

FLIGHT 935 DO YOU READ?

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CHAPTER 1

Thundering out of the tunnel, the express lurched unevenly as it swept towards the station. On the locomotive's footplate the driver and fireman stood immobile, staring ahead through the forward windows. At its present speed the leading bogie of the 'Duchess of Buccleugh' would clatter over a trailing crossover in a few seconds. The 'home' signal protecting the points stood at danger, as had the 'distant' warning the crew not long before. With no slackening of speed the eight-coach train hurtled past the 'home'. Its passage shook the horizontal signal arm. The signals were at danger because the points had been set for the crossover to allow a shunter to clear the main line. Electrical inter-locking prevented the signals from being pulled off while the track was set against the main line, as it still was, even though the tank engine shunter was indeed well clear and now stood in a goods siding opposite the station.

There were a few people standing on the platform and one or two on the footbridge straddling the tracks exactly over the offending points. A short distance beyond the platform end, road traffic waited for the level crossing gates to open. A signalman was leaning out of his box, his hand supporting him against the window frame. Back at the station a train of four suburban coaches positioned at the slow line platform was waiting for an

engine to haul it up the steep branch gradient. The rearmost carriage rocked on its wheels as the express careered past it on the fast line. The points were still against the express, but now there was no more time.

Disaster was imminent and inevitable.

At full speed the 'Duchess of Buccleugh's' bogie wheels ran onto the points frog and were immediately derailed, followed by the leading coupled wheels. But the massive locomotive's momentum propelled it onwards, even though it was now falling onto its side and twisting against its tender coupling so as to form a solid metal wall sweeping destructively forward. The first obstacle to be obliterated was a girder support for the footbridge. The bridge shuddered and started to collapse, sinking onto the first of the toppling carriages. Simultaneously the tender, couplings now broken, mounted the platform and crushed three or four waiting passengers, then demolished the wooden bookstall.

In a frenzy of annihilation the derailed express coaches smashed into the suburban stock on the adjacent line. Roofs shattered, bogie frames crunched into windows, wheels gouged through fragile wooden bodywork, compartments collapsed like a row of dominoes. But the kinetic energy was not yet spent. Tumbling over and over, the engine scythed through the signal box structure, its front bufferbeam smashing into the window where the signalman stood. At this instant the fireman was hurled from his engine's cab, his body thudding into the track ballast. The driver was still trapped in the whirling cab. A split second later the heavy boiler crashed through the level crossing gates and flattened a waiting bus.

Now the catastrophe had almost run its course. The last casualties were a loading gauge post knocked down and three coal wagons derailed by the battered locomotive as it finally came to rest on its flank in a siding. And to complete the panorama of devastation, a fractured section of station canopy

roofing collapsed over the shattered coaches. Then there was silence . . . and stillness.

'Oh, no . . . '

Eyes and mouth open, ten-year-old Robert Hayworth stared in horror at the wreckage. His hand reached out to pick up the locomotive, then froze in mid air. He could feel the panic welling up inside. He did not know what to do. For three seconds he stood motionless, scarcely believing what had happened. He closed his eyes, but he knew that when he reopened them the ghastly scene would still be there. The tightly screwed-up lids parted a fraction, testing. Yes, the unavoidable truth percolated into his mind. He had crashed Uncle John's model trains.

Again he felt a surge of sickness in his stomach. But then he remembered his uncle's instructions, the voice speaking through the jumble of his fearful thoughts. 'If a train is derailed, first of all turn off the master switch.' The hand that had originally reached forward to the engine now slowly wheeled round and switched off the power control. His mind becoming clearer, Robert decided not to touch the broken models in case he inflicted further damage. Obviously he would have to break the bad news to Uncle John busy at his computer in the study downstairs.

A sense of dread emerged as the boy descended the stairs. This was only the third time that Uncle John had permitted him to operate the railway without personal supervision. He knew that this privilege would now probably be withdrawn. Perhaps his uncle would never let him touch the controls again. Robert felt a stinging in his eyes, then controlled himself. He was past that stage. He was ten years old!

* * * * *

John Armstrong removed his specs and wearily rubbed his eyes. He had intended to finish his work at least an hour earlier, but somehow the minutes had just ticked away as he had put the finishing touches to his report. His tired eyes scanned the title page of the document on his laptop screen: 'Latest Developments in Solid State Micro-Relays. A Report by Dr J Armstrong, Assistant Director of Research, Holmyard Electronics.' Then, eyes closed, he leant back in the leather chair, hands behind his head. He sighed contentedly. The culmination of a year's work. The project successfully completed. On Monday Mollie, his PA, would embark on the Herculean task of editing the final draft, correcting his grammatical errors and adding a touch of finesse to his prosaic text.

Armstrong's thoughts were broken by a timid tapping at the study door. He took a deep breath.

'Come in, Robert.'

The boy closed the door behind him. His uncle spoke again.

'You don't have to knock. I've told you that before. You can come and go as you please as long as you don't make too much noise.' Then he noticed for the first time the concern in his nephew's eyes. Rising from his chair he stepped over and gently placed a hand on the boy's shoulder.

'Hey, what is it?' he asked quietly.

Robert took a moment to steady his nerves.

'I'm very sorry, Uncle. There's been an accident with the trains. There's a lot of damage.' The eyes looked up pleadingly and the boy suddenly spoke rapidly, the words tumbling out in his anxiety to impart the full story as quickly as possible and so terminate the horrid moment.

'I had the points set wrong and the express was derailed. There's a lot of damage . . . the station . . . the carriages . . . the signal box . . . the crossing . . . I'm sorry, Uncle . . . it was an accident.'

'Hey, steady on,' said Armstrong, interrupting the torrent. 'Keep calm. Here, sit down for a minute. Do you want a drink?' The boy nodded weakly. His uncle led him to a chair. 'Right,' said the scientist. 'I'm going to the kitchen to get you a glass of lemonade. You just sit quietly and calm yourself down. When you feel better we'll go up to the Railway Room and see what the situation is, okay?' He smiled encouragingly at his nephew and left the study.

Having replaced the lemonade bottle in the fridge, Armstrong paused before returning to the study. He needed to think about this problem for a minute or two. He wondered briefly about the extent of the damage upstairs. A deep sigh escaped his lips. What should he do? On the one hand the boy's self-esteem and confidence, never very strong, would evaporate completely if he berated him. Not for the first time, Armstrong found himself wishing that Robert's father had not run off when the boy was only a few years old. The scientist knew that children raised with inadequate paternal input often evolved into ill-disciplined bullies. But in his nephew's case the opposite trait was developing. The absence of masculine supervision seemed to be weakening Robert's character, despite the devoted and sometimes desperate efforts of his mother, Armstrong's sister Jeanette, to boost his self regard.

The scientist was worried about his nephew's apparent meekness and lack of determination, which seemed to be worsening as time went by. It was to help combat these negative traits that Armstrong had taught Robert how to control the large, complex model railway installed upstairs and had allowed the boy to operate the trains unattended. The idea was to make the boy think for himself and develop confidence in his own decisions and actions. And the scheme had seemed to be bearing fruit. The boy was not unintelligent and had quickly learnt the technique of running up to four trains simultaneously. Of course, like all youngsters these days he would have learnt these skills playing video games. On his nephew's last visit Armstrong had been pleasantly surprised to discover the extent of the boy's dexterity in operation of the locomotive controllers

and the points. Now this evening's calamity would probably destroy all that had been achieved. Unlike a video game, there was no 'reset' button to click on to repair physical damage.

On the other hand, it would not do to dismiss the matter with a shrug of the shoulders and a vague platitude. The boy had been instructed by his uncle that permission to operate the trains carried with it responsibility of safeguarding valuable equipment. Armstrong had explained that most of the rolling stock and accessories had been painstakingly made by hand, representing many years' work, all in his spare time. The scientist retraced his steps to the study, head lowered pensively. This was going to be a tricky one.

It was about ten minutes before Armstrong reckoned that his nephew was in a settled state of mind. No conversation had passed between them. As the boy sipped his drink, his uncle made a pretence of rearranging various volumes in his bookcase. Many of them had not been touched for years, as evidenced by a thick coating of grey dust. Occasionally the man cast surreptitious glances at the boy, trying to gauge the latter's mood. Yes, the lad seemed calmer now. Perhaps it was time to sort out this business. Robert drank the last of his lemonade and silently placed the empty glass on the desk top. He turned his head and regarded his uncle cautiously, waiting for him to make the next move.

'Well, Robert, shall we have a look upstairs?'

The boy nodded. 'Okay, Uncle.'

It did not take Armstrong long to assess the approximate extent of the damage. Although at first sight the station area appeared to be totally devastated, it was clear that the accident was not as bad as he had originally feared from Robert's description. The maroon 'Duchess' had lost a smoke deflector and had also sustained a bent coupling rod, but none of the linkages was broken. Its tender was unscathed apart from scratched paintwork. Incredibly, only one carriage seemed to be

beyond repair. Three or four others were heavily damaged, but could be rebuilt. However, it looked as if a large effort would be needed to restore the station buildings and footbridge to their original conditions. And some of the track would obviously require repinning. Armstrong delicately cleared the debris as Robert looked on impassively. *It could be worse*, mused the scientist, *it could be worse*. Finally, he stood back and rubbed his hands together. He had decided what he would say to the boy.

'That was quite a crash, wasn't it?'
'Yes.'

Armstrong turned to face his nephew. 'There's a lot of damage, Robert. No doubt about that.'

'Yes.'

'However,' continued his uncle, 'I think that it was an honest mistake and it could have happened to anyone. I think—'

'I know I made a mistake,' interrupted the boy, opening up a little. 'I remember that you told me about taking care with the points, and I was being careful. I don't know how it happened that the crossover was set wrong. But I know I'm responsible for the crash and I'm very sorry.'

Armstrong nodded. 'Well, I think this is what we should do. I think you should spend your Saturday mornings here from now on, helping to mend the models. The harder you work at it, the sooner the work will be finished. And for every hour you put in, I'll give you an hour's assistance. Do you think that's a fair arrangement?'

The boy considered for a moment. 'Okay. At least it's not as bad as detention at school. At least I'll be working on something interesting.'

'Good. That's agreed then.' A new thought occurred to the scientist. 'Detention? Have you ever been in detention?'

Robert looked away, his face colouring. 'It wasn't just me. Three of us got detentions for climbing onto the school roof, but

we were only looking for a football. It was a few weeks ago.' He turned back to face his uncle, eyes widening in fright. 'Please don't tell Mum, Uncle John. She'll kill me. She doesn't know about the detention. I told her I was late home because I was playing football after school.'

'It's a secret, then,' replied Armstrong, allowing a hint of a smile to cross his lips. A detention. For climbing onto the roof, looking for a football. Perhaps there was hope for the boy yet!

He looked at his watch. 'Well, it's after half past nine, Robert. Time for you to turn in, I think. What time is your mother coming to collect you tomorrow?'

'Eleven o'clock, she said.'

'Okay. We'll both get a good night's sleep, and then we can do some repair work tomorrow morning after breakfast before your mother turns up.'

'Okay. Goodnight, uncle.' The boy started towards the door, then paused.

'Uncle?'

'Yes?'

'Will I be allowed to play with the trains again?'

Armstrong pondered briefly. 'When the repair work is complete, then you can operate the railway again.'

The boy nodded, considering the response. 'Alright. Night night.'

After Robert had left Armstrong spent a few minutes tidying up the Railway Room. The damaged rolling stock was gingerly laid on a cupboard shelf. From an adjacent shelf the scientist took a notebook and jotted down details of the reparations needed to restore the models. He ruminated briefly on the feasibility of installing automatic protection equipment to prevent trains running through adverse signals. His pencil sketched out a circuit or two. Well, that could wait for a while. There were more important priorities, such as the Claughton class engine that lay half-built in the rolling stock cupboard. And it really was

about time he found some six-wheeled bogies for his London and North Western dining cars.

With a last glance round the room, Armstrong was satisfied that all was in order. He turned out the light and started downstairs. From the bathroom could be heard the sound of young teeth being brushed.

It had been a hard day. But tomorrow was Saturday and Armstrong promised himself to take it easy. No micro-relays, no image encrypters (his next project), no work of any sort. He might even go for a walk to Kew. It was a long time since he had done that. As for this evening, well, some Sibelius on the music player, a mug of cocoa spiked with rum, and then he too would turn in.

Back in the study Armstrong had lowered the gas fire and was about to insert his iPod into the dock when the doorbell rang. Annoyance flared up inside him. *Damn! Who the hell . . ?* It was nearly ten o'clock.

When he opened the door Armstrong saw a woman, blonde, trim figure, carrying a shopping bag. For a second or two he didn't recognise her. Then the grey eyes and turned-up nose stirred his recollection. It was Bill Fairwood's daughter. But what had happened to the lively expression that he had associated with Bill's girl? There was no cheeriness in the thin compressed lips. And lines in the forehead added ten years to the young face he remembered. Then Armstrong thought of the harrowing ordeal she had endured those last few months, and he understood the haggard look.

'Hello, Dr Armstrong.' Her voice was quiet, almost weary. 'I'm awfully sorry to trouble you at such a late hour.'

He eyed the unhappy figure. 'Not at all. Come in, come in.' It was as if he were offering shelter to a homeless orphan. He led her to the study and made her sit down. She did so, dropping the bag at her feet. The grey eyes looked up at him.

'The reason I've come to see you is that I was going through Dad's things the other day and I found some books that he'd borrowed from you.' She pointed at the bag. 'I thought I'd better return them to you and this will be the only chance I have to do so for a while. I phoned earlier but you were out and I don't know your mobile number.'

Armstrong nodded, only half listening to her words. His preoccupation was trying to remember her name. Bill's daughter . . . what was it . . ? Mary? Melanie? Something like that. When the girl had finished he confessed his lapse.

She smiled at him. 'Melody,' she said.

Of course, Melody. Bill's only child. The only woman in Bill's life since his wife died. And now Bill himself was gone. So Melody really was on her own, unless she had a boyfriend or something. Armstrong cast his mind back to the memorial service, the last time he'd set eyes on her. Amongst those paying their respects, Bill's friends and colleagues, Melody was his only close family. Armstrong couldn't remember if she was accompanied. Maybe there had been a fellow with her.

The scientist cleared his throat. 'Thanks for returning my books.'

He found himself at a loss for anything more to say. In the ensuing silence he was suddenly aware of the ticking of the grandfather clock and the soft hiss of the fire. The girl sat like a statue, seemingly deep in her own thoughts, grey eyes staring ahead. Armstrong touched her shoulder lightly to break the spell. 'Would you like some tea or coffee, or something stronger?'

The faint smile returned to her lips and she looked up. 'Well, I don't want to put you to any trouble . . . '

'It's no trouble, I assure you.'

'Thanks. I'd like a coffee, then, please.'

'Okay. Anything to eat?' He somehow felt protective towards her, as if it were his duty to shield her from the world's miseries. 'I can make a sandwich if you like, or some soup.'

'No, nothing, thank you. I've already eaten.'

'Fine,' replied the scientist. 'Excuse me for a minute while I sort out the coffee. Are you warm enough?'

She nodded.

'Here,' he continued, 'let me put some music on.'

Maybe now the Sibelius would be too sombre. Armstrong selected a Mozart playlist instead and smiled at his unexpected visitor as he passed her.

And so for the second time in less than an hour Armstrong found himself in the kitchen preparing a drink for an unhappy recipient. First young Robert, upset over the broken trains, and now Melody, Bill Fairwood's daughter, the crushing blow of her father's death no doubt compounded by the cold pronouncement of the Chairman of the Accident Enquiry.

Now there was a coincidence, because a common devotion to railways was the foundation of the friendship between John Armstrong and Bill Fairwood. The scientist thought back to his introduction to the Petersfield and Midhurst Railway Society. That was the first time he met Bill. And as the once defunct railway was gradually restored to its former glory, a private business carrying revenue passengers and freight, so Bill and he had become firm friends.

As a financial contributor to the P & M, Armstrong was entitled to ride on the footplate of the renovated steam locomotives. Bill had gone one stage further and was actually allowed to drive them. But of course with his technical background in aviation the complex handling of valves and levers came naturally to him.

As he poured boiling water into the coffee cups Armstrong remembered the fateful evening several months previously when he had arranged to meet his friend. The plan was to rendezvous in the 'Fat Goose' pub in Osterley for a beer or two, followed by a steak dinner. Bill was a captain with Blue Planet Airlines, a seasoned veteran on the Galleon fleet with just one more year's service to complete before retirement. But of course rather than aircraft, the subject of discussion for that evening would have been the success of the first steaming of a newly-restored J50, the P & M's latest jewel. When Bill failed to turn up, Armstrong suspected that his flight into Heathrow had been delayed for some reason, and he returned home sorely disappointed that he had lost an evening's train gossip.

Then, on the television news, there was a serious-faced newscaster announcing gravely: 'It is feared that two hundred and sixty-one people have died after an airliner crashed into the Atlantic earlier today . . . '

For about ten minutes Armstrong and the girl swapped small talk as they sipped their coffee, but both of them could sense a tension in the atmosphere and the scientist knew that one of them would have to broach the topic they were trying to circumnavigate, if only to clear the air. Eventually the exchanges dried up completely and Armstrong wondered if the time had come to talk about Bill. He was just considering his first words when Melody spoke up.

'I suppose you heard the verdict of the Enquiry?' she asked bitterly.

Armstrong had followed the press reports of the Enquiry as it sifted through the evidence of various technical experts. Gradually attention turned away from the aircraft itself and focussed upon the professional careers and personal lives of the crew members. Eventually the spotlight picked out the pilot. As many witnesses at the enquiry pointed out, the captain was the person legally responsible for the safety of the aircraft. And as the weight of opinion and testimony increased, more and more accusing fingers were pointed at Bill Fairwood, who of course was not there to defend himself.

Only Melody was there to protect her father's name. She had attended the Enquiry every day, although twice she had been ejected by officials when her outbursts of emotion and anger had disrupted the proceedings. It was true that Bill was well-respected by his colleagues in the airline, and many of them testified as to his conscientiousness in his duties and his technical expertise. But it was clear that even these fellow airmen believed Bill to be at least partly at fault. Melody fought harder. She hired an eminent barrister to add professional clout to her courtroom objections. The only effect was to drag out the proceedings and increase her frustration. As the enquiry drew to a close, no-one doubted the probable outcome.

And thus it turned out. Armstrong suddenly acknowledged the second coincidence of the evening. The words he had earlier spoken to his nephew came back to him. For the Enquiry Chairman had used the same expression . . . 'this accident was the result of an honest mistake by the flight crew . . . ' The only concession to Melody and her expensive barrister was the preceding phrase 'it is probable that . . .'

'Yes,' said Armstrong in response to the girl's question. 'I read it in the paper. It must have been very disheartening for you, after you put up such a fight.'

The girl looked at him, disgust twisting her face. 'I think the verdict was grossly unfair to Dad. The whole charade was based on conjecture and speculation. There was no hard evidence about anything.'

Although Armstrong had been a close friend of Bill Fairwood, he had read the Enquiry reports impartially, in the belief that justice would be done in the end. He was saddened to see the direction that things seemed to be going, but saw no reason to doubt the fairness of the proceedings. When the findings were published Armstrong accepted them with a mental shrug. Too bad. But Bill had made his 'honest mistake' and that was that.

Obviously he could not voice these thoughts to Melody. He tried to compose a neutral rejoinder to her complaint.

'I was sorry things turned out the way they did,' he said eventually.

'He was a scapegoat, you know. They had to find someone to blame and they chose him.' She spoke wearily, as if her spirit had been extinguished by the cruel blows fate had dealt her. Armstrong guessed that she had given up the fight to clear Bill's name. It was understandable that she should be down in the dumps. And of course it would take a while for her to pick herself up again. But he didn't doubt that the Fairwood resilience would finally revive her. In the meantime she would obviously need people to lean on. The scientist found himself saying:

'I know it's been a hard time for you, Melody. But if there is anything I can do, anything at all, to make things better for you, please tell me. Please look on me as a friend.'

'That's very kind of you, Dr Armstrong.' This time there was real warmth in her smile. 'I know Dad thought a lot of you as a friend, and I think I can understand why.'

'By the way, the name is John. I think we'd better drop the 'Dr Armstrong'. Makes me feel terribly old and decrepit.'

'Okay, 'John' it shall be.' She looked at her watch. 'Well, I think I'd better go now, or Peter will be worrying about me.'

Peter. So there was a boyfriend. Perhaps it was just as well that she had someone close to rely on. Armstrong didn't much like the idea of the girl facing the harshness of life on her own, not when her morale was clearly so fragile. This fellow Peter could fend for her.

'Anyway,' said the scientist as he opened the front door for her, 'for better or worse at least the whole business is over now. I know you won't be able to put it out of your mind immediately, but gradually the unhappiness will fade away and then you'll be able to get on with living your own life.' He knew his words sounded trite, although he meant them sincerely enough. But he wasn't at all prepared for her reaction.

'Oh, no! It's not over, not by any means.' Now the grey eyes narrowed. 'They can't just write off my father like that. He deserves better, and by God I'll make sure that he gets it. It's the only thing that matters to me now. I don't care about anything else.'

The scientist was surprised at the anger in her words. Clearly she meant what she said. He was disappointed, for her sake. He suspected that her crusade would be futile, and would only wear her down even further. Should he advise her against it? No, it would be impertinent of him. It was really none of his business. Again he chose a neutral response.

'Remember my offer, Melody. Anything I can do for you, you only have to ask.'

'Yes, thank you, Dr A . . . John.' The anger evaporated as quickly as it had appeared and the smile returned. Now her face was more as Armstrong remembered it.

She offered her hand. 'Well, it's been nice to talk to you again after such a long time. Perhaps we can meet again sometime soon.'

'Yes, that would be nice.'

They exchanged goodnights and he closed and locked the door. He stood in thought as he listened to the sound of her car door closing and its engine whirring into life. Poor old Bill. Poor Melody. What would become of her if she continued with her useless obsession? He shook his head sadly and returned to the study.

CHAPTER 2

Jeanette called to collect her son earlier than she had originally said. Soon after she arrived she indicated to her brother that she wanted to talk to him alone. Armstrong sent the boy back to the Railway Room to repaint one of the repaired carriage bodies they had been working on.

At first Jeanette seemed reluctant to speak her mind, preferring instead to exchange trivialities with Armstrong. Her hands kept toying with the pendant at her neck. The scientist knew his sister well and recognised the symptoms of inner conflict. Something was troubling her. He thought it best to wait until she opted to reveal her thoughts. Eventually it came out.

'John, I'm getting worried about the boy.'

Armstrong said nothing, waiting for his sister to expand her words.

'He's just not developing like a normal child. He's too shy, too timid.' She shook her head. 'He seems bright enough, but he won't mix with the other kids as much he should. He spends all his spare time indoors on the internet or playing video games. He's too introspective. I just don't know what to do with him.'

Armstrong nodded. 'I know. But lots of kids spend too much time in front of TV or computer screens these days.' He looked at her. 'Has he got any friends at all?'

The woman shrugged. 'He says he's got friends on the internet, which is something else for me to worry about of course. I'm not savvy enough to be able to check what he's doing or who he's communicating with. Sometimes he plays football in the park with one or two local boys, but that's about it. He's built a shell round himself and doesn't want to come out. I don't think he's made any really close friends at school. None that I know of, anyway.'

Her last sentence triggered a new line of thought in Armstrong's mind.

'What do you think of his school?'

She smiled ruefully. 'Not much. I don't think the teachers are very interested in him. They've given him up already, I reckon. He's told me himself that he finds the lessons dull. And he doesn't much like sport – apart from football of course.'

Armstrong regarded his sister. 'Maybe that's the answer, Jeanette. Perhaps we should send him to a private school.'

Jeanette returned the glance. 'I did look into it, actually. Made a few enquiries. There's a very good school near Staines. I've heard excellent reports about it. But John,' she raised her hands in exasperation, 'the fees are absolutely impossible. I'd have to sell the house to pay them.'

Armstrong paused. 'It's no problem. I'll pay the fees.'

'What?' The woman looked disbelievingly at her brother.

'I mean it. Let me pay the fees.'

'John, dear, don't be silly. It's a very kind offer, but I couldn't possibly let you do that.' She came over and squeezed his arm affectionately.

He looked her in the eyes. 'It's no sacrifice for me, sis. I've got more money than I know what to do with. It would please me very much if you agreed. '

His sister paused before replying. 'John, I know what it is. You still feel guilty about Robert's father, don't you? After all these years.'

'Whether I do or not, that's beside the point. This isn't charity, or a penance. We're family. It's family money I'm offering to pay the school fees.'

'John, how many times to I have to tell you? It wasn't your fault that *that man* did a bunk.' She spat the words out as if they left a bad taste in her mouth. 'I doubt if he would have been much good as a father for Robert even if he had stayed with us.'

'Sis, let's change the subject, please.' He walked over to the window and looked out. The midday sun was weakening, obscured by a thin veil of high cloud. Above the horizon the layer of grey was thickening ominously. The forecast had spoken of rain that afternoon and he wondered if he would lose his planned riverside walk after lunch.

He turned round and saw that his sister had seated herself. 'Let's stick to practicalities, Jeanette. We're both agreed that Robert needs the specialist attention he can only get at a private school. We have the financial resources to pay for those services. It's as simple as that.'

'You have the resources. I don't,' she corrected him.

'No,' he replied firmly, 'we have the resources.'

Jeanette put her hand to her forehead. 'I don't know, John, I'll have to think about it. I'd rather not discuss it any more at the moment, but thanks anyway.' She turned her face up with an exaggerated smile. 'So, changing the subject . . . you're off skiing next week?'

'Yep.'

'With Angie? What's happening there? Tell me to get lost if it's none of my business.'

'Well, we're not back together, not in that way. But as the holiday had already been booked we thought we'd go anyway.'

'So, accommodation-wise . . . '

'We've got another room. Angie has got someone else staying with her, the daughter of her Austrian friends – they'll sleep in the same room. I'll be on my own . . . unless Rob wants

to come, assuming I can get flight tickets for him. He could share my room. Shall we ask him?'

'No, it wouldn't work. He might want to do it but it wouldn't do to take him out of school. The headteacher sent out a letter warning parents not to do it. She's not someone you want to cross swords with.'

'Fair enough. Maybe another time. Doesn't the school run ski trips for the children?'

'Not the primary school. Maybe his next school organises . . .' She stopped in mid-sentence, distracted by a movement in the doorway. It was Robert.

'The coach is finished. I'm ready to go home.'

His mother smiled at him. 'Good. Let's go and leave your uncle in peace, then.'

Armstrong saw them to the car and waved them off. As he turned to go back indoors he looked up and saw to his dismay that the sun was completely blotted out now. Underneath the leaden clouds a large jet flew past, on its way to arrival at Heathrow, five miles away.

Well, it didn't matter, he would go for his walk unless it actually started to rain.

* * * * *

But it was not to be. As Armstrong finished his last mouthful of pizza, a flurry of wind splattered the first raindrops against the window. Within a few minutes the rain was falling steadily. The scientist stacked his plates in the dishwasher and walked over to the kitchen window, gloomily watching the drops splashing into the quickly-forming puddles on his garden pathway. So much for the afternoon's exercise. A neighbour's cat scurried across the lawn and took shelter under his rhododendron, curling its tail around itself as it settled to the ground.

So now he had the problem of spending the afternoon constructively. Another gust of wind rocked the swing seat in his garden and swept a whirlpool of dead leaves into the air outside. Well, he might just as well start work on the image encrypter program. It was a straightforward project he could delegate to one of the bright young wizards working under him once he'd got the basics sorted out. He'd already jotted down a few ideas. Perhaps this afternoon he could add some details.

Armstrong went to the study and had just switched on his laptop when his attention was drawn by the noise of another airliner on its approach to Heathrow. Ordinarily he paid no heed to the never-ending procession of jets floating over his house in St Margarets, not far from the Thames at Richmond Lock. The aircraft had long since receded into the general background of his home environment. But for some reason the engine whine now struck a chord and his mind returned to the previous evening and his conversation with Melody Fairwood.

He hibernated his laptop and walked over to the bookcase. Opening a large drawer beneath the shelves, he took out a stack of newspapers. None of them showed the yellowing of age, although the lower copies had turned off-white. He placed the stack upside down on his desk, so that the oldest paper was now on top, and then he switched on the Anglepoise light. The banner headline announced:

261 DIE AS AIRLINER PLUNGES INTO OCEAN

The pile of newspapers told the whole story, from the crash right through to the end of the Enquiry. Armstrong did not normally keep old papers, but his friendship with Bill Fairwood had prompted him to make this exception. He sat down at the desk, leisurely lit a cigar, and picked up the top paper. The smoke curled into weird blue skeins in the cone of light from the

lamp. Just as well his sister was not there to scold him about his disgusting habit. He started to read.

Two hundred and sixty-one people were feared dead yesterday after a Blue Planet Airlines Galleon crashed into the Atlantic Ocean approximately 140 miles northwest of Ireland. Besides being one of the worst disasters in the history of aviation, it was also one of the strangest.

The aircraft, Flight 935 from Larnaca, was scheduled to arrive at London's Heathrow Airport at 2.50 pm. It carried seven crew and 254 passengers, mostly Britons. First indications that the airliner had a problem was when it started to stray off course as it overflew Paris at approximately 2.05 pm. French Air Traffic Control officers made radio calls to the aircraft to alert the crew to their navigational error, but there was no response. The Galleon continued on a steady heading towards London and actually flew over the city at 2.35 but did not respond to radio transmissions made by British Air Traffic Control.

By this time the military services had been alerted in case a terrorist attack from the aircraft was imminent. Two Tornado fighters were scrambled from the RAF base at Wittering, Northants, and intercepted the airliner as it flew past Oxford. Flying in formation with it, the RAF crews reported that they could see the pilots on the flight deck quite clearly, but there was no response from them. At 2.50 an RAF Nimrod also joined the formation, which was now approaching Manchester, still heading northwest. The mystery airliner flew out over the Irish Sea, passing just south of the Isle of Man, overflew Northern Ireland and then continued on over the Atlantic Ocean.

At about 3.25 the airliner began a slow right turn, maintaining its height of 43,000 feet. There was still no sign of any sort of activity on the flight deck. The military crews reported that the Galleon's pilots sat 'impassively' and appeared to be wearing their oxygen masks. Five minutes later the turn suddenly

steepened and the airliner started to spiral downwards. The Tornados followed it as it spun seaward. Finally the plane nosedived into the ocean, where it broke up. It was reported that there seemed to be no survivors, although some floating wreckage was seen on the water. Ships in the area were requested to search the crash location for possible survivors.

Depressurisation theory

Last night a spokesman from Blue Planet said they did not know what had caused the disaster. But amongst technical experts the opinion was that the aircraft may have suffered a pressurisation failure in the cabin. In this event, there should be a supply of oxygen available to all crew and passengers. At 43,000 feet, if the airliner became depressurised and for some reason there was no oxygen, the people on board would become unconscious in a few seconds. Expert opinion is that this may be what happened to Flight 935. If this was the case all would have died within a few minutes depressurisation due to oxygen starvation. With the pilots unconscious or dead, the autopilot would have held the last course programmed into it, so flying the aircraft straight and level until the fuel was exhausted. Then the engines would stop and the aircraft would crash.

Pilots named

Last night Blue Planet said it would release the names of the passengers on board Flight 935 once their next of kin had been informed. The names of the cabin crew would be given at the same time. However the airline has already released the names of the flight crew. They were Captain William James Fairwood, 59, and First Officer Vayalar Sidhu, 29. A Blue Planet spokesman said that both were experienced Galleon crewmen.

Underneath a picture featuring a Galleon, the paper had printed photographs of the two pilots. The familiar face of Bill Fairwood stared out at Armstrong. The scientist discarded the paper and picked up the next one. Four days after the crash Flight 935 was still front page news.

GALLEON HAD PRESSURISATION FAULT

Although there is still much speculation about the precise cause of the accident to the Blue Planet Airlines Galleon which crashed last Tuesday killing 261 crew and passengers, aviation experts are now almost certain that the airliner, codenamed Echo Yankee, had suffered a pressurisation fault. Photographs and video taken by the crew of the Nimrod reconnaissance aircraft sent to intercept the wayward airliner show that the outflow valve below the aircraft's tail was fully open. Normally at cruise altitude this valve, which controls the release of air from the cabin, should be almost closed. An electrical fault may have opened the valve, causing the cabin to lose its internal air pressure and making it impossible for the occupants to breathe normally. Post mortem examination of bodies found floating in the water has shown that they had died at least half an hour before the crash. Examination of lung tissue has indicated that death was caused by oxygen starvation. Blue Planet have so far declined to comment on the apparent failure of the back-up oxygen supply system which would have kept the passengers and crew alive until the aircraft had descended to a lower height where normal breathing would have been possible. But a spokesman for the airline confirmed that standard procedure is to arm the system before take off and check that that sufficient oxygen is carried to cope with a pressurisation failure. The spokesman added that this check was the responsibility of the flight crew. At the

moment terrorism has not been ruled out as a cause of the disaster, although no group has yet claimed responsibility.

Armstrong's cigar had gone out. He relit it and looked again to the window. The rain still lashed against the glass and the sky was dark. The next paper in the pile was dated twelve days later. By now the story had been relegated to an inside page.

GALLEON CRASH: ENQUIRY ANNOUNCED

It was announced yesterday that the public Enquiry into the mysterious crash of Blue Planet Flight 935 would commence in two months' time and would be expected to last about four weeks. The chairman of the Commission will be Tina Movnes. Professor of Aeronautical Engineering at the University of London. Aviation experts are mostly of the opinion that either the airliner's oxygen system might have been empty when the pressurisation failure occurred or else the crew had not armed it. The possibility that the oxygen reservoir had leaked during flight is considered to be extremely unlikely. No occurrence of this sort has ever been reported by a Galleon operator, according to a spokesman for the manufacturers, Chinavia. The documentation completed by the flight crew before departure indicates that the oxygen system contents were adequate before take off. Nevertheless a service bulletin issued last week by the manufacturers advises all Galleon operators to check the integrity of their pressurisation and oxygen systems as a precautionary measure.

The papers covered the start of the Enquiry and reported the evidence given by various witnesses. Gradually the theme revealed itself. During flight the cabin pressurisation had failed for one reason or another, probably the faulty outflow valve. As soon as the crew realised what had happened they should have

donned their oxygen masks and tried to restore the pressurisation if possible. If they couldn't rectify the fault they should then have asked Air Traffic Control for clearance to descend quickly to a flight level where normal breathing was possible without recourse to oxygen masks.

What had happened in Echo Yankee? The pilots had put their masks on, as reported by the crews of the intercepting Tornado fighters. So therefore, since they had apparently become incapacitated, either the oxygen system had not been armed or else it was empty. But, according to several witnesses, one of the crew duties during flight was occasional monitoring of the aircraft's technical status, including oxygen system contents. In the event that insufficient oxygen was noted, the Galleon Operations Manual required the crew to descend to an altitude below 12,000 feet so that normal breathing would be possible if the cabin pressurisation subsequently failed.

Further technical details came to light during the Enquiry. Two witnesses had suggested that the products of Chinavia, a Chinese-Indian aircraft manufacturer, did not match up to technical standards demanded by the Developed World. But the majority opinion dismissed these allegations as xenophobia. The Galleon design and construction met all regulatory requirements and the fleet had been in satisfactory service with many airlines for many years. The aircraft's pressurisation and oxygen systems followed the industry pattern, with the back-up oxygen coming to the pilots from a pressurised reservoir and that for the cabin crew and passengers from a separate chemical generator which supplied the life-giving gas for 10 to 15 minutes, although if the aircraft did not descend most of the persons in the cabin would have begun to suffer the effects of oxygen deficiency after only a few minutes because the chemical generator did not supply the gas under pressure.

