting Matthew and the Lord's Prayer: "Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. . ."

While all the passengers experienced the nauseating G-forces of rapid descent, couples embraced, loving exchanges were made, and tears were shed as most were watching life pass before their eyes. Then, just suddenly as it had started, the rapid descent eased, until finally, the pilots leveled the aircraft. After a few seconds, there was another announcement from the cockpit: "Ah, ladies and gentlemen, we sure do apologize for that shakeup," the pilot said, calmly, almost casually; "it seems we found a little patch of turbulence over the Rockies which can be quite common this time of the year."

Dazed, Chrissy attempted to steady her wobbly stance. In doing so, she looked over in the direction of the horrifying flight attendant in the jump seat, but there was no sign of the phantasm. Once more composed, Chrissy then entered the aft galley to find it was also unoccupied. At the same time, Ricardo unlatched the lavatory door. Stumbling a bit, he too appeared stunned. "Good thing I was seated," he quipped to Chrissy in confidence; "otherwise I would've kissed the ceiling."

Quavered, Chrissy whispered in return; "*I did*, and hard; believe me." She then peaked around the corner into the coach cabin where passengers were finally settling down from their ordeal. "Do we have another attendant deadheading with us?" she urged.

"No, I don't think so," he reported. "Why?"

"Some freaky-old flight attendant was parked in your jump

seat. I noticed her just before we took that dive, but when we recovered, she was gone. And she was an unbelievable sight; like some elderly Goth girl in uniform; that bitch scared the shit out of me.”

Ricardo retrieved a copy of the trip manifest that was stored in the aft galley. He then scanned the printout: “According to the gate agent we’re only carrying civilians and no deadheading employees. Are you sure she was in uniform?”

“Ah, *yeah* . . . and she was soaking wet,” Chrissy said while gesturing to the vacant jump seat; “explain that mess.”

He walked over to the spot and casually inspected the carpet. “The floor is wet but I haven’t seen any off-duty employees flying with us all day. Maybe it was a passenger waiting for the head and they got airsick. I *was* in there for quite a while; it must have been that Tex-Mex I had for lunch.”

“Be serious,” Chrissy scolded. “I’m telling you, someone or something wearing *our uniform* was seated right there.”

While the debate continued, Heidi returned with a handful of liquor nips and peanut-snack pouches, “What’s going on? Is everyone alright back here,” she probed. “That was quite a bump we had. I really hate the Rocky Mountains.”

“Are we deadheading another attendant I don’t know about,” Chrissy interrogated.

Heidi shrugged. “Not that I’m aware of . . . did you check the manifest?”

When Ricardo gestured to his printout, as if to say, *been-there, done that*, Chrissy sighed, impatiently and then shook her head in frustration. Leaving her colleagues behind, she charged off to do a quick inspection of all the passengers. Moments later, she returned. “I’m telling you,” she insisted; “there was some creepy-old flight attendant, soaking wet, in that jump seat. Then, after she shrieked “*they pushed me*,” our plane took a nosedive. A minute later, she’s gone . . . just disappeared into thin air somehow.”

Ricardo was respectful but slightly skeptical when he suggested; “I don’t know; we’re all tired, and maybe something spilled back here during the turbulence; we have been serving a lot of cocktails in coach on this leg.”

Heidi followed the conversation, though she appeared quite confused. “Am I missing something here?”

Chrissy noticed that some of the nearby passengers could overhear the odd debate. She pointed at the mysterious wetness, the corresponding jump seat, and then whispered, harshly: “I know today was long, and *yes*, we’re all tired; but I’m telling ya, there was some kind of horrifying, I don’t know what to call it,” she

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confided; “some kind of *female creature* stowed away in that seat; and for a moment, as we literally dropped from the sky, it was like some kind of *seat of evil*.”

* * *

Routine can be a very dangerous, sometimes deadly word, for it's in that mind-frame of the ordinary and mundane where unexpected tragedy lurks. Nearly two-years before Chrissy Cooper's frightening encounter with the stowaway phantom on Flight 269, through the crystal-clear skies over Midwestern American farmland, a commercial airliner was on approach for landing. It seemed like a routine flight as another Southland Air 737-400 gently descended from the heavens. Flight attendants had made their final cabin checks, ensuring that the passengers had stowed carry-on items, secured tray tables and returned the seats to the upright position. Through the aircraft windows, the sun glistened upon the shinny-metallic wings, trimmed for descent. With the engine power reduced, only the occasional humming of control-surface adjustments was heard throughout the aircraft, reminding all souls on board that they were at the mercy of a complex machine, assembled from countless moving parts, manufactured and maintained by generally-well-intended, though imperfect men and women. And yet, for those traveling that day, everything about the flight still seemed *routine*.

