

# CHAPTER 1

MEMORIAL DAY

8:41 A.M.

CAPTAIN MICHAEL ROBB OPENED his eyes and found himself lying on the cockpit floor. Heat washed over him as if the airliner had been plunged into a blast furnace, and multiple warning horns blared. Blood trickled from his brow, stinging his eye. For a second he lay there, dazed, wondering what had happened. Then he remembered. The impact.

He had just returned to the cockpit, swearing off coffee for the rest of the trip. It had been his third trip to the lavatory, and the flight from Los Angeles to Sydney wasn't even halfway over. His copilot, Wendy Jacobs, a good twenty years younger than he, had smirked at him but said nothing. He had been about to climb back into his seat when a streak of light flashed by the airliner's starboard wing.

Robb thought it was a lightning strike from the storm they were flying above, but then the plane was thrown sideways, as if batted away by a giant hand. A sonic boom blasted the plane, and he smacked into the bulkhead, his head and shoulder taking most of the blow.

He must have been out for only a few seconds. Though his mind was still fuzzy, his vision quickly came back into focus. Robb sat up and wiped the blood from

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his eye. The instrument panel was intact. Jacobs had disengaged the autopilot and grabbed the yoke, which she now fought for control. Robb pulled himself to his feet. He had no idea how badly he was injured, but he was moving. That was enough.

As Robb clambered into his seat, he glanced at the cabin differential pressure gauge. Its needle was pegged at zero. Explosive decompression.

Reflexively, he reached for the mask hanging to his left, years of training taking over. His shoulder protested the motion, and he winced in pain.

“Oxygen masks on, one hundred percent!” he shouted.

Robb pulled the mask over his head, and Jacobs did the same. The masks in the passenger compartment had already dropped automatically. He mentally raced through the possibilities for the blast. A terrorist bomb? Missile attack? Fuel tank explosion? To depressurize that fast, some of the passenger windows must have blown out, maybe an entire door. The aircraft was still flying though, so that meant the fuselage was intact.

With his attention focused on getting the airliner under control, there was no time for Robb to talk to the passengers. The flight attendants would have to deal with them. The best thing he could do for the passengers was to get the plane down to ten thousand feet, where there was breathable air.

He pushed the yoke forward and silenced the decompression horn, but another one continued to wail. The lights for the starboard engines flashed red, meaning both were on fire.

“Pull number three engine T-handle!” Robb barked out. He suppressed the panic edging into his voice.

Jacobs pulled the handle and pressed the button

beneath it, extinguishing the fire. She glanced out the starboard window to make a visual check.

“Fire’s out on number three engine! Number four engine is completely gone!”

“Gone?”

“Sheared off from the pylon.”

Robb cursed under his breath. His 747-400 was certified to fly with only three engines, but with just the two port engines they’d be lucky to stay in the air.

He turned to Jacobs. Her face was ashen but otherwise professional.

“Issue the distress call,” Robb said.

Jacobs nodded, understanding the implications. Even if someone heard the radio call, it would make little difference. The best they could hope for was to report their position in case they had to ditch. She keyed the radio.

“Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! This is TransPac 823. We are going down. We are going down. We’ve lost both number three and number four engines. Our position is seventy-five miles bearing two four five from Palmyra VOR.”

No answer, just static.

“Activate the emergency transponder,” Robb said. He knew activating it was a useless procedure. They were beyond the range of any radar units.

“Setting transponder to 7700 in squawk emergency,” Jacobs replied.

As their rapid descent took the plane through thirty thousand feet, an unearthly glow bloomed within the cloud cover ten miles to their right. At first the clouds softened it, but then the light pierced them, shooting toward the stratosphere, for a moment brighter than the sun.

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“What the hell?” Jacobs said.

A fireball rolled upward in the distinctive mushroom shape Robb had seen in countless photos. He gaped, mesmerized by the sight. Atomic weapons testing in the Pacific had been outlawed for years, and there were no volcanoes in this region of the ocean. What else could have caused such a massive explosion?

Whatever it was, the explanation didn't matter.

“Roll left!” he yelled. Stabilizing the plane should have been his highest priority, but they had to get away from the blast zone.

“Rolling left,” came Jacobs's response after only a second's hesitation.

Robb just had to hope that he could ride out the shock wave and find someplace to land. They had passed over the Palmyra Atoll only ten minutes before, but the runway built during World War II had been abandoned decades earlier. Christmas Island, five hundred miles away, had the closest operational runway. Despite all the damage the plane had sustained, it was still flying. They might make it.

“Come on, you bastard!” Robb grunted as he strained at the controls.

The nose of the enormous plane came around slowly. Too slowly.

The blast wave from the explosion caught up with them and slapped at the plane from behind, heaving its tail up. A colossal crack of thunder hammered the aircraft. The windows shattered and wind howled through the cockpit. The number one engine was wrenched from its mounts, shearing half the port wing from the plane and setting the fuel tanks aflame. The plane plummeted like an elevator cut from its cable.

With two engines gone and another shut down, the airliner was mortally wounded. Thinking of the 373 men, women, and children in the plane—people who were his responsibility—Robb didn't give up, but he had no more hope of flying it than one of the passengers. He battled the controls trying to level the plane, but it was a dead stick. Despite his efforts, the plane spun downward in a death spiral. By the time the airliner plunged through the lowest cloud layer, the altimeter read one thousand feet. For the first time in an hour, Robb could see the blue water of the Pacific.

Realizing that their fate was inevitable, Robb let go of the yoke and sat back. He held out his hand to Jacobs, who grasped it tightly with her own. Never much for religion, Robb nonetheless closed his eyes and found himself reciting the Lord's Prayer. He was up to the words "Thy kingdom come" when the plane slammed into the ocean at over five hundred miles per hour.