Another Blue Planet pilot with responsibility for technical monitoring of the Galleon fleet led the Commission through the checks that the pilots should have done before take-off, including arming the system by opening the oxygen system shut-off valve. Both pilots should have checked that oxygen flow was available to their masks and noted the pressure in the reservoir. Captain MacAndrew told the Commission that regulators in the masks allowed oxygen to flow only when the pilots were wearing them. After verification of oxygen flow the shut-off valve would then have been left open until the aircraft had landed at destination, when it would be shut again to stop any residual leakage from the regulators in the masks before the next flight. Captain MacAndrew also explained that the valve switch was located in the systems panel above the pilots' head within reach of both of them, together with an indicator showing whether the valve was open or closed. If the shut-off valve was not open when the aircraft depressurised then there would have been no flow of oxygen to the masks and the pilots would have lost consciousness within a few seconds.

In the cabin, the chemical oxygen system would have automatically activated when the air pressure dropped and the flight attendants and passengers would have donned their masks. The cabin crew knew that the pilots would be completing check list procedures to deal with the situation. They would have expected that before too long the aircraft would have started a rapid descent or else, if the pressurisation had been restored, a call on the interphone or over the PA explaining the pilots' subsequent intentions. If neither of these events happened the situation would have been difficult for the cabin crew to assess. Although the senior flight attendant could put on a portable oxygen cylinder and gain access to the flight deck by inputting a security code into the lock system, what then? If she had piloting experience there was a chance to prevent calamity, but if not, what could she do?

It was beginning to look as if Bill was not aware that the shutoff valve had not been opened before take-off, his 'honest mistake'. The only inexplicable element was the apparent lack of professionalism of First Officer Sidhu, who should have noticed the valve position himself. All the witnesses who knew him testified that Vayalar Sidhu was a conscientious pilot of proven ability who would not have hesitated to make an input if required.

Some of the media reports described the oxygen system in more detail. One or two included diagrams. The technician in Armstrong noted the general arrangement of valves and reservoirs and pressure gauges. It was not complicated and therefore unworthy of deeper analysis.

Melody's lawyer had intervened occasionally to emphasise that the Commission was ignoring a possible scenario in which the oxygen system could have depleted itself for some reason not long before the depressurisation. But this 'double failure' conjecture was dismissed by most witnesses as extremely unlikely.

Armstrong stubbed out his cigar and sat back, thinking. Poor old Bill. Bill who handled the P & M's locomotives with such dexterity, who cured the injector fault on the Standard tank engine which had baffled the railway veterans. What a waste of a life. The scientist sighed and picked up another paper.

OUTBURST AT CRASH ENQUIRY

The Blue Planet Galleon crash Enquiry took a dramatic turn yesterday when the deceased pilot's daughter shouted at the chairman. The Commission was hearing evidence from Desmond Parkinson, Maintenance Manager with the airline at Heathrow Airport. Questioned by the Commission, Mr Parkinson stated that the crew should be held responsible for the accident because they had neglected to open the oxygen system shut-off

valve before take off. At this point Melody Fairwood jumped to her feet and started to shout at the Chairman, Professor Moynes. She accused the Enquiry of being 'utterly unfair' and attacked Mr Parkinson as 'looking for a convenient scapegoat'. She said that there was no definite evidence that the aircraft's oxygen system had not failed prior to the loss of air pressure. Ms Fairwood ignored appeals by Professor Moynes to be seated and eventually two officials were summoned to remove her from the hall.

Outside, a tearful Ms Fairwood declined to talk to reporters. She ran to her car and drove off. One reporter had to jump out of the way as her car sped swiftly away. Ms Fairwood, 32, is a senior flight attendant with Blue Planet.

More details emerged yesterday of the class action law suit being prepared against Blue Planet Airlines and Chinavia. In the absence of evidence that terrorist motives were behind the accident it is anticipated that lawyers will accuse either or both companies of negligence in their pursuit of compensation for the next of kin of the deceased passengers and crew.

Armstrong looked at the accompanying photograph. Melody was a picture of distress, mouth turned downwards, tearful eyes, hands half held up to defend herself against the paparazzi cameras. It was a human being in the depths of misery. The scientist was surprised to discover a current of emotion inside. His heart went out to the pitiable victim of the pressmen's interrogation. It had slipped his mind that Bill's daughter also worked for Blue Planet. But now he thought of it, he remembered that he had once met Melody in her airline uniform. About five minutes later Armstrong had reached the last paper of the stack.

GALLEON ENQUIRY VERDICT

The Commission of Enquiry into the crash last year of Blue Planet Airlines Galleon 'Echo Yankee' has published its conclusions and recommendations. In her report, Chairman Professor Tina Moynes said: 'In this unfortunate accident the Enquiry was hindered by a lack of concrete evidence about its causes. This was mainly because very little was found of the aircraft after the crash, the only debris recovered being pieces of light structure and soft furnishings of various kinds. However, there was a good deal of circumstantial evidence which allowed the Commission to draw its conclusions, albeit without full confidence. It is acknowledged that while this circumstantial evidence indicates the probable sequence of events, it cannot be said that this was proved beyond a shadow of a doubt. The finding of the Commission is therefore that it is probable that this accident was the result of an honest mistake by the flight crew, in that they neglected to verify that the aircraft's flight crew oxygen system had been armed before flight. This omission, and their failure to correct it, resulted in the deaths by oxygen starvation of all persons on board after the aircraft's pressurisation system had malfunctioned.'

Professor Moynes went on to comment on the fact that neither the 'black box' flight data recorder nor the cockpit voice recorder, designed to withstand the forces of impact and to float in the sea, had been found. Either or both components would have yielded valuable information had they been recovered. Ms Moynes also suggested that Chinavia, the Galleon manufacturers, should consider installing warning systems to alert the crew if the oxygen system shut-off valve was not open before take-off.

Armstrong refolded the paper and added it to the rest of the pile. Elbows on the desk, he put his head in his hands. So there it was. Having reread the history of Echo Yankee he felt he could now understand Melody's viewpoint. Suppose that Bill and his copilot had checked and armed the oxygen system as they should have done. But suppose that for some reason a leak developed, say, a short while before the depressurisation. Unless someone was actually looking at the contents indication during that moment, they would not notice the leak until the next periodic systems check. How often did pilots check the aircraft system status? Surely Bill could not be criticised if that was what happened in this case. Was Melody right? Was the Commission looking for a scapegoat? Armstrong sighed. It was a sorry story. He stood up, stretched, then returned the newspapers to their drawer. A glance out of the window showed that the rain was slackening off. The scientist decided that he would make himself a coffee and then perhaps go for a stroll as far as the river and back.

CHAPTER 3

'You missing the cigars, then? How many days is it now?'

Armstrong winced. 'It seems natural to light up after lunch. But it would be a shame to displace the pure mountain air in my lungs with cigar smoke.'

The three of them were sitting at a table on the wooden decking outside the Brandstadl Bergrestaurant. Although the school holiday period was over the ski slopes and restaurants were still busy. Armstrong and his two companions were facing southwest towards the Hohe Salve peak, the sun glinting off their darkened glasses. Angie, in a pink ski jacket, was seated next to him, her long black hair matching her black salopettes. An observer who judged the pair of them to be in their middle thirties would have been spot on. Next to Angie was the teenaged Irena, blonde hair almost as long as Angie's, dressed head to boots in pale blue.

Apart from the self-imposed cigar ban, and the separate rooms set-up, the holiday was going well, thought Armstrong. Most of the Tyrolean mountains were still mantled in good snow even if some of the south facing lower slopes were turning to slush in the ever-strengthening spring sunshine.

It was the first holiday in which Angie and the scientist had not shared a bed. The three year relationship had petered out and neither blamed the other or indeed themselves. 'Drifting apart' seemed to be the most appropriate assessment. The ski holiday had been booked before the break up and Angie said she was happy to go away with her ex-lover as long as he slept in a separate room. She offered the spare bed in her room to the daughter of her friends who lived in Klagenfurt, two hundred kilometres to the southeast of the Ski-Welt resort. Irena had arrived by train the day after Armstrong and Angie had checked in to the Hochlinden hotel in Westendorf, the pretty village a few kilometres from Kitzbühel.

'Well, now I exchange my skis for my canopy,' said Irena in accented English. 'See you in a moment.' She stood up from the table and went inside the restaurant.

'Her English is good,' commented the scientist. 'A damn sight better than my German.'

'Ditto,' agreed his companion. 'But all the kids here are multilingual. Not something we Brits are good at.'

Armstrong and Angie had first met in Las Vegas at an IT conference organised by forensic specialists from the United States and various European countries. The scientist gave a presentation on new developments in face recognition software that the police might find useful in identifying criminal and terrorist suspects from low quality CCTV recordings. Angie ran her own company, selling a variety of IT products, including software which could extract deregistered files from computer hard drives and data from mobile phones and SIM cards, helpful to the police authorities for analysing information retrieved from these devices when they had been confiscated from suspects.

It was the same conference that led indirectly to Armstrong joining the Petersfield and Midhurst Steam Railway Society via a friendship which began between him and Artie Mackelbury, a senior British police officer. The two of them, seated together at dinner, had discovered a mutual interest in model railways. During their conversation it emerged that Mack was a founder

member of the 'P and M'. This group of enthusiasts were planning to restore a derelict line between the two towns in Sussex and set up a commercial service operated by a mix of renovated old diesel and steam locomotives.

'Do you want to watch me go?' Irena had returned, carrying a large pack on her back.

'Yes,' replied Angie. 'How do want to play it?'

'I can meet you back here if you want.'

'Alright. We'll ski to Ellmau and then come back on the funicular to meet you.'

From Angie and from Irena herself Armstrong had learned her background. She was nineteen years old, studying for a degree in environmental studies at the University of Graz. Her parents were friends of Angie. Like Armstrong she was a keen skier. Unlike him she also knew how to ride a horse and sail a boat. And sometimes she threw herself off the tops of mountains suspended under 'a large handkerchief', as she described her paraglider canopy.

She was concerned about the environment in her day to day life. 'I try to make small my carbon footprint,' Irena had previously explained to her older companions. 'I'm not going to buy a car. And my – what's the English word? – hobbies – are as green as possible.'

'Very commendable,' agreed Armstrong, wondering if he should think more along these lines himself. To borrow Angie's phrase: something else we Brits are not too good at.

'Although I should worry about the carbon dioxide I make coming to the mountain top by gondola. My weight means more electricity is required for the gondola motors, which means more fuel is burnt by the power generators.'

Wow, thought Armstrong, she *is* serious. Then he noticed Irena's impish smile and grinned back. 'Have you calculated how much extra CO2 you're responsible for?'

'No. But you are a science person. You can do the math for me!'

Now the three crunched through the snow to the north-east facing drop, Irena carrying her canopy pack. The two older friends watched the girl unpack her kit and lay out the blue and white fabric canopy with its fan-like array of thin riser lines radiating from the harness to the canopy edges. Two other paragliders were also being prepared for launch, with a small gathering of onlookers commenting and taking photos and videos.

Armstrong noted the care with which Irena examined and assembled her kit. To be expected, he thought, as she would soon be dangling from it in mid air. The girl's canopy was the first of the three to be ready for flight, laid out in an arc on the snow. She turned to face it, holding the control lines in both hands and checking that there were no tangled or broken risers. Then she turned away to face down the mountain slope. She took a few steps forward. Behind her the canopy rose, inflated by the air entering the vents along the leading edge. But evidently something was not quite right. Irena halted and the canopy sank back to earth behind her. Again the girl checked the lines and canopy disposition and again turned to face the valley. A few steps. The canopy lifted, inflated. A few more steps and then Irena was airborne, her canopy settling into a perfect arc above her as she started the long glide down to the village of Sheffau, a thousand meters below. A few spectators applauded.

Perhaps it was watching the paragliders flying which brought Armstrong's thoughts back to the Galleon business and Bill Fairwood. What had the papers said? There was no evidence of malfeasance behind the disaster, neither terrorism nor criminal activity, according to the police and intelligence services. And yet . . . why had so little attention been paid to the offending outflow valve controlling the pressurisation? Was 'electrical fault'

sufficient to explain its erroneous behaviour? The scientist remembered that media reports of the Enquiry proceedings had referred to speculation about the valve's malfunction. The suggestion of interference from mobile phones accidentally left switched on had been discussed by technical experts but then dismissed as a cause of the problem.

Armstrong thought that it wouldn't do any harm to ask his railway friend Mack about the investigations. Mack wasn't directly involved as far as he knew, but maybe he could get the facts through his connections in the police force. On the other hand, why bother? What good would come of it? As it was there were still repercussions rumbling on. Beside Melody and her obsession with clearing her father's name there were the lawyers intending to sue the airline and manufacturer for negligence. *No, don't get involved, John. Not your business.*

'Are you listening to me?'

Angie's question brought him back to a mountaintop in Austria. 'Sorry, what was the question?'

'Are we going to ski to Ellmau so you can ride that silly funicular railway thing?'

'It's not silly. It's a masterpiece of engineering.'

'If you say so. By the time we get back here Irena should have landed in Scheffau and come up in the gondola. So then she can leave her canopy here and put her skis back on and we'll head home. We'll ski to Brixen, gondola up to the Choralpe and ski down as far as we can to Westendorf.'

'Sounds good. How long is Irena staying?'

'Another day. Why?'

'No reason.'

'I know you, John Armstrong. I know what you're thinking. And the answer is . . . you never know. You may get lucky!'

CHAPTER 4

Sue Kristiansen turned into the galley, pulled the curtain against the prying eyes of the passengers, unfolded the retractable seat and dropped herself onto it. She reached into her bag for the little plastic mint packet and popped one into her mouth. Then she pulled out one of the aluminium bar boxes facing her and put her feet up on it. Much better. Come hell or high water, she wasn't going to move from that position for five minutes.

She looked at her watch. Three o'clock. Thank God the flight was running to time. Should be landing in just over forty minutes. There were only seventy-odd passengers on this return flight from Malta to Heathrow – less than half the capacity of the Airbus A321. Although Sue knew that empty seats were bad for business, she was nevertheless grateful that she hadn't been worked off her feet. After all, when she got home there various domestic matters to sort out before she and Gustav tarted themselves up for going to a friend's party. She'd call him on her mobile on the drive home. Remind him to iron a shirt and make sure his shoes were clean.

Toying with the sweet container, Sue sat undisturbed apart from a brief appearance by Karen, one of the other girls.

'Another whisky for the idiot in 13B. I tell you, if he tries to grab me just one more time, I'll pour his bloody drink down his bloody neck.'

Sue laughed. 'Now, now, Karen. Remember the customer is always right.'

'The customer is a pain in the arse,' observed Karen wryly as she left the galley with the drink, switching on her automatic smile for the passengers as she pulled the curtain behind her.

Sue reached up to drop the sweets back in her handbag. As she did so her fingertips touched the long envelope inside. Recalling its contents, Sue's heart sank. Reluctantly she took out the envelope and extracted the enclosed letter. She had read it several times already.

FROM: General Manager Cabin Crew TO: Cabin Manager Susan Kristiansen SUBJECT: PASSENGER COMPLAINT

I regret to inform you that the company has received a written complaint from a passenger on Flight 114 on March 19th, on which you were the senior member of cabin crew.

You are probably aware of the nature of the complaint, and no doubt you are also aware that such a complaint, if substantiated, could warrant disciplinary action by the company against you. Although Captain Harris has informed me that there were extenuating circumstances which may explain your conduct, I would nevertheless like to point out that they in no way justify it.

I am still reviewing this matter and will require to see you when I have decided what course of action should be taken.

Capt Oliver Longman General Manager Cabin Crew 'Pompous fool!' muttered Sue as she refolded the letter. Not for the first time she found herself thinking that the airline management seemed to have a penchant for promoting the most unsuitable people into positions of authority. For 'Oily' Longman (the nickname derived from his initials and was eminently suitable) to criticise Sue's behaviour was like Al Capone sitting in judgement on a petty pickpocket.

After losing his Airline Transport Pilot's Licence for medical reasons Longman's cronies in senior management had found the new role for him. He had displaced the previous incumbent, a senior stewardess much respected by those in her charge. Most of the cabin crew members were unimpressed with the new arrangement, especially those who remembered him from his flying days.

Longman's reputation for less than chaste behaviour on nightstops and infidelity to his long-suffering wife before she finally divorced him was known throughout the airline. He was physically attractive to women and some of the more impressionable girls had succumbed to his slick patter, then found themselves wondering how they ever fell for him once they discovered his true nature. Sue herself had almost joined this unhappy band. But just before it was too late she had realised her error of judgement and managed to save her honour. It had been an unpleasant episode.

Longman did not forgive her for this snub and for a while retaliated by making her life difficult whenever they were crewed up together. But Sue counter-attacked by withdrawing all cooperation other than that required by the company's rules. After several coffees had been taken to him in the flight deck that were tepid, or over or under milked, or accidentally sweetened or sometimes just 'temporarily forgotten', a draw had been declared. Sue made sure she did not join the ranks of those unfortunates who would be his target whenever he could find a way of humiliating or distressing them for the effrontery of

turning him down or for otherwise annoying him. Of course, with witnesses present the General Manager was always the perfect gentleman when dealing with those in his charge and no official accusation of harrassment had even been made against him. He also knew how to use his power to threaten those who might consider complaining.

'Oily' was one of three epithets conferred on Longman by Blue Planet employees who knew him. 'Shorty' was an obvious alternative and one to which the GM did not object. The less respectful 'Shortarse', although in common usage, seldom reached his ears. Longman was not slow to condemn any female employee who resisted his charms as a 'bloody lesbian'. But the slur brought unintended consequences. His many enemies in the airline, male and female, straight and gay, all claimed membership of the 'Longman's Lesbians' resistance group. One enterprising person had even made some discreet 'LL' lapel badges for them to wear at work. When he asked about their significance, Longman was told that the badges were to show support for an animal charity, the 'Latvian Lions'. Whether or not he had bothered to check the credentials of the alleged charity was not known but not long after the badges appeared the GM dispatched a Notice to Crews: Cabin crew are reminded that wearing of any insignia other than those authorised by Blue Planet is strictly forbidden. This ban includes badges worn in support of charities or other enterprises. Severe penalties will be incurred by staff found in breach of this instruction.

'Bloody power-mad schoolboy Casanova,' was the sneered opinion of one of the girls. 'Not to mention racist and homophobic.' Many Blue Planet cabin crew wondered what work he actually carried out in his management role apart from issuing countless notices and memos either stating the bleeding obvious or imposing silly rules and restrictions. One of the latest was a reminder that crew members must supply their own pens and were not allowed to take company pens from the crew room

offices. 'Yes, we know what's usually on his desk top,' was a frequent remark. 'Bridget.' Of course, no-one had ever seen Longman and his PA in sexual conjugation in his office, but that did not stop the rumours.

Another accusation was that Longman exploited his authority for his own personal agendas. Sue was not the only one to have heard of the undue influence he exerted in the Roster Department, where some of the personnel were believed to among his coterie. It was said that those cabin crew who had sold their souls to the GM could rely on him to influence their work patterns to avoid onerous flights or displace other crew members on easy or lucrative duties. Strictly against the rules of course, but once again there was never concrete proof of interference. In this way Longman's favourites could maximise their allowances or avoid unpopular trips.

In a variation on the theme the GM could take his vengeance on those who had offended him in the past. They would find themselves rostered for the most gruelling night flights, or called in for a trip during their last hour of standby duty. Some had been driven to the edge of breakdown by his spiteful schemes of revenge. A few had thrown in the towel and resigned from the company.

Others, Sue among them, had no fear of him at all and gave back as good as they got. Whenever Longman broke their truce Sue's favourite counterploy, taking advantage of her position as a Coordinator, was to deluge the GM with mountains of trivia. A powerful weapon was the forwarding to him of all the company emails she herself received, sometimes in duplicate 'by mistake'. If he didn't acknowledge them she would print them out and send the hard copies to his office. A taste of his own medicine. And the *pièce de résistance*—copying back to him the email he had sent her telling her off for sending him irrelevant emails. And so usually Longman and Sue found that it suited both of them to keep each other at arm's length. It was a mutual

dislike based on mutual acceptance of the other's ability to make life awkward.

But clearly battle was to be joined again. The letter in her hand signified a new phase in the cold war. It was petty and spiteful, and would achieve no purpose apart from wasting Sue's time. Her standing in the company was excellent, with nearly ten years' unblemished service behind her, and nothing that Longman could do or say could possibly do her career any lasting damage. She also had the friendship and respect of many people in the airline. If it ever occurred that Longman overstepped the mark in his harassment of her, he would come up against an army of friends ready to protect her.

The stewardess returned the letter to her bag. She let her mind run back to the incident the GM had referred to. Why was it, she asked herself, as she had done many times before, that in an average airliner-load of passengers there was always at least one who would turn out to be, as Karen had found on this flight, a pain in the backside? For some inexplicable reason flying seemed to bring out the worst in some people. These troublemakers took a perverse delight in subjecting the cabin crew to insults, unnecessary demands and downright rudeness, safe in the knowledge that they could get away with the sort of bad conduct they would never dream of in their normal lives. For the cabin crew were forbidden by company rule to return the discourtesy.

The first year of flying was the worst. Sue remembered how she herself had almost blown her top once or twice, just managing to suppress the seething irritation by walking away with teeth gritted and fists clenched. The stewards were usually able to handle even the most vitriolic passengers, but once in a while one of the girls would be pushed over the edge. Instinct would overcome training and she would lose her temper with the offender. But if the recipient of this retaliation complained of the stewardess's behaviour she would be reprimanded by the

airline. It was unfair, of course, but it was part of the job and you had to accept it.

On the flight mentioned in Longman's letter, a particularly obnoxious passenger had singled out one of the junior girls and needled and irritated her from the moment they were airborne. The more the unfortunate girl responded with the politeness demanded by her employers, the more offensive his manner became. Sue knew very little about the situation until the girl came flying into the galley in tears, shouting 'I'll kill that bastard. I'll really kill him'. Sue calmed her down with soothing words and eventually the sobbing girl was able to relate the catalogue of harassment. Her story was corroborated by one of the stewards who had also been insulted by the passenger.

Sue decided that this time justice would be done and she would take the law into her own hands. She marched down the aisle and stood facing the man, her face a mask of stern authority. 'I understand that you have behaved badly to one of my crew,' she said to him. Around her, one or two other passengers nodded their heads in agreement, clearly repelled themselves by the man's rudeness. 'So,' she continued, 'I have instructed my crew not to serve you with food or drink or any other facility during the flight. And if you continue to behave in this way I will ask the captain to have the airport police escort you from the aircraft when we land.'

It was a bluff, of course. She wouldn't dare ask a captain to do any such thing, and even if she did, it was very unlikely that he would agree to do so. But it did the trick. The man's bravado melted into surly submission and they had no more trouble from him. Obviously his hurt pride had subsequently motivated him to restore his self-regard by complaining to the airline, and so the end product of the whole incident was the letter now lying in Sue's handbag.

She wondered what Longman intended in the way of 'disciplinary action'. As far as she knew he did not have the

authority to demote her or reduce her seniority. Nor could he penalise her financially. If he wrote a bad conduct report for her personal file, so what? The same file contained hundreds of commendations of one sort or another which would easily swamp the black mark. Thoughts of retribution formed in Sue's mind. *Okay, mate, if you want trouble, I'll give you trouble.*

In her role as one of the airline's Coordinators, Sue acted as a channel through which eighty or so juniors could approach the management on a personal level. It was not an onerous burden. On the whole the crew members were content with their working lives. Of course there was the sort of low-level grumbling that can be heard from millions of employees working for thousands of employers around the world. Unfair treatment by 'Shortarse' Longman was a common theme.

At the moment Sue had only two cases of grievance on her hands, neither very exciting. One concerned a girl who was sure that the company owed her an extra day of leave, and the other a steward who was appealing against a refusal of the company to pay a mileage claim. Sue had no doubt that both these hiccups would eventually be resolved without any heartbreak on anyone's part, particularly since both of these problems lay outside Longman's remit. Meanwhile, her status as Coordinator would again give her a chance to fight the GM.

She would let loose a barrage of emails and forms. She would apply for a new pen for every one of the cabin crew in her charge, on individual forms, of course. And, on separate forms, new batteries for their individual electronic data organisers. She would email him to alert him to the anticipated influx of paper forms. If Longman reminded her that crews had to supply their own pens, as per his recent notice, she would send another email apologising for her error — in duplicate, naturally, and perhaps printed out too. Ditto if he pointed out that batteries for EDOs could be swapped without paperwork. But to prevent Longman from throwing all the forms away unread, she would

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intersperse them with a few genuine papers. Maybe a training certification or two for signature, or a few uniform requisitions. Backed up by emails, of course. That way the evil little snake would have to sort through the whole stack.

Sue smiled to herself as she prepared to go back to work. Yes, it was a good ploy. Let battle commence!

CHAPTER 5

In front of the fire the tortoiseshell cat rolled onto its side and stretched its legs. Its eyes were closed and it purred loudly. An ear twitched twice. It was shorter than the other, having lost its tip in a street fight many years previously.

Melody knelt down to stroke the soft white fur over the tummy. The purring rose to an ecstatic crescendo and the ear twitched again.

'Yes, you're very lucky, Winston. I wish I could change places with you. No work to do, no house to look after, no bills to pay. Just eat and sleep and sleep and eat. What a life.'

Winston lazily held out a paw and partly extended his claws to grip his mistress's hand. The eyes opened slightly to narrow slits. Melody gently removed the paw and stood up. She looked at the little china-faced pendulum clock on the wall.

'Well, Winston, our dinner guest should be here soon. I hope he hasn't got lost. Surely a chap like that would have a sat nav in his car.'

She glanced round the room to check again that everything was tidy. Strangely, she felt slightly nervous. She repeated her inspection tour, starting in the dining room. Silverware, napkins, condiments, glasses for wine and water. Yes, all okay. She would light the candles just before they started the meal.

In the kitchen she lifted a saucepan lid to check the contents. The joint was roasting nicely on the spit, basting itself in its own juices as it rotated. Suddenly the girl's eyes opened wide and her hand flew to her mouth. Oh God, gravy! She'd forgotten about gravy! She threw open the cupboard door, frantically searched inside and then breathed a prayer of gratitude. On the shelf stood a full packet of granules. Melody picked it up and placed it by the cooker. That was it. There was nothing more she could do until her guest arrived.

On the way back to the lounge she caught her reflection in the hall mirror as she passed. She stopped and retraced her steps to look at the image more closely. There was no doubt about it. The face that stared back at her was beginning to show its years. Despite the make up it was possible to pick out the lines in the forehead. They were faint, true enough, but they were there. And so was the hint of a double chin. The faces shook their heads at each other. You're past your prime, Mel, you've got to admit it. If only you could go back in time, say ten years, back to the days when you still had your looks. If only you could . . .

Melody jumped when the door bell rang, so carried away had she been in her thoughts. Still looking in the mirror she teased her hair into place and smoothed down her dress. Then she walked to the door and opened it.

Her guest smiled at her in greeting. He was wearing a dark lounge suit which looked neat, if a little old fashioned. At least he was tieless. In his left hand was a wine bottle, in the other a box of chocolates.

'Hello, John,' said the girl, returning his smile. 'Do come in. Did you find your way here alright?' She led him into the lounge and sat him down.

'Would you like a drink?'
'Whisky and ginger, thanks.'

Melody poured a measure into a glass and took it to the kitchen to get some ice. While she was gone Armstrong looked around the lounge with the natural curiosity of a first-time visitor. Although nothing grand, it was tastefully decorated, with walls panelled in pine. The scientist stood up and gravitated to the row of books on one of the shelves. Nothing very exciting there, mainly paperback novels. There were several language books, nearly all Russian and German. Amongst the hardbacks were a copy of Charles Lindbergh's 'Spirit of St Louis' and a Lindbergh biography. Melody's books? More probably her late father's. One or two volumes were definitely Bill's. 'Railways in Victorian Britain',' Sir Edward Watkin, Railway King' and 'Collett's Express Locomotives'.

On another shelf was a framed photo of Bill. He was wearing his airline uniform and looked to be about thirty-five years old. The familiar face was cracked into a broad grin, with extensive crow's feet radiating from the corners of the eyes. In the background stood a propeller-driven airliner. 'Inter Britain' announced the logo on the fuselage. Armstrong shrugged. It meant nothing to him. Judging from Bill's appearance the scientist guessed that the photo would have been taken during the 'eighties.

Nearby was another picture, a family group this time. Bill and his wife—Alice, was it?—sitting on a beach with palm trees arched over their heads, and a Melody about ten years old kneeling in front of them. Three exuberant faces laughing at the camera. Who could have foreseen that such a cheerful family would be destined to suffer such a tragic misfortune?

'Is that enough ginger for you?'

Armstrong turned to face the girl, now paying more attention to her. She was wearing a stylish black cocktail dress offset by a string of pearls at the neck. Tresses of honey-blonde hair cascaded around her face. A touch of purple shadow applied to the lids accentuated the beauty of her soft grey eyes. Her trim figure reminded the scientist uncomfortably that his own frame was carrying a kilo or two more than it ought to. Melody was holding the glass out to him, smiling.

He took the drink and sat down again as the girl went back to the cocktail cabinet to pour herself a Martini. Armstrong still didn't know the purpose of the invitation to dinner. The letter had arrived about two weeks previously, out of the blue. Giving the matter some thought, Armstrong had eventually concluded that the girl was probably taking him up on his offer to help her sort things out in the aftermath of Bill's death. As he watched her prepare her drink he wondered again what sort of assistance she would ask him for. Financial? Probably not. After all, besides this house in Wooburn Green which she already owned, she would have inherited Bill's estate, including his spacious house in Osterley. Emotional guidance? Well, that was an area he was certainly unqualified for, particularly in view of his poor track record in dealing with affairs of the heart. He lifted his glass to his lips. He would just have to wait and see.

Melody sat herself down opposite her guest and smiled briefly. As the girl sipped her Martini she regarded the scientist over the rim of her glass. She was still slightly ill at ease, the way one is at first with an unfamiliar visitor in one's house. She reviewed her assessment of the man facing her. He had been a good friend of her father, like him a railway freak. She remembered a photograph she had once seen of the two of them standing in front of a steam engine in grubby overalls, grinning like happy schoolboys. She guessed him to be in his early or mid thirties, apparently unattached. Her dinner invitation had included 'a partner', but he had replied that he would come alone.

He was not handsome in the rugged, aftershaveadvertisement sense, and he was built a little on the heavy side. Bill had told his daughter that Armstrong was highly regarded in the world of electronics, but she couldn't clearly remember what his field was—something to do with computers or IT perhaps. He seemed to have an open, generous nature, but of course she had only met him once or twice before this evening, so it was difficult to judge his personality. Melody wondered how he would react when he discovered the purpose behind the invitation.

To launch a conversation the girl asked Armstrong how the Petersfield & Midhurst Railway was progressing. His eyes lit up with enthusiasm and he told her about the latest developments, avoiding technicalities, while at the same time watching her reaction to make sure she was not getting bored. From lecturing experience he had learnt how to assess when your audience had left you. Eyes glazed over blankly, nails were examined, fingers traced doodles on the table. That was the time to bring things to a close.

Melody herself was not terribly interested in railways, but with an intelligent question or two she encouraged her guest to carry on. His voice had a soothing effect and helped her to relax. She was careful not to exhibit any symptoms of boredom, sitting motionless and watching him closely as he spoke.

'The real boost to the railway is the new car assembly plant at Midhurst,' Armstrong continued. 'It means that we have guaranteed custom every day, with people using the service to travel to work. The station is just outside the factory gates, so it's extremely convenient for the workforce. And according to the latest rumour there's another company looking at the site with plans to start a production facility, which would help our ticket sales even more. At weekends, enthusiasts take the place of factory workers, so the rolling stock achieves a high utilisation throughout the week. The next stage of the development plan is to—'

They were interrupted by the noise of the front door closing. 'There's Peter,' announced Melody to her guest.

Peter. Of course. That would be the boyfriend. It was the name Melody had mentioned when she visited Armstrong's

house the previous month to return the books. So it looked like three for dinner. The scientist found himself thinking that perhaps he should have brought 'a partner' as Melody had invited. Angie had turned him down with an excuse that was probably genuine. The last night of the ski holiday had been like old times but both of them had agreed that from now on they were just friends. He had several other female acquaintances, mostly girls from work. But guessing that Melody would possibly want to talk about personal matters, he had thought it inappropriate to take a casual friend along to dinner.

There was a tap on the lounge door and it opened to reveal Peter. Armstrong arched his eyebrows in surprise.

Peter could not have been a day under seventy. He was short, not more than five six, and his wiry frame showed the shrinkage of age. The facial skin was gnarled and leathery, with the complexion of a walnut. But the eyes sparkled.

'Hi, Peter,' said Melody. 'Let me introduce you to Dr John Armstrong. He's having dinner with me tonight.'

The scientist stood up and held out his hand.

'John, this is Peter. He lives in the flat upstairs.'

'Pleased to meet you, young man,' said Peter in a gravelly voice, pumping Armstrong's hand. 'You're very lucky, you know, if Mel's cooking a meal for you. She's no slouch with the recipe book, let me tell you.' The old eyes turned to the girl. 'I've just been down to the 'Red Cow' for a beer or two. Tommy Taylor died yesterday. Pity, he was a good lad. We were discussing the funeral arrangements. Should be a grand do.' He rubbed his chin with a wrinkled hand. 'I just looked in to tell you that I noticed some damage to the gutter the other day. I'll get onto the builder tomorrow to get it repaired.'

'Okay, thanks, Peter.'

The old man nodded. 'Good. I'll leave you to it, then. Goodnight.'

After he had gone, slowly climbing the creaking stairs, Melody spoke to her guest.

'That business about the guttering is just an excuse to check up on me,' she said with a smile. 'He's told me at least three times about it. But he likes to keep an eye on me, bless him, to make sure I'm okay. He's like a second father to me.' Her voice dropped a tone. 'Particularly since Dad died.'

'I'm glad you've got someone watching over you,' said Armstrong, matching her mood. 'It's no fun facing the world on your own. Have you got . . . a partner . . . to help you if you need it?' He hoped his hostess would not think he was prying.

'Officially, I still have a fiance,' replied Melody. 'But I may not have much longer.'

Armstrong did not know how to reply so he kept his counsel.

'I've been given an ultimatum which I don't think I can meet. So our engagement is most likely headed for the rocks. But I've got a few close friends I can lean on if needed. I'm not alone.'

'I'm pleased to hear it,' said the scientist. He remembered his own wound, long since healed. But even during the worst time there had always been Jeanette to rely on. Brother and sister had both been kicked in the teeth by fate at the same time but their dependence on each other's support had pulled them through. The two of them would always be close after their shared ordeal.

'Anyway, enough talk for now,' said Melody brightly, clearly wishing to change the subject. 'How about something to eat?'

'Suits me.'

'I must confess I'm using you as a guinea pig,' said the girl as she led him to the dining room. 'I've made a starter that I haven't tried before. I hope it turns out alright.'

It was delicious. Mushroom caps stuffed with garlic flavoured breadcrumbs, topped with browned grated cheese. Followed by chicken marengo, and after a fifteen minute pause to settle the digestion, a glorious baked Alaska which Melody brought in straight from the oven.