After an unexpected surge of engine power, the 737 again began to climb skyward. Several minutes later, two bells chimed over the PA. The A-attendant left her seat and walked from first class to the inter-flight phone panel. After stepping in front of the peephole, she gently knocked on the door. When the security latch was released, she entered the cockpit to find the pilots abnormally busy flying the airplane. Seated to the left, the captain had a bot-belly and gray hair with pattern balding. To the right, the first officer was younger and more attractive in every conceivable way.

The captain raised his headset above his ear. “Maggie, we're having a problem with the landing gear,” he stated, calmly. “We may have to come in for a wheels-up landing.”

Maggie, a flight attendant in her mid-forties, with blond hair and gray-blue eyes, appeared completely composed. “Yes, Captain,” she replied.

Maggie listened as the first officer spoke into his headset microphone. “O'Hare Tower, Southland 593; after our go-around, we're still unable to lower our left-side landing gear, both

manually and by free fall. After we ran a Christmas tree test, we still have no indicator light and we need to declare an emergency.”

“Southland 593, O’Hare Tower; your maintenance people are on their way up here,” was heard in the cockpit through the audio panel that had been set to VOX.

“O’Hare Tower, Southland 593; understand that we’re standing by for maintenance recommendations.”

The captain turned to his first officer. “Let’s start burning off some extra fuel,” he said. “When the emergency crews are ready for us, we’ll land on the foam, easy-peasy.”

“Copy that,” the first officer dutifully replied.

“Maggie, prepare the cabin for an alternative-emergency landing on foam,” the captain ordered.

“I understand,” she replied without wavering, although she had to keep her legs from shaking. “The cabin will be ready, Sir.”

“Don’t worry, everything will be fine,” the captain said with a reassuring wink. It was as if he could sense the flight attendant’s fear, even though she appeared to be working hard to disguise her emotions.

At the same moment Maggie left the cockpit, the captain activated the aircraft-wide PA. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he announced, “this is your captain up on the flight deck. We seem to be having a problem with the landing gear, so we are going to be required to make an alternative-emergency landing.”

Maggie reached the first-class seats as the announcement continued. “There is no reason to be concerned as this is standard procedure,” she heard the captain casually comment. “The flight attendants will be coming through the cabin giving you specific instructions. Please do everything they ask and please stay calm.”

Maggie studied the shocked and bewildered expressions of the people seated in the comfortable loungers, who only moments before had been finishing their coffee, cocktails, or Diet Cokes.

“What exactly does alternative-emergency landing mean?” A man wearing an expensive suit firmly inquired. “And why can’t we use the landing gear?”

“Please, Sir, stay calm,” Maggie replied. “Everything will be explained to you.”

“We’re still going to be landing in Chicago,” another man insisted. With a large gold Rolex watch poking out from his Armani jacket sleeve, he too was dressed for business. “I have an important meeting in Chicago this afternoon.”

Maggie silenced him with a stern glare. It always amazed her how thoughtless and self-centered people could be, especially in a time a crisis. “Please, Sir,” she cautioned. “I need you quiet and

paying attention to my instructions.”

Glancing out the window, Maggie noticed the slow, steady turn the pilots were executing. She knew from training that it was crucial for the aircraft to stay within the vicinity of the airport, while at the same time, reducing the amount of fuel they were carrying. The combination of half-full wing tanks with air pockets made for a deadly combination should there be a fire upon impact. Without landing gear, according to the company manual, alternative-emergency landing was a gentler way of describing a controlled crash. While activating the cabin-wide PA, Maggie tried to put the idea of the impact, fire and toxic smoke out of her mind. She had to stay focused, and most importantly, for the sake of the passengers, she had to appear unafraid.

“Ladies and gentlemen . . . please pay special attention to the instructions you are going to be given,” she announced. “All loose carry-on items must be stowed in the overhead compartments. Flight attendants will be coming through the cabin to make sure that nothing can become airborne when we land. Afterward, please remain in your seats with the belt tightly fastened and await further instructions.”

Drilled for that exact scenario during training, the two other attendants working that flight were already checking for loose objects, securing overhead latches, and calming the one-hundred and forty-six frightened passengers on the filled-to-capacity flight. While all the cabin doors were unlocked for slide activation and emergency egress, Maggie began consulting economy-class passengers seated in exit rows at the center of the aircraft.

