

CHAPTER

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one

2:00 p.m. October 3, 1985
Tegucigalpa Airport, Honduras

Cole Andrews dropped the backpack on the ceramic tile of the airport terminal and lowered himself onto the wooden bench. The early morning trip from the coast of Honduras to the highlands of the capital city, Tegucigalpa, had capped off the end of a difficult month. His work as a remote area missionary and rescue manager had been intense this hurricane season, and he'd earned a break.

He closed his eyes to shut out the busyness of the facility; the click of shoes, staccato conversations, and the soft overtones of people parting were all noises that droned around him. But weariness muted any real interest in the crowded hallway until the gate attendant interrupted the low rumble of sound: "Flight NA301, prepare for boarding."

Cole watched while the passengers formed into a short line. Not many *personas* for this flight, but that was okay, the quicker the flight got going, the better he'd like it. Two Americans stood among the small group of Hondurans: a middle-aged businessman in a crumpled but expensive suit that hung over a lanky frame, and with a gaunt, creased face, he had the look of a professor. The second, an attractive young woman he guessed to be about thirty; tall, lean and tanned, she easily hoisted a camping pack onto her shoulders. A red and white medic card hung from the back of her bag; he had worked with a lot of American medical personnel, but he didn't remember seeing her before.

The line moved forward, and he stepped to the counter where the attendant studied his ticket and waved him on. Through the open gate he glimpsed the tarmac where in the distance several

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passengers had already climbed the stairs to the Convair's hatch. The swelter of heat and the wind blew jet fumes into his face as he stepped from underneath the awning; unfortunately, the scattered cloud cover had not stifled the humidity, and he noted the windsock as it popped in the gusts. Down the length of the terminal, planes lined the ramp and personnel guided carts that clattered along, pulled by aging tractors. He hoped his luggage made it on one of those piles.

In the baggage area, a worker took the last suitcase off the squeaking conveyor and placed it on the second cart in the line. He removed his gloves, shoved them in his back pocket, and stepped onto the platform of the tractor. He flipped the switch, and the engine turned over with a shrill grind, but it refused to start.

From the hallway outside the room a voice called, "Señor, por favor. ¿Me puede esperar un momento? Tengo una maleta más." *Sir, wait a minute. I have another bag.* A small, wiry American stepped through the doorway and held out a hard-shell brown suitcase.

The worker climbed out of his seat and reached for the luggage with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Gracias por esperarme. El avión casi me deja." *Thanks for waiting. I almost missed my flight,* the American said.

The employee frowned. "No hay problema, Señor." *No problem, sir.* He turned his back on the passenger and threw the bag on the cart. He jumped onto the tractor and turned the key; the motor churned again, backfired, and reluctantly started.

The American looked at his bag lying on top of the pile as the tractor pulled away. "Muchas gracias, amigo!" *Thank you very much.* He left the room, hurried down the hallway, and entered the lobby area where the mid-afternoon crowd waited for later flights, but he headed away from the gate and toward the front entrance. Less than two minutes later, he slipped into a waiting car that peeled out of the parking lot.

Cole crossed the concrete and dodged a tractor that emerged

from the terminal. He approached the stairs that led up to the twin-engine plane and noted that the baggage carts stopped under the rear fuselage of the plane where workers began to throw the luggage into the hold. With satisfaction, Cole saw his own bag wedged under several cases.

He climbed the stairs and stooped through the opening. “Hola, amiga. ¿Cómo está?” *Hello, how are you?* he said to the flight attendant.

“Very good, sir. Thank you.” The lead attendant checked his ticket and gestured to the cabin. “There’s plenty of room, so pick a seat.”

“Thanks ...” Cole noted her name tag: Rachel Lopez, “Señorita Lopez. I will.”

The Convair 580 was empty with not more than a handful of its two rows of twenty-five seats occupied, the few passengers seated from the wings to the forward bulkhead. He sidled down the aisle, said hello to the businessman, and nodded to the young woman. He chose a row over the wings by the emergency exit then placed his bag overhead and fell into the seat. After buckling his belt, he observed the other passengers. One appeared nervous: a Honduran, thin mustache and long black hair, with shirt collar loosely draped over a lightweight brown leather jacket. Another Honduran, neatly dressed with dark hair swept back, placed a bag under the seat and turned to greet the second attendant who was closing the overhead lockers. Others carried on casual conversation, their discourse clipped by laughter.