'Congratulations. An excellent meal,' complimented the scientist. 'Shame I've given up cigars. Would have been the perfect ending.' He tapped his midriff appreciatively. 'But not so good for the figure, I think. I'll have to go without food for a week to compensate for all the calories I've just consumed.' He looked across at his hostess through the flickering candlelight. 'I don't know how you keep your slim figure if you eat meals like that all the time.'

The girl laughed. 'I gave myself smaller portions than you. Actually, I could do with losing a few pounds myself. As soon as the weather gets warmer I'll have to start playing tennis again. Get myself back into shape.'

The scientist nodded. 'Yes. I really ought to do something like that myself. The only exercise I get is an occasional walk by the river. It's not surprising that I'm getting pear-shaped.'

'Try tennis,' replied Melody. 'I'll give you a game sometime.'

'Alright, you're on. But I'll need to practise first. I haven't played for years.'

'That would be cheating,' said the girl, laughing again.

The topic dismissed, neither of them spoke for a few moments. Armstrong sat back in his chair and sighed contentedly. Even without a cigar it was the most enjoyable evening he had spent since his break up with Angie. And how long since he had eaten such a fantastic meal? The problem was that he couldn't be bothered cooking fancy dishes for himself. He could hear his sister's voice admonishing him. 'It really is no good eating TV dinners and microwave meals all the time, John.' The thought triggered a question.

'Do you usually cook for Peter?' he asked, restarting the conversation.

The girl shook her head. 'Not very often. He looks after himself most of the time. He's very independent. Although he

likes to check up on me, he won't let me interfere with his life at all. Occasionally I prepare a dinner for him and sometimes he returns the favour. His cooking is very good, actually.'

'Does he own the flat upstairs?'

'No. The whole house belongs to me. Peter pays me rent. In fact, when I bought the house he and his wife were already installed as tenants. I acquired them with the title deeds,' she added with a smile. 'When his wife died, about three years ago, he asked me if he could stay on. He's lived in the top flat for over twenty years.'

Armstrong nodded. It was another little stone in the mosaic of information he was building up. He knew a good deal more about Melody and her affairs than when he had arrived. Over dinner the conversation had touched on her father and mother, her childhood and her present life. She gave the scientist an insight into her work, frequently eliciting a laugh from him when she narrated some of her experiences in the airline world.

During the meal, Armstrong had asked the girl whether she enjoyed her job. She replied that she had done so, until the Galleon disaster. She listed the benefits, including working with like-minded spirits, a varied roster pattern, chances to visit far-flung places, concessional travel and holiday accommodation and reasonable pay compared to other occupations. She had also spoken of the disadvantages such as long duty periods, frequent night work, disruption of social arrangements by aircraft unserviceabilities and bad weather, and obnoxious passengers. But all things considered she had been well contented with her lot.

The death of her father had changed everything. At first, she couldn't even bring herself to get on board an aircraft, let alone continue working. But Blue Planet had considerately granted her compassionate leave to give her time to sort herself out, and her friends from work had rallied round her to lend moral support. She was just beginning to get over the crash when the Enquiry

started, and with it the bitterness and misery returned. It was the nadir of her life, she told the scientist, and she had seriously considered giving it all up and starting a new life somewhere a long way away. Perhaps in Canada, where she had a distant relative. Which hadn't impressed Sebastian.

'Sebastian?'

'My fiance. Probably soon to be my ex-fiance. Canada would not fit into his life plan.'

When Armstrong had asked her whether leaving the job was still her intention, she shrugged. She explained that during the unhappiest days she knew her judgement was unsound because of her mixed-up emotions, and she realised that it would be best to endure the situation until she was less confused and then make up her mind. Although she was much happier now, she told her guest, she still hadn't come to a final decision. Meanwhile she had plucked up her courage and gone back to work. It wasn't like the old days, of course, but it gave her something to do and stopped her moping around at home. She didn't tell Armstrong that sometimes during flights her eyes would fill with tears without warning or reason and she would have to hide herself in the toilet or the galley until she had regained control of herself.

Armstrong looked up at the pendulum clock. Almost ten o'clock, and the girl had revealed almost everything about herself apart from the reason for inviting him to dinner. Then it occurred to him that maybe there was no ulterior motive after all. Perhaps Melody just wanted to meet him again. Although flattering to his ego, this thought was quickly suppressed by his instinctive realism. *Don't kid yourself!*

Melody had noticed Armstrong glancing at the clock. She would have to come out with it soon, before he started to get ready to leave,

'Would you like some coffee, John?' she asked, standing up. He nodded, stretching his arms.

The girl disappeared into the kitchen, leaving Armstrong alone with the flickering candlelight. His mind drifted back to the mundanities of work. Tomorrow morning he would have to brief his team on progress on the image encrypting program.

Melody returned with a full coffee pot and a bottle of brandy, but her guest declined the liqueur. She poured the coffee and then picked up an envelope from the mantelpiece. She glanced at her guest, as if trying to make a decision, and took her seat again. For a few moments the two sat in silence sipping their coffee, Melody toying with the envelope, the scientist reviewing the allocation of tasks amongst the juniors. They could take the basic Version 4 code and—

'John, I have a request to make,' announced the girl quietly, interrupting Armstrong's reverie.

'Have you?' He tried to guess what was coming next.

She looked at him. 'I'm going to ask you to do me a favour. Please forgive my effrontery and please don't hesitate to say no if you don't want to do it.'

'Try me,' he said, smiling guardedly.

'It's about Dad's involvement in the Echo Yankee crash. I need your help to challenge the Enquiry findings.'

Armstrong's heart sank. From their dinner conversation he had deduced that Melody had resigned herself to accept what had happened as a fait accompli, outside her control. Now it looked as if she wanted to stir the whole thing up again. He waited unhappily for her next words.

'I want to clear my father's name,' the girl continued. 'I'll be frank with you, John. I've made no progress at all since the verdict. No one in Blue Planet is interested in my problem. I know a lot of my friends at work think I'm neurotic about the whole affair. They've all advised me to drop the matter. But I won't drop it.' The determination of her words shone in her eyes. 'Have a look at this letter.' She took out the paper from the envelope and profferred it to her guest.

Dear Ms Fairwood, it began. I'm writing to express my condolences in connection with the death of your father. I lost three of my family in the Galleon crash so I'm well aware what you're going through. My father, mother and grandmother all died in the accident and to say it's devastated the lives of my brother and sister and me would be a gross understatement. Like you I followed the course of the Enquiry and I have to admit that initially I bore a grudge against Captain Fairwood for what happened. But since then I've come to see your point of view. Maybe a problem with the plane's oxygen contributed to the accident instead of negligence by the crew.

You may know that several bereaved members of the families of the victims are putting together a court case against Chinavia and Blue Planet Airlines, handled by the law firm Hunter, Mirza and Ford, alleging negligence. At the moment we are researching the technical aspects of the Galleon's systems but needless to say we're not getting full cooperation from either the manufacturers or the airline. If it can be shown that there were previous problems or potential problems with the pressurisation or the oxygen we will proceed with the law suit. No doubt you yourself would like to see your father cleared of blame.

If you have any information that may be helpful or would like to join our group please let me know. Contact details are shown below.

Yours sincerely Simon Ketteridge

Armstrong pursed his lips and handed the letter back.

'What do you think, John?'

'I don't think it'll work. The Galleon's systems were examined in detail during the Enquiry, weren't they? As I recall no damning evidence was found. Where will the plaintiffs expect to get new information, if there is any?'

'That's where you come in, John. As we can't get help from inside the airline world, we'll have to look outside. It would have to be someone who could understand all this pressurisation and oxygen business. Someone with a knowledge of science and mechanics. The answer occurred to me about two weeks ago. What about Dad's friend Dr Armstrong? Hence the dinner invite.' She raised her hands to emphasise the explanation. 'Do you think it was dishonest of me?'

'I must admit I suspected there might be a reason. But I didn't think it would have anything to do with the Enquiry.' He looked at her. 'I don't know if I can be of any help. What did you have in mind?'

She refilled the coffee cups. One of the candles had almost burnt itself out and was spluttering in its death throes. Melody pouted her lips and extinguished the failing light with her breath.

'If you agree to help, I thought that perhaps you could study the Galleon's oxygen system to see if there was any way the oxygen could have leaked out during flight.'

'Even if I could prove that there could have been an inflight leakage,' the scientist replied, 'how would that help the case? The Enquiry has already accepted it, but only as a very remote possibility. They decided that it was far more likely that your father and the copilot had simply forgotten to arm the oxygen system before flight. Anyway, it seems just as relevant to me that the outflow valve malfunctioned the way it did.' The scientist immediately regretted his last words and hoped that Melody would not pick him up. But she was too sharp.

'There you are! Why hasn't anyone followed that up? If the valve hadn't opened the plane would not have depressurised. No-one would have needed oxygen.'

'But it *did* open, Melody. They *did* need oxygen. And there wasn't any.'

'But John, there was no proof that the pilots hadn't armed the oxygen. That's what I've been saying all along.' She sighed in exasperation. 'What we have to do is show that it was physically possible for the oxygen system to have failed during flight. If so, there is no case against my father.'

Armstrong shook his head, recalling the newspaper reports. 'There has never been an inflight failure of the Galleon oxygen system.'

'So maybe this was the first one.'

Armstrong considered further. During the last sentences he had been thinking of ways of trying to discourage Melody from carrying out her plan without offending her feelings by outrightly rejecting the idea. But his inspiration failed him. Again he studied the face opposite, the imploring eyes and pleading expression. He capitulated.

'Alright,' he said eventually in a heavy voice. 'How do you propose to go about it?'

She reached out and covered his hand with her own. The contact gave him a strange tingle of pleasure. Then the hand was withdrawn and the girl spoke.

'John, you're so kind, just like Dad said.' She smiled warmly at him and he realised that he had been outmanoeuvred by her feminine guile. She traced her finger nail across the table. 'I think the best course of action would be for you to visit the Blue Planet Engineering Base at Heathrow on some pretext or other, and ask to look at the Galleon oxygen system. Either the diagrams, or on the aircraft itself. You could then see for yourself whether an inflight leakage was technically possible.'

'Will I be allowed into the base as a visitor?'

'Oh, that's easy to arrange. I've been told there are often parties of visitors there, trainee engineers, college students and so on, looking over the hangars. Just apply for a visitor's pass. We'll have to invent a reason to justify the request. You might

need security vetting but otherwise I'm sure it will be quite simple.'

'Would you be coming with me?'

She shook her head emphatically. 'No. I've tried a few tines to get authorisation to look round a Galleon in the base. But they know why I'm asking and always refuse permission. I'm strictly persona non grata so far as the Engineering Base is concerned.' She shrugged. 'It wouldn't do any good anyway, even if they changed their minds. I wouldn't know an oxygen system from a hydraulic pump.'

Armstrong nodded. Unless he could quickly come up with a reason not to without upsetting her he would feel obliged to go along with her scheme. Well, no harm would be done by it anyway. And he supposed it would help to keep her morale afloat. He would need to consider reasons he could use to obtain a visitor's pass. One or two possibilities sprang to mind, using connections to Holmyard Electronics. Then a new thought occurred. If he was granted a pass, why not take young Robert along? The boy would surely enjoy watching the airliners being serviced.

'Okay, Melody. If you tell me who to write to, I'll send off for a pass.' His glance went to the china clock. Time to go home.

'John, you're terrific!' The girl reached over and squeezed his shoulder. Her eyes sparkled happily and the scientist realised again just how important this thing was to her. He'd obviously made her day by agreeing to her supplication.

'I think I'd better be on my way,' he said. 'Work tomorrow and all that.'

At the door he paused to thank her for a pleasant evening.

'I enjoyed your company, John. Would you like to come round again one day soon? Just dinner. No strings attached. No favours.'

'Why don't we change the venue to my place? I can knock up a passable Stroganoff.'

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'Love to.' She held his arm again. 'Give me a call soon and we'll arrange a date.'

She opened the door to let him out. As he passed her she turned up her face and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

'You're a nice person,' she said softly as he was recovering from the surprise.

'The feeling is mutual,' Armstrong replied, still feeling the brush of her lips on his skin. They looked at each other for a second, standing motionless.

'Goodnight.'

'Goodnight.'

The door closed and the scientist turned his feet along the gravel driveway. The stones crunched under his feet.

CHAPTER 6

It was a beautiful May morning. The chestnut trees guarding the redbrick school building were in full bloom. Apart from one or two puffs of cumulus floating on the warm breeze the sky was cloudless.

On one side of the building the grounds were laid out as a games pitch. A youthful cricket match was now in progress on the lush grass. The two men strolling past the schoolhouse were about a hundred yards away from the wicket, and so their eyes saw the stroke of white bat to red ball a half-second before their ears heard the sharp impact of leather on wood.

Deep in conversation, the men turned and wandered slowly towards the tennis courts on the other side of the building. One was the Academy's headteacher. He had slightly stooped shoulders and wispy grey hair sprouting in haphazard tufts from his balding dome. His tweed jacket belonged to an earlier era. The other man, taller and younger, was wearing a dark business suit.

'Well, Dr Griffiths, I think that covers all the points I wanted to ask you. I'll tell my sister that her son will be starting at his new school in a fortnight's time.'

'Very well, Dr Armstrong. I'm sure we can arrange a smooth transition of his studies. As far as this summer's exams are concerned, he'll do the standard SATs of course, but we also

compile our own papers to check that our pupils are learning more than just how to pass state exams. In Robert's case we'll modify them to take into account that he won't have completed a full year's syllabus here.'

The men stopped at the tennis courts and turned to look past the games pitch towards the river sweeping past the fields. Two four-crew sculls, a pair of boys and a pair of girls in each boat, were slicing through the water, obviously in a race. Their oars flashed in the spring sunshine in two perfectly synchronised sets of eight.

Armstrong had now seen most of the Laleham Academy and its amenities and was highly impressed. If anybody could get the best out of Robert then Dr Griffiths and his dedicated staff were the ones to do it.

The two men turned to walk back to the main building. There was just one more item for Armstrong to clear up.

'On a rather delicate matter, Dr Griffiths, can you tell me about the financial state of the Academy. I know a few independent schools have closed recently because of money problems.'

The headteacher smiled sardonically. 'The truthful answer to that sometimes we struggle ourselves. Our budget is calculated to the nearest penny. You see, we have to pay reasonable salaries to the teaching staff in order to attract and retain the best people. And the overheads incurred running the school are monumental. The revenue we take in fees never covers the expenditure. There's always a shortfall. We can't afford to give away bursaries. But if we put up the fees too much we deny our facilities to those families who don't have much money to spare, and the one thing I won't allow is for the Academy to become a preserve of the wealthy. Our Founders' Charter is quite clear on that point. It's a delicate balance.'

'How do you make up the shortfall?'

'Mainly donations from parents and other benefactors. And, I have to admit, from commercial sponsors. But again we are very choosy about who we accept donations from. We check potential sponsors for ethical trading standards and how they treat their employees and what they are demanding in return. Some contributions come from ex-pupils themselves, those who have done well for themselves in the world after leaving school. We also get grants from various authorities, but these are unreliable and variable and depend on the political complexion of the local and national governments. At the moment the school's finances are in reasonable shape, though we're not awash with cash.'

'Is there a problem with demand exceeding capacity then?' asked the scientist. 'High educational standards and low fees. You must get swamped with applications.'

'Oh yes, we are. Every year. But our admissions procedures are very rigorous in assessing suitability. The school's founders were very specific in their intentions. Laleham is for local boys and girls or those from further afield who are struggling with school work or personal development. Robert is covered by both categories. Money or influence will not buy a place here.'

'Nevertheless, I'd like to make an extra contribution over and above Robert's fees. Let's say I pay three times the standard rate.'

The headteacher stopped in his stride.

'Dr Armstrong, that is very generous of you. But I wasn't fishing for more money.'

'I know. It was me who brought up the subject, remember. In a way I'm passing on a portion of my good luck. You might have heard of Memotron?'

'Forgive me, no, I haven't.'

'It's an app—an application—for mobile phones.'

Obviously the school head had no idea what the scientist was talking about. 'I only use my phone as—well—a phone,' said the

older man. 'I'm sure it can do other things as well but I haven't got a clue what they are or how you do them.'

Armstrong smiled. 'Yes, it can get a bit nerdish at times for those of us in electronics. A year or two ago I devised a modification to a voice recognition program. You know how you put things into cupboards and then forget where they are? My idea was that you used your mobile's voice recorder to help you find them again. You say the name of the object and the phone tells you where it is.'

'I could do with something like that,' smiled Dr Griffiths. 'I'm always forgetting where I've put things.'

'Show me your phone,' said Armstrong. The head teacher took his mobile out of his pocket and handed it over.

'Yes, you've got it here.' The scientist pushed a few buttons. 'See—Memotron. I'll give you a demo before I leave.'

'Well I never! Perhaps I should pay more attention to these things.'

'Anyway,' continued Armstrong, 'my employer, Holmyard Electronics, applied for the patent on my behalf and gave me the resources to develop the idea. So now we get royalty payments every time Memotron is installed in a phone. The company splits the payments with me. So that was my luck—inventing it before anyone else. Now I'm going to share my luck with Robert's new school.'

'Well, all I can say is thank you. It's that sort of generosity which keeps us afloat.' He resumed walking, the scientist ambling in step alongside. 'Actually,' continued the old man, 'we are fortunate to be still in existence. Although things are brighter now, last year it looked as if we might have to shut our gates for good because the coffers were pretty well empty.'

'How did you manage to keep going?'

'It was the father of one of our boys, a pop singer, I believe he is. He gave us a tidy sum. It's mainly due to him that we're still in business.'

FLIGHT 935 DO YOU READ

'Well, Dr Griffiths, I hope things turn out well for the school and not just for Robert's sake.'

'Thank you. We've been here for nearly two hundred years. It would be a shame if such a long and proud tradition were broken. Now, shall we go back to the office and discuss details? To start with, what are Robert's best subjects?'

A distant cry went up. The umpire agreed. Leg before.

CHAPTER 7

The man and the boy vacated the car and slammed the doors closed. The roar of jet engines drew their attention and they both looked up as a plane swept over their heads on final approach. The man winced at the painful assault on his auditory senses. The boy covered his ears with his hands and shouted, 'Wow!'

The noise quickly subsided to a tolerable whine as the airliner sank towards the runway. Armstrong followed it with his eyes, his scientist's brain pondering the misty vortices trailing from the wings. Probably adiabatic cooling of the air to its saturation point.

Looking in the opposite direction the next arriving aircraft could be seen on the approach path. And a few miles behind, yet another, its presence given away by shimmering landing lights, even in the bright daylight.

During the drive to the airport Armstrong had quizzed his nephew about his new school. The boy had shrugged and said, 'It's okay, I suppose. The other children are alright. I don't mind going there as long as can see my friends from my old school as well. The computers aren't as good as the old school. But I did well in tennis last week. They've picked me for the form team.' Armstrong made a mental note about the computers. With his contacts in the business it wouldn't cost a fortune to

upgrade their IT facilities. He would pay for the kit himself and donate it to the Academy.

The two visitors made their way from the car park to the entrance of the vast engineering complex. Inside, they presented themselves at the reception desk where the duty officer scrutinised their passes. He picked up one of the phones on his desk.

'Hello . . . Mr Courtney? . . . I have a Dr Armstrong here, with a visitor's pass. It says on the pass to contact you . . . yes . . . okay.' He replaced the receiver and looked at the scientist. 'Mr Courtney is on his way now. If you've got any bags you should deposit them here before you go through security.'

A minute later a short, swarthy man approached them, profferring his hand. 'Good afternoon, I'm Ian Courtney, Duty Manager. I understand you want to look round a Galleon.'

Armstrong nodded and extracted a copy of the letter he had written to the Director of Engineering, which he handed to Courtney. The manager scanned the lines, furrowing his brow in concentration. Armstrong had given considerable thought to the composition of his letter before committing it to the printer. He thought better of Melody's idea of a vague technical pretext and decided instead that his approach should be at least partly truthful, revealing his intention from the outset, although avoiding any mention of Melody or her father. He had chosen his words accordingly.

Recently I chanced to read the press reports of the accident which occurred to the Blue Planet Galleon 'Echo Yankee'. As specialists in electronics we at Holmyard Electronics wonder if it would be possible to design a warning system to alert the crew if the oxygen system was not armed or if the reservoir contents had leaked away in flight. We would also like to examine the pressurisation control systems to see if the electronic circuitry could be improved to prevent any electrical faults from driving

the valve fully open, which is what seems to have happened to Echo Yankee.

Obviously these components and others in the aircraft are designed and constructed by specialist manufacturers, but sometimes an outside observer can pick up potential problems that the specialists have overlooked.

Looking at the other side of the coin, we ourselves might gather useful insights from aviation technology that would help us in the development of our own products.

Would it be possible for me and my young nephew to look over a Galleon at your maintenance facility at Heathrow?

Courtney turned the page and read the reply which the scientist had stapled to the letter, nodding as he did so.

Dear Dr Armstrong,

Thank you for your letter. We note your observations about the Galleon oxygen and pressurisation systems. As you can imagine, we and the aircraft manufacturers spent considerable time after the crash discussing how to modify the systems to prevent any repeat occurrence. As a result several changes have already been made or are in the process of being made:

An advisory message is triggered in the flight deck any time the oxygen system is not armed.

A caution message and chime is triggered in the flight deck when the cabin altitude exceeds 4000 feet if the oxygen system has not been armed; typically this cabin pressure corresponds to an actual aircraft altitude of 10,000 feet.

An advisory message is triggered if the pressure detected in the oxygen reservoir drops below 50 bar (which is about 50% of normal service charge). A second position sensor is being installed on the main outflow valve; this sensor will prevent valve movement beyond 35% opening unless a separate override switch is activated in the flight deck.

Flight crew procedures have been amended to bring verification of oxygen arming into the 'passing 10,000 feet' climb checklist.

The technical modifications have been recommended by Chinavia to all Galleon operators around the world. In several countries, including the UK, the regulatory authorities have notified the mods as mandatory. Blue Planet Galleons have either been modified or will be modified as soon as fleet utilisation allows.

If you wish to study the Galleon technical systems for your own edification we would be happy to accommodate your request. Please download the application form from the link shown below and email it to the address given.

The manager handed the visitors over to a junior mechanic whom he introduced as 'Davy'. Armstrong and his nephew were led through a vast store room stacked with tyres and wheels and into another where turbine engines sat on trolleys, looking like weird racing cars. The next door they passed through admitted them into a cavernous hangar, a structure large enough to house four airliners.

'Wow! The planes are wicked!' breathed young Robert in wonderment.

In the nearest bay stood a dismembered airliner. It was a Galleon. Several panels had been removed from its wings to reveal a labyrinth of pipes and cables. The nose structure was also missing, uncovering a flat bulkhead just ahead of the flight deck windows. On the bulkhead was mounted what Armstrong recognised as a scanning antenna. For the weather radar, he

deduced. Supported on huge jacks with its landing gear retracted, the aircraft also lacked its control surfaces and engines and was clearly undergoing a rigorous overhaul programme.

'Stand clear in Bay Alpha,' a voice boomed over the public address, followed by a loud klaxon. 'Landing gear extension tests now commencing.'

Several white overalled men working on the aircraft moved away and stood patiently at a prudent distance. There was a whining noise, like a pump starting up. Suddenly panels hinged down under the Galleon's belly and the two main landing gear legs unfolded, each carrying a large four-wheeled bogie. Simultaneously the twin-wheeled nose leg lowered itself from beneath the forward fuselage. With three audible 'clunks' the legs locked into position. Armstrong saw one mechanic consulting an electronic timer and entering his measurements on a record sheet.

'There's a Galleon in Bay Charlie', Davy announced to the visitors. 'Echo Victor. You can look over that one.'

Echo Victor was resplendent in its navy, azure and silver livery. Davy explained that it had almost completed its current maintenance cycle and would be released for service the next day. Armstrong and the boy climbed up the access stairway and reverently entered the flight deck. The scientist's first impression was of the compactness of the layout. There seemed to be only just enough room for the two crew members who usually sat there and the two observer seats behind them. Davy invited them to take the pilots' seats. The boy readily agreed but Armstrong chose the observer station instead.

So this was where Bill Fairwood worked. Armstrong's eyes scanned the rows of displays and controls. Just like the photos in the papers. He turned to Davy.

'Has this plane got the latest mods installed?' he asked.

'Should have,' came the reply. 'It'll say in the tech log, which is probably in the office. Hang on, though. Let's have a look.' On one of the centre screens was a list of messages in amber script. 'Yup, there it is.' He pointed to it. 'OXY NOT ARMED'. He reached to a switch in the systems panel above the pilots' seats and pressed it. The warning disappeared. 'Here, you try it,' said the mechanic to Robert. The boy pressed the switch above his head and the message reappeared. Armstrong found himself pondering. Could that little switch really have been responsible for the deaths of two hundred and sixty-one people?

'Put your right hand on these levers.' Davy was addressing Robert. The boy was sitting in the left hand pilot's seat, clutching the control wheel, excited eyes sweeping over the incomprehensible displays in front of him. 'That's how you fly the aircraft,' said the mechanic. 'Your left hand moves the control wheel and your right hand controls the power from the engines with the thrust levers. That's all there is to it.'

'Wow. It's fantastic. Just like a video game.' He twisted his head round. 'Uncle John, look at me flying the airliner!' Armstrong smiled encouragingly but his mind was still with Bill. How incredible that his erstwhile friend could not only master the technical complications of this large aircraft, but also drive the locomotives so skilfully on the P & M. What a tragedy that such a useful life should end so uselessly.

Davy spent the next five minutes explaining the layout of the cockpit, pitching the level of his answers according to whether his questioner was the enthusiastic young boy or the mature intellectual. He was obviously impressed by Armstrong's quick grasp of the technicalities.

'Sorry, folks, have to throw you out.' Another engineer had appeared in the doorway. 'Work to do in here.'

'No worries,' said Davy. 'I'll show John the other bits and pieces. Robert, I've got some good games on my computer in the office. Want a go?'

At Armstrong's request the next item was the oxygen system. A few minutes later he found himself standing beside the mechanic on a platform which raised them a metre or so above the hangar floor, their heads poking up through an inspection hatch into an equipment bay under the flight deck. The crew oxygen was supplied from a cylinder beneath the flight deck floor. It was a simple set up. The pipe from a charging port on the outside fuselage surface led to the cylinder. Another ran from the cylinder up through the floor to the distribution manifold in the flight deck.

'Pressure relief valve?' asked Armstrong, pointing to a component in the charging line.

'Yes,' said Davy. 'If the pressure exceeds a certain figure it opens to vent the excess oxygen to atmosphere.'

'What could cause overpressure?'

The mechanic pursed his lips. 'Overcharging, although the chargers are supposed to have their own shut-offs. Or overtemperature. If the reservoir is at max pressure and the system heats up the valve would open. It would have to be pretty warm, mind you. Hotter than midsummer day in Riyadh.'

'How does the valve work?'

'Not sure,' said Davy. 'We can look at the manuals later if you want.'

The mechanic took the visitor to the aircraft's tail. Armstrong recognised the pressurisation outflow valve, a flat metal plate retracted into the fuselage to uncover a square orifice about half a metre across.

'That's the fully open position, I take it,' he asked.

'Yes. It's always open on the ground to keep the cabin depressurised, even when the engines are running. In flight it gradually closes the higher you go, to keep the cabin at the right pressure.'

'Why did it open on Echo Yankee?'

'Good question. No-one can work that one out. The valve is signalled by two separate systems, completely independent of each other. If they send different signals a comparator freezes the valve at its current position. Then the pilots can control it using a manual override system.'

'So there's no way the valve could be signalled open by both systems?'

'Only on the ground. When the landing gear detects aircraft weight it sends an 'open' signal to both systems. Each main gear signals one system.'

'So even if one of the weight sensors was faulty and sent an 'open' signal in flight—'

'The comparator would freeze the valve.'

'What about electromagnetic interference? Mobile phones or wireless laptops, that sort of thing?'

Davy shook his head. 'No. Chinavia took some valves and bombarded the control circuitry with high energy radiation right through the radio frequency spectrum. Nothing. No sign of movement.'

Armstrong peered up through the inspection hatch near the valve. More cables and pipes ran along the underside of the cabin floor. Again he found himself marvelling at the technical complexity of the aircraft and admiring the designers and engineers whose product it was. Through a hatch in the floor he could see up into the cabin itself. A wash basin was visible above, and a mirror. Below the floor at eye level was a large tank. He didn't need Davy to explain its purpose. 'Foul Waste' was stencilled on its flank. His eyes went to a nearby control panel from which electrical wiring ran to the outflow valve.

'What's that for?'

Davy peered up through the hatch. 'Test panel for the pressurisation. You can test the system from the cabin. You've got to get into the bog to do it, though.'

'Why on earth did they put the test panel under the toilet floor?'

'Lack of space anywhere else, probably. It means you can test the system and watch the valve operation from inside the aircraft. A big bonus if it's peeing down with rain outside and you need to do maintenance on it.'

'Good point.'

A few minutes later they were back in the office. Robert was shooting down Japanese Zero fighters over the Pacific. At an adjacent monitor Davy accessed the Galleon technical manuals for Armstrong. The diagrams were easy to follow. One showed a cross-section through the oxygen pressure relief valve.

'It's very basic,' the scientist noted. 'Just a metal spring holding the valve against its seating.' The arrangement was no different from the safety valves on the boilers of steam locomotives.

'Yes, basic, but probably expensive,' said Davy. 'Anything to do with aviation is ten times more expensive than everyday kit doing the same job. Quality control and all the rest of it. That spring will be made of some super-duper metal that costs a fortune.'

'But if the spring broke,' said Armstrong, 'the oxygen would escape.'

'Correct.'

'Can I save this page onto my memory stick?'

'Don't see why not.'

The scientist transferred his attention to the Galleon pressurisation and Davy brought the test panel diagram onto the screen.

'That 'System Operation Test' switch. How does it work?'

Davy read the notes on the screen. 'You can simulate ground or flight conditions. If you switch it to 'Flight' the landing gear inputs are isolated. You can then set various simulated pressure differentials on this rotary knob and watch how the outflow valve responds. In real flight, of course, the higher you fly the greater the differential has to be so the valve should move towards the closed position.'

'And if you switch to 'Ground'?'

'It simulates the landing gear weight signals to make the system think the aircraft has landed. Useful when the aircraft is supported on jacks rather than on its landing gear.'

'So 'Ground' makes the valve drive fully open?'
'Yes.'

'Suppose a fault in the test system made it revert to 'Ground' mode during flight?'

'Well, again, there's a dual system to stop the valve opening.' Davy pointed to the monitor screen. 'See, you have to select 'Ground' and also press that red button alongside to complete the circuit.'

'So only a double failure in the test circuitry could make the valve open?'

'Correct.'

'Suppose water leaked from the toilet above and short-circuited both switches. The valve would fully open?'

'Probably.'

'Has it ever happened?'

'No,' said a voice behind Armstrong. It was the Duty Manager, who had come into the office unnoticed by the scientist. 'It's never happened. And with the new modifications it's impossible. Seen all you need to?'

'Yes thanks,' said the scientist. 'And thanks for your hospitality.'

'You're welcome,' said Courtney. He paused for a moment. 'As a matter of interest, you're not by any chance involved in that group who want to take legal action against us, are you?'

'No.'

'Are you a friend of Melody Fairwood?'

Armstrong felt his face redden uncontrollably. 'I . . . I knew Bill Fairwood,' he admitted, avoiding a direct answer to the question. 'He was a good friend of mine. I'd known him for years.'

'So was that the reason you wanted to see the Galleon? Rather than professional interest? I hope you're not planning to discredit us in some way.'

The scientist eyed his accuser. 'Mr Courtney, you've been very kind to Robert and me today, and I hope you don't think I've abused your hospitality.' He cleared his throat. 'What I have told you is true. It was because of what I read in the newspaper that I was interested in the oxygen system. I do admit that my interest was aroused further by my friendship with Bill. But please believe me when I say that I certainly am not muckraking.' He sighed, still feeling uncomfortable. If only Melody knew what he going through on her behalf.

The Duty Manager nodded. 'Very well. I don't think there's any harm done. I trust you, Dr Armstrong. But I must ask you to keep your speculations to yourself. The media would love to hear them, not to mention the legal hawks. It would be a good excuse to resurrect the whole business again.'

'I promise that I won't contact the media. After all, Bill was my friend. I don't want his name dragged through the papers again. And I have no connection whatsoever with any legal proceedings.'

'Okay then, let's leave it at that.'

'Agreed.'

The two men looked at each other for a second. Then Armstrong held out his hand. The other shook it and the moment of tension was over. Robert, too, realised that the two adults had resumed a normal relationship and chose the moment to make his announcement.

'Uncle John, I've decided what I want to be when I grow up.' The scientist opened his eyes in surprise. 'You have?'

'Yes. I'm going to be an aircraft engineer.'

CHAPTER 8

Armstrong shipped the oars, allowing the boat to drift as it would on the slack current. He propped his elbows on his thighs and rested his chin in his hands. In the stern seat facing him, Melody regarded him quizzically.

'Just taking a rest,' he explained.

The boat began to yaw. Melody pulled at the rudder cable but with no way on the craft her corrective action had no effect. Soon they were broadside on to the current. The only sounds to be heard were the soft plip-plops of wavelets against the wooden hull. On the riverbank two elderly anglers sat motionless, probably asleep, as their floats bobbed on the tranquil surface. The sun shone from a cloudless sky and there was the merest hint of a zephyr breeze to ripple the leaves of the oak trees by the tow path.

'Would you like me to take over?' asked the girl.

'If you want to.'

They had hired the skiff at Richmond Bridge, a mile up river, and Armstrong had rowed it at an undemanding pace towards St Margarets Lock, where the weir stemmed the river in its desire to rush towards London and the sea. When their hour was up they would return the craft to the boathouse and drive to the

London Apprentice pub, on the river bank between Richmond and Kew, for lunch.

Their excursion had been planned for the previous week, but Melody's crew had been delayed a day in Germany and so they had had to cancel the arrangement. She had taken the trouble to phone him from Hamburg to apologise for the cancellation, and her disappointment had sounded genuine. Strangely enough, the unexpected turn of events spoilt Armstrong's whole day and he was somewhat surprised to discover the depth of his own disappointment. It was the first time that he truly realised how much he was looking forward to their meeting. He had chided himself for reacting like a soppy adolescent and forced himself to shrug off his feelings.

Now he eyed his companion, idly dangling the rudder cable in the water. She was wearing a tee shirt, denim skirt and sandals and she would have found it difficult to win an ugliness competition. She turned her face towards him and suddenly smiled. Self-consciously he smiled back.

The peace was broken by a harsh squawk, and two ducks flew past the boat in a wide sweeping turn, extending their webbed feet at the last moment before scything into the water in twin plumes of spray.

'Right then, I'll have a go,' said the girl.

With some judicious manoeuvring they managed to change places, but not without Melody at one stage clinging onto her companion to keep her balance as the boat rocked. Armstrong found himself unsettled by her touch. *Absurd*, he told himself. *Stop acting like a teenager!*

The girl lowered the blades into the water and began to row, with a better style and rhythm than his own efforts, the scientist noted.

'You've done this before,' he commented.

'I like boats,' she responded. 'Didn't I tell you I was a member of the Bourne End Sailing Club? Sails are better than oars, of course. This is too much like hard work.'

They slid under a railway bridge just as a train rumbled across, the girder structure booming out metallically at its passage, and soon they arrived at the massive weir gates. Armstrong ruddered the boat onto a reciprocal heading back towards Richmond.

'Have you got your own sailboat?' he asked.

'Yes, it was Dad's. You must come along and have a go yourself one day.'