She leaned in from the aisle toward the man in the window seat. He appeared to be in his early-twenties, perhaps fresh out of college, ready to take-on the world. However, he was clinching his arm rest and appeared nearly catatonic with fear. “Sir, once we’ve landed,” she instructed with her finger pointed, “I’ll need you to pull back on that latch handle and open the emergency exit door.”

Only acknowledging her with an empty stare, the young man was stone-faced and seemed void of perceivable emotion.

“Sir,” Maggie reiterated. “Can you hear me?”

A middle-aged, bucolic looking man with a western-styled shirt tapped the young man on the arm. “Hey, buddy, the emergency door,” he said. “Are you with us? She’s asking you to open the emergency door.”

With the young man seemingly unwilling, or, unable to answer, the man in the middle said to Maggie, “I can open the door when we land.”

She nodded. “If necessary, Sir, will you also be willing to help

passengers out onto the wing?”

At first, he didn't appear eager for the job of hero; however, after scanning the faces of all the nervous passengers seated in the rows around him, he said with a sigh, “yeah, sure, I can handle that.”

“Then I'll need you both to switch seats,” Maggie instructed of the two men.

A young woman in the aisle seat of that row tugged at Maggie's skirt pleat. “He's my fiancé and he really hates flying,” she finally admitted, after having only watched the interaction. “We didn't know the flight was going to be full, so we requested an aisle and a window in hopes of getting an empty seat between us. I know you asked us about the emergency exit when we boarded, but we never thought we'd have to actually use it,” she confessed with a nervous grin.

“Most people don't,” Maggie remarked. “But now, I need your fiancé helped away from the emergency exit door. Please step into the aisle, ma'am, so these two gentlemen can switch seats.”

The young woman hesitantly complied, as if merely standing-up required all the internal fortitude she could muster. After the Westerner in the middle seat moved into the aisle as well, Maggie reached in to help the young man still gripping his armrest.

“Come into the aisle with me,” the young woman implored over Maggie's shoulder. “Sweetheart, you have to get out of that seat.”

With quivering lips, he only nodded a reply. Maggie helped him release his fingers from the armrest. “That's it,” Maggie said quietly. “The pilots will get us down on the ground, without a problem.”

While the seat swapping progressed, Maggie noticed the exchange was upsetting nearby passengers. Though no one said anything, clearly the urgent need for the emergency exit was a chilling manifestation of the impending landing. Usually, during the pre-flight safety video, most passengers disregard the instructions and would rarely look up from personal devices, newspapers or in-flight magazines. For them, the idea of a real emergency seemed inconceivable or remote at best. However, Maggie clearly understood that when an emergency really occurs, the amount of repetitive or foolish questions was beyond belief from otherwise fairly-intelligent people.

Once the Westerner had moved to the seat by the emergency exit door, Maggie leaned over to him. “Everything will be just fine, Sir. Thank you for helping.”

When two bells again chimed over the PA, Maggie hurried

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back toward the cockpit. After the security door was unlatched and she stepped inside to consult the pilots, she got a flight-deck view of the airport, looming in the distance. Though it was still several miles away, she could clearly see the flashing lights of emergency vehicles lining the taxiways. And she could also see that a blanket of thick-white foam was covering the runway.

“How are things going in the cabin, Maggie?” The captain asked.

“Cabin check is complete, Captain,” she replied, confidently.

The captain then glanced at his first officer. The man in the right seat was speaking into his headset while at the same time he was focusing on the landing gear indicator lights. “O’Hare Tower, Southland 593. I understand that during our last flyby, left main landing gear was still not down, I repeat, not down,” the copilot stressed.

He then grimaced ever so slightly before turning to the captain. “No left side gear sighted, so we don’t have a faulty indicator light,” he reported. “Hydraulic pressure is okay. The wheels must be jammed up there somehow. Maybe we snagged a goose on departure.”

“Then our goose of an aircraft is cooked because we can’t very well get out and pry the gear down,” the captain remarked. He then focused his attention on Maggie. “Start giving the passengers the alternative-landing commands. After stopping, and when we have to evacuate the aircraft, we’ll give the evacuation command from the flight deck.”

“Yes Sir,” she replied. At the same moment she spoke, the aircraft buffeted from some moderate turbulence, causing Maggie to stumble backwards into the flight-deck bulkhead.

As she regained her balance, she overheard the first officer report: “ATIS and O’Hare Tower are now advising us about fifteen-knot crosswinds, gusting to twenty-five. But now that the foam is down, they’re not going to change the active runway.”

“The Windy City,” the captain grumbled. “A problem with the main gear had to happen here . . . well, we can’t go anywhere else with our tanks now emptied. We’ll only have just enough fuel for one go-around if things go south.”