His gaze fell upon the young medic. Though she spoke in rudimentary Spanish, her personality was so warm that she was soon engaged in conversation with the people seated close to her. Her ability to develop camaraderie impressed Cole. On the other side of the aisle, the businessman opened his briefcase and wrote on a white pad already covered with lines of scribble.

Cole lowered the seat to the rest position. For two months he had coordinated the completion of a shelter for last year’s flood victims. From five o’clock each morning until eleven at night, he moved non-stop, directing the construction and encouraging the

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families. Aware of his overload, the mission team insisted on a two-week breather, and he decided his home in Chicago would provide a restful retreat. As he thought of the many victims who remained in tents, he decided he didn't need two weeks, maybe one would be enough.

The turboprops started as he leaned against the window, and the emergency announcements of the lead attendant faded as his eyes flickered and closed.

4:54 p.m. ... over the Campeche State, Mexico

The captain scanned the gauges as the Convair floated up out of the “bowl”—the capital city was situated in the mountainous mainland of Honduras—and circumnavigated the mountaintops to reach safety above 9000 feet. The Tegucigalpa airport could present difficulty based upon the weather, and today the sun splattered the mountain peaks through darkening cumulous clouds.

After a cargo stop in San Pedro Sula, the plane turned on course to New Orleans, and for the first part of the flight path they skirted the outer zone of a tropical storm with limited winds and turbulence. The SIGMETS, Significant Meteorological Advisories, detailed the scope of the storm but had failed to accurately forecast its ferocious development. The tropical storm had progressed into the Caribbean, intensified into a Category 2 hurricane called *Julianne*, turned inland and now bore down on Flight NA301 of *Transportes Aereos para America Central-TAAC*.

After fourteen-years as a veteran captain, Roberto Rodriguez understood the cryptic language of the advisory. “Not good. Did you catch all that from control?” he asked the First Officer.

“They didn't expect it to develop this quickly. But it did.” the First Officer said.

The captain flipped the switch for the fasten-seat-belt sign in the cabin and clicked the lead attendant's private intercom. “Rachel, make sure Miranda is secure in the back—there's turbulence ahead.”

“Yes, Captain.” Rachel picked up the microphone and

announced to the passengers, “The seat belt light is on. Fasten your belts tightly; the captain says there is turbulence ahead.” She moved along the aisle and checked the passengers’ seat belts. The businessman in 5B had his notes laid on top of his briefcase. “Would you like for me to put your briefcase in the overhead compartment?”

He ignored her request and scribbled again.

“Sir, you need to put your case overhead or under the seat.” She stooped in front of his seat and forced him to look up at her.

“Now?” he asked.

“Yes, now.” She straightened, stepped back, and waited.

Intimidated by her glare, he stuffed the papers in the case and thrust it under the seat.

She moved on, shook her head in relief, then smiled thinly at Cole Andrews in 12A and reached the rear of the cabin. To her coworker she whispered, “Rough weather ahead.”

“Uh oh.” Wide eyed, Miranda sat down. “I feel it. The turbulence is getting worse.”

Rachel returned to the front of the plane with her hands passing over the seat backs for stability, then stumbled into the jump seat, and cinched the belt. She grabbed the swaying intercom. “Captain, everybody’s down, and I’m set. How bad is it?”

The Convair 580 entered the ominous cloudbank and dropped from an abrupt downdraft. Captain Rodriguez checked the altimeter—19,400 feet—down six hundred feet. He returned the plane to its original altitude of 20,000 feet and rechecked the engine gauges that illuminated the darkened cockpit. Relieved to find them normal, he cocked an ear to the signature throb of the Allison turboprop engines; they sounded strong.

He knew what lay ahead. Every aviator had his share of bad weather stories, and most could laugh at tense moments and close calls. The first priority was to avoid the inclement weather altogether, but if that wasn’t possible, with cautious navigation most storms brought only slight delays. The greatest threat was the dramatic movement of updrafts and downdrafts in severe

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thunderstorms. Unfortunately, at the Convair's cruising altitude of 20,000 feet, they were in the danger zone of the storm, right where the convergence of these drafts created the most havoc.

A splintered display of lightning lit the cockpit and thunder roiled over them; the copilot flinched. "Captain, looks bad."

"I've seen worse," he said to the copilot, his concern hidden. "But I'm turning 30 degrees west to see if we can slip out of this front."