'I'd like that.'

After another ten minutes they carefully changed seats again and the girl sat back with a sigh.

'That's my exercise for this week,' she announced.

Armstrong grinned as he picked up the oars. 'No stamina. That's the trouble with young people today.'

'Yes, you're right, you old fogey.'

They rowed under Richmond Bridge and positioned the skiff for landing, Melody steering expertly as they approached the stage. The boatman grasped the painter and hauled the craft alongside. Armstrong and the girl stepped out onto firm ground.

'That was great fun,' said Melody, taking his arm as they walked away. 'Come on, let's get an ice cream.'

They slowly strolled along the tow path towards the spot where Armstrong had parked his car. To his great delight Melody still held his arm. Occasionally his nostrils caught the scent of her perfume.

'I'm glad you could make it today,' he said as they nibbled their cornets.

'So am I,' she replied. 'I was really annoyed to miss last week. I'm glad we've made up for it now.'

They reached the car and Armstrong started the engine. Fifteen minutes later they arrived at the London Apprentice and parked by the slipway. The fine weather had brought many others to the pub for lunch.

'John, just explain again what you found out about the Galleon,' said Melody, suddenly striking up a conversation halfway through the meal.

Armstrong crunched a pickled onion and swallowed it.

'Let me draw a diagram for you. This here is a pressure relief valve . . .'

Her head bent close to his as he sketched on a discarded paper napkin. Now and then a stirring of air would brush her blonde hair against his face.

When he had finished Melody sat upright again and cut another slice of her veal pie. Creased forehead showed that she was deep in thought. Not wishing to disturb her, Armstrong kept his silence and looked out across the river to watch a large pleasure cruiser sweep past with a throbbing of engines. In the middle of the river was the tip of the long, curving wooded island which gave Isleworth Ait its ancient name. Two hundred yards away from the London Apprentice on the same riverbank, opposite the island, was a development of luxury apartments. Armstrong's mind went back to boyhood days when the site was a neglected ruin, a derelict wharf guarded by two rusting cranes, decrepit relic of a bygone era when the Thames carried so much of the nation's commercial traffic.

'I think I might drop the whole thing.'

The scientist's thoughts raced back to the present. He looked at the girl for fuller enlightenment.

Melody shook her head. 'There's no point in trying to change things. I'm not going to take it any further. My friends were right. Even if I could get the verdict overturned, that wouldn't bring back my father. Nothing can do that.'

Armstrong looked at her troubled face. 'I think you've made a wise decision,' he counselled. 'What about the law suit people? What will you say to them?'

'I don't know. Part of me says I should tell them what you've told me. They'll be grieving as much as me and maybe they're entitled to some sort of compensation.'

'I don't think it helps them,' said the scientist. 'A faulty relief valve can only be a supposition. There's no evidence.'

'Didn't you say the Blue Planet engineers asked you not to talk about it to other people?'

'Yes. It's a difficult situation for me too. I agreed to what they requested. Of course, I had to tell you. If you subsequently passed on my speculation to others I'd be indirectly breaking the promise I gave them.'

'Well, that settles it then. It finishes here.' A brief, wistful smile. 'I'm grateful to you, John, for what you've done. For my own peace of mind I am going to believe that what happened to Echo Yankee was what you described to me. Dad was not that careless. He would have checked his oxygen. I know it. He and the crew and the passengers were killed by a broken spring.'

She looked up at him. A tear ran down her face. She brushed it quickly away and forced a smile.

'Now then, Dr Armstrong, you told me you were going to take me to Kew Gardens.'

'Yes.'

'Well, what are we waiting for?'

* * * * *

The two figures lay on the grass in the sunshine, dozing peacefully. It was four o'clock, and the golden orb of the sun was beginning to arc towards the western horizon. The couple were lying by an azalea bush, oblivious to the exultant burst of mauve flowers. Not far away, the oriental structure of the Pagoda soared up above the tops of the fir trees like a giant ornamental candle.

Although it was a weekday the Botanical Gardens were busy. Here and there people were stretched out on the grass, like Armstrong and Melody, relaxing in the balmy spring sunshine. Other visitors meandered through the grounds, now pointing upwards, now stooping as they viewed the variety of flora and took photographs of the plants and themselves. Before he had slipped into unconsciousness Armstrong had mentally taken note of the diversity of tongues to be heard as the promenaders wandered past. Many languages he could not identify.

The man and the girl breathed evenly and deeply. The air was filled with a hundred fragrances and the hum of a thousand tiny insect wings. A bee lurched towards the humans and alighted on the girl's forearm, rousing her from her slumber.

'Oh, go away, you horrid thing,' she murmured, shaking her arm. The offender complied, continuing on its haphazard flight path.

Melody's voice had woken Armstrong. He rubbed his eyes and turned to look at the girl.

'Bloody hell! I fell asleep.'

'Me too. Must be all that rowing.'

They propped themselves up on elbows and surveyed the peaceful panorama. Two young children appeared and raced frantically round a tree before tearing off out of sight, their speed accentuated by the stillness of the surroundings.

'John, can I ask you a personal question? You don't have to answer it.'

'Of course.'

She turned her grey eyes towards him.

'Were you ever married?'

The scientist looked into the distance and then at the ground. He plucked a handful of grass and let the blades fall individually to the ground. Dark memories formed like spectres in his mind, thoughts that were usually suppressed before they had a chance to germinate. It had taken years of discipline to achieve

this self-protective mechanism for his emotions. Now the shield cracked and in his imagination he saw the face . . . Cheryl's face . . . He made himself block out the apparition, forcing his eyes to register the reality around him.

He was aware that Melody was awaiting a reply.

'Almost . . . once,' he answered. He paused, still marshalling his thoughts. Yes, it was okay, the shield was intact again. 'But things didn't work out as they were supposed to.'

Melody recognised that they were treading on shaky ground, but her curiosity drove her on. This man was beginning to loom large in her life and she wanted to know more about him.

'Was it a long time ago?'

He nodded, counting the years. It must have been when Robert was about two or three.

'Roughly eight years ago.'

Melody looked at him intently. 'What happened? Or would you rather not talk about it? It's none of my business.'

What happened? Why did Cheryl do what she did? He didn't know. He would never know the answer to that, the greatest mystery of the universe. 'It didn't work out,' he repeated enigmatically.

'Oh.' Melody looked down, deducing that she had arrived at an impenetrable barrier.

'Maybe it was my fault. I don't know.'

The girl chose a detour.

'And what about now? Tell me to shut up if I'm getting too personal.' Melody watched his eyes and could see the sadness fading as his thoughts changed direction.

'There was Angie,' said the scientist, 'but in the words of the old Rolling Stones song, It's All Over Now. It was never earth-shattering. I learnt my lesson, you see, Mel. Always keep your guard up. Don't commit yourself. It's a good policy. It's done me well these last eight years.'

'You must have been badly hurt.'

'I got over it.'

They stood up, brushed themselves down and began to walk to the exit, their mood quieter than before. Armstrong glanced sideways at his companion.

'What's the latest on you and Sebastian?'

'I think the Stones' song applies to us too. I was too late complying with the ultimatum.'

'Which was . . . '

'Seb first, Galleon second. I couldn't blame him really. I knew I was turning into an obsessive but I couldn't stop myself. It's the second time I've messed up my love life, actually. Do you want to hear about the first? I was really stupid.'

'Okay, if you want to tell me.'

'He was not good enough for me, or so I thought at the time. He was a mere schoolteacher, but me . . . I was a glamorous air hostess cruising round the world in jet airliners, staying in the best hotels, rubbing shoulders with the famous and the wealthy.'

She shook her head. 'Bullshit!' she spat out, 'what a fool I was to believe that garbage.'

'You could have changed your mind.'

'Yes, I did . . . but I left it too late. Steven emigrated to the States. He gave up on me. I'd driven him away.'

'Did you ever see him again?'

'I moped around for about a year, then decided to look him up. Eventually I found out his address in America. It took another six months to pluck up the courage to write a letter. When I posted it I felt so happy. We'd start all over again, I thought.' She smiled sadly at Armstrong. 'But it wasn't to be. He replied to my letter, wishing me well, and enclosing a picture of himself and his wife. Such a pretty girl. Expecting their first baby.'

There were no tears in her eyes, only the merest hint of regret. Melody had obviously made a good recovery from her heartbreak. Just as well, thought the scientist, considering the misfortune that she had recently had to endure. No, life had not been kind to her. But Armstrong could see that she had the Fairwood toughness. She was a survivor.

'Looks as if we're both a couple of hopeless cases, doesn't it?' he said with a smile.

She nodded. Suddenly her eyes brightened and she reached out her hand. 'Come on, let's walk along the river again. It's so peaceful.'

* * * * *

As Melody drove home in her little blue sports car she luxuriated in a warm glow.

He's okay, she told herself. I like him. Her hands and feet operated the controls subconsciously as she reviewed her day with Armstrong. So carried away was she in her daydreaming that she almost ran through a red light, slamming on the brakes at the last second with a tortured squeal of tyres. A passing bus driver glowered at her and she smiled happily back at him, unable to show any animosity to anyone or anything.

It was a long time since she had felt this way, and it was delicious. The cynicism bred by disappointments of the past was beginning to crumble away. Was it love? Of course not. Infatuation? Probably. There was no blinding passion, no fluttering of the heartbeat. Just . . . she couldn't even put a name to it.

Well, there was no hurry. Let the relationship take its course as it would. She was not going to rush anything. He liked her company, she knew that. Would he be prepared to . . . what did he say . . . lower his guard? That was up to him . . . and perhaps partly up to her, too. Did she want him to lower his guard? Oh, yes! Most certainly, yes!

Suddenly Melody realised that she was exceeding fifty in a 30-mile limit and quickly took her foot off the accelerator, anxiously looking in her mirror for a flashing blue light. An imaginary conversation took place in her thoughts. Yes, officer, I admit I was speeding, but you see there's this man who makes me feel so good that I can't concentrate on my driving.

Mel, you're a grown woman, she chided herself, not a lovesick teenager. Control yourself! The speedometer said thirty-five. That's better. Her right foot pressed the accelerator pedal to prevent further decay of velocity. Now she was showing the composure to be expected of any other decent, law-abiding citizen, cruising at the normal five miles per hour above the speed limit.

* * * * *

The last dishes put away, Armstrong returned to the study. How should he spend the evening? He considered the options. Phone up his friend Mack and suggest meeting for a beer and some railway talk? More work on the image encrypter? No, not tonight. Give yourself a break from work. Maybe there's something on the TV. It was a shame Melody couldn't stay for the evening. She had almost accepted his invitation. But it would have been unfair of him to insist that she stay, not when she had to go to work early the following morning. He would just have to possess his soul in patience for another week, when she was coming round to dinner.

She was having a strange effect on him, this girl Melody. If the friendship developed he knew it would not turn out to be just another casual affair. It would be deeper than that. Did he want it to develop? His heart said yes. His instinct said . . . perhaps . . . but remember . . . keep your guard up. Don't put yourself in a vulnerable position. He had been fooled before and had no intention of letting it happen again.

Now then, this evening. What should he do? He took two steps towards the television remote, then stopped in mid-stride.

Of course. Should have thought of it before. He turned round, left the study and climbed the stairs.

In the Railway Room he went to the rolling stock cupboard and took out a cardboard box. It had arrived only the previous day. Armstrong opened the package. He took out a small object wrapped in tissue paper. Like a jeweller handling a precious stone he carefully peeled back the folds of paper. Delicately he picked up the uncovered object and held it up to examine more closely. Perfect. It was a beautifully detailed six-wheeled carriage bogie. The scientist ran his eyes over the axle boxes and springs. Excellent. Absolute precision. There were three more bogie assemblies in the box. They had cost him a pretty penny, but wait until his two dining cars were complete. They'd look very grand. It would be worth it. From the cupboard he lifted out a carriage body. He held the new bogie in place under the chassis. Absolutely perfect. He settled in his chair and rolled up his sleeves. It would take about an hour to fit all the bogies. He reached for the tool box and glue pot but his hand never arrived, because the telephone rang. Who would that be? He wasn't expecting any calls. A glance at the caller ID screen. No, he didn't recognise the number.

'Hello?'

'Hello, is that you, John?'

His heart turned to ice. That voice. Or was it? Perhaps the phone was playing tricks with his ears.

'Is that John Armstrong?'

The hand holding the phone tightened its grip. Armstrong tried to speak but no sound emerged. He had not heard that voice for eight years. His mind flashed back to the dark reminiscences of the afternoon. Had that been some sort of omen?

'John, if that's you please speak to me.'

'Cheryl?' The word escaped his lips as a croak. It was not his own voice.

'Yes, it's me. Look, I know it's been a long time. I was just calling to see how you were.'

'I'm fine . . . I'm fine.' He couldn't really believe he was having this conversation. It was like a bad dream.

'That's good. I'm glad to hear it. Listen. I'm living in Chiswick now. I thought It would be a good idea to meet up sometime. Me and you and . . . Mrs Armstrong.'

The last phrase had the intonation of a question.

'There's no Mrs Armstrong,' he said heavily, before realising that a lie might have nipped this new problem in the bud. *Idiot*, he chided himself. *Think before you speak . . . this is a dangerous situation.*

'Oh. I wasn't sure. So it would be just you and me then.'

'Cheryl, what's your game? What are you after?'

'Don't be so distrustful. I'm holding out an olive branch. Where's the harm in an innocent meeting? Just for a chat.'

'Does Neil know you were planning to contact me?'

There was a pause.

'Well, does he?' Armstrong did not bother to hide his impatience.

'Neil and I are . . . not together any more.'

'Divorced?'

'No, just . . . not together.'

Another pause, then both spoke simultaneously.

'Cheryl, I don't think---'

'I just want to see you--'

They stopped. The voice in his earphone started again.

'John, all I'm suggesting is a meeting. Nothing else. I have no sinister intentions.'

'But why? Damn it, it's been eight years.'

'Old wounds should have healed in that time.'

'But don't you remember? Don't you remember what you did? How can you just call me and suggest meeting . . . for a chat . .

. as if nothing happened. Damn it, you are unbelievable. You . . . you . . . ' Again words failed him.

'Alright, John. It was a bad time, I know. I took my share of heartache, too, you know.'

Anger reenergised his vocal cords. 'Your share of heartache!' he exclaimed sarcastically. 'You caused the bloody heartache. You ruined my life, you ruined my sister's life . . . I take it you've now ruined Neil's life as well.'

'John, calm down. You're getting hysterical.'

'You bet I am.'

'Listen, calm down. Listen to me. I'm not a monster, you know. It was just fate that things turned out as they did.'

'No. You're wrong. You are a monster. Don't blame fate for your own evil tricks.'

'John, you must calm down. Call me names if you want to. But just take it easy, and listen to what I've got to say.'

Armstrong took a few deliberate breaths to steady his nerves. 'Alright, let's hear it.'

'Look, first of all, I'm sorry for what happened . . . no, don't interrupt . . . I'm truly sorry. I never intended to hurt anyone. Secondly, I'm offering a chance to bury the hatchet. We're both eight years older. Why can't we get together for a drink and a talk. That's all I'm asking.'

You're asking a hell of a lot, thought Armstrong. But he was slightly ashamed of himself for losing his temper and made an effort to cool things down.

'Cheryl, I appreciate the apology. I believe you mean it.' He didn't believe any such thing, but thought the lie would help to settle the dust. 'But quite honestly, I don't think it would be a good idea for you and me to meet . . . ever.'

'Okay, I won't labour the point. But I still don't see why not.'

'Because . . . because, frankly, I don't want to.'

'I appreciate your frankness.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude.'

'It's okay. So that's your final word?'

'Yes.'

'Alright. Perhaps I'll come round to your house sometime instead, then.'

'Cheryl, no . . . please . . . look, give me some time to think. Give me a week, then call again if you feel you must. My mind will be clearer then.'

'Alright, one week. Goodbye, John.'

The line clicked and was dead. Armstrong slowly lowered the phone. He looked at it incredulously, shaking his head. Angrily he slammed it down into its cradle.

Damn the woman! He picked up the phone again and selected the caller list. He wrote Cheryl's number on a Post-It and stuck it by the cradle. If she phoned again he would ignore the call. If she kept on calling he would keep on ignoring it.

But what would he do if she carried out her threat of a personal visitation? Deep down inside he was afraid that he hadn't seen the last of his old adversary, that the old wound was in danger of being painfully reopened.

* * * * *

He was thinking about this problem the next day at work when Mollie came into the office to tell him that a man from Blue Planet Airlines was on the phone. Armstrong took the call.

'Dr Armstrong?'

'Speaking.'

'Paul Reynolds here. Director of Communications.'

'What can I do for you?'

'You were shown round one of our Galleons by Engineering recently, I believe.'

'Yes.'

'You must have some sort of psychic powers, Dr Armstrong,' said the voice on the line.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Well, you won't believe this. A bulletin arrived on my desk today from the Director of Engineering. About the Galleon oxygen system.'

'Uh, huh.'

'It seems that a Galleon was being prepared for service in Cape Town a week or so ago. It belonged to Trans-African, one of the older aircraft in their fleet. Well, when they topped up the oxygen the pressure relief valve failed. Fracture in the valve spring. They had to AOG the plane.'

'AOG?'

'Sorry. Engineering jargon. A plane that's unserviceable is Aircraft On Ground.'

'That's incredible,' said Armstrong.

'Quite so. I said you wouldn't believe it. Anyway, the aircraft manufacturer has grounded all Galleons that are more than five years old until their relief valves have been replaced. Bit of a pain for us. It's going to mess up our schedules while we shuffle aircraft around. So really, I'm phoning to offer you an apology. We were rather dismissive when you suggested the broken spring theory. The Trans-African aircraft was due to fly to Barbados. If the valve had failed mid-flight the crew would have been forced to descend and divert to Natal. At low level the fuel consumption is much higher. They wouldn't have made it to Barbados.'

A question arose in Armstrong's mind.

'Does all this have any bearing on the Echo Yankee Enquiry?' There was a pause.

'I don't know,' came the eventual reply. 'That's not really my department, although the Director of Engineering did say that Prof Moynes—the Enquiry chairwoman—has been told about it. Perhaps they'll reopen the Enquiry. I don't honestly know.'

'Is this information confidential?'

FLIGHT 935 DO YOU READ

A laugh came over the line. 'Hardly. The media are onto it already. No doubt it'll be on our TVs tonight and all over the front pages tomorrow.'

'It'll be interesting to see the eventual outcome of all this, won't it?'

There was a sigh at the other end of the line. 'It certainly will.'

CHAPTER 9

The door said 'Captain Oliver I Longman, Cabin Crew General Manager'. Sue Kristiansen drew a deep breath and knocked. There was no reply so she rapped the door more vigorously. Still nothing. The door was slightly ajar, so she pushed it open and let herself into the office. To be exact, Bridget's office. Longman's PA was not there.

Sue crossed the room to the open door leading to the GM's office. Again she tapped, then peered round the door. Longman's chair also was empty.

Well, she was a few minutes early. But she wanted to get the confrontation over with as soon as possible and then forget the whole business. She would just have to wait for Oily to turn up.

Sue was about to sit down when she noticed a stack of papers on Longman's desk. She investigated more closely. It was the pile of forms she had brought him to sign, designed to waste his time and so discourage him from giving her any more trouble. Her face a mask of curiosity, Sue picked them up and flicked through them. She couldn't stop herself smiling. Most of them were the requisitions for pens for the juniors in her care. Each was rubber-stamped 'REJECTED' in red ink. Sue noted that Longman had copied her tactic of interspersing the spurious forms with genuine paperwork. Had Bridget stacked them in the

order they had been processed or had Oily instructed her to deliberately mix them up for when Sue collected and distributed them?

The uppermost form was a uniform requisition. A new jacket and skirt for M Fairwood. That was Melody, Bill Fairwood's daughter. Sue knew her quite well, although they were acquaintances rather than friends. In her role as coordinator Sue had visited Melody once or twice since her father's death to check that she was coping. The last time Sue called, Melody was still considering challenging the Echo Yankee verdict and Sue had been alarmed at the other girl's enduring bitterness. She had tried to talk her out of it, without success. But recently she had seen Melody a few times in the crew room before or after flights, and formed the impression that the girl seemed to be in a happier frame of mind. And now this Trans-African Galleon had turned up with its broken oxygen system. Would that clear Bill Fairwood's name? It must be good news for Mel.

It might be an idea to call in on the way home, thought Sue. It wasn't much of a detour. She could say that she was dropping off the uniform requisition form, and it would give her a chance to find out for herself whether the scars were indeed healing.

'Hello.'

The soft voice in her ear startled her so suddenly that she jumped, letting go the stack of papers, which cascaded onto the desk and onto the floor like confetti at a giant's wedding. A few sheets fluttered to the farthest corners of the room.

Sue held her hand to her heart.

'God, you gave me a fright. I didn't hear you come in. You didn't have to do that.'

Longman grinned at her, evidently enjoying her embarrassment.

'Aren't you going to pick them up?' he asked, indicating with a sweep of his arm the haphazard array of papers on the floor.

'Will you help me?'

'Why, of course,' he replied.

It took a minute to retrieve all the forms. Sue was not pleased when, as she knelt on all fours to fish out a paper from under a cupboard by the wall, Longman briefly rested his hand on her behind, chuckling 'I like to get to the bottom of things, you know.'

Sue held her tongue. Trying to regain her exposure she stood up and placed the dishevelled papers on the desk. 'I believe you wanted to see me about a passenger complaint,' she said neutrally.

'Yes, unfortunate business,' responded Longman. His smile was not one of friendship.

May as well grab the bull by the horns, thought Sue.

'What are you going to do about it?'

Longman looked up at the ceiling.

'Well . . . there are several options. Loss of seniority. Reduction of roster bid rights. Demotion from coordinator . . . '

'You don't have the authority,' countered Sue bravely, although she was not too certain in her own mind.

'No, you're right. All I can do is make recommendations.' He sat back in his chair and joined his hands behind his head. A serious look had displaced the false smile. 'But,' he continued, 'the situation vis-a-vis my superiors and myself is such that anything I recommend in this respect will be ratified by them.'

You bastard, thought Sue savagely. You've probably got the whole of the management in your pocket. Suddenly she was back in Phuket. It was before she had met Gustav. She was still quite new to the job, and a little overwhelmed by the opulent grandeur of the Silver Banyan beach hotel, where the crew were staying for three days, the glorious sub-tropical weather (it was March, and they had left a chilly, rainswept UK) and an incredibly attractive and charming pilot who obviously fancied her. In her naivety she chose to ignore warnings from the other crew members that First Officer Longman was a wolf.

The heady concoction was laced with periodic infusions of alcohol. The crew had taken a day's boat trip to Phi Phi Island for snorkelling and sunbathing and later had returned to Phuket Island to dine at the Suan Thip restaurant, looking out to sea, a mile to the north of their hotel. An idyllic setting. And a beautiful man whose eyes Sue's could not avoid. When they rode back to the hotel in a taxi she and Oliver happened to find themselves together in the back seat, thighs pressed against each other.

Back at the Silver Banyan it was vodka tonics in the bar and then the party began to break up. Sue announced that she was going to bed. She let herself into her room, slightly puzzled that the floor was rocking from side to side. The walls, too, were swaying.

Sue giggled and collapsed on the bed. The ceiling rotated slowly. More giggling. Then a strange noise. What was it? A woodpecker? No, surely there wasn't a woodpecker in the room, was there? There it was again . . . a tapping sound. If it wasn't a woodpecker it must be someone knocking at the door. Yes . . . someone at the door. Another giggle. By an intense effort of concentration she made it to the door without falling over.

It was Oliver. He was carrying a bottle of wine and two glasses.

'Hello Oliver,' giggled Sue.

He stepped into her room. Offering no challenge she took a pace backwards as he entered. He quietly closed the door behind him and put the bottle and glasses on a table. Still stepping backwards, Sue almost lost her balance and reached out to the man with both arms for support. In response he enclosed her with his own arms. Suddenly he was kissing her hungrily, clamping her body tightly against his own.

Alarm bells sounded in Sue's befuddled brain. She could feel his growing erection and his hands roving over her back, lifting her top and reaching for her bra clip. What the hell was going on? Jesus, what have you let yourself in for, Sue? You're in trouble, girl!

'Don't,' moaned Sue. 'Don't, Oliver. I don't want to do this.'

'It's okay,' he purred in her ear, 'You're going to enjoy it. It'll be good.'

'No . . . I didn't mean this to happen. Oliver, please don't. Please let me go . . . please!'

'C'mon Sue,' came the slightly impatient reply. 'We both know the score. You've been giving me the eye all day.' The bra was unfastened and his hand moved round to her breast, roughly fondling the nipple.

'Oh God, please . . . no . . . please . . . '

Now his hands ran down her back and inside her panties. His eyes shone with lust.

Sobering up remarkably quickly, Sue knew that drastic action was called for. She clenched her fist, gritted her teeth in determination and punched him as hard as she could in the face. The impact was excruciating. It was like hitting a block of concrete. Sue felt she had broken her fingers. But it did the trick. Longman reeled and fell against the wall, collapsing in a heap on the floor. Blood spurted from his nose and dripped onto his shirt like crimson raindrops. Sue was paralysed, not knowing what to do next, her clothes a mess.

'You cow! . . . you fucking—' The pilot launched into a tirade of expletives and denunciations. Some of the words Sue had never even heard before, but she realised they were not terms of endearment.

'I'm sorry, Oliver,' she intervened unhappily when he paused for breath. 'I had to do it to stop you. You were going too far.' Her composure was returning and she began to restore her clothing to tidiness.

Groggily Longman started to pick himself up. A shiver of fear ran down the girl's spine. Perhaps he was going to hit her back! Edging away, Sue took a deep breath, preparing to scream as loudly as she could. But no, instead of moving towards her he snatched a towel from her bathroom and held it to the injured proboscis. His eyes flashed at her in hatred and he opened the door and stormed out of her room.

Sue was stunned. Five minutes ago she was happily partying, not a care in the world, living it up in a superb hotel on a tropical island. Now she was trembling with shock, bruised fingers screaming in agony, red bloodstains spreading on her carpet. Her head began to throb painfully. She wished she was home.

'Anyway, I think you should write a letter apologising to this passenger,' Longman was saying, accelerating Sue back to the present.

'You must be joking,' she answered with disgust. 'That is one thing I will not do.'

'Oh yes you will,' countered the GM with a vengeful smile. He started to rub his nose. Was he thinking of Phuket too? 'If you don't, I'll see to it that your coordinator status is withdrawn. Have no doubt I can make it happen.'

'On what grounds?'

'On the grounds that you aren't taking your responsibilities seriously.'

That's a laugh, for you to say that, thought Sue.

'That's untrue,' she said, deciding not to voice her thoughts. 'I take them very seriously.'

'Well,' replied Longman, 'I can give you two examples of irresponsible behaviour. One, you're refusing to apologise to a customer for a totally justified complaint against you.'

'Rubbish,' she retorted. 'The complaint was totally unjustified. Captain Harris will vouch for my behaviour on that flight.'

'You didn't tell Captain Harris that you threatened the passenger with police arrest after landing, did you?'

The stewardess' face reddened. She couldn't deny it. Longman sensed his victory and his smile broadened. 'The other example,' he continued, pressing home the advantage, 'is swamping me with trivial paperwork, wasting my time and the company's resources.'

'You know why I do it.'

'Tell me.'

Sue regained a little of her fortitude. 'To stop you harassing me.'

The GM assumed a hurt look. It was not very convincing, betrayed by that cynical smile. 'Me? Harass you? Why would I do that?'

'You tell me.' Because you're an obnoxious, childish, egotistical prick, that's why.

Longman's smile vanished. 'Ms Kristiansen, I think my superiors will understand my point of view. That for some spiteful reason you are trying to cause me problems, disrupting the important work I do on the airline's behalf with these unnecessary forms.' He gestured at the pile of papers they had retrieved after Sue dropped them, now sitting on his desk. 'Not to mention all the pointless emails you send me.'

Sue couldn't resist an urge to burst out laughing.

'Now that is funny,' she said with sardonic humour. 'Important work? What important work? You spend your time drinking coffee and propositioning any female who comes within range. One day you'll get done for sexual harrassment. I can hardly wait to see you booted out.'

Surprisingly, Longman didn't reply to this. He turned his face and stared out of the window overlooking the airport. Sue instantly regretted her words, realising she had overstepped the mark. The protracted silence intensified her discomfort. She too looked out of the window, her eyes fastening onto a landing aircraft. It hit heavily, sending up a blue pall of scorching tyre rubber, and bounced. The second touchdown was more controlled and this time the aircraft stuck to the runway.

'Ouch,' said Longman, his professional judgement instinctively commenting on the pilot's efforts. They both watched the airliner decelerate to taxying speed.

Longman turned his eyes back to Sue. They were expressionless and cold. A decision had been made. The girl braced herself for the bad news. After her outburst she expected the worst. Again he surprised her.

'Listen, I'm not a hard man. I'll give you another chance. You write the letter of apology and show it to me for approval before you send it. And no more silly forms and emails. If you promise that, then we'll forget all about dropping your coordinator status. There'll be no seniority penalty.' He paused to let her consider the proposition. 'Is it a deal?'

Sue thought carefully before replying. Don't say anything stupid, she cautioned herself. Better back down this time.

'Okay, it's a deal,' she said, defeated.

'Good. Very good.' The smile had returned to his face, almost benevolent. 'I'm glad that's settled. I hate unpleasant scenes.' He pointed at the stack of forms. 'Don't forget to take those with you.'

She nodded silently. He had won, she had lost. Better get out now, out of his evil presence. She picked up the forms.

Longman stood up. Sue thought he was going to open the door for her, but instead he moved towards her and put his arm around her waist.

'You know, Sue, there's no reason why we can't be friends,' he said. The touch of his hand and the sudden use of her first name alarmed the girl. What was coming next? 'I think we could be good friends, you and I. Just think how well your career would develop if we were . . . friends.'

Sue suddenly understood the connotation and her sensibilities recoiled in horror. Longman's arm tightened round her waist. She shuddered in revolt. It was like Phuket all over again.

'Take your filthy hands off me,' she hissed, 'or I'll kill you.' Somewhat taken aback, Longman relinquished his grip.

'Okay,' he said, 'have it your own way.' But the leer returned quickly. 'It's a pity. I just fancied having it off with you right here in the office. On the desk top. Or on the floor. Which would you prefer?'

Sue opened her mouth, stupified. She was speechless with shock, and then rage.

'You are the limit!' she shouted. 'The most revolting little shit I've ever met. God, no wonder your wife divorced you. You're so spiteful.' A thought from earlier raced into her mind. 'I wouldn't be surprised to find out you made Echo Yankee crash just to kill her.'

It was the GM's turn to be shocked. And Sue herself was immediately mortified by what she'd blurted out after her loss of control. Amongst the passengers on the Galleon was Longman's ex-wife. She had been well-liked in the airline and many people were upset when they found out she had been one of the victims.

'I'm sorry,' said Sue, shaking her head. 'That was unforgivable.'

'You can leave now,' said Longman. 'The matter is closed.'

Sue turned and fled the room, almost colliding with a steward who quickly got out of her way as she swept past him, tears already welling in her eyes.

CHAPTER 10

'Ready about?'

'Ready.'

'Lee-oh!'

Armstrong pushed the tiller of the 4-metre Ivatt sail boat away from him. In the front of the cockpit Melody changed the jib sheets as the bow swung through the wind. They both ducked their heads as the boom swung across the centreline and resat themselves on the windward side.

The girl grinned at her pupil. 'Not bad! Push the tiller out a bit to get closer to the wind.'

Above them the mainsail started to flap. 'Not too much!' cautioned Melody. 'Ease it in a bit.'

'I thought you told me this was easier than rowing,' said the scientist.

'So it is. This is your first time, remember. Watch that boat off to starboard, John. He has right of way on this tack.'

Their little red dinghy was zigzagging along the river in the company of a dozen others and Melody had already stressed to the scientist that collision avoidance was more important than steering the exact heading you wanted to. They had spent an hour or so on the water and now it was time to return for landing at the Bourne End Sailing Club, halfway between Marlow and

Cookham. Melody let her pupil keep the helm as they approached the dock, calling instructions to him as she handled the sails. The wind was not strong and the boat arrived at the dock with a gentle bump. The girl stepped ashore and secured it with its painter.

'Right, home for lunch,' said Melody.

It didn't take long to haul the dinghy out of the water, de-rig the sails and fit the cover. Melody declined the offer from some of the other club members to join them for a drink in the bar and soon she and Armstrong were driving back to her house in Wooburn Green in his car.

'What sort of boat is your dinghy?'

'Ivatt. Four metres. Very common. Easy to sail. Reasonable performance.'

Armstrong queried the spelling of the boatmaker's name.

'Why do you ask?'

'Well, the boat might be common, but the name isn't.'

'So?'

'There was a locomotive designer on the LMS named Ivatt.'

'LMS?'

'London Midland and Scottish Railway.'

'Of course.'

Armstrong glanced at his passenger and saw she was grinning.

'Your Dad would have known.'

'Are you offering that as your defence?'

'Okay, I'm a nerd,' admitted the scientist as they pulled into the gravel driveway. 'I must find out whether the same man designed both boats and steam engines.'

'Yes,' laughed the girl. 'You are a nerd.'

* * * * *

As Melody prepared the salad Armstrong went out into the garden, lit the gas barbeque and started cooking the kebabs.

Over lunch the conversation turned back to Bill Fairwood.

'He taught you to sail?' asked Melody's guest.

'Yes.'

'What about flying?'

'I've done some gliding, but not recently. But I'm seriously thinking about starting up again, now that . . . other matters . . . have been sorted out.'

Armstrong briefly described the paragliders he had seen on his ski holiday. 'How did your Dad get into aviation?' he asked. 'Didn't he tell me once he trained as an engineer?'

'That's right. He did a Mechanical Engineering degree at Manchester University. While he was at uni a friend told him about the Air Squadron, run by the Air Force. If you joined you got free flying lessons. Dad signed up and got hooked. So when he graduated he had to make a choice. A career as an engineer, or join the Air Force or go in for civil aviation. Then he was offered a sponsorship by Blue Planet for airline flying training and decided to do that.'

Armstrong remembered the discussion about the faulty injector on the Petersfield and Midhurst's Standard Tank locomotive. Bill it was who came up with the answer to the problem which had baffled the experts.

'So he never did engineering as a career?'

'No. As soon as he got his licences he started as a First Officer with Inter Britain. That's a domestic airline. They had an arrangement with Blue Planet. Newly qualified pilots gained experience on smaller short range aircraft before moving on to the big stuff.'

'Ah, yes. There's a photo in your lounge.'

'That's right. Dad, just before he left Inter Britain to join Blue Planet.'

They ate in silence for a few minutes, both thinking about Bill.

'What about the law suit?' asked Armstrong. 'Presumably they can't sue the airline now?'

'No, it's all changed. Simon sent me an email last week. They're looking at suing Chinavia, the Galleon manufacturers. But Chinavia are apparently suing the makers of the relief valves. Hang on, I've got a print-out somewhere. I'll see if I can find it.'

Melody went indoors and Armstrong attended to the kebabs and sausages on the barbeque. The girl returned waving a sheet of paper.

It seemed that the valve manufacturer had identified a batch in which the springs had been made from an alloy not meeting the specifications in the contract. The valve makers were suing the spring suppliers. So there was now a multilateral argument going on between the various parties and their lawyers and insurers. Echo Victor's oxygen system had included one of these sub-standard valves. In his email, Simon Ketteridge had again apologised to Melody for accusing her father of negligence and again asked her if she wanted to be included in the class action. As a bereaved plaintiff she might be able to claim compensation herself if the group's lawyers won their case.