As their discussion continued, Maggie calmly exited the cockpit and closed the door. Taking a deep, calming breath, she activated the cabin-wide PA on the wall panel near her forward jump seat.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I’m going to divide the cabin into sections,” Maggie instructed. “Passengers in the back should exit the back door with a slide; those in the front exit the forward door

with a slide. And those seated in the center of the aircraft should use the left and right emergency exits over the wings.”

After the other flight attendants demonstrated the cabin division points of front and back, and left and right, Maggie continued her instructions: “Ladies and Gentlemen, in preparation for our alternative-emergency landing, you will be hearing a series of commands,” she announced. Suddenly, more bumpy turbulence caused a collective groan from the passengers. However, Maggie continued, unabated: “it is very important that you follow all of our instructions. This will help the pilots and flight attendants get us on the ground safely. We understand that this is difficult for everyone, but please stay calm. What you are about to hear is routine for these kinds of landings.”

Giving her their undivided attention, the passengers were completely silent as they waited for Maggie to continue. That changed when the 737 encountered another pocket of wind shear, causing more heavy sighs and groans. Then, like an ominous portents of the impending danger, the yellow oxygen masks dropped down from the overhead panels.

“The oxygen masks have been lowered as standard procedure,” Maggie explained; “please disregard the masks, as they are not needed at this altitude.” However, just the very sight of them was unnerving for those who had likely only seen the devices as part of a safety demonstration. For others, they appeared to be completely alien devices.

“This is a test run,” Maggie proclaimed. “The commands are grab ankles, heads down, stay down.”

After the passengers did exactly as instructed, and not a head could be seen behind the seat backs, Maggie then instructed: “after landing you will be told to release seatbelts, release seatbelts, come this way, come this way, and get out, get out. Test complete. Thank you.” Her words and tone were emotionless, business like, yet deadly-serious.

As the flight attendants made one last cabin check, five bells chimed over the PA system from the cockpit. Each of the flight attendants manned their jump seats, two in the aft cabin and Maggie was seated near the forward galley. There came another distinct altitude drop, resulting in more cabin-wide, anxious groans. With the exception of Maggie, waiting to give commands over the PA from microphone panel near her seat, there was nothing else the other flight attendants could do — like the passengers, they too were at the mercy of the men in the cockpit — it would come down to the pilot’s judgment, their skill, and a little bit of luck. Around her wrist, under her uniform sleeve, Maggie

was wearing a silver bracelet with a charm displaying the head of a ram, something akin to an astrological sign. She unclasped it, gave the charm a rub for luck and then gripped it tightly in her palm. “You’ve always protected me during landings,” she covertly whispered to the charm. “I need you now, like never before.” Maggie slipped the bracelet inside the pouch of her apron as flight attendants were required to remove things like nylon stockings and jewelry before an emergency landing. External personal items could cause additional injury in a fire, where nylons for example could literally melt onto human flesh. There she waited in the eerie stillness inside the cabin, like a calm preceding an approaching storm, until another five bells chimed over the PA.

“Command start!” Maggie ordered into her microphone. “Grab ankles, heads down, stay down.”

While the Boeing 737 traveled down from a circular orbit above Chicago, the last few minutes had felt like countless hours for every soul in the cabin. It all came down to that last few seconds, as the pilots targeted the runway growing in their cockpit windscreens. The engines had been throttled back for a slow, final approach and the control surfaces were optimally set for lift. And those two men were the only ones who could see anything at all, for everyone in the cabin was doing exactly as instructed during those last few seconds: staying down and not looking out of their windows. Even Maggie was required to keep her arms wrapped firmly around her ankles. For her, in a brace position, the only word that came to mind was powerless, utterly powerless.

After Maggie’s commands, another eerie stillness prevailed throughout the cabin. Though there was no interior movement, there were distinct sounds. Through the thin aluminum skin, she could hear the engines humming with healthy compression and the final adjustments being made to the control surfaces. There were muted prayers spoken by some passengers, and loving goodbyes whispered by others. Another gust of crosswind inspired a sobbing Hail Mary from a woman seated in first class.