"Is 30 degrees enough? Two Seven Zero, due west, is better." The copilot pointed to the storm scope where red images covered the screen.

Roberto shook his head. "No ... we should be fine. We'll get past these outer bands shortly, and we won't lose much time. I've seen this before." He turned the yoke, and the plane banked swiftly.

Turbulence rocked the plane. In the cabin, Jennifer Saunders grabbed the armrest of her seat, her heart thumped and throat constricted. Through her medical training, she understood the conditions of crisis-induced stress.

But this was panic.

Get a grip, she told herself. Focus on the other passengers. She looked around; they sat face forward, anxious, arms locked on the rests.

The plane swayed.

The businessman succumbed to nausea and bent over a barf bag, his retching audible over the roar of the turboprops. The scent of bile diffused through the plane with each jolt.

Jennifer leaned across the aisle. "Here's another."

He dropped the soaked bag and reached for the clean receptacle.

She twisted in her seat to look back at the American. "Are you okay?" she mouthed.

Though she noted the tightened forehead and the narrowed eyes, he smiled and gave her the thumbs up and a reassuring nod.

With lips tight, she turned and rechecked her belt. It's going

to be okay, she reassured herself.

Two rows forward, one of the Hondurans unbuckled, fumbled with his jacket and stood in the aisle. "I'm going to talk to the captain." With feet planted widely, he shuffled toward the front of the cabin.

The lead attendant released her belt and blocked his entrance to the cockpit. "Sir, please return to your seat."

"How long will we be in this storm? Can't we go around it?" He stared at her expectantly.

"Sir, I'll contact the captain. Please return to your seat." The plane jolted again. She picked up the intercom and spoke to the copilot, then placed the phone on its hook. "Mr. ..."

"Fuentes!" he said. "Marcos Fuentes."

"Mr. Fuentes, we're going around the worst part. You must return to your seat, now!"

Flustered, he moved toward his seat and hissed through clenched teeth, "The pilot is going around the ..."

A blinding flash jagged through the cabin, lightning crashed, and thunder clapped on the right wing. A second later a deep thud shook the back of the plane, and the Convair rolled wildly to the right. Marcos fell heavily on the seat-rest before hitting the floor.

Inside a brown, hard-shell case in the bottom of the cargo hold, a timer clicked, a fuse ignited, and a bundle of dynamite discharged, the force of the explosion shredding the belly of the Convair. Aluminum skin peeled backward and lodged against the horizontal stabilizer while severed hydraulic lines spewed liquid into the turbulent air. The crippled plane careened out of control.

Cole felt a thud like a shock wave run through the fuselage, and then the plane rolled. He grabbed the armrest to upright himself.

The lights in the cabin dimmed.

The plane plummeted.

Acrid smoke filled the enclosure.

He looked over the headrests toward the front; overhead

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lockers burst open and luggage spilled. He shifted his sight toward the back of the plane and saw the rear attendant release her belt and struggle to stand. His stomach tightened, and he motioned with his hand. “Stay down. Sit down!”

The aisle floor beneath her feet buckled and ripped open, throwing her against a seat. A loud *whoosh* swept through the cabin; the abrupt change of pressure caused a rush of air toward the rear of the plane. Dust and dirt from the floor filled the fuselage. The passengers coughed and gasped while loose items flew around the cabin as dangerous projectiles.

Cole wrestled to release his belt; the attendant needed help. He saw that she now clutched a headrest to steady herself, but the plane jolted, rolled, pitched down then up again. Screaming, she fell to the floor and was sucked through the crushed opening. He gritted his teeth. “No ...”

Abruptly, oxygen masks fell and dangled from the overhead compartment as the cabin lost pressure.

The panicked voice of the pilot broke through the confusion. “Put ... masks on your face ... belts.”

Cole fought the tangle of hoses and fastened the oxygen mask over his face. Despite the jostling of the plane, the oxygen shocked his system and cleared his thoughts. He pushed back against the seat and planted his feet on the floor, pinning himself to the cushion. He looked forward again. He saw the panic of the passengers.

Fear filled each face.

Death seemed near.

NA 301 plunged toward the Yucatan wilderness.

Two hundred-fifty miles away, at the small airport outside del Carmen, Mexico, a fuel attendant turned from his cup of steaming coffee to hear jumbled words on the emergency frequency. “¡Socorro! ... Flight ... 301. Emergency! Declaring an emergency! Going down.”