'And will you join them?'

'I said yes, as it's a no-win no-fee arrangement. But to be honest, I'm not that bothered, now that Dad has been exonerated.'

'It's still lop-sided, though,' said Armstrong. Melody threw him a puzzled look. 'All this fuss about the oxygen valve,' he continued. 'But no-one has yet explained why the pressurisation failed.'

'You had your own theory about that, didn't you?'

'Yes. The test circuit is under the rear toilet. A leak from the toilet or wash basin could have shorted out both the interrupts in the ground signal circuit and opened the outflow valve. Very unlikely, but not impossible in my opinion.'

'Er . . . yes . . . I wish I understood what you were talking about. But anyway, John, it's apparently never happened. Didn't you tell me that before?'

'Oxygen failure had never happened before either. Until Echo Yankee.'

'Good point. But haven't they modified the pressurisation as well since the crash?'

'That's what I was told by the engineers at Heathrow. Let's hope the mods prevent whatever it was that caused the problem before.'

'Yes, let's hope so. I still fly Galleons myself, remember.'
'Hello!'

The call came from the path at the side of the house. The scientist noted a dark-haired woman about the same age as Melody walking towards them with a smile.

'I rang your bell but there was no reply. Looks like I'm just in time for lunch.'

'Sue! Good to see you, come and join us. There's some food left over if you fancy a bite.'

'Might join you in a burnt sausage and a glass of Chardonnay.'

Melody made the introductions. 'Sue, this is John Armstrong, renowned electronics expert and trainspotter geek. John, this is Sue Kristiansen, my guardian angel at the airline. What brings you to this neck of the woods, Sue?'

'Thought I'd pop in on my way home. See how things are. I've got a uniform requisition for you, too.'

Armstrong went to the kitchen to pour the new visitor a glass of wine and fetch a plate for her, leaving the girls to chat. When he returned he noticed that their mood had changed. Neither of them looked particularly happy.

'The bastard,' hissed Melody.

'I don't know what to do,' said Sue. 'I've just about had enough. Ironic, isn't it? I come round to check if you're okay and

I end up loading all my troubles on to you. I thought about getting the union to make a complaint to somebody higher up but Longman would probably deny the whole thing. Anyway, he is well and truly 'in' with all the upper Management. Any complaint I made would just be ignored. It's so unfair. He holds all the cards and I can't do a thing about it. Even if I resign, I'm only hurting myself and Gustav. We need the money. Longman couldn't care less. He'd probably be pleased to see the back of me.' She turned to look at Armstrong. 'I'm sorry, this is very boring for you.'

'Would it be best if I went inside, if it's a personal matter?' said the scientist.

'No, it's okay. I've finished moaning now.'

'No, you mustn't resign,' said Melody. 'Not on account of that sod.'

'Trouble is, if I do complain he'll probably try to make things difficult for me at work, just out of spite,' added Sue glumly. 'Especially now. I went a bit too far, Mel. He'll definitely hate me now. I as much as accused him of murdering his ex-wife.'

Melody and Armstrong looked at her intently.

'What do you mean, Sue?'

'She was a passenger on Echo Yankee.' Eyes watering, Sue described what had happened in the Assistant General Manager's office.

Melody put an arm round her friend's shoulder. 'Don't upset yourself, love. You're not to blame. He provoked you. What a shit! But listen, don't make any hasty decisions. Let things settle down for a day or two. I'll see what the union has to say about Shortarse. Maybe they can do something. Meanwhile, if you need a shoulder to cry on, here I am.'

Sue dabbed a tissue to her eyes. 'Thanks, Mel. Silly, isn't it? As I said, I came here to be a good Samaritan to you but it ends up you counselling me.'

'We're a mutual aid society. And I have my new friend John here to look out for me.'

Armstrong smiled but it was obvious his mind had changed tack. 'I take it this Longman chap was distraught when his wife died, even though they were divorced?'

'Hardly,' snorted Sue. 'He wasn't exactly jumping for joy, of course, but the rumour mill alleges that he told some-one that every cloud has a silver lining – he wouldn't have to pay her alimony any more.'

'What a nasty little shit he is!' was Melody's comment.

'Might just be false gossip,' said Sue. 'But you can imagine him saying it, can't you?'

'Did you say this Longman chap was a pilot himself?' asked the scientist.

'Yes, before he was grounded. Before those idiots in the upper echelons made him GM.'

'What type of plane did he fly?'

'Galleon.'

The two girls looked at him. 'Why do you ask?' said Melody. The scientist screwed up his eyes. 'Just curious.'

CHAPTER 11

The Superfortress bomber banked gently to the right and swept through the air in a wide turn. Then the wings levelled and it gradually lost height until eventually the wheels touched down.

Robert Hayworth closely scrutinised the model he had just landed on the table top. It was almost finished. The paintwork was complete, apart from exhaust stains to add round the cowlings. All he had to do now was apply the last of the transfer markings. The aircraft's nose bore the legend 'Enola Gay', showing it to be a miniature copy of the bomber that had reduced Hiroshima to a funeral pyre of radioactive rubble at the end of the Second War.

'How are you getting on?'

The boy turned round to face his mother.

'What do you think?'

Jeanette approached reverently. Her son had obviously taken a great deal of trouble with the model. It looked very realistic in its silver paint and blue markings.

'Is it a Lancaster?' It was the only old bomber type she could think of.

'No, Mum,' replied Robert, with the scornful impatience that children have with stupid parents. 'It's a B29 Superfortress.'

'Oh, I see,' said Jeanette, none the wiser.

This new aeronautical interest of her son's had certainly captured his imagination. It all seemed to have begun after John had taken him to Heathrow to see the maintenance base. The boy had come home bubbling with enthusiasm and informed his mother that he wanted to be an aircraft engineer, 'maybe even a pilot'.

At first Jeanette thought it would be a flash in the pan, a nine day wonder like his brief experiment with fishing. She was not unhappy when that craze died, particularly after Robert had left a box of maggots in a cupboard and then forgotten about them. She almost had a heart attack when she unsuspectingly opened the door and so liberated an angry swarm of newly-hatched bluebottles.

But this was different. Already her son's bedroom walls were covered with pictures of aircraft. And now a disparate flock of models hung from the ceiling by threads. Jeanette had to remember to keep her head low when dusting his room to prevent her hair becoming entangled with propeller blades, bomb doors and landing wheels. There was a good chance that her son would stick with this pursuit, too, because his new school had an Aircraft Club, which Robert had immediately joined. Older pupils could apply for membership of the Air Cadets, with a chance to fly gliders and light aircraft.

Jeanette was pleased with the improvement in him since he had started at the Laleham Academy. It was a gradual transformation rather than a Damascene conversion. Diffidence was being displaced by confidence and lethargy by a new attentiveness to his studies. It was easy to understand the cause of this renaissance. Robert's teachers actually took the trouble to show an interest in him, and Jeanette could see that her son felt he belonged to the school.

Other school policies suited Jeanette too. The Laleham Academy day started at 9.30, later than others in the area. It meant that the staff and teachers avoided the worst of the traffic

jams, as did the school buses and parents running their children in. For Robert, the walk to the bus stop from their house in Egham was only five minutes. If the weather was bad or he was laden with kit his mother could drop him off at the bus stop on her way to Staines, where she worked as receptionist at a dental practice.

There were other gains for Jeanette. Her son's revival had boosted her own morale. She felt chirpier, uplifted, more able to cope with life's tribulations. Why, even John had remarked that she seemed 'very bright and breezy' the last time he had visited her.

How could she ever repay the debt to her brother? For Jeanette to meet the fees for her son's tuition would have been well beyond the bounds of possibility. Her salary was barely enough to cover the basic requirements of adequate diet and a roof over their heads, with little to spare for treats or rainy days or pensions. But it was more than financial benevolence that John bestowed on his nephew. If Robert finally developed into a balanced, responsible individual, it would be due in no small part to the role of vicarious father that John had assumed. No amount of money could repay that debt. Jeanette often wondered what proportion of her brother's concern for his nephew derived from a sense of family duty, and how much was because of the guilt which he still bore, so onerously and so unjustifiably, for the behaviour of Robert's father eight years earlier.

Her thoughts lingered with her brother for a while. His liaison with that airline girl was doing him good. Jeanette had met Melody at John's house and she had had to agree that her brother had made a good choice. The girl was very attractive, and even though John was nowhere near besotted, Jeanette sensed that this relationship could easily become his deepest involvement with a woman since Cheryl had done her dirty trick on him. Melody was a few years younger than John, not that that made any difference to anything. More to the point, Jeanette

could tell from the way the girl looked at him that she was well on the way to committing herself.

Returning to her domestic chores, Armstrong's sister found herself reviewing her own love life. There was no equivalent to John's Melody for her. The nearest thing to that was Graham, and he was no more than a superficial flavouring in her existence. She didn't see him very often and in any case she knew that he was involved with other women besides herself. Jeanette usually ended up in bed with him when they did actually get to meet and in this way she managed to avoid total celibacy. It was a sort of business relationship really. He fulfilled her sexual requirements, which were not very demanding, and no doubt she did the same for him. In point of fact she knew less about Graham than perhaps she ought to and she preferred to keep it that way. He was apparently respectable and he was kind and courteous. Beyond that, Jeanette was not interested. In the common parlance of the times, he was her 'bit on the side'. The arrangement had been in effect for the last four years, to the satisfaction of both parties, and there was no reason why it should not continue in the future. John had met Graham and had not disapproved, although the degree of intimacy had not been a subject for discussion between Jeanette and her brother. But John was smart enough to guess the score, thought his sister.

Perhaps fate would bring Jeanette a man she could commit to, but she wasn't banking on it. The last time it happened she had been cruelly deceived and she would not let herself fall into that trap again, not unless she was absolutely sure of him. And every year that passed subtracted a little of her feminine attractiveness. She might have to make do with 'Grahams' for the rest of her life. Her mind went back to her first visit to the Academy, where she met Mr McVay, the teacher who was Robert's mentor. Now he would be something more than a Graham! She could tell that straight away. About forty years old, black wavy hair just beginning to grey at the sideburns,

distinguished features, merry blue eyes. And he was such a cheerful character, the mouth permanently crinkled into a smile. What lucky woman enjoyed that man's affections? Well, there would be a chance to meet him again soon because she would be attending a teachers and parents dinner at the school in two weeks' time. Perhaps she would find out a little bit more about Mr McVay then.

She sighed. The dusting was almost done. When she was finished she would make a nice cup of tea.

The telephone rang and Robert answered it. After a brief conversation with the caller he summoned his mother. 'It's Uncle John,' he said, handing the phone over.

'Hi.'

'Hello, sis. What's Robert doing at home today? No problems at school, I hope.'

'No, none at all. It's a holiday today.'

'Oh, good. That's why I rang—to ask you how he was getting on at Laleham.'

'He's settling in well,' answered Jeanette. 'Seems to be getting on with the other children okay.'

'What about the academic side of things?'

'Too early to say yet. Mr McVay will be setting him some exams at the end of term to assess his ability. But he told me that Robert wasn't having any particular difficulty with his classwork. The teachers are very good. He's been getting special coaching to help him catch up with the classroom lessons. Otherwise he'd be out of touch with the Laleham syllabus, which is different from his old school. The staff are certainly helping him as much as they can. I'm very encouraged.'

'Glad to hear it, sis. Looks like our money is well spent.'

'Your money.'

'Come on, Jeanette. We've been through this before. Remember what we agreed?'

'I'm sorry, John, really. It's just that sometimes I feel that I'm shirking my responsibilities by letting someone else pay for my son's education.'

'I'm not 'someone else'. I'm his mother's brother. Anyway, the subject is closed. As of this moment, okay?'

'Okay.'

There was a pause.

'Jeanette, there's something else I have to tell you.'

'Oh dear, that sounds ominous.'

'Well, it could be. I've been agonising about it, wondering whether or not I should tell you.'

The woman was silent, waiting for the bad news, for that was obviously what it was going to be.

'I had a nasty experience which may possibly happen again. It's my problem really, but it might also become your problem, although I hate to have to say it.' He sighed. 'I had a phone call from Cheryl. It was a few weeks ago. She called me at home, out of the blue, saying she wanted to meet me.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. When I asked her she just repeated that she wanted us to meet. She was quite affable, at first anyway. Of course I refused the invitation. She persisted. I held my ground. Towards the end she began to get annoyed.'

'What happened?'

'Just before she hung up she said she would call me again a week later. She said that unless I agreed to a meeting she would actually turn up at my house.'

'Oh dear.'

'Well, funnily enough, she didn't call, and she didn't turn up either.'

'So what is she up to?' Jeanette was as suspicious as her brother.

'I've really no idea. For the first two weeks I was on tenterhooks, dreading to pick up the phone when it rang or answer the doorbell. But I've heard nothing more from her, and now I'm hoping it was just a momentary whim of hers.'

There was a pause before Jeanette asked the next question. 'Did she say anything about . . . about Neil?'

Armstrong cleared his throat. 'She said they were separated. Not divorced. She's living down here now, in Chiswick. '

'That bitch,' hissed Jeanette with uncharacteristic acrimony. 'You said it.'

'I'd like to get my hands on her. I'd like to make her suffer.'

Armstrong was surprised at this eruption from his normally placid sister. He reflected that Time was not always the great healer. Not even eight years.

'Well perhaps the incident is over,' he said to try to calm her down. 'After all, I didn't hear from her again. Perhaps she's changed her mind and decided to leave me in peace.'

'Perhaps she's planning some fiendish trick. Maybe she wants to keep you guessing for a while. That's more like Cheryl.'

Armstrong sadly agreed. The same thought had already occurred to him. 'That's why I felt I had to tell you about it . . . in case she tries to harass you as well. At least now you've been forewarned.'

'I'm glad you have told me. Does Melody know about it?' 'Yes.'

'Did you tell her what happened eight years ago?'

'No . . . just that Cheryl and I were engaged.'

'Yes, that's probably for the best. No reason to dig all that up again.'

'That's what I thought. Anyway, maybe we'll never hear from Cheryl again. If only she would fall under a bus or something.'

'It's a heartless thing to say but I wouldn't shed any tears. Now then, let's change the subject.' Jeanette made a conscious effort to brighten her mood. 'When are you coming over to see us? Robert's dying to show you his latest models.'

* * * * *

Having made arrangements to visit his sister, Armstrong replaced the phone. For several minutes he sat doodling on a notepad, collecting his thoughts. He felt better now that Jeanette knew about Cheryl's phone call. There was still the possibility that Cheryl would try to start trouble.

It could be that Neil had walked out on her and she was intending to inflict her revenge on Armstrong or his sister. Was Jeanette less vulnerable than he was? After all, she had not remarried and so far as he knew she was not heavily involved with anyone and so there wasn't much damage that Cheryl could do there. But suppose the witch tried to come between him and Melody . . .

The scientist forced his attention back to other matters. He had been invited to give one of his lectures on developments in electronics to year 12 pupils at a local school and was preparing his notes. He often gave up his evenings to these presentations, for which he received no remuneration, not even travelling expenses. That didn't bother him at all. Nor was his motivation any high-minded sense of duty to the community. The plain fact was that he knew his subject thoroughly and he enjoyed talking about it. Simple dedication endowed the scientist with the art of imparting information that so many professional teachers lacked despite years in training colleges.

Over the five years or so that he had been presenting his lectures for school students he had seen a gradual increase in the numbers making up his audiences. The schoolteachers had told him that after years of drift away from science subjects the pendulum was beginning to reverse its swing, propelled by the massive growth in IT and related subjects. It was the prGMatism of crude market forces at work. The students knew that finding a job was easier if their studies had a scientific or technical basis. Armstrong had also noted an increase in the percentage

of girls attending his presentations. Well, he had no objections to that either.

The scientist fired up his laptop and opened the folder containing his school lecture files. His general policy was to prepare talks lasting about an hour. When the round of local schools was complete he would choose a new topic for the next tour. Of course electronics and IT subjects were the basis of most of his presentations but from time to time he would introduce other material to widen his audience appeal. Sometimes he was surprised at how obscure knowledge enthused his young listeners. One of his most popular lectures turned out to be about the design and manufacture of cart wheels for horse-drawn vehicles. With luck the tiresome epithet 'Memotron Man' would gradually drop out of use.

Why not put his recent aeronautical engineering experience to good use? He could describe what he had seen at the Blue Planet engineering base at Heathrow. He could talk about the Galleon technical systems in language his audiences would understand without too much difficulty. Bring in the problems with the oxygen and pressurisation and how they had been dealt with.

Hmmm. That outflow valve. The engineers were certain that electromagnetic interference could not have caused the malfunction. So for the valve to fully open in flight the two breaks in the ground signal circuit would have to have been bypassed somehow. Water from a toilet leak or . . . some other agent. Human interference perhaps? But how? And why? How . . ? Difficult to answer. Why . . ? The act of a terrorist, perhaps. But if a suicide terrorist had the technical ability to open the outflow valve somehow he—or she—would probably also have known that depressurisation alone would not have brought down the aircraft, because the crew and passengers would have donned oxygen masks to keep them alive until the aircraft had descended into breathable air. Was there a more elaborate plan

then? Somehow nobble the oxygen and then the pressurisation? Armstrong shook his head. Impossible. It just didn't make sense. And yet . . .

He started to type his new presentation but the questions would not leave his mind. He told himself he was making something out of nothing. The Echo Yankee affair was over, wasn't it? Would good would it do to keep on digging?

The scientist was halfway through his second paragraph when he stopped again. *No, it was no good. He would have to do something about it.* He picked up his phone and dialled.

* * * * *

Clapham Junction. A damp afternoon, but to the south more luminous patches of cloud suggesting where the sun might soon break through. Maybe twenty passengers standing or walking along the platform. Still plenty of puddles for them to avoid. Not modern times, since several of the men were wearing hats although the above-the-knee skirts of the females dated the scene post-1960. A peaceful scene about to be shattered, for at its centre a Merchant Navy pacific locomotive was screaming towards the viewer. To judge from the dirty white plume of flattened exhaust torn from the engine's chimney the train was doing at least eighty. The plate on its smokebox door bore the number 35004. Although the nameplate above the driving wheels was not yet visible, enthusiasts would have identified the machine as 'Cunard White Star', a Bulleid designed express passenger locomotive. Enthusiasts such as airline pilot Bill Fairwood, or electronics scientist John Armstrong or Detective Inspector Arthur Mackelbury, who was now adding the finishing touches to his oil painting. The work was completed to his general satisfaction although he thought he might enlarge one of the puddles to let him expand the reflected image of the grimy station buildings.

Mackelbury lived and worked in Epsom. A cheery, portly character of fifty-two, he was well liked and respected by his colleagues in the North Downs Police Force and by his neighbours. His wife Rose matched him almost exactly in temperament, and for that matter, in build. Their twin daughters both lived away from home, one married, the other about to be. Freed of maternal responsibility, Rose devoted her spare time to old-fashioned activities such as knitting and embroidery, 'keeping myself busy doing something useful' as she told her friends. Her prodigious output was nearly all donated to local charities for fund-raising.

Her husband's twin passions were painting and railways. He often combined the two and was able to supplement his modest salary with commissions earned from the sale of his train pictures. Mackelbury paintings were renowned amongst the fraternity of railway enthusiasts.

The police officer was still thinking about his Clapham Junction puddles when Rose brought him the phone. 'It's John Armstrong,' she said.

After a brief exchange of pleasantries Armstrong broached the topic that was on his mind.

'Artie, I'm looking for info about something.'

'Go on.'

'It's that Galleon airliner that went down last year.'

'The plane Bill was on?' The pilot had been a friend of Mackelbury's too, through the Petersfield and Midhurst Railway.

'Yes, there's something bothering me about it. Tell me Mack, do you know if the police looked at terrorism as a possible motive? Or sabotage?'

'Couldn't really tell you, mate,' came the reply. 'Not really my area, you see. Why do you ask? Do you know something?'

Armstrong summarised his recent involvement with Melody's campaign and the questions it had raised.

'Interesting,' said the policeman. 'These days all that sort of stuff is dealt with by Transec—Transport Security. I think that's a part of the Department of Transport. I would imagine they would have links with the Intelligence boys as well as the cops.'

'Presumably they would have looked into the backgrounds of all the passengers and crew who were on the aircraft?'

'You would have thought so. I haven't heard any suggestion that terrorism or sabotage was behind it.'

'It was just a thought.'

'Hmmm. Tell you what, John. I've got some mates in the Met who probably work with Transec. Let me make some calls and I'll see what I can dig up.'

'Great, I'd appreciate that, Mack. By the way, when are you next going down to the P & M?'

CHAPTER 12

Melody looked at her watch. Nearly five o'clock. Damn. They should have landed back at Heathrow an hour and a half ago and here they were still at Toulouse, waiting for take-off clearance. If they didn't get off soon she would miss the dinner date with John. As it was she would probably have to go straight to the restaurant in her uniform. Maybe throw on a sweater to civilianise her appearance.

Things had started to go wrong from the moment she boarded the Airbus A320 with the rest of the crew at Heathrow shortly before midday. Captain Goodall had come back into the cabin from the flight deck to break the news to the flight attendants that the airport firemen had just walked out to attend an impromptu union meeting. The guarrel with the British Airports Authority over productivity had been simmering for weeks and many people had forecast trouble. Now, without fire and rescue cover, the airport was effectively closed to all commercial traffic. Aircraft waiting at the holding point for takeoff returned to the ramp. Arriving flights were diverted to other airports. In a very short space of time Heathrow, never able to much tolerate disruption to its precariously-balanced organisation, ground to a chaotic halt. Terminals quickly overflowed with irate passengers. Some aircraft had had to shut down on the taxiways for lack of apron space on the ramps.

Captain Goodall ordered his dispatcher to board the Toulouse passengers anyway, preferring to be ready to go at short notice when normal working resumed. And so they had sat on the stand for over an hour, with the air conditioning just about able to cope with a cabin full of overheated passengers in the warm, humid July atmosphere. Melody and the other cabin crew served complimentary drinks at the Captain's instruction and tried as far as possible to quell the increasing irritability of customers yet again subjected to the disruption caused by industrial action. As usual, both sides in the dispute blamed the other, and both sides expressed their regrets that the travelling public were suffering the effects of their opponents' intransigence. Both sides emphasised their desire to 'get round the table to find a solution'.

The firemen had stayed out for about an hour. Even when they returned it took the airport several hours to clear up the back log and attain some semblance of normal operation. Luckily Melody's flight got away only ninety minutes late. It could have been worse. Melody would not have been surprised to learn that some departures were eventually delayed by more than twelve hours, particularly those incoming intercontinental flights that had been forced to land at diversion airfields before finally getting authorisation to continue onwards to Heathrow.

But Captain Goodall's problems were not yet over. Their late arrival into Toulouse coincided with an influx of flights from Zagreb and Split, carrying thousands of fans for a football match being staged in the French city that evening. The airport struggled to cope with the extra traffic disrupting the already-busy schedules.

So here was Melody's aircraft in the take-off queue. About five minutes previously she had called the flight deck on the interphone to find out what progress was being achieved. There were still four flights ahead of them, she was told. Melody hung up the receiver, calculating timings. Let's see, if we take off in, say, fifteen minutes, we should arrive on stand at Heathrow before seven, assuming no holding delay before landing. There would still be time—just—to phone John with an update before he set off for Mario's restaurant in Holyport. She would tart herself up in the crew room and meet him at the restaurant at eight thirty as planned. A rumble of engines outside signified another departure on its way. Good, only three ahead now.

There would be lots to talk about with John. Melody opened her bag and took out the print-out of the roster she had downloaded in the crew room just before they left London. In three weeks' time she was scheduled for a trip to Funchal, Madeira. The crew would be stopping over for two nights before returning. Why not invite John along? He could travel as a passenger and take a separate room at the Internacional Hotel, where the crew would be accommodated. She was sure that her colleagues would not mind if John tagged along with them, or if she left them to go sightseeing with him.

Separate room? Or sleep together? That would be new territory. It was clear that John wanted to go further than just kissing and cuddling but so far she had resisted further advances and he had accepted her explanation that she wasn't ready for the next stage—not yet anyway. Unlike Sebastian he was not making any demands on her. But her resistance was weakening and she knew it would only be a matter of time before their relationship became physical. Maybe Madeira would be the right place to let him seduce her, in the holiday atmosphere of a beautiful island away from home. If he was still interested. And if he wasn't, what then?

The stewardess sighed and folded her arms. Another jet roared past on its take-off run and her own aircraft edged closer to the holding point. Just hope for the best, she told herself.

There was another piece of news to tell John when she saw him. Two days previously she had received a letter from Arrow Tip, a television production company. It seemed that they were compiling a documentary about the Galleon, in the light of the oxygen failure on the Trans-African aircraft. The theme of the programme would be along the lines of whether the travelling public was being properly protected from further failures. Were the modified valves safe? Was there any guarantee that the valve springs would not fail in the future? The TV researchers had discovered that the answer to that was . . . apparently not. Also, were other types of aircraft with similar oxygen systems perfectly safe? The answer to that seemed to be . . . everyone was hoping for the best. Had the reason for Echo Yankee's pressurisation malfunction been identified? No, it hadn't. Were the manufacturers still looking for the cause? Apparently not. The letter invited Melody to make any comments she might have for inclusion in the programme, she being the only living relative of the captain on Echo Yankee. In reply, Melody suggested that Arrow Tip might care to review her objections to the conduct of the Commission of Enquiry. As she had written the email a little of the old anger smouldered inside, but she firmly disciplined herself not to get upset.

She would tell John all about it at the restaurant, if she ever got there! Her watch said ten past five. C'mon Air Traffic Control, let us go!

As if in response to her plea the PA clicked into life and Captain Goodall's voice permeated the cabin in distorted amplification.

'Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to say that we are now number one, expecting take-off clearance in two or three minutes. Take it from me—my crew and I are as desperate to get home as you are.'

One or two passengers smiled. Several others looked impatiently at their watches. A baby started crying.

Just before 5.15 the engines wound up to take-off thrust, shaking the airframe into a feverish tremble. The airliner began to accelerate. Half a minute later the nose lifted and at last the Blue Planet A320 was homeward bound.

CHAPTER 13

For ninety years a single-track branch railway connected the Hampshire town of Petersfield on the main London to Portsmouth line with Pulborough in Sussex, running via Midhurst. The branch was first opened in the 1860s during the golden age of the railways and survived until a decade after the second world war when diminishing patronisation forced the nationalised British Railways Board to withdraw the services and close the line. The rails were torn up and soon only a weeded trackbed and dilapidated station buildings remained.

Even these last vestiges might eventually have vanished were it not for the foundation of the Petersfield and Midhurst Railway Society, whose aim it was to relay the track between these locations, rebuild the station at Midhurst and the branch line platform at Petersfield and run enthusiasts' trains hauled by preserved steam locomotives.

Financed by the sale of bonds to members of the Society, not to mention a vast donation from an eccentric retired multimillionaire, the project gradually came to fruition and, to the surprise and delight of its instigators, actually began to pay its way with revenue from ticket sales and souvenirs.

Amongst those railway buffs who had bought P & M bonds were one John Armstrong, electronics research scientist, one

Arthur Mackelbury, police officer, and one Bill Fairwood, airline captain.

* * * * *

It was a fine morning late in July, a Saturday. A rain-bearing front had swept through southern England overnight but it had since raced across the Channel and was now drenching the Belgian coastal towns. A flotilla of puffy cumulus clouds now cruised through the blue skies on a gentle westerly wind.

The forecast was good, although many of the enthusiasts now milling ground the platform at Midhurst station were pessimistically garbed in rain jackets. The fans ranged in age from about five to about eighty. Shrunken old men stood in little cliques reminiscing about the golden years when the Southern's expresses were still hauled by steam, more than a match for the modern worm-like electric trains that had about as much character as a piece of wet cardboard.

The youngest of the pilgrims clung uncertainly to their mothers' hands, a little fearful of the noise and movement around them, while the fathers pottered around the rolling stock. An observer would note that the female faces in the crowd wore expressions encompassing the entire gradation from stoic tolerance to acute boredom.

The train about to depart for Petersfield comprised a rake of crimson-and-cream 1950s corridor coaches, two ex-London and Brighton suburban coaches in Southern green livery and, incongruously, an ancient Great Western clerestory, painstakingly rebuilt from dereliction after spending its last eighty years at the end of a forgotten siding near Chipping Sodbury.

A dense nucleus of spectators thronged round the engine now hissing at the head of the train, at which a host of cameras and camcorders were pointed. Resplendent in pre-war London and North Eastern Railway colours was the P & M' s J50 saddle tank.

The fireman threw in another shovelful of coal and clanged the firebox door closed with his foot before turning on the injector to top up the boiler. His eyes scrutinised the gauge glass carefully.

It was hard work for a man of sixty-eight, but of course Harold Wiggins had started his railway career firing engines and so it was all second nature to him.

Horace Skidmore, the driver, was leaning cut of the cab talking to two men and a boy standing on the platform. Another veteran of steam, although Harold would often refer to him as 'the kid' as he was a mere sixty-five years old.

'So you're riding footplate today, John?'

'If you'll let me.'

Skidmore's face broadened into a grin. 'Of course, old son. You're welcome any time. You too, Mack,' he added, turning to the other man. He nonchalantly twisted his head to check the steam pressure. The needle hovered just below the maximum. Any more, and the safety valves would blow off.

'You're working well, Harold, old son,' he called over his shoulder to his older mate.

The fireman kicked a piece of coal away from the cab floor. 'Yes, I am. It's about time we got this tub moving, isn't it?'

'Patience, old son. Two minutes to go yet.'

Robert Hayworth was peering inside the cab at the various controls, his eyes wide with the curiosity of youth. His uncle spoke again to the driver.

'Horace, would it be possible for Rob to travel in the cab with you on the return?'

The old man rubbed his wizened face with a machinery-blackened hand. 'Well, Harold will be driver on the way back. I'll be his fireman. What do you think, Harold? If he's got the right name . . . '

Harold dropped the slacker pipe he was about to use to hose down the floor. He came to the cab entrance and looked down at the boy, a twinkle in his eye. 'Your name must begin with the letter aitch to be allowed to drive this engine. What's your name, son?'

'Robert.'

'Did you say 'Henry'?'

Robert suddenly caught on, grinning.

'Yes, Henry.'

'That'll be okay then. You can come back with us on this kettle if you want.'

The deal arranged, Horace looked at his watch and tooted the whistle twice. Down the platform the corpulent figure of the P & M's Assistant Manager could be seen pushing his way through the crowds towards the locomotive.

'Okay, Horace. All the passengers are on board,' he gasped between pants, forehead glistening with dew drops of perspiration. 'You can get this thing out of here now.'

'Okay, boss.'

Artie Mackelbury and Robert clambered into the first carriage and Armstrong mounted the cab. The heat was overpowering, accentuated by the sibilant escape of steam from a leaky valve.

'You like to drive, John?'

The scientist opened his jaw. 'What, me?'

'Nothing to it, old son. I'll talk you through it.'

The old railwayman moved the cut-off lever to the start setting and instructed Armstrong to take hold of the regulator, a long brass handle angled across the cab at forty-five degrees to the vertical.

'We'll start off with about 65 per cent as the load's not heavy. Once we're off we'll bring the cut-off back to thirty and drive on the regulator,' he explained to the novice. 'It can be done the other way round – open the regulator and control the steam with the cut-off. It's six and half-a-dozen if you ask me.'

Armstrong smiled uncertainly, lacking full comprehension.

Horace nodded to his fireman and Harold wound off the hand brake.

'Let's give it a go,' said the driver. Again he gave two blasts on the whistle, then looked back to verify the green flag from the guard.

'Lift the handle gently, about three inches.'

The scientist gingerly complied. The hissing sounds increased, and then with a whoosh of exhaust from the chimney the metal monster edged forward. Behind them the couplings took up with clattering and banging and the train moved slowly away. A cheer went up from the passengers leaning out of the windows and from the spectators on the platform. It was all good fun.

The exhaust beats became quicker as the train picked up speed and then suddenly increased to a staccato drumming. At the same time the train's acceleration sagged.

'Wheel spin,' announced Horace. 'The rails must be greasy here. I'll give her some sand till she grips again.'

Soon they were chugging along the track at about thirty miles an hour, shattering the tranquillity of the slumbering Sussex countryside. On every bridge they clattered under groups of people waved and pointed cameras at them.

Armstrong stood in the swaying cab, right hand tightly clutching the regulator, peering through the front window. Behind him Horace puffed energetically at his pipe. Occasionally he would lean out of the cab to check that the line was clear ahead. It was not unknown for the odd sheep or cow to stray onto the tracks. Horace had once even encountered an abandoned car. But today there were no obstructions to hinder their clamorous progress. Every few minutes Harold opened the firebox door, revealing a white hot inferno raging inside, to shovel in more coal.

'I'll open the injector again,' said the fireman at one point, tapping the gauge glass. 'Level's dropping a bit.'

Horace checked his boiler pressure. 'Whatever you like, old son.' His mate opened the cock to feed more water into the boiler.

Behind them trundled the harlequin procession of coaches. A billowing serpent of sulphurous steam delineated their passage over the peaceful farmland, dissipating slowly in the morning air after the train had passed.

Ten minutes later their destination hove into sight. Horace indicated to Armstrong that he would now take control and the scientist made way for the professional driver, glad to have the responsibility lifted from his shoulders.

Horace closed the regulator and the J50 coasted into Petersfield station, carriages snaking behind it, to a rowdy reception from another crowd of railway freaks. With a squeal of brake shoes against metal tyres the train juddered to a halt. Harold wound on the hand brake and opened the firebox door to examine the state of the glowing coals inside.

Armstrong watched as the two retired railwaymen prepared their engine for the turnround. The locomotive was uncoupled and driven onwards over the points onto the main Portsmouth line. Harold reversed the engine past the carriages and thence back onto the branch line at the far end of the train. Another switching of points and the J50 approached the last carriage, now the first of the return service, for recoupling. It would thus be driven bunker first back to Midhurst.

When the train rolled out of Petersfield young Robert was in the cab, careful to keep out of the enginemen's way, eagerly enjoying a new experience as he watched the veterans at work.

Seated in the clerestory, Armstrong and Mackelbury listened to the straining beat of the engine, punctuated by the clicketyclack of the carriage bogies on the rail joints. The scientist turned to face his companion. 'Well, Artie, what's the latest gen?'

'How much did I tell you over the phone?'

'You said you spoke to your friends in the Met and they asked you to go and see them.'

'Right. I went to Scotland Yard. There were a couple of people from Transec there, too.'

'That's Transport Security, isn't it? I think you mentioned them before.'

'Yes. They were interested in your idea about interference with the pressurisation. When the plane didn't respond to instructions the air traffic controllers suspected a hijack or terrorist attack and initiated the unlawful interference procedure. The military sent up a couple of fighters to intercept.' Mackelbury looked round to check that nobody was in earshot. The clerestory was two thirds full of enthusiasts so he lowered his voice as a precaution. 'Your ears only, John.'

'Of course.'

'They came close to shooting it down. But by the time they'd located the Home Secretary for authorisation the plane was approaching London. The Home Sec said they didn't want chunks of aeroplane and dead bodies raining down on the capital. He managed to contact the Prime Minister and she told them to hold fire as by then it looked like crew incapacitation rather than hijacking. You know the rest.'

'So did they suspect any skullduggery amongst the passengers?'

'Any time a plane crashes these days they go through the passenger list with a fine tooth comb.'

'So, on Echo Yankee, any doubtful characters?'