Feeling the aircraft nose beginning to flare, Maggie realized that they were only a few heartbeats away from contacting the runway. From training, she understood that the pilots were required to keep the aircraft level enough for the nose wheel and right main landing gear to support the entire fuselage when they first touched down. With the lack of wheels on the left, as the airspeed dropped, the aircraft’s left wingtip and underside would eventually impact the runway. Maggie remembered that it had been a noisy and unnerving event, as she had experienced one other alternate landing during her decades of flying. However,

she'd found the process to be actually less violent than she had expected. In the former case, the fire-retardant foam had helped lubricate the initial impact of the imperiled aircraft's underside, causing it to slide smoothly down the runway with friction acting as brakes. Although the other aircraft she'd been in never flew again, the passengers and crew had walked away with only rattled nerves. She also understood that once the side without landing gear eventually hit the ground, there would be no going around for another try. When the pilots committed, they had one shot at keeping the aircraft on the centerline. In ideal weather conditions, the procedure was very survivable; however, after another gust of Midwestern wind, Maggie realized that all bets were off for this landing.

Those fateful moments for everyone on board Southland Airlines Flight 593 occurred like random movie clips, experienced in their collective minds like surreal video frames from an omnipotent director's camera. And for those watching from the tower or on the ground, the low-speed approach over the apron appeared flawless until a whipping-wind-gust lifted the right wing and raised the nose skyward. Accordingly, the left wing dipped dangerously close to the tarmac. As the pilots attempted a go-around, but before the jet engines could spool up to full power, the back of the fuselage slammed into the pavement, causing a violent bump. Deprived of airspeed, the nose of the aircraft followed in the downward direction. Then, without the left wheels, the left side wingtip scraped the O'Hare tarmac, causing the 737 to careen sharply to the left. Having lost the flow of air required for lift, gravity and inertia took control. Moving around a pivot-point, the aluminum and composite materials that comprised the left wing quickly disintegrated and the nose of the aircraft veered off the pavement, away from the fire-retardant foam.

Judging by the stomach-wrenching g-forces and the sudden change of direction, Maggie knew something had gone terribly wrong. Keeping her head between her knees, she began to whisper a prayer to her Aries charm for protection. It occurred to her that the cliché about having life flash before her eyes was a reality, yet those vivid images of her past were random and disjointed, like a poorly edited movie. With the engines spooled to full power, the most hellish sounds imaginable were heard by everyone inside the aircraft when the first of the two powerful Rolls Royce jet engines made contact with the grass and gravel lining the runway. The intakes sucked in metal from the wing and debris from the ground, causing the blades to shatter. Then, the left engine exploded, sending burning petroleum and metal into the cabin. Suddenly, a

burst of bright sunlight appeared from the ceiling as the fuselage cracked open under the stress. Terrified passengers called out and cried, but even their shrieking voices were barely audible over the sounds of utter and complete destruction. Despite the 135-knot approach speed, the crumpled craft came to rest on an adjacent taxiway less than a hundred yards away from their initial impact point and in less than ten-seconds. Sensing that her body was bruised, but at least intact, Maggie opened her eyes and surveyed the hellish environment. Right away, she knew the survivors had to get out, immediately.

“Release seat belts! Come this way!” She bellowed over the sounds of the injured and the dying.

The emergency floor lights were glowing at her feet and they were illuminating layers of acrid smoke. For her, what followed was an over-stimulation of her sense of smell; her nose burned from the toxic fuel vapor, melting aircraft materials and roasting human flesh. Though the fuselage was mostly intact, the left side of the cabin suffered the most impact damage. The left wing fuel tank and engine had been crushed into the seat rows causing, from what Maggie assumed was unspeakable carnage. And from a distance, she could see that the Westerner, the man who had changed seats with the frightened fiancé, had been crush under the emergency exit door he agreed to operate. As for the engaged couple, the deadly-steel-rain caused by the shattered engine took them as unwed-partners into eternity.

“Release seat belts! Come this way!” She ordered to a herd of passengers from the right side of the aircraft that were able to get out of their seats.

The other flight attendant posted to the aft cabin had the door open and the slide extended, while passengers on the right side had opened the emergency exits over the wing. Echoing from the world outside, Maggie could hear the sounds of emergency vehicles rushing into action. When dazed passengers began stumbling past her, she noticed one middle-age woman was reaching up into an overhead compartment and attempting to remove a bag.

“Ma’am! Come forward, now!” Maggie demanded.

Whether the woman was stunned from an injury or just insensitive beyond measure, she didn’t respond. She simply kept tugging at an object stuck in the overhead bin. With the smoke having thickened to what felt like a toxic-black paste, flames appeared from within a mass of left-side seats, twisted metal and bloodied bodies. Knowing that breathable air and time was running out for everyone still on board the aircraft, Maggie charged towards the woman in the aisle under the bin.

“Dammit! Leave your bag and come this way!” Maggie shrieked. The experience filled her with an unparalleled feeling of frustration. Within seconds, she reached the woman and grabbed her by the arm. “Come forward! Now!” She repeated.