'They were looking for terrorists, criminals and anyone who might be a hate figure or a potential target for assassination. They also looked at the crew members and other Blue Planet employees travelling on that flight.'

'Surely they wouldn't suspect the airline's own people?'

'Afraid so. It's the coercion scenario. Airline employees have often got security clearance to gain entry into sensitive parts of airports and aircraft. So a bad guy comes up to you one day and says 'put this package in the overhead bin or we'll kill your wife and children'. What would you do?'

'But surely no-one can get suspect material through Security. Not even crew. What about all the scanners and so on?'

'The Transec people told us it's quite easy to bypass Security. They didn't tell us how, for obvious reasons.'

'That's not very reassuring, Mack.'

The police officer shrugged. 'That's the world we live in. The politicians are very panicky about terrorism. They have to look tough and so they bring in draconian laws but they know the bad guys will always hold the best cards. The baddies can change tactics as they please and the politicians can only wait to see where and how and where the next atrocity is committed.'

Mackelbury's jacket was lying on the seat next to him. He pulled a sheaf of papers from an inside pocket and unfolded them. 'Here's what we've got,' he continued. 'The black list. There are about twenty people here. See what you think.'

CHAPTER 14

Armstrong smoothed out the document. The title was 'PART 15: BLUE PLANET FLIGHT 935: PASSENGER BACKGROUNDS'. The rubric said: 'The backgrounds of the following persons were investigated by Transec Committee 44/10 in accordance with Article 12 and Schedule F of the Prevention of Terrorism Act. These data are not for release into the public domain and are exempted from the Freedom of Information and Data Protection legislation.' He started to read.

SHAHID RAZIQ

Age: 25.

Supposed purpose of travel: On package holiday with three friends. In Cyprus for two weeks. Package included an apartment in Larnaca Bay. This party included Yousaf Pirzada (see below).

General: Domiciled Headingley, Leeds, with parents. Father delivery driver and security guard. Mother works in supermarket. One younger sister.

Employment: part time and casual work, frequent periods of unemployment.

Other: Two years ago joined a radical mosque (Bank Street) in Leeds. Went to Pakistan and joined a madrassa in Bahawalpur for 6 months. On return to UK was involved in anti-West demonstrations. Last year charged with breach of peace and damage to property during a demonstration in London against Western presence in Afghanistan. Convicted. Suspended sentence of three months. Police found anti-West propaganda at his home.

Relevance to Flight 935: Not determined. Shahid Raziq had not been actively involved in Islamic activism after his conviction so far as is known.

YOUSAF PIRZADA

Age: 24.

Supposed purpose of travel: On package holiday with three friends. In Cyprus for two weeks. Package included an apartment in Larnaca Bay. This party included Shahid Raziq (see above).

General: Domiciled Hyde Park, Leeds, with parents. Father postman. Mother teacher. Two younger brothers.

Employment: Chef.

Other: Met Shahid Raziq at the Bank Street Mosque, Leeds. Not considered to have been radicalised.

Relevance to Flight 935: Probably none.

DOUGAL 'JACK' RUSSELL

Age: 39

Supposed purpose of travel: Returning from 10-day holiday in Paphos, where he owned a villa. Travelling with 2nd wife, Suzanne.

General: Domiciled Bonnybridge (near Falkirk, Scotland) and Chigwell, London. Twin brother, Ian, lives in Falkirk.

Employment: See below.

Other: The Russell twins have been involved in criminal activities all their adult lives. Both have served prison sentences. Dougal served a 3-year sentence for drug offences. He was suspected of organising the killing of a rival in 2006 but evidence was insufficient to bring prosecution. More recently he escaped prosecution for GBH because DNA evidence found at the scene could not differentiate between the twins and both denied the charge and provided alibis. Owned an employment agency in Plaistow, London, specialising in placing immigrants in employment. It is believed some of these were illegal entrants.

Relevance to Flight 935: Not determined.

RIOGHAN MURRAY

Age: 48

Supposed purpose of travel: Returning after two week holiday with his wife in Limassol. Had booked onward flight to Belfast, due to depart Heathrow three hours after arrival of Flight 935.

FLIGHT 935 DO YOU READ

General: Domiciled Dundonald, Northern Ireland. Was serving

as local councillor (Sinn Fein).

Employment: Worked as a supervisor in a floor covering

manufacturing company.

Other: Active member of the IRA during the Troubles. Four months jail in 1988 for wounding a British soldier during a riot in Belfast. No known criminal or terrorist activity since release from

jail.

Relevance to Flight 935: Not determined.

KAREN WOODSTOCK

Age: 52

Supposed purpose of travel: Returning after two week holiday in

Aya Napa with her daughter, also named Karen.

General: Domiciled Hazelrigg, Northumberland. Divorced.

Employment: retired in the rank of Superintendent from

Northumbria Police Force.

Other: Successfully put many criminals in the Newcastle area

behind bars. Some of these had vowed to take their revenge

once released from jail.

Relevance to Flight 935: Not determined.

SIR MICHAEL GRANTEL

Age: 64

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Supposed purpose of travel: Business in UK

General: Domiciled Episkopi, Cyprus, with his wife, Joanna. Married. Three children, two grandchildren, all living in UK. Employment: CEO of Eismann Wolff Financial Services. Owned three other properties in the UK.

Other: Triggered controversy when EWFS narrowly avoided bankruptcy during the 2008/9 financial crisis. Accused of reckless management of investment funds and criticised for drawing large salary and bonuses during the crisis. Shareholders narrowly voted not to demand his resignation.

Relevance to Flight 935: Not determined.

HELEN GILDERAN-STEWART

Age: 29

Supposed purpose of travel: On holiday with her boyfriend, William Kemp.

General: Domiciled East Sheen, southwest London in a rented apartment.

Employment: Helen and her boyfriend were both freelance journalists.

Other: Helen had attracted controversy with several high-profile exposés of illegal practices in the GM agricultural industry. Successfully fought a libel challenge brought by Genhancement Agritech after an article in which she wrote that GenAg were manipulating research data.

Relevance to Flight 935: Not determined.

HEDAYAT FAHIM

Age: 42

Supposed purpose of travel: Travelling to London as member of a trade delegation from Afghanistan.

General: Domiciled Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan. Deputy Governor of Balkh Province. Married. Four children.

Employment: See below.

Other: Business enterprises included local management of the Asia-Link mobile phone network. Suspected of having clandestine links with Taliban sympathisers in the north of Afghanistan. Hedayat Fahim had left four days before the other members of the delegation and spent these days in Larnaca as a guest of American friends who were renting an apartment. UK Intelligence Services are of the opinion that one or more of these 'friends' were CIA operatives. Washington has replied 'no comment' when questioned about this.

Relevance to Flight 935: Not determined. In the absence of cooperation from either the CIA or the Dept of Homeland Security no further judgements can be made.

SHALOM QUINTET

Age: various, from 26 to 37

Supposed purpose of travel: The five musicians in this group had been visiting various Mediterranean countries on a concert tour. London was to have been the start of their northern Europe tour.

General: Four domiciled Israel, one domiciled St Petersburg, Russia.

Employment: See below.

Other: The quintet's planned arrival in the UK had been beset by political controversy as all five members had been members of the Israeli Defence Force under the conscription regulations currently in force. Several pressure groups threatened to disrupt the concerts and death threats had been issued by extreme Muslim factions.

Relevance to Flight 935: Significant. These musicians were hate figures for extremists, firstly for their nationality and secondly because some members had seen military action in Lebanon and Gaza.

RICHARD COSTELLO

Age: 61

Supposed purpose of travel: Travelling back to the US with his wife via London after staying with British friends in their villa in Aya Napa.

General: Domiciled Springfield, Missouri, USA. Married, no children (see below).

Employment: Richard Costello was a Bishop in the New Free Baptist Church of America.

Other: Well-known for neo-con political views. Had advocated crusades to halt the spread of Islam. Vehemently anti-abortion and against same-sex marriages. Information revealed to British Intelligence from the CIA and FBI suggests that Costello might in fact have been a closet homosexual and his wife a lesbian.

Relevance to Flight 935: Not determined. Possible hate figure because of his immoderate opinions.

THE FOLLOWING PERSONS ARE ALL EMPLOYEES OR EX-EMPLOYEES OF BLUE PLANET AIRLINES

MARY COOPER

Age: 55

Supposed purpose of travel: Returning home after holiday with her husband.

General: Adminstrator in Blue Planet Pensions Office. 32 years service.

Other: No significant remarks.

Relevance to Flight 935: Probably none.

JAMES WILLIAMSON

Age: 35

Supposed purpose of travel: On duty for Blue Planet. Returning to UK after attending travel industry conference in Larnaca. James Williamson was involved in negotiations to set prices for airport services at Larnaca and Paphos. General: Finance Controller (Airport Services Europe). 13 years service.

Other: Should have returned home with other members of his team two days previously but had been taken ill with food poisoning and so was returning alone.

Relevance to Flight 935: Probably none.

COLIN TURNBULL

Age: 30

Supposed purpose of travel: Returning home after visiting his retired parents in their home in Aya Napa.

General: Domiciled Leighton Buzzard in apartment he owned. Not married. No current partner. One older sister.

Other: Worked in the Staff Services Department. Dismissed after 8 years service for defrauding the company by selling discounted tickets to persons not entitled to them. Blue Planet asked police to prosecute but then withdrew when it was revealed he was suffering mental illness. Was working for a charity at the time of his death. Was still attending clinic for psychiatric disorders. Doctors at the clinic were happy with his progress. Frequently visited his parents.

Relevance to Flight 935: Probably none. Colin Turnbull's mental health problems did not include suicidal tendencies, according to medical experts who assessed him.

TRICIA LONGMAN

Age: 36.

Supposed purpose of travel: Returning home after staying with friends near Paphos. Travelled several times a year to see them.

General: Domiciled Chichester. Ran her own business selling clothes. Owned shops in Chichester, Bognor Regis and Havant. Divorced. One son with her current partner.

Other: Worked as cabin crew (flight attendant) for Blue Planet for 10 years, attaining rank of Cabin Manager. Married for 7 years to Oliver Longman, pilot with BPA. Bitter divorce proceedings, but won right to share of ex-husband's pension fund.

Relevance to Flight 935: Probably none.

NIGEL HEPWORTH

Age: 32

Supposed purpose of travel: Returning after short holiday staying with colleague in Larnaca (see below).

General: Domiciled Woking. Own house. Not married, but long term partner.

Other: Employed as aircraft technician at Blue Planet Engineering, Heathrow. Worked on Airbus and Galleon aircraft. 8 years service. Expected to complete qualification upgrade to licensed engineer within next 2 years. Had just started 6-month career break to go travelling. Had spent 3 days with another BPA engineer who was on temporary detachment to Larnaca.

Relevance to Flight 935: Not determined. Nigel Hepworth would have been familiar with the Galleon's oxygen and pressurisation systems. He could perhaps have helped the flight crew to deal with the problems. This would have required donning a portable mask and gaining access to the flight deck with the assistance of the Cabin Manager. Mr Hepworth did not have any piloting experience.

Armstrong grunted. The J50 tooted its whistle and the passengers in the clerestory felt the jolt of the initial brake application as the train approached Midhurst.

'Well, I think I know who did it,' he said as he refolded the list and handed it back to his policeman friend.

'Colonel Mustard in the library with the lead pipe?' laughed Mackelbury, alluding to a popular detective board game.

The scientist shook his head. 'No, Nigel Hepworth in the toilet with a test circuit.'

* * * * *

For the J50's next run to Petersfield another enthusiast took Robert's place in the locomotive cab. The boy's uncle and his policeman friend told him they would have lunch in the Midhurst station restaurant but Robert wanted to ride in the train again so Armstrong bought him some sandwiches and a drink to take into the carriage with him.

'Moderately healthy,' said the scientist, indicating the tortilla wrap and salad on the table in front of him.

'Moderately unhealthy,' responded Mackelbury, pointing at the cheeseburger he was about to attack. The restaurant was busy, with several people sitting nearby, so the two men's conversation was continued sotto voce.

'You think this Hepworth fellow deliberately opened the outflow valve to let the cabin air out? How could he do that?'

'He goes into the toilet and locks the door. That's not suspicious, of course. Then he opens the inspection hatch in the toilet floor. In the space under this hatch is the test panel for the valve. He either lowers himself down into this space or else reaches down from the toilet floor. He's got some sort of timer device with him, you know, the sort of thing that can switch lights on and off in an empty house.'

'Yeah, I know what you mean.'

'He connects the timer across the wires that feed the ground signal into the control circuit, bypassing the safety interrupts. Then he replaces the hatch and leaves the toilet. After a while the timer kicks in, completes the circuit and the outflow drives fully open.'

'So then the cabin depressurises and the oxygen masks drop down. How will that be of any use? All the crew and passengers will have oxygen to breathe. Or they would have done if the system hadn't emptied because of the broken pressure relief valve.'

Armstrong grimaced. 'Yeah, I can't work out what was suppose to happen next. I think the plan was for Hepworth to kill another passenger during or after the depressurisation but I can't think how. But I think I know who.'

'Who?'

'Tricia Longman.'

'Explain.'

'I could be wrong. As that list shows, there were plenty of other potential murder victims on the plane. But there's another factor too.' Between mouthfuls of tortilla Armstrong told his friend about the conversation Melody had had with Sue Kristiansen when he was at her house.

'So are you saying that this Sue whatever-her-name-is actually suspected Oliver Longman of arranging his wife's murder?'

'No, I think she said it out of anger in the heat of the moment. She told us she apologised to Longman as soon as she said it.'

'But you think she unknowingly had stumbled on the truth.'

Armstrong nodded. 'Yes. If it was Hepworth who opened the outflow then Mrs Longman would be the most obvious victim.'

'Most obvious, perhaps, John. But that doesn't cut the mustard in detective work. If he had been hired as a hit man his target might have been anyone on that list.'

'True enough, Mack.' Armstrong sighed. 'Hell, I don't know. Why are we wasting our time on this? Nothing can be proved. It's all in the past.'

'And putting on my defence barrister's hat, mate, there are other difficulties.'

'Such as?'

'Okay, I don't know as much about electronics as you but surely he would have had to tamper with the wires to connect the timer. You know, disconnect them from the test panel. Or cut away some insulation to get contact with the leads from the timer. Either way, he leaves evidence.'

'Yes, good point. He would have known that the aircraft's systems would have been closely examined after landing if the plan had worked as expected. Perhaps he was planning to go back into the toilet before landing to remove the timer and reconnect the original wiring.'

'Hmm. It's all pretty shaky, John. Plus, what about security? Suppose they had asked him what he was doing with an electric timer in his bag when it went through the scanners. What would he have said? It's not the sort of thing you take on as cabin baggage. And he would have needed a screwdriver or wire strippers as well. Doubtful he could have got them through

security. He was travelling as a passenger, remember, not as an aircraft technician.'

'Maybe he secreted them on the plane beforehand when he was doing an engineering shift at the airport.'

'But how would he have known which aircraft they were going to use for Flight 935? How far in advance are these things planned? Suppose there was a change of aircraft on the day for operational reasons?'

'Yes,' said Armstrong with a wry smile. 'You'd make a good defence lawyer.'

'You've got someone who may be a murderer supposedly killing someone who is one of twenty potential victims by a method which nobody can work out.'

'Not very good, I agree,' admitted the scientist. 'Mack, do they know where the passengers were sitting, the seat allocations? That might give us a clue. Maybe Hepworth had a seat near Tricia Longman.'

'The seat allocations are shown on another page in that document. Let's have a look.'

It seemed that the technician had been seated five rows ahead of Tricia Longman, on the other side of the cabin, which didn't prove or disprove anything, as both the scientist and the police officer agreed, particularly as the aircraft was not full and passengers might have changed seats.

The police officer grimaced. 'For what it's worth, John, from what you've told me, I reckon you're probably right. It looks like Oliver Longman contracted with Nigel Hepworth to kill his exwife, probably for financial reasons. How did he do it? He depressurised the plane and then . . . well, who knows what the next step was supposed to be?'

The two men looked at each other and Armstrong shrugged. A bustle of activity outside drew their attention. Splendid in its black British Railways livery, wreathed in steam and smoke,

FLIGHT 935 DO YOU READ

Standard 2-6-4 tank engine No. 80055 clanked bunker first into view chased by a swarm of enthusiasts.

'The engine Bill fixed,' noted Mackelbury.

'Yes. Poor old Bill.'

CHAPTER 15

Every time John Armstrong passed through Heathrow Airport his impression was confirmed that the planners were fighting a losing battle as they tried to expand the facilities to accommodate the ever increasing flock of travellers. He joined the Blue Planet check in queue in Terminal 4, surrounded by a multi-race human sea. Everywhere the eye looked there was incessant bustle. People standing, moving, walking and running, struggling with coats and bags, hands clutching passports, boarding cards and tickets. Greeting, talking, arguing in many languages. Faces registered confusion, exasperation, boredom, fatigue. Shoulders slumped wearily. Handkerchiefs dabbed at sweating brows.

Dreading the hassle of security, Armstrong was pleased to find that that day—a welcome change—there were sufficient staff on duty to process the throughput without too much delay. In the relative tranquility of the departure lounge the human fluidity continued. The scientist watched an overexcited child race through the room, weaving skilfully round obstructions live and inanimate. But the young feet misjudged the friction coefficient of the polished floor and the boy careered into a coffee table, spilling a cup of cold tea over the briefcase of a

none-too-amused businessman sitting nearby. A distraught woman strode over and collared the boy.

Her profuse apologies did little to mollify the victim, who was still muttering a few minutes later when the flight started boarding. Armstrong joined his fellow travellers in the procession shuffling along the jetty. He caught sight of Melody before she saw him. How attractive she looked in her blue and grey uniform as she welcomed the passengers on board with her professional work-smile. Edging forward with the others, the scientist too passed through the entry door. The stewardess's eyes turned to him and her smile broadened with genuine pleasure. She leant forward for a confidential private greeting.

'Morning, John. There'll be a chance to talk soon. Managed to get you into Business Class. You're in 12D. Here, read this.' She thrust an envelope into his hand as he moved away in the line of passengers searching for their allotted seats.

Armstrong deposited his hand baggage in the overhead bin and settled into his seat by the window. The hassle of Heathrow had already exhausted him, and they hadn't even taken off yet. He let his eyelids drop for a minute, allowing the louvre fan to play refreshingly cool air over his face.

Eyes open again, he fastened his seat belt and read the safety placard, mentally noting the locations of the emergency escape exits. The safety procedures for the Galleon seemed very similar to those of other airliners he had flown in. The screen on the back of the seat in front of him was cycling through adverts for various products and services, thankfully with no sound as yet. Why is it, he pondered, that the world was becoming a giant inescapable billboard? The scientist chided himself with a wry smile. *Turning into a whiney old man, Armstrong!* Then he remembered the envelope Melody had given him. He looked along the cabin. She was bidding welcome to the last of the passengers to board, the work-smile still fixed on her face.

He turned his attention to the envelope. It was addressed to the girl at her home. He took out the letter and opened it.

Dear Ms Fairwood,

As you probably know already, an incident came to light recently involving a Galleon aircraft of Trans-African Airlines. During its pre-flight inspection this aircraft was found to have a fault in its oxygen system. Had this problem occurred during flight, there is a high chance that the contents would have leaked away through a broken valve. Fortunately the defect was discovered before this alarming possibility could have occurred.

Clearly the Trans-African incident bears heavily on the crash of Blue Planet Galleon Echo Yankee, on which the captain was your father. It is quite conceivable that the misfortune that befell that aircraft might have had an identical or similar cause.

Together with my colleagues on the Board of the Commission of Enquiry into the accident I have carefully studied the implications of the new information. After much discussion and further consultation with interested parties, we have decided to revise the findings to reflect the changed circumstances. The revised conclusion will be worded as follows:

'It is possible that the accident to Blue Planet Airlines Galleon airliner Golf Quebec Xray Echo Yankee was caused by a multiple equipment failure, as a result of which all persons on board died from oxygen starvation. The Board notes that this conclusion cannot be given unequivocally since lack of evidence makes it impossible to deduce the status of the oxygen system prior to the pressurisation malfunction.'

I thought it courteous to advise you of our action before the pronouncement was made public. The news media will be informed in due course, and in the interests of avoiding sensationalism I would request that you refrain from revealing the contents of this letter to any agency or person concerned with the news media until then.

I trust you are well.

Yours faithfully,

Tina Moynes (Chairman)

Armstrong refolded the letter and tucked it into his pocket. He peered round the aisle seat to catch a glimpse of Melody but she had disappeared from sight, presumably into one of the galleys. The scientist relaxed in his seat again.

Now the aircraft was rolling backwards, pushed away from the jetty by a tug. With a whine of rotating machinery the first engine spun into life, quickly followed by the other, and only a few behind schedule the Galleon taxied away from its stand.

Today's take-off queue was not too long and within twenty minutes they were airborne and banking to the left, heading southwest. The next to Armstrong was vacant. Good. He could take off his jacket and spread himself out. That was better. The scientist turned to the window to watch the sunlit green fields recede behind the wing.

A few minutes later they crossed the coast and Armstrong identified the Isle of Wight. Incredible how much traffic there was in the Solent. How did all those vessels manage to avoid each other?

Now over the Channel there was little to divert his thoughts and Melody's letter came into his mind. She would obviously be pleased at the outcome of it all. Strange to consider the capricious workings of fate. All the trouble and heartache she went through to cleanse the Fairwood escutcheon, quite unsuccessfully. And then, when she had finally resigned herself to accept the status quo, this unforeseeable twist of events.

Armstrong's contemplation took a new tangent. This business about the pressurisation. Suppose this Longman fellow wanted to get rid of his ex-wife, out of hatred, or to avoid paying alimony. Suppose he had contacted Hepworth somehow and hired him to do the dirty deed. And suppose Longman knew his ex-wife was intending to take Flight 935 from Larnaca to London.

Okay, that was the motive and the opportunity. What about means? Was it really possible that Hepworth had interfered with the pressurisation controls using the test circuit? But then the oxygen masks would automatically deploy, one for each passenger and crew member, and so no-one would be deprived of the life-sustaining gas. Tricia Longman would survive the depressurisation along with everybody else. So how would Hepworth have killed her?

Armstrong shook his head. It didn't quite add up. He was still missing the last vital piece of the puzzle. He hadn't mentioned any of this to Melody. There was no point in giving her something else to worry about, particularly now that she had finally conquered her past unhappiness. It might be a good idea to forget about it himself, before he developed a neurosis. Was he making something out of nothing after all?

'Are you enjoying your flight, sir?'

Armstrong looked up at Melody's face and returned the smile. 'I'm glad to escape the bedlam at Heathrow.'

The girl raised her eyes. 'Grim, isn't it? Look, I'll be serving drinks with the other crew for the next twenty minutes or so. Then I'll introduce you to everyone. There's plenty of time. We won't be landing in Funchal for another two and a half hours.' She smiled again and walked back down the aisle, leaving a trace of perfume in the air.

'Good morning again, everyone,' announced a female voice on the PA. 'This is your Captain, Peggy Enstone, with some flight information. We're now cruising at 36,000 feet over the Channel, headed towards the Brest peninsula in northwest France. On the left of the aircraft you can see the islands of Guernsey and Jersey, with the coastline of the Cherbourg peninsula further in the distance. Our routing to Madeira this morning will take us from Brest out over the Bay of Biscay, to make a landfall at the northwestern tip of Spain, at Santiago. From there it's across the ocean again on a direct track to Funchal, where we expect to arrive on schedule. You can follow our progress if you want to on the Airtracker program on the screens in front of you. We anticipate smooth flight conditions en route, and the forecast for Funchal is excellent. This morning my flight deck colleague, Senior First Officer Marissa Lafontaine, is flying the plane. Later on she'll give you an update on our progress and landing time. I hope you're enjoying the flight.'

One of the stewards served Armstrong with his coffee. 'I'm Matt,' he said pleasantly. The scientist looked up to see a young cheerful looking man of about twenty. 'Mel told me to give you special service, so you've got an extra packet of peanuts.'

'Thank you, Matt.' He pointed to himself. 'John Armstrong. Pleased to meet you.'

The plane flew steadily on its way and after a while Armstrong fell into a doze. He had not slept too well the previous night, and his early wake-up and exposure to the Heathrow Experience had accentuated the fatigue. In his unconscious state he was not aware of Melody pausing as she walked past his seat to regard him tenderly, her head tilted slightly, a hint of a smile on her lips. Had she been there to see it, Armstrong's sister would have offered him an interpretation of Melody's expression, and she would have been correct.

After twenty minutes or so the sleeping scientist was roused by the PA. 'Hello again, ladies and gentleman. This is First Officer Marissa Lafontaine with a progress report for you. We're now flying over the Bay of Biscay and we've climbed to 38,000 feet. The next landmark you'll see will be the coastal town of La

Coruña in northwest Spain in about half an hour. Still expecting to arrive in Funchal on schedule.'

Observing discreetly from the galley, Melody noted that her companion was awake again and she made her way down the aisle towards him. He stifled a yawn and grinned at her.

'John, come and meet the rest of the gang.'

He followed her to the galley as bidden and Melody pulled the curtain behind them. Matt and a young Asian stewardess were preparing a bar trolley. A man who looked much older was peering at an electronic gadget through reading glasses. He had crinkly grey hair and a lived-in face.

'This is John, everyone,' announced Melody. The other three turned to face their visitor. 'John, meet Kenny. He's our boss.'

'Hello,' said Kenny in a Scottish highland burr, looking over his glasses at Armstrong. He smiled. 'We've heard all about you. Welcome to the Chain Gang. I hope the others are looking after you okay. Mel tells me you're a computer ace.'

'Mel might be exaggerating,' said the scientist.

'Och, that's a pity. I can't get this bloody EDO to unlock.' He held the offending gadget up for inspection. 'Frozen screen. Any ideas?'

'Have you tried hitting it?' joked Armstrong.

The young girl with Matt spoke up. 'Take its battery out, Kenny. Wait for 30 seconds then put it back and switch on again. Might work.' She smiled at the scientist. 'I'm Beeka,' she said.

'What's an EDO?' asked the scientist.

'Electronic Data Organiser,' said Melody. 'They're just fancy calculators really. We use them when we're selling stuff to passengers.'

'What software does it use?'

The four flight attendants looked quizzically at each other. 'Is that something we ought to know, John?' said the Cabin Manager.

'No, of course not. Sorry, I switched into nerd mode there.'

'Did Mel say you invented the Memotron app?' asked Beeka.

'And what the hell is a Memo thingy?' muttered Kenny. 'What's an app?'

'Application,' translated Armstrong. 'You use it to remind you where you've put things. You've probably got one on your mobile.'

'Och, I cannae be bothered with all that nonsense,' snorted the older man. 'If I need to remember something I write it on a piece of paper.'

The galley curtain opened again and another bar trolley was wheeled in, pushed by a mixed race male who looked barely out of his teens. Behind him was a brunette, early twenties, judged Armstrong.

'Howie, Wendy, this is the famous John Armstrong.'

'What are you famous for?' asked Wendy, her smile revealing a glittering array of white teeth.

'He invents things,' said Beeka.

'Okay,' said Kenny. 'John, could you invent for me some cabin crew that actually did some work instead of hanging around blethering all the time? That would be a very useful thing to have.'

'Slavedriver!' said Melody.

'I'm just going to the flight deck to see if the ladies are happy,' said the Cabin Manager as the four younger crew members took their trolleys out again. 'Back in a wee minute.'

Melody sat down on the crew seat and motioned to Armstrong to join her. She crossed her legs and kicked off her shoes.

'What do you think of the letter?' she asked.

'What do you think?' he parried.

'I'm very pleased. At least they've agreed the accident wasn't Dad's fault. About bloody time, too.' There was no acrimony in her last words. It merely signified that as far as she was concerned that was the end of the matter, and good riddance.

'Will it affect the TV programme?'

'I don't know,' replied the stewardess. 'It would be pointless to show the interview with me, particularly as I spent most of it slamming the Enquiry proceedings. I suppose they'll cut that bit out now,'

'A pity,' said Armstrong. 'Your chance to become a TV star gone.'

'I know. Just when I had my bags packed for Hollywood.'

The scientist left the galley to let Melody get on with her work and made his way back to his seat. Twenty minutes later the crew began to serve lunch. Melody attended to Armstrong herself.

'It's not home cooking,' she said apologetically, with a furtive look round to make sure that no other passengers were within earshot, 'but it'll keep you going until we get a decent meal in Madeira.'

Armstrong consumed most of the comestibles on offer and washed the food down with a small bottle of red wine. Beeka took his tray away when he had finished and Armstrong turned his attention out of the window. Nothing to see except sea and sky and a few cauliflower puffs of cloud far beneath the aircraft.

He brought his gaze inside again and flicked through the channels on the entertainment system. Nothing there to hold his interest. Okay. How about some work? Perhaps that would occupy his mind. He picked up his briefcase and opened it, removing his laptop. He began to read some notes he had typed, but the potent combination of thin cabin air, sleep deficit and prandial wine got the better of him. Soon his eyelids drooped. He fought to open them, almost managed to do so, but then they closed again. His head slumped forward and he fell asleep once more. His laptop followed suit shortly afterwards.

The Galleon sped onwards, covering the earth's surface at the rate of nine miles every minute. The Iberian coast was now well behind as the aircraft cruised along its southwesterly track, parallelling the Moroccan coast four hundred miles out to sea. Many of the passengers, like Armstrong, were sleeping. The cabin crew, their duties almost complete, were tidying away the last meal trays. From now on there would be only the occasional drink to serve. The crew pottered in and out of their galleys, sometimes stopping for a drink or a chat.

'Seems okay,' Matt was saying to Beeka.

'Who?' asked Wendy, having just come into the galley.

'John, Melody's fellow.'

'A bit on the heavy side,' reckoned Wendy. 'He could do with losing a few pounds.'

'Rubbish,' said Beeka. 'He's just right. I hate skinny men.'

'Okay, marks out of ten?

The other girl considered, narrowing her eyes and pouting.

'Oh, I'd say eight.'

'No, seven, tops,' said Wendy.

'Or nine even,' continued Beeka.

'You never were too fussy, were you?' taunted Wendy cheekily.

'Oh, listen to the bitch!' mocked Beeka with a laugh.

'I wonder how many marks—'

Wendy stopped in mid-stream because Melody had just appeared. The sudden pause aroused the senior girl's suspicions immediately, particularly as the others were making a great play of nonchalance, examining finger nails, tapping feet.

'Okay, what gives?' she demanded.

'What do you mean, Mel?'

'Who was being marked out of ten?'

The three looked at each other with wide eyes, feigning incomprehension. Melody shook her head, smiling. 'Let me know when you've given him a score. I'd be delighted to tell him myself. Now . . . onto more serious matters. We'll have to decide how many bottles to buy from the bar for our stopover. Let's say we—'

She was interrupted by the two-tone chime signifying the pilots wanted to speak to the cabin crew on the interphone.

Melody picked up the handset. 'Hi . . . brilliant . . . okay, I'll ask him. Ciao.'

She went to the scientist and gently woke him. 'Landing in about forty minutes. Peggy says you can watch from the flight deck if you want. Kenny'll let you in when you're ready.'

'I'd like that, thank you.' Armstrong stretched and yawned and sat quietly for a minute gathering his senses together. Then he went forward.

Kenny interphoned the flight deck for permission for their visitor to go in and the scientist heard the security lock click open. The Cabin Manager pulled the door open and stood back to let Armstrong pass.

CHAPTER 16

Two female faces turned to greet the visitor to the flight deck. In the left hand seat was a black woman, thirtyish, with long wavy hair and a wide smile. The right seat's occupant was much older, at least fifty, thought Armstrong. She had shoulder length blonde highlighted hair and a somewhat aristocratic demeanour, but her smile was friendly. They were both wearing headsets but with an ear uncovered so they could converse with their visitor.

'Come in, sit yourself down,' said the older pilot, indicating the observer seat behind them. 'I'm Peggy, this is Marissa. There's a headset hanging up there, look. Easier to talk. Strap yourself in, would you? There's no turbulence forecast but better safe than sorry.'

The scientist introduced himself and settled into his new seat and nodded as Peggy explained the intercom system to him. 'If we're talking and I hold my hand up, it means stop talking because we're communicating with ATC or vice versa.'

'ATC will be Air Traffic Control?'

'Yes, sorry, John. We tend to talk in acronyms. It's the same for you, isn't it, in the electronics business?'

'Yes, everything is TLAs with us.'

'TLAs?'

'Three letter acronyms,' explained Marissa with a grin.

Armstrong remembered the layout of the flight deck from his Heathrow visit. In front of each pilot were two large video screens displaying flight parameters and geographic location. Screens in the centre of the panel showed systems status and engine parameters. Peggy ran through the overhead panel layout to refresh the scientist's memory, Armstrong nodding as she pointed out hydraulics, electrics, pressurisation, fuel system and anti-ice controls. He found himself looking for the crew oxygen shut off control. The switch was in the 'ARMED' position. Peggy followed his eyes. 'Yes, that's it. And we check the reservoir pressure too.' She pointed to the lower screen in the centre instrument panel. 'Just like Bill and Vayalar would have done.'

There was a moment's silence.

'Doesn't the captain normally sit in the left seat?' asked the scientist eventually, comparing the pilots' epaulettes. 'Or do we Brits swap over like in our cars?'

'No, we're the same as the rest of the world. But Marissa is doing a Command Course, training to be a captain. So she's running the show and she'll be doing the landing in Funchal. Normally, copilots aren't allowed to do that at Funchal.'

'Why not?'

'It can be difficult. The winds can be tricky because of the terrain and there's no ILS—sorry, John, Instrument Landing System—so we can't use the autopilot for the approach and we can't do an automatic landing, even if the weather's bad.'

Armstrong spoke to the younger pilot. 'So you've not landed at Funchal before?'

'Nope. First time,' grinned Marissa. 'Wish me luck.'

'It's not as horrible as it used to be,' continued Peggy. 'Twenty years ago the runway wasn't much more than half the length it is now. There were a couple of nasty accidents. I can remember a couple of hairy landings when I was a copilot on 737s. Trouble was, the runway was carved into the edge of the mountain, with

nowhere to extend it. So eventually they built some concrete stilts and stuck the extra runway on them. You'll see what I mean as we start our approach.'

'The longer the better, as far as I'm concerned,' said Marissa.

'The weather's not too bad today,' continued Peggy. 'But we may get a few bumps on final approach. On these Command Courses we try to operate into the most difficult airports in the network to give the trainees experience. So today, Marissa is acting as captain and me as copilot. She's flying and I'm doing the other stuff.'

A male voice spoke in the headphones in accented English. 'Planet 188, descend when ready level three four zero.'

Peggy pressed a transmit button on the console between the pilots. 'Descend when ready level three four zero, Planet 188,' she replied to the controller.

'We're still talking to Lisbon,' she explained to Armstrong, 'but later they'll hand us over to Madeira.' On the console a curl of paper spewed out from a small printer. Peggy tore it off, glanced at it then showed it to the younger pilot.

'Latest weather.'

'Could be worse.'

Marissa drew Armstrong's attention and pointed to one of the screens in front of her. 'There's the island of Madeira,' she said, indicating an amorphous coloured blob. 'Green is low terrain, amber higher and the red bit is the mountains. The highest is about 2000 metres, just over 6000 feet. I'll show you the approach.'

The first officer adjusted the scale on the display to expand the map and pointed to the yellow line showing the planned route.

'We come in to this point here, that's a radio beacon on this spit of land out to the northeast of the airport. Then we track southwest, flying over the bay so the runway passes by on the right side. When we're six miles from the beacon we turn right

and position visually for landing on runway zero five. That points northeast. The autopilot will follow the yellow line to start with but I'll have to disconnect it for landing, as Peggy explained.'

Armstrong nodded. 'Are there many female pilots in Blue Planet?' he asked on a change of tack.

'More now than there used to be,' said Peggy. 'When I started in the business thirty years ago most pilots were male and most were white. Hardly any female captains.' She smiled at her colleague. 'But we've made progress since the bad old days. Now the sisters are doing it for themselves. Marissa will be this airline's first black female captain.'

'If I pass the course,' said the first officer.

'You'll pass,' said Peggy. 'I'll bet a year's pay on it. You've got a brilliant instructor, haven't you?'

'Of course, the best!'

The pilots were busy for a minute or two, setting controls and reading checklists and Armstrong was content to watch, not wishing to distract them with questions. Then there was a quieter moment and the scientist thought it a good time to settle a query.

'Marissa, you said the autopilot would follow the route line unless you disconnected it.'

'Yes.'

'So on Echo Yankee, why didn't the autopilot fly the plane to Heathrow and circle overhead?'

'It would have done. It would have flown over the airport then turned to the missed approach beacon at Epsom and circled overhead till the fuel ran out. But they'd been given a vector—a heading to fly—by French ATC for traffic separation, which took them off the route line. Then the depressurisation happened before they were released to their own navigation again so the autopilot stayed in heading hold mode and they carried on straight and level.'

'Just as well,' said Peggy. 'Otherwise they could have come down in a built up area. Or been shot down.' She shook her head. 'Bill was a great man. I really liked him. When I was a junior copilot some of the captains could be quite intimidating to young female first officers. Not Bill. A delight to fly with. On a four leg day he'd give his copilots three landings and just keep one for himself.'

'Yes,' agreed Marissa. 'One of the best.'

'Not like Oliver Longman, then,' said Armstrong, fishing for information.

'You've heard about him then,' said Peggy. 'I got my promotion a few years before he did so I only flew with him when he was still a first officer. He didn't give me any bother once I'd laid out some ground rules when we were crewed together. Thank God for seniority.'

'Well, I know it's telling tales out of school but he's not my favourite person either,' said Marissa. 'He tried it on with me but I warned him off. Told him my boyfriend was a PE instructor in the army.'

'And is he?'

'Good Lord, no. He's a music teacher. I'm tougher than he is.'

The first officer turned to face Armstrong again. 'We're starting down now, John. It'll be a higher workload for us, so no unnecessary conversation from now on, please.'

'Okay.'

'Good call, boss,' said Peggy with a wink at her colleague.

Armstrong found he was able to understand most of what was happening to the aircraft and some of the exchanges between the pilots. He noted the thrust levers moving themselves backwards and the aircraft's nose dipping a few degrees for the start of their descent.

'Idle thrust, autospeed.'

'Check.'

Peggy pressed her transmit button. 'Lisboa, Planet 188 ready for further.'

'Planet 188, cleared level one eight zero. Contact Madeira one one nine decimal two. Safe landing.'

'Cleared level one eight zero, one one nine two, Planet 188. Obrigado. Goodbye.'

The senior pilot changed the frequency on the VHF and announced herself to the Madeira controller.

'Bom dia, Planet 188,' came back a husky female voice. 'Descend level one four zero. Copy latest Funchal weather.'

'Go ahead.'

'Wind three five zero, twelve, gusts twenty. Rosario three three zero, ten, gusts sixteen. Three zero kilometres. Cloud scattered three thousand. Temperature 25, dew point 17. Altimeter one zero one eight.'

'Copy,' acknowledged Peggy.

Marissa looked across to her colleague. 'Wind's got up a bit, Peggy. Still within limits.'

The older pilot nodded.

'Well, we'd better have a plan B ready,' said Marissa. 'I'll continue to fly the approach but if I'm not happy or you're not happy then I'll hand it over to you for the landing.'

'Okay.'

'If it goes outside limits we'll divert to Porto Santo. We've got an extra thirty-five minutes over standard reserves.'

'Okay.'

'Right, Peggy, I'm off radio to say cheerio to the passengers.'

The Galleon continued on its glide. Armstrong watched the island of Porto Santo slide past on the left side, a sentry guarding the great bulk of Madeira thirty miles beyond, whose uneven silhouette on the horizon was now crystallising into a mountain range.

'Back with you,' announced Marissa after she had finished her PA. 'I told them it might be bumpy on the approach.'

'No change,' said Peggy, updating her colleague on the flight's progress.

The island grew larger in the windscreen. Armstrong noticed that they were flying towards the easternmost tip of the land mass. Below the dark jagged summits of the mountains their sloping flanks were a mottled botanical green of woods, terraced plantations and orchards.

They swept over a narrow headland and then along the coast, keeping a mile or two to seaward. Armstrong marvelled at the view. A snaking shoreline delineated by foaming surf, the verdant land corrugated with lush valleys, a forbidden barren hinterland where the volcanic mountains soared to their heights, settlements of white houses scattered along the coast, clinging precariously to the steeply rising ground.

And then the airport appeared on the right, nestling against the hillside. Armstrong noted the massive columns supporting the northern end of the runway. An aircraft running off the side would have plunged . . . no, better not to think about that.

'Gear down, flaps twenty,' ordered Marissa. Peggy made the selections as demanded and Armstrong could hear the increased slipstream noise as the Galleon's nosewheel extended under the flight deck. The air was bumpier now as they sank into the turbulent lee of the mountains.

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'Landing checklist, please.'
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'Okay.' Peggy extracted the card from its holder. 'Cabin?'

'Secure for landing.'

'Pressurisation override?'

'On.'

'Speedbrake?'

'Armed.'

'Landing gear?'

'Down.'

'Flaps?'

'Twenty.'

'Go around review?'

'Complete. Altitude 3000 set.'

'Forty flap will complete.'

'Okay.'

Peggy replaced the checklist and called, 'Six miles.'

'Check,' said Marissa, 'turning right.' She leaned forward to look out past Peggy, who leaned back in her seat to make it easier for her.

'I've got the VAP,' said Marissa. Armstrong remembered that earlier the first officer had referred to the Visual Aiming Point. For this approach the VAP was a white roofed banana packing factory on the shoreline about two miles from the airport.

Both pilots were now swivelling their heads, alternatively checking their instrument displays and the visual scene outside as the Galleon banked right to line up with the runway.

'Disconnecting,' said Marissa. A chime confirmed that the autopilot had disengaged. The first officer was now flying manually, left hand moving the control wheel to adjust the flight path and right hand on the thrust levers to maintain speed.

'Planet 188 cleared to land,' said the Tower controller in their earphones. 'Wind three six zero, nine, gusts twenty-two.'

'Still in limits,' said Marissa. 'Flaps forty.'

Peggy moved the lever fully back in its quadrant and pointed to the lower centre video screen. 'Flaps?'

Marissa quickly glanced across. 'Forty.'

'Landing checks complete,' said Peggy. 'Cleared to land.'

As she spoke the aircraft shook, nose dipping and wings tilting. Marissa was obviously working hard to maintain the correct approach path, her left hand abruptly moving the control wheel to minimise the upsets. The right hand held the thrust levers firmly, sliding them forwards and backwards to adjust the engine power.

'One thousand,' called the computer generated voice signalled by the radio altimeter.

'Wow!' breathed Peggy as another gust rocked the airliner.

More rapid control movements. A sudden scream of engines as Marissa advanced the levers to maintain speed. Armstrong's stomach rose and he gulped nervously as the first officer guided the aircraft down the approach, fighting the capricious air currents, the Galleon's nose pointing left of the centreline to counteract the crosswind.

'Five hundred,' said the radio altimeter.

The runway loomed up to meet them.

'Fifty . . . thirty . . . ten . . . '

Armstrong watched Marissa retard the thrust levers. As the engines died the Galleon's nose swung right to line up with the centreline and the wings tilted slightly left.

A barely perceptible bump confirmed that the main landing gear had touched down. The speedbrake lever on the console automatically moved back to raise the wing spoilers and so kill their lift.

'Speedbrake up,' called Peggy.

Marissa lowered the nosewheel onto the runway and eased the reverse thrust levers up to decelerate the aircraft.

'Eighty,' called Peggy above the engine noise.

Marissa cancelled the reverse, slowing the aircraft to taxiing speed with the footbrakes. Then she swung it round using her nosewheel steering to backtrack the runway. Armstrong gratefully exhaled a long-held breath.

'One eight eight landed time two two,' said Tower. 'Take first left to the apron. Parking stand one zero.'

'Roger,' transmitted Peggy. She grinned at her colleague. 'You are an absolute star! How do you do it?'

'Beginner's luck,' laughed the younger pilot with an even broader grin. 'After landing procedure, please.'

'Yes, ma'am. Here we go.'

CHAPTER 17

Peggy and her crew, Armstrong with them, were transported in a coach from the airport to Funchal city, a scenic drive of a quarter of an hour or so along the Via Rápida motorway. Marissa pointed out the banana factory that had served as their visual reference during the approach manoeuvre.

'Used to take forty minutes when I first started coming here,' said Kenny, describing how the old road almost doubled the fourteen kilometre direct distance as it snaked in and out of the coastal valleys in an attempt to hold a reasonable gradient, with tortuous hairpin bends and steep climbs and descents.

The transit took them through a rich proliferation of flora, mainly banana plantations and vines interspersed with colourful splashes of flowers and shrubs. Inland, the slopes were wooded with eucalyptus and juniper and lofty pines, or were cultivated into orchards with closely spaced horizontal terraces hugging the rugged contours of the hillside. On the other side of the road the ground occasionally fell away to a black rocky shoreline. At one point they were suddenly engulfed by a torrential shower, a violent cascade of water that drummed on the coach roof and reduced visibility to a few hundred metres. Equally suddenly they were out of it and following the weaving road under a sunny blue sky.

The Internacional hotel was perched at the western end of Funchal bay, along with several others sprung up to accommodate the ever expanding influx of tourists. Armstrong's room turned out to be on the floor above the rest of the crew. It commanded an excellent view over the bustling harbour. From the balcony the city of Funchal could be seen nestling comfortably in its bowl of wooded hills. Across the bay a rocky bluff jutted into the ocean.

As soon as they arrived, Peggy suggested meeting down at the poolside bar for a drink and a discussion about crew activities. Thus it was that Armstrong found himself sitting at a table under a parasol sipping a light lager beer, dressed like his new friends in casual clothes. The four younger crew members were already stretched out on loungers in their swimwear, trying to catch the last of the afternoon's sun. Melody and Marissa were both in tee shirts and summer skirts, Peggy in a cheesecloth blouse. Kenny and Armstrong wore short-sleeved shirts and shorts.

'Well, John and I were thinking of hiring a car tomorrow and driving up to Curral das Freiras. Anyone want to join us?' said Melody.

Howie was the only one to take them up on the offer. The others had done the excursion on previous trips, but they recommended the journey to the scientist as a worthwhile venture. Apparently the little village was located inside the rim of an extinct volcano, making for a picturesque outing. Melody said she would arrange car hire and ask the hotel to prepare a packed lunch for the three of them to take with them.

'It's not such a bad way to earn a living, is it,' said Armstrong. 'Sitting round a pool drinking beer at your employer's expense.'

'We've earned it,' said Marissa. 'Don't forget we started our day early this morning in Munich. So we did a full day's work.'

'And yesterday it took three legs to get to Munich,' added Kenny. 'Compared with the old days we do twice as much work and get half the time off. So we're much more productive now. Shame our pay didn't increase to match it.'

It seemed that the previous day Peggy and her crew had flown Heathrow to Munich to Heathrow to Munich and stayed the night in a hotel near the airport. Today they had returned to Heathrow and then operated the Funchal flight. In two day's time they would fly back to Heathrow and then to Geneva and back again, another long duty day.

'It's alright for you lot with the stamina of youth. Wait till you get to my age.'

'I'm not far behind you, Kenny,' said Peggy with a laugh.

'Do you still enjoy the job?' Armstrong asked the cabin manager.

'Och, I suppose so. I've been doing it for forty years. Most of the time it's okay. I like the people I work with. If I hated it I wouldn't have lasted this long.'

'How are the grandchildren, Kenny?' asked the captain.

'All fine, thanks Peg. How about your boys?'

Gradually Armstrong built up a mosaic of the crew's backgrounds. Kenny had three children and grandchildren. He and his wife had both joined the airline when it comprised a humble fleet of five Boeing 737s, having met on the cabin crew training course. The father of the Galleon's captain was a professional jazz musician, playing saxophone and clarinet. His daughter was born in 1958, when the new craze of rock 'n' roll was sweeping the country. Hence her name, Peggy Sue, inspired by the Buddy Holly hit. Her husband worked in television as a script editor and she had two sons, both at university. Marissa was an accomplished pianist, as Armstrong discovered when the conversation reverted to crew activities during their Madeiran stopover. It turned out that Kenny was friendly with the owner of 'O Inferno', a night club in Funchal, and had told him to expect a visitation from the Blue Planet crew that evening. He called across to the sun worshippers.

'Well, kids, what about it?'

'Thanks, Kenny, but we're off to Egg Balloon,' responded Matt. 'Respect and all that, but Inferno is for senior citizens.'

'By which you mean . . . '

'Anyone over the age of thirty.'

'Egg Balloon,' snorted Kenny. 'Full of hooligans.'

'Yes, but they're young hooligans,' said Beeka, grinning.

'Och, would you listen to yourself,' said Kenny.

Wendy sat up on her lounger. 'I might join you,' she said. 'As someone who's nearer thirty than twenty.'

'No!' said Matt. 'Don't do it. There's no way back! You'll be like the oldies! You must stay with your own people.'

'Bloody cheek,' said Kenny. 'But you'll be missing a treat. Wouldn't you like to hear Peggy doing her thing on the bass?'

'I haven't agreed yet,' said the captain with a smile.

It turned out that the evening's entertainment at 'O Inferno' would include live music from Retro, a British pop band whose set featured mainly hits from the sixties and seventies. When Kenny found out that Peggy was in the crew stopping over in Funchal he had arranged with the club owner that she would play bass on one or two of their songs, subject to the band's approval.

'Anyway,' said Peggy. 'Marissa's supposed to be acting as captain. She should play bass.' She laughed. 'I can be her instructor.'

'Not sure about bass,' said Marissa. 'But I can do you a boogie-woogie on the keyboard in an emergency.'

The others learned that the first officer had reached Grade 8 on the piano and played piano and harpsichord with several orchestras and classical music groups in the Woking area in Surrey. She was also in demand as an organist at local religious music festivals.

'I haven't the heart to tell them I'm an atheist,' said Marissa. 'Anyway, I love the music, although Chopin is always number one for me.'

'Can you play the Widor Toccata?' asked Armstrong. It was one of his favourites.

The younger pilot screwed up her face. 'Well . . . sort of . . . slowly, with lots of mistakes.'

'I'm impressed,' said the scientist.

Marissa laughed. 'You haven't heard me play. That might change your tune . . . literally!'

Matt came over to the table and sat down with the others. 'I started doing piano but I found it hard reading music,' he said, joining in the discussion. 'My teacher said I had a good ear but I wouldn't make progress till I could read music better. But it seemed a very complicated way of telling you which notes to play and how long they lasted, almost like a code. Pity someone didn't invent a system like karaoke where a moving dot showed you what note to play and when to play it. In the end I gave up.'

'We're actually working on something like that,' said Armstrong. He told the others about a software program that Holmyard Electronics was developing.

'A music college approached us to ask us to design a system to help their younger orchestra students. Funnily enough, the biggest problem is bar counting. If you're playing the same notes for many bars you can lose track of where you are if you don't know the piece very well. Or if you've got lots of rest bars you might not know when you're supposed to come in again. So our system is a bit like Matt suggested. The display screen uses conventional music notation but the active bar is highlighted so you can see where you are.'

'But how does it know the tempo? Or suppose the conductor wants to change the tempo during the piece?' said Peggy.

'We're working on multiple control options,' replied the scientist. 'Either the conductor can set the tempo manually using

a system input or . . . and this is the clever bit . . . in automatic mode the system senses the tempo from analysis of the acoustic pattern the orchestra is outputting. So if the conductor slows things down or speeds things up the Maestron detects it and adjusts the highlighting.'

'The what?' said Matt.

Armstrong looked slightly embarrassed. 'Maestron. That's its provisional name. My idea, actually.'

The others briefly discussed the merits of the proposed nomenclature and by and large approved of it.

A mobile phone rang by the poolside and Howie answered it. 'Hi . . . okay . . . that's wicked . . . when did you get here? . . . yeah, that'll be cool . . . laters.'

He called over to his colleagues sitting under the table parasol. 'That's my friend Zoe. She's just arrived on a Horridair flight for a nightstop. Okay if I meet her this evening instead of going out with you lot?'

'Fill your boots, laddie,' said Kenny. 'Who's the cabin manager on the Horridair? I might know them.'

'I'll find out and let you know,' said Howie.

'No rush,' said Kenny. 'It's not that important.'

'Horridair?' queried Armstrong, intrigued. 'Strange name for an airline. Worse than 'Maestron' as a daft name.'

'Airline humour,' explained Kenny. 'As soon as a pompous name turns up it gets modified into something insulting. So Blue Planet for example is known throughout the industry as 'Bloopers'. There was a airline called Albion who wanted to tart up their image. Their speciality was package holidays so they spent squillions changing their name to 'Holidair'. Of course this immediately turned into 'Horridair' amongst airline staff, followed by the media whenever bad publicity hit the airline. So they spent squillions more changing back to 'Albion'. But of course they can't shake off their old nickname. They'll be 'Horridair' for evermore.'

'Moral of the story – beware of image consultants,' offered Peggy. She looked at her watch. 'Right I'm off for a shower. Shall we meet about seven thirty in the bar?'

'Sounds good,' said Kenny. 'Where are we eating?'

'How about the Boa Vista?' said Marissa.

'Are you lot eating with us?' Peggy directed her question to the younger crew members. 'I'll book a table once I know how many we'll be.'

It was agreed that they would dine together at the Boa Vista restaurant, a few metres away from the hotel, except for Howie who was going off to meet his friend. Then the party would split into the 'Inferno' faction and the 'Egg Balloon' faction. The crew finished their drinks and drifted off to their separate rooms. Mel squeezed Armstrong's shoulder as she passed him.

* * * * *

Attire now upgraded to smart casual, the Blue Planet crew and their guest dined excellently and economically at the Boa Vista, a two minute stroll from the hotel. Armstrong feasted on espetada, skewered chunks of beef, onions and peppers roasted on a laurel spit over charcoal. The party treated themselves to some Madeira dessert wine and sat back contentedly to watch a local troupe of youths performing folk dances in colourful peasant dress. The girls wore red dresses and capes and the boys voluminous white trousers drawn in at mid calf, white shirts and dark waistcoats. The spectacle reminded Armstrong of Morris dances he had seen at home. Accompanying music was by accordion, violin and drum, with one boy playing what seemed to be literally a 'rhythm stick'. It consisted of a pole around which were arranged little articulated wooden models of the dancers themselves. The youth slid a collar up and down, twisting it at the same time, so that the miniature figures danced round the pole in synchronisation with the drum beat.

After the meal the diners separated into their two groups outside the restaurant and the older party walked downhill to 'O Inferno' on the waterfront. The club was busy with tourists but not uncomfortably crowded. On the stage stood a forest of instruments, mike stands, amplifiers and other musical paraphernalia. The bass drum bore the legend 'RETRO'.

'Egg Balloon will be heaving with drunken kids,' muttered Kenny as they squeezed round a table. 'This is much more civilised. John, help me get the drinks in, would you.'

A few minutes later three middle aged men approached the Blue Planet party. Kenny stood up with a smile to greet them. 'Percy! How the devil are you?'

'Pretty damn good,' said one of the trio, a jovial man with close-cut wavy grey hair. 'How's it going, Ken?'

Percy was introduced as the British owner of the club. The other two were the singer and the bass player of Retro, Roland and James. Roland was also the leader of the band. Percy was quickly called away by a subordinate to deal with other matters, leaving the musicians to sort out the guest spots. The air crew made space for them at the table.

'We've done our first set,' said Roland. 'We start again in about ten minutes. How many songs do you want to do?'

'Well, we don't want to outstay our welcome,' said Peggy. 'It's your show after all. We don't want to hog the limelight.'

'Not at all. Do as much as you want. I'm sure the punters would rather watch two hot women play than two slobby old men.'

'It's a long time since anyone's called me a hot woman,' laughed Peggy. 'Have you had your eyes tested recently?'

The band leader produced a sheet of paper which he smoothed out on the table.

'This is the stuff we were going to do.'

Peggy and Marissa pored over the list. The older woman was familiar with all the songs but Marissa's era was two decades later and most of the titles were unknown to her.

Roland ticked some of the songs with a pen. 'Look, these are all twelve-bars in E or A or D. Or they're standard three-chord chants.'

'Yes, I can vamp those,' said Marissa.

'Are you two pilots, did Percy say?' asked James.

'Yes.'

'Which is more difficult, flying a plane or playing an instrument?'

'Playing an instrument!' said the pilots in unison.

'So, if we let you play with the band, can we fly your plane?'

'Of course,' said Peggy. 'I should have brought the Ops Manual with me so you'd know what to do.'

Roland explained to the Blue Planet crowd that part of Retro's success was playing more quietly than other bands.

'We can belt them out at Warp Factor Ten if necessary but usually people want to talk as well as dance, so in a venue like this we keep the volume down. We always ask the club manager to signal to us if we're too loud, or too quiet for that matter. It gets us plenty of work when other bands are struggling to find gigs. That's a professional secret, by the way. Don't go blabbing it to our rivals.'

The playing order was discussed for a few more minutes and then the musicians went off to set up their kit for their second set. Marissa made notes on a scrap of paper while Peggy talked her through the chord sequences and arrangements of the chosen songs.

Retro was a five-piece band, all male, all in their fourth or fifth decade. Roland played rhythm guitar and sang lead vocals. Besides James on the bass, there was a drummer, a lead guitar and a keyboard player.

'Retro alright,' noted Marissa. 'That DX-27 keyboard is probably older than me.'

A guitar chord filled the room.

'Right, as we said before, we're here to put the fun in Funchal,' announced Roland at the start of the set. 'Fun, fun, fun . . . '

'... till his Daddy takes his T-bird away,' responded James in a clearly pre-rehearsed exchange. The group launched into the old Beach Boys' track and soon the dance floor was filled with couples and groups strutting their stuff.

Melody was whisked off by Kenny for a dance and Marissa fell into conversation with Armstrong while across the table Peggy chatted with Wendy.

'Enjoying yourself?' asked the pilot. 'We haven't driven you nuts yet?'

'No, it's terrific. Thanks for letting me come along. I'm having a great time. And I love this sixties music.'

'Good to see Mel happy again,' said the pilot. 'After all she's been through.'

'Yes, it is,' agreed the scientist.

'She told us all about what you did to help. I think you saved her sanity.'

'Well, I was reluctant at first, but she talked me into it.'

'Are you two going out?'

'Yes, I suppose we are.'

'Brilliant. I'm pleased she's got a good man to look after her. We all are. We all loved her Dad. It was great when they cleared him of blame for Echo Yankee. We knew he wouldn't have forgotten to arm the oxygen.'

'You would have known all the crew members, I take it?'

'Yeah, some better than others. As a copilot you tend to know captains more than other copilots because they're who you work with. But I knew Vayalar pretty well. A good operator, highly

regarded. And that Blooper engineer who was a passenger, I knew him too.'

Armstrong raised his eyebrows in surprise.

'You mean Nigel Hepworth?'

'Yes, but I knew him through golf rather than work.'

'Golf?'

'Yeah, he played at the same club as me. Mimbridge, near Woking. I actually played with him once or twice. There are quite a few airline people in the club, as you would expect.'

'What was he like? As a person, I mean.'

'Okay, I suppose. I never knew him well. No outstanding characteristics that I can think of. A bit flash maybe. Gold medallions, BMW convertible, that sort of thing. Played golf better than me.'

A light bulb flashed on in the scientist's mind.

'Is Oliver Longman by any chance a member of the same club?'

'Yes.'

Armstrong brought his fist down on the table.

'Bingo!'

'What?' asked Marissa.

'Sorry, nothing,' said the scientist. 'I've just worked something out.'

'Okay,' said Marissa, puzzled.

Roland's voice came over the PA.

'Right, guys and gals, we've got a special treat for you tonight. James and Stevie are going to take a well-earned rest and we're bringing on the subs. Let's hear it for Peggy and Marissa, our fly girls.'

The pilots stood up and grinned at each other, wishing themselves good luck. They made their way towards the stage accompanied by applause and whistles, passing Kenny and Melody, who were coming back to the table.

On stage, James handed his bass guitar to Peggy and ran through the controls. Marissa placed her arrangement aidememoire paper on the Yamaha and settled herself on the stool.

'We're going back to 1963,' announced Roland. 'We're going to shake it up, baby.'

He glanced at the stand-ins to confirm they were ready then nodded to the lead guitarist to start the intro to 'Twist and Shout', the song made famous by the Beatles.

'They're good, aren't they,' said Melody to Armstrong.

'Yes, good music, good musicians.'

'You okay, John? You look a bit distracted.'

'Sorry. Mind was wandering. Must be the old songs making me reminisce.'

The girl put her hand on his. 'Thanks.'

'What for?'

'For dragging me out of my pit.'

He smiled. 'You're welcome. I've enjoyed every minute I've spent with you.'

They stopped talking to join in the audience applause for a fancy improvised solo the younger pilot's flying hands had just played during the instrumental break in the song.

'Go Marissa!' called out Wendy.

The guest musicians played for about twenty minutes to general approval and then returned to their table. Their colleagues stood up to applaud.

'Not bad,' said Kenny.

'Bloody brilliant,' was Wendy's opinion.

'Hear, hear,' added Armstrong.

They finished their drinks and said their farewells to the band and to Percy and then it was time to walk back up the hill to the Internacional. Armstrong and Melody stopped briefly to stare out to sea. The night was clear and the wind had eased. The clouds that had brought the afternoon's showers had disappeared. In

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the distance the twinkling lights of a cruise ship crept along the horizon.

'C'mon,' said Melody, taking his arm. 'Time for bed.'

They went inside and entered the lift. Melody pressed the button for the fourth floor and Armstrong did the same for the fifth. They were silent as the lift ascended. It stopped at Melody's floor and the doors opened. She took his hand and led him out.

CHAPTER 18

The white Nissan Micra was compact, not too old, and cheap to hire. Armstrong was designated driver, with Howie his right seat passenger and Melody sitting in the back as they set off from Funchal. The weather was again sunny but tufts of cloud were already sitting on the higher terrain inland and the forecast warned of showers. Soon they were bouncing over the uneven road twisting up towards the mountains. They stopped off at Pico dos Barcelos for a short while to admire the view over Funchal bay and then piled into the car again to resume the climb inland. The serpentine road struggled up the hillside, sometimes reversing its direction completely to allow an easier gradient. Only rarely did Armstrong manage to get out of second gear. Every few minutes they would lurch through a tiny village, little huddles of shuttered Mediterranean style houses, some beautifully maintained with white stucco walls freshly painted, others closer to dilapidation. At the corners of each roof were mounted small figurines, made of the same red clay as the roof tiles themselves. They bore human faces, or were moulded into bird or animal shapes. Revealing her horticultural knowledge, Melody reeled off the names of the flowers which dotted the landscape with exquisite colours.

As they gained height the road would sometimes lead them

round a rocky outcrop and they would catch a glimpse of the sunlit Atlantic far beneath them in the distance. The nose of the car wove from side to side as it followed the sinusoidal black trail ever higher. On one side of the road, faithfully parallelling its winding course, a channel had been cut into the rock, carrying a stream. It was a levada, explained Melody, part of the extensive irrigation network that distributed the precious liquid to Madeira's orchards and plantations.

Armstrong noticed that the sky was becoming progressively mottled with wisps of cloud. As the minutes passed the wisps grew into larger grey shapes which began to merge with each other. Soon there was more grey than blue and the temperature had dropped noticeably. In one or two places the tarmac surface of the road had crumbled away, uncovering rough square cobbles cut from the local black volcanic stone on which the tyres jumped viciously. The scientist swung the car round a sheer bluff and met a curtain of mist. Headlights on, they pressed forward, taking extra care now that the road faded into white oblivion a few yards ahead of them. They were now driving through the cloud. Melody donned her cardigan to ward off the dank air.

Suddenly they plunged into a narrow tunnel punched into the rock and solid darkness enveloped them, alleviated only by the twin cones of the headlights shining into the mist. Armstrong could just discern the tiny reflectors set into the roadside showing the direction to steer. Large drops of water splashed onto the windscreen.

'We're actually going through the volcano rim,' said Melody. 'When we come out at the other end we should get a view down into the crater.'

It was impossible to tell if she was right at first, for when they emerged from the damp gloom of the tunnel it was only to reencounter the opacity of the mountain fog, although the fact that the road was descending now certainly added credence to the girl's statement that they were indeed dropping into the crater itself.

Then the mist began to thin, with patches of blue overhead, and finally they broke out into brilliant sunshine again. The scientist stopped the car so that they could marvel at the spectacular panorama.

A stout iron rail protected the road against the vertical drop below. Several hundred feet above, the jagged black edge of the rim cut into the sky. Scanning the irregular castellations Armstrong guessed the crater to be over a mile wide at the rim. Here and there the rocky walls were hidden by veils of fog. The scientist's gaze dropped down inside the crater and found the settlement of Curral das Freiras, a village of perhaps seventy or so little buildings, including a church with a square topped tower.

Armstrong followed the road into the square and parked the car. There were only three other vehicles there and the open space accentuated the atmosphere of desertion that seemed to cloak the village. In the doorway of a scruffy general store, apparently closed, a fat old woman sat impassively, her bulk emphasised by her black clothes and headwear.

A gang of children ran up to the visitors as they strolled towards the church. 'Dinheiro, dinheiro,' they shouted, grinning toothlessly and holding out dirty hands. Melody obliged with a handful of coins, which the children proceeded to argue over noisily. By contrast the few adults that they saw regarded them with silent indifference. Their weathered faces registered neither hostility or friendliness. Armstrong stepped over a skinny dog lying asleep in the middle of the street.

Two old locals shuffled past, muttering to each other. Both wore grubby woollen caps with flaps covering the ears and one of the men carried a wineskin over his shoulder.

The three day trippers sat down on a stone seat in the churchyard and began their packed lunch.

'Is this your first time here?' Armstrong asked Howie through a mouthful of sandwich.

'Yes. Thanks for taking me along. Don't forget to tell me what I owe you for my share of the car hire.'

'It's on me,' said the scientist.

'Thanks, I appreciate it. I'm saving my pennies just now.' Melody crunched into an apple.

'Howie, is it correct you're taking flying lessons?' she asked.

'Yeah,' replied the young steward. 'That's why I'm saving my dough.'

'How far have you got?'

'Just done my first solo.' He grinned. 'It was wicked. But I've got a long, long way to go.'

'Is it expensive?' asked the scientist.

'Are you kidding me? This job doesn't pay very good wages. I can only afford one lesson a month, sometimes two. Luckily my instructor is a Blooper pilot who doesn't charge me anything for his time so I just pay for the plane.'

'What made you start?'

'I won a competition, man. I had to write an essay about what I'd like to do as an adventure and I just tried to imagine what it would be like to fly a plane. I won second prize, and I used the money to buy a trial flying lesson. I'd never even been in a plane.'

'Not even on holiday?' asked Melody.

'No way. We couldn't afford holidays. I grew up on an estate in Tower Hamlets. When I was born my Dad was in jail for attempted murder. But he was innocent. He got fitted up by the cops. My Mum brought me and my sister up on her own until my Dad came out. It was difficult. She had to do two jobs to earn enough money. But not everything was bad. She made sure we went to school and did our homework and she kept us out of trouble. I left school with six GCSEs, which was good going round our way. I didn't get into drugs and I didn't get shot or stabbed.'

Armstrong and Melody exchanged glances. This was a world neither of them had any experience of.

'I was lucky to get into this job, even though it doesn't pay too good,' continued Howie. 'Most of my friends back in Tower Hamlets are unemployed. I learned to speak good English—my Mum made sure of that. If I spoke like they do on the estate you wouldn't understand a word of it.'

'Is your Mum white, Howie?' asked Melody.

'No, she's black. My Dad's white. She's great, my Mum. She never abandoned my Dad when he went inside and she kept writing to the papers and the Government to tell them Dad was innocent. But no-one paid any attention.'

'One of my friends is in the police,' said Armstrong. 'He seems okay.'

'Yeah, I think most of them are okay,' said Howie. 'But some are prejudiced against blacks. Or whites who marry blacks. Some of them are corrupt. They protect the dealers for a kick back. My Dad got framed by a bent cop to keep someone else out of jail.'

'Are you resentful?' asked Melody.

'Yeah, I'm resentful,' said Howie. 'But I follow my Mum's guidance. Stay out of trouble, don't fight the system and do the best you can.'

'What about your sister?'

'She's doing okay. She's a nurse.'

'And you want to be a pilot? What, in the airlines?'

'No, a bush pilot. To start with anyway. I want to work in Africa, flying doctors and equipment to help people in war zones and famine areas. My dream would be to do bush flying for maybe ten years and then try to get into the airlines. But unless I win the lottery I'll never be able to afford the training. No-one's offering sponsorship these days.'

'That's interesting,' said Armstrong. 'I may be able to help you there.'

Howie looked at him in amazement. 'Really? How?'

'The company I work for gives grants to young people so they can take courses they wouldn't otherwise be able to afford. In your case, flying lessons.'

'Are you serious, man?'

'Certainly. I'll look into it when we get home. Remind me to get your email address.'

'That would be wicked. Thanks, John.' Howie shook his head and grinned. 'That would be wicked,' he repeated. He stood up. 'Look, I'm gonna wander around and take some photos. When do want to go back?'

'Half an hour?' suggested Armstrong.

'Cool.' The steward took a small camera from his pocket and walked away.

Melody took Armstrong's hand and smiled at him. 'And exactly when did your employer start giving these grants?'

'About ten seconds ago.'

'I thought as much. How will you do it?'

'Holmyard makes a lot of money from the Memotron app, royalty payments. And I get a cut of that, which goes straight into my pension fund. I can easily live on my salary and my mortgage is paid off. There's plenty available for other stuff. I'll get Howie to write a plan for me. How much training he'll need, what the likely cost will be, how long it will take and so on. Then we'll work out my contribution. I'll make it look like Holmyard are paying a grant so he's not uncomfortable about it.'

Armstrong covered Melody's hand with his own and they gazed into each other's eyes for a moment. Neither of them had spoken the L-word yet but an impartial observer would have suggested that that was the territory they were headed towards.

'What a nice person you are,' said Melody.

'Takes one to know one.'

There was a brief pause.

'John, did Cheryl ever call you again?'

He turned to face her. 'No, I'm glad to say. I never heard anything more from her.'

A few more seconds slipped by.

'You know, you never did tell me about you and her. I know it's none of my business . . .'

Armstrong cleared his throat. 'I'll tell you. It's not a very nice story though.' He paused to gather his thoughts. Melody watched him intently, trying to see into the distant eyes.

'It was many years ago. I met Cheryl and fell head over heels for her. I was absolutely besotted. We dated for six months or so and then I proposed to her and she accepted. I was over the moon, of course. By that time she had met my sister Jeanette several times, but for some reason the two of them didn't hit it off. I remember on one occasion Jeanette told me flatly that she didn't like Cheryl and that she didn't trust her. I ignored her, thinking that it was a manifestation of jealousy of some sort.