The woman glared at Maggie with black, seemingly hallow eyes. Void of facial expression, she appeared like a corpse with bodily animation. Shocked by the hideous sight, Maggie let go of her grip and backed away. “You have to come forward, now!” She insisted.

Without responding, the woman smiled, menacingly before resuming her seemingly senseless effort of removing a bag. Maggie knew that she had to help others get outside before the entire plane was consumed in smoke and flames. Leaving the woman at the overhead bin, Maggie turned back toward the emergency exit row. Oddly, she tried to walk but her feet were stuck, as though the flooring had melted and was gluing her shoes in place. Her frustration turned to panic as the interior had grown into a hellish caldron of destruction.

“This is what they want,” the ghoulish woman said as she pulled the bag free. “This was our price to pay . . . all of us.”

From what Maggie could see through the billowing smoke, the woman was holding a Southland Air cargo satchel. The zipper was open, revealing wads of dollar bills stuffed in the canvas bag. Next, Maggie heard a loud, inexplicable human clap! Then, there came a profound silence, until:

“Do you remember where you are?” A man asked. To Maggie, he sounded calm, collected, yet quite inquisitive, as would a doctor, or more specifically a head-shrink, she concluded.

It felt like the present day, from what she sensed, logically, and things slowly coming back to her; instead of seeing ash and flames, Maggie was staring at a hypnotic-gold pen, being held in the air by a man with a dress shirt, dingy-red tie and a lab coat. She noticed that he had particularly hairy wrists and chubby fingers with buffed nails. He was seated across from her at a desk in an office, and that office was perfectly suited for a doctor as it had several diplomas on the wall, a few fake plants and sparsely-placed pieces of decorative artwork that appeared soothing and benign, like the prints decorating elevator cars at a business-traveler’s hotel.

“Phoenix,” she said, curtly as though the answer was quite obvious.

“And do you know who I am?” The man inquired.

“You’re a psychologist for Southland Air at our hub here in Phoenix,” she remarked.

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With a slightly raised eyebrow, the man appeared intrigued by her calm demeanor and brevity in answering the questions. “And do you remember why you’re in my office today?”

“I came in here after I had a slight panic attack on the job this afternoon,” she admitted, although the answer was slightly cryptic and evasive.

“A little more than a *slight* panic attack, wouldn’t you say?” he inquired.

“Yes, well . . .” she said with a shrug.

The man referred to a clip board that was a resting on the desk next to the gold pen. “You’re fortunate that Southland Air has medical offices here in Phoenix, otherwise, you may have checked yourself into a hospital. When you first came in you told me that a Southland gate agent helped calm you down before the TSA or airport authorities were notified.”

“I remember,” she said, firmly. “I’m fine now and I’m sorry to have troubled you. I’ve just been under a lot of stress lately,” she said with a more complicit tone.

“The gate agent reported that after your flight landed this afternoon, you sprinted out of the aircraft and up the Jetway yelling, and I quote: ‘get off while you can . . . they’re going to try to kill us again.’ What did you by that?”

“I don’t really remember that,” she confessed, as if becoming slightly irritated. Maggie then began inexplicably rubbing her wrist. “I recently changed anxiety medications, so, I’m thinking that had something to do with my panic attack, and my PTSD.”

“Part of the reason why I hypnotized you was because you couldn’t completely remember the incident this afternoon.” Again, he glanced at the clipboard. “As for your PTSD, I can certainly understand its underlying cause. You and your fellow crewmembers did experience great trauma during Flight 593, when it made that alternative landing in Chicago a few years back.”

“More like a crash,” she said, bluntly.

“It was a terrible accident,” he said, objectively; “because of *mechanical failure*, Maggie; but because of your brave actions, there were many survivors who may have otherwise burned to death. Your entire crew . . . you’re all heroes.”

Maggie reacted with a blank stare, as though she’d heard it all before. It was as if, in her heart, she also understood that any sense of heroism could not be generated from mere words, delivered like the party line from a corporate handbook; words could not take away the underlying mental anguish that persisted in her psyche. And still, her odd, seemingly subconscious rubbing of her wrist persisted, causing it to turn red.

Amanda Cox

“Do you have a rash?” The man asked, off topic.

“A rash?” Maggie inquired, as if the question was quite strange.

The man pointed. “You’ve been rubbing your wrist; are you injured?”

Immediately stopping, she offered a false, nervous smile. “Oh no, I’m fine. I left my lucky necklace on the plane somehow. It’s a family heirloom and I feel naked without it.”

Appearing convinced with the explanation, he continued with the topic at hand. “When I had you under hypnosis, I asked you specific questions about Flight 593. Do you recall any of our discussion?”

She took a deep breath and then exhaled, audibly. “No.”

“You described Flight 593 in detail, and then when you were describing your efforts to help passengers out of the burning plane, you referred to a demonic woman in possession of a cargo satchel stuffed with money; do you remember that?”

“I was under hypnosis,” she said, curtly. “How do you expect me to remember anything?”

Once again, he referred to his notes. “You said this was our price to pay . . . all of us. What do you think that means?”

“Just rumors I’ve heard, I guess,” she remarked.

He cocked his head, slightly; “Rumors?”

“There have always been rumors that Flight 593 wasn’t really an accident and that the plane was actually sabotaged for insurance reasons. Hey, just put the blame on Boeing because the left wheel got jammed up in the wing. The thought of Flight 593 haunts me. Have you ever seen people crushed by a jet engine or burned alive in their seats?” The man only shook his head in response to her question. “And like the world is going to believe an airline could do that to its passengers and crew,” she continued. “But I’ve talked to a lot of pilots since the accident, and from what they’ve told me, and with everything I experienced then, and now . . . heck, I should write a book. Maybe I will,” she grunted. After a moment, her eyes began wondering around the small office room as though she was withdrawing from the analysis session.

“That’s quite an accusation, Ms. Lund.” The man placed the gold pen across the clipboard as if signaling a conclusion to their discussion. “Why don’t we meet again tomorrow,” he suggested. “I’ll have the airline set you up with a hotel room tonight and we can chat again when you’re better rested. Maybe we need to explore your concerns about Flight 593 in a little more detail.”

“After my crew layover tonight, I’m to continue my trip on Flight 237, scheduled to depart early tomorrow morning.”

Airless

The man rocked casually back in his chair. “Do you think getting back on an airplane right now is such a good idea? You were quite upset only a few hours ago.”

“I told you it was just my new meds,” she insisted “I’ll just stop taking them for the rest of my trip.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea,” he asked rhetorically, with a hint of sarcasm.

“Are you grounding me because of what I said about Flight 593?” she asked, bluntly.

“Do you think I should?” he asked, maintaining the rhetoric.

For Maggie, it seemed to be getting increasingly annoying. “Look, I had a mild panic attack,” she admitted; “but I’m okay now. I just want to get some rest and continue my trip tomorrow, as scheduled. Flying is the only thing that keeps me from —” she said and then abruptly stopped.

“— From what?” the man asked directly.

A silent moment followed the exchange. “Nothing,” she said, calmly and then smiled. “My job is just very important to me.”

“Do you have a doctor back in L.A.?” he casually inquired.

“Which kind?” she asked.

“The psychotherapist kind,” he mentioned.

“No,” she said with a smirk. “Are you suggesting I should?”

“Who prescribed the new medications you mentioned?”

“My regular doctor; his name is probably in my company file somewhere.”

Another quiet moment followed her words until the man nonchalantly rolled his hands to reveal his palms. “I’ll give your doctor in L.A. a call and consult him about your new meds. I have his number in your file,” he said and then stood from his desk. “Frankly, I haven’t seen you display any overt psychological symptoms that necessitate me grounding you and I didn’t witness the incident on the Jetway. You came to see me voluntarily, you’re not drunk or high from what I can tell, and you’re protected by the flight attendants’ union from arbitrary groundings. Off the record, I think we should talk some more about Flight 593, but under these circumstances, I can’t force you to have more counseling.”

Maggie stood abruptly and then visually scanned the area near her seat. “My flight bag?” she inquired, prompting the man to gesture toward the door. Maggie turned in that direction. “Yes, of course . . . I put it there,” she said in a joking way. “Oh, and I’m not sure where my crew is staying tonight. You know the area well I’m sure; any suggestions for a hotel?”

“The Desert Inn at Sky Harbor is nice; I know a lot of Southland Air crews stay there on layovers.”

“The Desert Inn it is,” she proclaimed. And before she would give the company head-shrink a chance to change his mind about her mental health, Maggie grabbed her bag, straightened her shoulders, and then with brisk steps, headed for the outside world. She then inexplicably stopped in front of the office door and turned back to face the man. “When I get back to Los Angeles, maybe I will find someone to help me cope with my issues and anxieties from Flight 593. Maybe I’ll even spill my guts to the L.A. Times,” Maggie warned as if wanting to reinforce the fact that she wasn’t crazy. “Plus, we’re all just mules for this airline . . . some of the stuff we’re hauling? A lot of people know but they’re too afraid to report it. *But not me,*” she declared.

He nodded, subtly. “Em-hmm . . .” was his only response without so much as looking up from the paperwork.

She closed the door behind her leaving the man alone at his desk. He glanced down at his clipboard for a moment and then picked up the receiver on his office phone. He tapped a few keys on the pad and waited as the call connected. “It’s me,” he said covertly. “I think we may have a small problem.”

* * *

Several hours later, Maggie Lund was back on board an aircraft, however, it was not the routine trip scheduled for the next morning. She was back inside the raging inferno of Flight 593. Struggling to lift her feet from the liquefied cabin floor, Maggie was unable to move. The feeling of frustration gave way to sheer panic, as the conflagration surrounded her, leaving no direction of escape. She could feel the searing heat upon her face and upper body. She could hear the screams of the dying. Maggie wanted desperately to cry out but she was unable to make a sound. In spite of the searing temperature, she then felt an inexplicably cold, wet sensation. Her panic, fear and confusion reached a crescendo as everything went dark. Was she also dying? Or was she already dead?

Then, suddenly, Maggie Lund awoke in a hotel room, alone, and covered with a sweat that had drenched her pillows. Convinced her flesh had been roasting on the bone she began sobbing upon feeling her body unharmed. Traumatized by her nightmare, she didn’t have the energy to wipe away the tears. Only after several minutes, did she muster the strength to check her watch.

“Only ten-o’clock,” she gasped into the darkness; “these

Airless

nightmares have to stop.” She stared at the ceiling, wide awake, and her teary eyes ached. Maggie realized that if she had a similar episode on Flight 237 the next day, she might very well be ground, or worse. And considering her most recent panic attack was on the ground and not in flight, it was only for that reason that she was still working. Perhaps, she thought, the doctor was correct about her getting some mental help, and soon. And maybe telling the world her theory about sabotage was a great place to start. After another few minutes, Maggie reached over to the nightstand and fumbled with her cell phone. She programmed a number, swiped away blond hair, and placed the receiver to her ear.

“Southland Air, Central Dispatch,” a young female operator answered.

“Yes, yes, this is Maggie Lund, senior flight attendant on Flight 237,” she stammered.

“I’m sorry, could you repeat that please.”

The tapping of computer keys followed Maggie’s slowed reiteration. “Yes, Ms. Lund,” the woman replied. “How can I help you?”

“I’m on a layover in Phoenix and I can’t, I won’t finish the trip.”

“Are you sick?”

“I don’t know. No.”

“Oh.” A pause followed. “May I ask why you can’t make your flight?”

“Because . . . because, I think,” she faltered. After several seconds and a few deep breaths, she admitted, “I know what you’ve all done; it haunts me . . . and I won’t get on another Southland airplane”

“I’m not sure what you mean by that,” the woman said without sounding judgmental; “but we’ll schedule a replacement. Is there anyone else you need to talk with? I can refer you to psychological services.”

“Been there, done that,” Maggie remarked. “And I’m not crazy or unstable.”

“I’m not saying you are, but you know I’m going to have to report this to your supervisor, and it will go in your progress report.”

Maggie paused, feeling a profound sense of anger and resentment towards her company. “Do what you need to do, and I’ll do what I need to do,” she warned and then abruptly disconnected.

Several hours later, just before dawn at the ten-story Desert Plaza Hotel where Maggie was staying, only a few miles away

from Sky Harbor Airport, grounds keeper Juan Carlos was beginning his dayshift. He parked in the employee lot and then entered the maintenance area through the garage. He swiped his card on the punch clock, put his lunch bag in the fridge, and then started turning on the lights for the hotel swimming pool. Through the security cameras he noticed the water appeared strangely discolored. Taking the keys for the gate, he thought to go investigate, as the pool would be opened for guests at sunrise. After entering the swimming area, his concern about the water quality was confirmed when he noticed that the liquid had a distinct orangey-red color made more pronounced by the submerged pool lights. As he scanned the area for the cause, he came to a horrifying conclusion. Inches from the pool steps, a woman was sprawled out on the concrete, motionless, and in a large pool of blood that had meandered into the water. Her head was split wide open, revealing a splattering of gray matter. One eye had been projected out of its socket and white bones protruded from the lumpy flesh.

After the police did their investigation, it was determined that hotel guest Margret “Maggie” Lund, a flight attendant for Southland Air, had flung herself out of a tenth-story window. With no signs of struggling in her room, Maggie’s death was ruled a suicide. After her next-of-kin were notified, no further inquiries were made.