'At that time Jeanette had been married about three years, and she and her husband, Neil, had a baby son, my nephew Robert. I suppose they were what you would call an ideal family. Neil a rising executive working for the Crown Agents, Jeanette a busy suburban housewife in her neat little house in Egham looking after her child, involving herself socially with other young mothers in the locality. Life was never brighter. I'd always got on well with my sister, and I liked Neil. We didn't have a lot in common, but he was a responsible young man and utterly devoted to Jeanette and the kid. But Cheryl somehow upset the family harmony. The bad feeling between her and my sister intensified. I suppose I should have accepted the status quo and just kept them apart, but I didn't. I couldn't bear the idea of the two women I loved hating each other. So I suggested that the four of us go away for a holiday together, just for a weekend, to try to get the girls on friendlier terms. Jeanette was reluctant at first but finally agreed.'

Armstrong sighed, obviously reliving the episode in his memory.

'We rented a little cottage near Broad Haven on the Pembrokeshire coast, arriving early on the Friday evening. Jeanette had left Robert with our parents, as planned. Things started off well, better than I expected. We spent Saturday on the beach and both the women seemed to be making the effort to be pleasant to each other. It looked as if my scheme was going to be a success. So I was somewhat shocked when Jeanette told me that evening that Cheryl was making a play for Neil. I just didn't believe her. I told her she must be mistaken. Certainly I hadn't seen anything to arouse my suspicions.

'Anyway, on the Sunday the weather was perfect, so we went down to the beach again for a picnic lunch. Well, that was okay. Then Neil said he was going back up to the cottage to get his camera. Cheryl said she'd go with him, for the exercise. Meanwhile, I fell asleep on the sand.'

Armstrong unscrewed the cap on his water bottle and took a sip.

'Sometime later Jeanette woke me up,' the scientist said, picking up his narrative. 'She told me that Neil and Cheryl had been gone for an hour, and wasn't it about time they returned? I didn't think anything of it. We called their mobiles but they were both switched off. I said that perhaps they had gone for a walk or something. But Jeanette wouldn't buy that. She had a hunch, she said, and insisted that I go up to the cottage with her. Well, she'd sowed the seeds of doubt in my mind, so I agreed. We went up the cliff path and made our way to the cottage. Jeanette motioned that we should creep up to avoid making any noise. I was about to tell her that I felt uncomfortable, like a voyeur, but she silenced me. Anyway, we arrived at the house and went through the rooms. All empty. Then she pointed to the disused barn that was part of the property. We looked in through the window . . . '

Armstrong stopped. He lowered his head and rubbed his eyes.

'They were making love on the floor,' he said finally. 'Completely oblivious to us and to the world, my fiancee and my sister's husband making love . . . she was getting her exercise, all right,' he added bitterly.

Melody laid her hand on his arm. 'Poor old John,' she said soothingly.

'Yes, poor old John,' he repeated, mocking himself. 'Poor old stupid John with his clever ideas. He wasn't content to leave well alone. What did he do? He paired off his fiancee with his sister's husband.'

The scientist fell to silence again and Melody could think of nothing to say. She could see his troubled mind through his eyes and desperately wished she could help him forget his unhappy past. Her heart pained. She squeezed his hand and leant forward to kiss him on the forehead.

The minutes went by and eventually Armstrong stirred. 'So that was that,' he said. 'Of course there was a big scene. They both blamed the wine they had been drinking. We drove home in silence. Cheryl was very apologetic and promised that nothing like that would ever happen again. But I told her I needed time to think about things. After a few days of heartsearching I came to the view that maybe I should forgive her and try to start over again. She was supposed to be coming over to my place to talk about it. She was late, so late I began to get worried. And then I got a phone call from Jeanette. She was distraught. Neil had gone. There was a note saying he was leaving her and was planning to run off with Cheryl.'

A sardonic smile crossed the scientist's face. 'Like the plot of a second-rate movie, isn't it?'

Melody snuggled closer to him and rested her head on his shoulder, her eyes moist. No wonder he had been reluctant to give himself fully to another woman.

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The two sat silently in the stillness of the churchyard, arms round each other, as the sun sunk towards the western rim of the volcano.

Finally the girl raised her face. 'Here's Howie coming back. Do you want to drop in to see the Jardim Botanico on the way back? It's worth a look.'

Armstrong smiled. 'Good idea. Don't worry. I'll be okay in a minute. Why be miserable about Cheryl when I've got you.'

CHAPTER 19

Melody drove home from work in a contented daze. She had bid John adieu as he got off the aircraft (she couldn't really hug and kiss him in front of the other passengers, although that was what she would dearly have loved to do) having arranged to meet him on her next free day. As an added bonus she and her crew had been taken off the Geneva there-and-back flight. They had arrived two hours behind schedule at Heathrow because of delays the aircraft assigned to the Funchal flight had picked up earlier and Blue Planet had allocated another aircraft and a standby crew to the Geneva service.

The fine weather had followed them back to England and the afternoon sun was still strong as she parked her little blue car in front of the house. The air was filled with the fragrance of summer and a wood pigeon cooed from the trees nearby. It was like being back in Madeira again. Madeira. What a wonderful island! Madeira, where she had at last discovered she could be happy again.

She sighed contentedly and climbed out of the car. As she put the key in her front door a blur of motion caught the corner of her eye. It was Winston, bounding across the lawn with remarkable alacrity, considering his age. Purring loudly, he

rubbed his head against his mistress's calf, folding the tipless ear inside out.

Melody opened the door and the cat leapt into the house ahead of her, making straight for his meal tray in the kitchen. The girl removed her cases from the car boot and dumped them in the hall. Somewhat to her surprise Winston ran up to her again from the kitchen and resumed the head rubbing against her legs.

'What is it, Winston? Haven't you got any food?' She called upstairs in a louder voice. 'Peter, are you in?'

Obviously not. He was probably down at the bowling green. But surely he would have attended to Winston before he went out. The girl's lips tightened as she deduced an explanation. Winston's breakfast had most likely been devoured by one of the neighbours' cats. That was the trouble with having a flap in the back door to allow Winston in and out of the house at will. Melody was probably feeding the entire feline population of Wooburn Green.

She went into the kitchen to check out her theory and was again surprised. There was indeed nothing in the food bowl. But, stranger than that, the milk saucer had evidently not been cleaned that morning. There was a rim of dry yellow skin round the edge. Peter, you've never let me down before. Why didn't you wash the bowls while I was away, as you promised you would?

Again the stewardess called out her lodger's name, only to be greeted by silence. She opened some windows to let fresh air in. Outside, the wood pigeon recapitulated its limited repertoire. Winston sat on his haunches in the kitchen doorway, regarding his mistress through narrowed eyes.

'Okay, I'll fix something for you in a minute. Let me get out of this uniform first. It's naughty of Uncle Peter to neglect you like that, isn't it?' She rang her lodger's mobile but it immediately reverted to voice mail. Melody went into her bedroom carrying a suitcase and rummaged inside the case for her toilet bag. Suddenly she was struck by an impulse. She dropped the bag and ran upstairs to Peter's flat. The door was unlocked, which was how he always left it when he went out.

The girl hesitated for a moment, respectful of the old man's privacy, and then overrode her doubts and opened the door. Everything was neat and tidy, plates washed and stacked away, bed made. Melody paused to examine a sepia photo of Peter and his wife on their wedding day. He was certainly a good looker when he was younger, proudly wearing his army uniform.

The stewardess chastised herself for her unwarranted intrusion and left the flat. She stepped slowly downstairs, a little uneasy in her mind. Something was amiss but she couldn't identify it. Something was . . . wrong.

Undecided as to whether she needed to check further about her lodger's whereabouts she went to the phone and selected message playback. The first four were from friends wanting her to call back or to make arrangements to meet. The fifth was a man's voice.

'This is a message for Ms Melody Fairwood. Please phone High Wycombe police as soon as possible regarding Mr Peter Osbourne . . '

Melody grabbed the pen near the phone cradle and scribbled the number which followed on a notepad. She picked up the phone and dialled.

'One moment, please,' said the female voice at the other end. The line was silent for about thirty seconds during which Melody's imagination went into overdrive. Had Peter had an accident of some sort? Was he ill? Then a man's voice came through the earpiece.

'Ms Fairwood?'

'Yes.'

'Sorry to keep you waiting. I'm Sergeant Cannon.'

'Yes.'

'I'm afraid I have some bad news for you.'

'Oh no! Is it Peter? What's happened.'

'I . . . er . . . do you want me to tell you over the phone, or shall I send an officer round?'

'Tell me, please.' Her heart fluttered and her knees turned to jelly.

'I'm very sorry to have to tell you this, Ms Fairwood. Mr Osbourne passed away yesterday.'

'Oh . . . no . . . ' Melody's legs began to give way and she dropped down heavily into a chair.

'It was at the British Legion in Wycombe. He collapsed suddenly and was taken to the hospital, but he was dead on arrival. I'm sorry.'

Melody shook her head. It couldn't be true. Not dear old Peter. The kind old man she had known all those years. So considerate, so genial. Peter who watched over her like a guardian angel, who had comforted her when her father had died. Peter whose flat was all neat and tidy, bed made, dishes stacked. Gone for ever? Surely not. She couldn't believe it. The hand holding the phone slowly dropped. The girl's tearducts filled and she started to cry.

'Hullo, Miss Fairwood, are you still there?'

Melody was conscious of the voice in the earpiece. She sniffed twice and held the phone to her mouth.

'Yes . . . I'm sorry . . . I'm here. Thank you for telling me. I suppose I'll have to . . . what happens? . . what do I do now? . .'

'Don't do anything. Just make yourself a cup of tea. I'm just about to dispatch one of my officers, WPC Green, to call on you. She'll be with you shortly.'

'Okay . . . thanks,' said Melody in a quiet voice, the tears tracking down her cheeks.

'Is there anyone we can call for you? Anyone who can help?'
'No . . . yes . . . he's got relatives . . . a son and a daughter. If you hang on I'll try to find—'

'No, don't do anything. We're tracking down his family. You don't need to do that.'

'Okay.'

'WPC Green will be there soon. She'll look after you. Alright?' 'Yes . . . thank you . . .'

The stewardess slowly replaced the phone. She blew her nose and dried her eyes.

Wearily she rose to her feet and made her way to the kitchen. Winston sat patiently by the cooker with tail curled neatly round front legs. Melody leant down to stroke the old head.

'Uncle Peter's gone, Winston. You won't see him again.' Winston began to purr. And as his mistress reached into the cupboard for a sachet of cat food the purring increased to a loud rattle in his throat. *At last, something to eat.*

* * * * *

'Cheers, John.'

'Cheers.'

The two tankards chinked against each other and then separated to deliver their contents down the throats of the men holding them. Armstrong put his pint on the table and looked at his friend.

'I've got some news for you, Artie.'

'You said it was about Echo Yankee when you phoned.'

After the Madeira interlude, Armstrong had settled back into his normal routine. But he couldn't devote his full attention to his work because he was still bothered by what Marissa had told him about Oliver Longman and Nigel Hepworth.

'Well, I don't know if the police or Transec knew they were members of the same golf club,' said Mackelbury. 'But John, is that really relevant? You said that the pilot told you there were lots of airline staff who were members of the Mimbridge club.'

'It's a stronger link between them than just being employees of the same airline. I just wondered if they had hatched a plan to kill Tricia Longman during an encounter at Mimbridge, perhaps when they were playing golf together. Hepworth was the paid hit man and Longman the one who paid him.'

'Well, we know it's possible,' said the policeman thoughtfully. 'But it doesn't get us much further. Let's say Hepworth depressurised the cabin. Tricia Longman would have used her oxygen just like all the other passengers. You told me that yourself.'

'I know. I can't work it out.'

The policeman shook his head. 'I think we'll just have to let matters lie as they are. Give Longman the benefit of the doubt.' He brought his face closer and lowered his voice. 'I'll tell you something, though, John. When you've been in this business as long as I have, you get hunches about things and often your hunches turn out to be right. I've got a feeling about this case. As I've said before, I reckon you've got the right answer. There was a conspiracy to murder Mrs Longman and it involved Hepworth depressurising that Galleon. Personally, I think Oliver Longman is responsible for the deaths of two hundred and sixtyone people, including his intended victim and also by accident his accomplice. The pity is that he's probably going to get away with what he did. That would upset me.'

Armstrong thought back to the happy times he had spent with his old friend Bill Fairwood.

'It would upset me too,' he said quietly.

CHAPTER 20

'Is the tea alright, love?'

Melody sat down beside Armstrong in front of her television. Each sipped at their mugs, eyes glued to the screen. The scientist absent-mindedly nibbled a biscuit. Soon the theme music introducing 'Today and Tomorrow' faded and presenter David Highhill's face appeared.

'Good evening. We are going to start tonight's 'Today and Tomorrow' Special with a film never shown in public before. It was taken by an RAF Nimrod reconnaissance aircraft as it followed Blue Planet Galleon Echo Yankee on the airliner's fateful flight last year. There is no soundtrack to the film, but I have here in the studio with me Captain Christopher Corley, who is the Galleon Fleet Manager and he'll be making pertinent observations as the film runs.'

The camera panned across to a distinguished looking man of about fifty with thin lips and serious eyes.

'I know him,' said Melody quietly. 'Chris Corley. Nice man.'

'The film begins with the Nimrod intercepting Echo Yankee over Oxfordshire.'

A vast expanse of blue filled the screen. In the middle, flitting about like midges, were three black specks. The specks steadied and grew, developed wings, tails and engines. Two of them resolved themselves into Tornado fighters, escorting a larger aircraft in blue and silver livery, one each side. In the middle was the Galleon, cruising serenely through the sunlit stratosphere. In close up the camera moved to the rear fuselage to confirm the airliner's registration. Then the picture zoomed out to the entire subject. Behind the engines streamed two white contrails.

The picture flickered erratically and then stabilised again. Now the reconnaissance aircraft had been positioned on the other side of the Galleon and the camera closed up on the flight deck window.

'That's First Officer Sidhu,' said Captain Corley tersely.

The screen showed a white-shirted figure sitting in the shadows of the flight deck. It was impossible to make out the face, particularly as it seemed to be slumped forward and was wearing an oxygen mask. 'Although the picture's not that clear, it certainly appears that the copilot is unconscious or incapacitated in some way. He's not responding at all to the aircraft outside or to radio calls.'

It looked now as if the Nimrod was passing beneath the Galleon and reformating on the other side of the nose. Again the shot enlarged to look into the flight deck.

'And there's Captain Fairwood. He looks to be in the same condition as the First Officer. Again, if he were conscious we would expect him to show some reaction to the reconnaissance aircraft flying closely alongside. So I think we must assume that he too is incapacitated.'

Armstrong felt Melody's hand reach for his own and squeeze it, evidently needing the security of her man at that harrowing moment. Her father was in that aircraft, probably dead, and if not, about to die shortly. Poor Melody. To come home and find that her old friend Peter had passed on while she was away, and now to be subjected to this gruesome reminder of the past. She really had had more than her share of bad luck. Armstrong had

suggested that they skip the TV programme for her sake, but she had insisted on watching it.

'We're looking at the outflow valve under the tail now. That picture shows the valve fully open, that square orifice. In cruising flight you'd normally see just a narrow slit. The valve would be almost closed.'

The camera momentarily zoomed out again to show the whole airliner, and then moved in for close ups of the engines and wings. In one shot passenger cabin windows were plainly visible, but there was no sign of activity inside, no faces peering out.

'Now . . . something's happening there,' said the presenter.

'Yes. Notice the exhaust contrail behind the right engine. It's becoming irregular and it's fading. The right engine's running out of fuel, you see. And now look . . . the contrail has vanished . . . the engine has flamed out . . . it's stopped. And look at that . . . see how the right aileron has deflected downwards to try to keep the aircraft straight. That's the autopilot compensating for the asymmetric thrust . . . the other engine is still going but . . . now notice how the fuselage is beginning to pitch upwards. The autopilot is trying to maintain height as the aircraft loses speed . . . increasing the angle of attack of the wings to maintain lift . . . it must be approaching a stall . . . '

The airliner seemed to hang in the sky, nose up, and then abruptly dropped its right wing.

'There . . . it's just entered a spin . . . it's spinning down, out of control . . . '

Captain Corley's voice was still steady, although emotion had wound up its pitch noticeably. Of course he would have known the crew members on Echo Yankee very well.

The cameras were pointed downwards now, towards the sea. The Galleon was still spinning, nose steeply down, getting smaller and smaller as it lost altitude. There was a macabre gracefulness to its final moments, like a pirouetting ballerina,

wings flashing brilliantly in their fatal rotation as they caught the sunlight.

The delicate silver toy struck the water and exploded in a mushroom of spray. Melody turned away from the set and buried her face in Armstrong's chest, clinging to him tightly with white knuckles. Instinctively he put his arm round her and patted her shoulder.

'It's okay, darling, it's okay . . . it's finished.'

The programme went on to investigate the Trans-African Galleon. After a minute Melody let go of the scientist and sat upright again, watching the television with dull eyes, as if her mind were elsewhere.

Now the presenter was talking to an executive of Chinavia. 'Mr Sang, can you confirm that Galleons are safe to fly in?' Like most Chinese businessmen, Sang Lin Pu spoke staccato English with an American accent.

'Sure, absolutely. All the Galleons have new pressure relief valves installed in their oxygen systems. Remember, there are hundreds of these airplanes in service all over the world and only one has had a valve failure, or two, if you include Echo Yankee. Some of these airplanes are ten years old but only two failures. So they were very safe anyway. We put the new valves in as a precaution.'

Back in the studio again David Highhill faced the camera.

'As you may know, the Commission of Enquiry investigating the Echo Yankee crash has recently revised its conclusion in the light of the Trans-African failure. The original finding was that the flight crew was probably to blame for neglecting to check that the oxygen system was armed before take off. Before the revised verdict was announced we asked Melody Fairwood, the captain's daughter, for her comments on the matter.'

Melody sat up, suddenly taking more interest. Eyebrows raised, she was looking at herself on the television. 'I didn't think they'd show this,' she remarked.

'Ms Fairwood, you objected to the line that the investigation took. Has your reaction changed at all in view of what happened to the Trans-African aircraft?'

'Yes, I feel even more strongly that my father should be publicly exonerated. He did his job very conscientiously, as his colleagues in Blue Planet testified at the Enquiry. He would have armed his oxygen. I'm sure that what happened to Echo Yankee was a system failure, like the broken spring found in the Trans-African aircraft. Don't forget that Echo Yankee was one of the first Galleons to be built.'

'There's no firm evidence for a failure on Echo Yankee, of course.'

'Neither is there for a fault on my father's part. That's my point. There is no evidence for anything. That's why the Enquiry findings are unfair to my father.'

'Are you still trying to get the findings changed?'

'No, I've had enough. I'm through with the whole business. I believe . . . I know that Echo Yankee had an system malfunction, that Dad was not negligent in his duties. That's all that matters now . . . what I believe in my own mind.'

Back to the studio, and the presenter's face speaking earnestly.

'Well, as I said before, the Commission of Enquiry did subsequently revise their conclusions and found that the accident to Galleon Echo Yankee was possibly due to multiple equipment failure, which I'm sure Ms Fairwood was delighted to hear.'

'You can say that again,' commented Melody with a bitter smile on her lips.

'I thought you came over very well during that interview,' said Armstrong.

The girl nodded. 'I'm glad they showed it after all. I feel that I've done my bounden duty as far as Dad's reputation is concerned. I'm not saying that I got the verdict changed entirely

by my own efforts. Obviously the Trans-African thing was the biggest factor. But perhaps all that fighting I did might have helped a little.'

'I'm sure it did,' replied Armstrong, turning his attention to the box again.

'There is one last point to consider before we finish this report. So far we've concentrated on the Galleon oxygen system. But of course on Echo Yankee there was also apparently a coincident failure of the pressurisation. Normally such a failure is not critical, assuming that the oxygen system is functioning properly to ensure that all persons on board receive a sufficient supply of oxygen. The Today and Tomorrow team did in fact investigate the frequency of incidence of pressurisation failures on Galleons and compared them to other airliners in commercial service. Statistically, the Galleon failure rate compares favourably against other types. But there are still questions being asked. Mainly, how did Echo Yankee's outflow valve open fully when there are supposed to be safeguards to stop that happening. Mr Sang again . . . '

The Chinavia executive pointed to a schematic diagram of the airliner.

'The outflow valve is controlled by two circuits that have to agree with each other before the valve can change position. If they disagree—if they are sending different signals—the valve cannot move.'

'So what happened in Echo Yankee?'

'We cannot be sure. It must have been a multiple electrical malfunction.'

'So it could happen again.'

'No, it couldn't happen again. We have installed a new independent control that stops the valve fully opening in flight, even if the two normal control circuits malfunction.'

'And there have been no more Galleon depressurisation incidents since Echo Yankee?'

'None have been reported to us. Also, we are still carrying out tests to try and find out why the system malfunctioned on Echo Yankee. We are testing components to see if we can duplicate the problem in case it was a short circuit caused by condensation or something like that.'

After thanking Mr Sang for his contribution the television presenter again spoke to the camera.

'So there we have it. The travelling public can be sure that it's safe to fly on Galleon airliners, according to their manufacturer. It looks sadly as if the tragedy that befell Echo Yankee was an Act of God.'

'Or an act of sabotage,' said Armstrong in a low tone, before he could stop himself.

'What!' Melody wheeled round to face him. 'What did you say?' Her eyes were wide open with consternation.

'Oh God, I'm sorry, Mel. I should keep my thoughts to myself.' He had not intended to say anything to the girl about what he had deduced, to avoid upsetting her. Why couldn't he keep his big mouth closed?

She gripped his arm tightly. 'John, tell me. What did you mean . . . sabotage? You must tell me.' The grip tightened.

The scientist attempted a comforting smile. He searched for an escape route. He must nip this thing in the bud if he could.

'It's nothing, honestly. Just my imagination running away with me. I was thinking about how it would be impossible for the outflow valve to open unless it was done deliberately.'

'Tell me the truth, John. Have you discovered something else about Echo Yankee?' The eyes were still wide, the hand still a vice on his arm.

'No, nothing at all,' he lied, unable to meet her gaze, hoping that the words sounded sincere.

Melody's eyes narrowed. 'Sabotage,' she said softly. 'I never thought of that. The idea of someone deliberately hazarding my father's aircraft. It's . . . it's repulsive!'

'Put it out of your mind,' pleaded Armstrong desperately. 'That's what I'm going to do. I'm sure there was no skullduggery really.'

The girl looked at him.

'Is that your honest opinion?' she asked.

He regarded her steadily. This was his chance to stamp out the new complication and he must not fluff it. 'Yes,' he said firmly, hoping she would not challenge the second lie. 'It's my honest opinion.'

CHAPTER 21

It was true, she really was beautiful.

Armstrong turned the locomotive 'Talisman' onto its back and steadied it between his fingers. His other hand reached out for the oil bottle. It was a little polythene vessel with a long flexible feed tube to facilitate accurate application of lubricating fluid. By pinching or relaxing the tube, the flow of oil could be stopped or restarted. Armstrong skilfully treated the axle bearings and connecting rod pins.

The room was becoming very gloomy. It was only half past seven and yet the August evening light had weakened rapidly. Armstrong looked out of the window. He had been so engrossed in his work that he hadn't realised it was raining. The sky was almost black and the scientist could feel the electricity in the air. It was one mighty storm brewing up in the murky heavens.

Having finished the engine, Armstrong turned his attention to the tender. As he picked up the oiler the room was suddenly bathed in a dazzling blue-white flash of light. Seven seconds later came the violent crack of thunder. The storm was just over a mile away. Armstrong altered the angle of his work table lamp and resumed his task. Despite the double glazing the rain was intense enough to be heard as well as seen as it cascaded against the windows. An echoing cadence of thunder growled in the distance as the scientist applied a drop of oil to the main coupling.

He had almost completed his work when the answer hit him like a hammer blow. Why on earth hadn't he thought of it before? Instead of an oil tube . . . a flexible plastic tube relaying oxygen from the manifold above the seat to the victim's face mask. Instead of a thumb and finger squeezing the tube, some sort of clamp . . . a stationery clip maybe.

It must be. The timer Hepworth had installed earlier opened the outlow valve. There would be pandemonium in the aircraft as the air suddenly rushed out of the cabin. Ears would pain, the ambient temperature would drop and debris would fly around. The access panels under the overhead lockers would automatically open and the emergency masks would drop down in front of the passengers' faces. Many of them would panic, adding to the general confusion. Meanwhile Hepworth, perhaps loitering near Tricia Longman's seat while he waited for the timer to activate, somehow restricted the flow of oxygen to her mask with the clamp, clipping it to the tube up at the manifold behind the opened access panel where she wouldn't see what he was doing. With so many other duties to carry out, such as ensuring that all the passengers were wearing their masks, it would be unlikely that the cabin crew would pay much attention to what he was up to. They knew he was a Blue Planet aircraft technician and they would assume he was trying to help in some way. Of course by then the pilot—Bill Fairwood—would have started an emergency descent. But it would take several minutes to drop to a level where normal breathing was possible. For all the passengers bar one, there would have been oxygen to sustain them until that level had been attained. But by that time the victim, deprived of oxygen during the critical moments, would be dead. Once the aircraft had settled into cruising flight at the lower level, the masks would be taken off. Hepworth would inconspicuously remove the lethal clamp, and later on the timer.

Everything would be back to normal, apart from a forest of oxygen tubes dangling from the overhead lockers. And apart from one dead passenger. What bad luck, they would say. Perhaps it was a heart attack caused by fright. Perhaps the mask hadn't been worn correctly. Such bad luck! Particularly when everyone else had come through the experience unscathed.

Except that Echo Yankee had an empty oxygen system, because of a fractured spring, and so . . .

A double flash illuminated the Railway Room and the thunder boomed explosively four seconds later. The storm was getting nearer.

That was it. He had finally solved the riddle. And Longman was very, very lucky, because even though things didn't turn out as planned, the eventual outcome was better than he could have hoped for. His intended victim was dead, the accomplice was dead, and any evidence of felony was sitting beyond retrieval on the sea bed under thousands of fathoms of water. And why should Longman's conscience be troubled by the incidental demise of two hundred and sixty others? It wasn't his fault that Echo Yankee's oxygen system was empty, was it?

It looked like the perfect murder, because there was no trace of it. And Armstrong and Mackelbury were powerless to do anything about it.

The scientist picked up the Claughton and lowered it to the rails, coupling the tender to the locomotive. He moved the slider on the control box a centimetre forward. In perfect obedience the engine rolled smoothly along the track. Armstrong brought it to a halt and began to assemble a train for the maiden run, shunting the coaches with the Claughton itself to assess its control precision.

Couplings inspected, all wheels correctly railed. Okay, off we go. Under Armstrong's control 'Talisman' slid away from the platform with its seven coach load in tow. The scientist's glance darted to the signals. All off, apart from the 'distant' by the viaduct and the 'home' beyond it. The circuit indicator board confirmed that the crossover was set against the main line. Armstrong corrected the alignment and those signals came off too. A clear road for the express now trundling past the engine sheds.

Outside the lightning flashed and the thunder roared. The storm had arrived overhead and was wreaking its vengeance on the rain-sodden earth beneath. Inside the Railway Room 'Talisman' and its train rolled over the girder bridge and onto the high embankment above the marshalling yard. Armstrong notched the slider further forward and the engine accelerated promptly. Twice more round the circuit and then he would call up Mack and tell him about his new theory.

Was that the doorbell? The puny chine had been all but swapped by the aerial percussion raging outside. The scientist stopped his train and listened alertly. Yes, there it was again. He had a visitor.

He switched on the hall light as he descended the stairs but it immediately went out again, as did the light upstairs in the Railway Room and the street lights outside. Damn, a power cut. The storm must have knocked out the electricity. His emergency torch was in the hall. It was very dark now and the scientist could hear the rain pounding on the stone flags of his garden path. He picked up the torch and switched it on but there was no light. He had forgotten to wind it up. Cursing, he arrived at the door and opened it.

It was a woman, but he couldn't identify her in the Stygian gloom. She was wearing a kagool with its hood up, collar held against her neck to protect her from the elements.

'Hello . . .' Armstrong began. As he spoke there was a blinding flash of lightning and for a brief moment the woman's face was harshly illuminated. The scientist's words choked in his throat and his heart stopped.

'Good evening, John,' came the reply from the woman, now a mere silhouette again. 'I said I'd call round, didn't I? Looks like I've chosen the wrong moment. What's happened to the power?'

Recovering from its initial shock, Armstrong's heart was pounding and he suddenly felt light headed, as if he had had too much to drink. He forced himself to keep calm. He was handling explosives here and he had to get control of events immediately. He found his voice again, although it sounded strange in his ears.

'What do you want, Cheryl?'

'I want to come in out of the rain.' Another flicker of lightning lit her face. The face he had never wanted to see again in his life.

'What do you want?' repeated the scientist. It was like the phone call, only this was worse. He couldn't hang up.

'John, I'm getting cold standing here. Please let me in.'

Armstrong hesitated for a second and then acquiesced, standing back to allow her to pass. At the same moment the lights came back on.

'Thank you,' said Cheryl with a polite smile as she stepped into the hall. Rainwater dripped from her coat onto the carpet.

'Go through to the study,' said Armstrong sternly, unable to bring himself to hold a civil tone. 'I'm sure you remember where it is.'

She took off her kagool and handed it to him. He threw it carelessly over the stair rail. No joint in hanging it up, because she wouldn't be staying long.

'You're looking well, dear,' began the girl in a friendly manner. She had sat down unbidden on the sofa and crossed her legs as though making herself at home. 'Perhaps a touch on the heavy side.'

He remained standing, staring down at her, face set grimly. She certainly hadn't lost her looks over the years. There were no tell-tale wrinkles or filling out of figure. She had obviously taken good care of herself.

'You still haven't told me why you're here,' he said finally.

'I'd love a cup of coffee. It's quite cold, isn't it, especially for August. Must be the storm.'

'Okay,' answered Armstrong. 'I'll make you a coffee and I'll give you ten minutes of my time. Then I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave.'

'That's very kind of you,' responded the girl with a hint of sarcasm. 'I'd better make the most of it, then, hadn't I?'

Armstrong withdrew a little. It went against the grain to be overly rude to anyone, even . . . her. 'I'm sorry If I sounded discourteous,' he found himself saying. 'Do you take milk and sugar these days?'

He went to the kitchen to be alone, to think this problem out while the kettle was boiling. But Cheryl followed him. It was disconcerting. He had a momentary impulse to grab her by the collar and throw her out. With difficulty he resisted it.

She leant against the fridge, watching his preparations, that whimsical smile on her lips. She was smartly dressed and Armstrong could see that she had taken trouble with her make up and hair. Strangely her beauty was all the more annoying. He wanted to hate her and it was not so easy when she was at her most physically attractive.

'Here, let me help you,' she said, picking up the milk bottle.

Armstrong caught her perfume as she stood by him in uncomfortably close proximity. *Damn it, woman. Why can't you leave me in peace?*

Oddly, he noticed his hand trembling slightly as he poured the water into the mugs. Cheryl's self assurance and composure began to unsettle him. He tried to think of something to say to break the uneasy silence but the girl beat him to it. 'Come on, John, let's go back to the study for a chat,' she said. She laid her hand on his arm. 'Don't worry, I'm not going to bite you,' she added softly.

He followed her out of the kitchen, head muddled with conflicting thoughts.

To mask his discomfort he fiddled with the stereo, removing the iPod from its dock and scrolling through the playlists. He made a selection and replaced the gadget in the dock. He had chosen Tchaikovsky's Capriccio Italien, one of his favourite pieces. Perhaps the familiar strains would boost his flagging confidence. But the strident brass fanfare opening the piece immediately sounded incongruous, inappropriately cheerful.

'Are you back with Neil?' he asked gruffly.

'No, we're through.'

'Have you got any children?'

'Yes, a daughter. She's with Neil.'

'What's her name?'

'Stella. She's six years old.'

Armstrong nodded. 'Don't you want custody?'

'Yes, but Neil loves her as much as I do, if not more. It would be cruel to take her away from him.'

Well, that was a turn up for the books, thought Armstrong. Cheryl considering someone else's feelings. Perhaps the last eight years had mellowed her character. He was about to make a petty jibe along the lines of 'you've changed your tune' but managed to hold his tongue. No point in looking for a fight.

'But what about you, John. Were you ever married?'

He shook his head.

'No girlfriends?'

'Yes. Just the one.'

Cheryl smiled at him. 'Going steady?'

He felt resentment at the personal interrogation but again kept his reaction to himself.

'Yes. Very steady.'

'I see. What's she like?'

'Standard format. One head, two arms, two legs. Usual shape.' His sarcasm sounded flat.

Cheryl nodded. 'Fancy that,' she remarked drily, evidently avoiding a clever reply herself. Armstrong made an attempt to steer back to neutrality.

'She's a stewardess with Blue Planet Airlines.'

Cheryl raised her eyebrows. 'A stewardess?' The unspoken words were 'so you're flying high'. Out loud she asked, 'Are you going to get married?'

'No . . . yes . . . I don't know. It hasn't been discussed.'

'Does she want to marry you?'

The scientist shrugged. 'It hasn't been discussed.'

Cheryl took a sip of coffee. 'And how is your sister?'

Armstrong regarded his ex-fiancee, the old acid surging inside.

'Do you care how she is?'

'I'm only trying to be friendly, John,' said Cheryl defensively.

'Considering what she went through she's doing okay.' He had to show her that the past couldn't be forgotten.

'I'm glad. You know, I'm sorry for what happened. Honestly.' She looked at him with earnest eyes and for a moment he almost believed her. 'But you must remember that I wasn't the real villain of the piece,' she continued. 'It takes two to tango.'

'You're trying to blame Neil, then.' They had fought on this battleground eight years ago.

'No, I'm blaming both of us. Maybe even you as well.'

'Me?' The scientist spoke incredulously. This was new territory.

'It was you who tried to force Jeanette and me to reconcile our differences. It was you who insisted on arranging foursomes all the time. I'll admit it . . . I fell for Neil. But maybe I wouldn't have done if we hadn't seen so much of each other.'

'I see. It was my fault you seduced Jeanette's husband.'

Cheryl didn't answer this. She came over and sat beside him, again resting her hand on his arm. Her physical closeness immediately took the wind out of his sails and further disturbed his already shaky equilibrium.

'John, what happened happened. What does it matter who was to blame? Maybe it was all of us. Maybe it was none of us.'

The touch of her hand was having a strange effect on him. It jumbled his mind and swept rationality from his thoughts. More alarmingly, he found he could not suppress a guilty thrill inside.

'John, forgive me,' whispered Cheryl.

He was unable to meet her eyes, unable to answer, powerless to break away from her contact. He was floundering in a quicksand of confusion and he was aware of it, but there was nothing he could do to prevent it.

'John, will you forgive me?' Her hand moved up to his shoulder and gently squeezed it.

'I . . . I . . . don't know,' he said, flustered. 'I don't know what to think.'

'Think of the good things, not the bad. Remember how it used to be between us. Remember that first weekend in Paris. The Bateau Mouche, the Hotel Vienne . . . '

Armstrong was losing control of the situation. Cheryl's witchcraft was swamping him. Involuntarily his memory took him back to the Hotel Vienne in the Boulevard St Germain. He recalled in vivid clarity how they had arrived mid afternoon . . . been shown to their room . . . dismissed the porter . . . closed the door . . . locked it . . . flew into each other's arms . . . undressed each other in delicious anticipation . . . made passionate love . . . with the traffic roaring past outside . . . the April sun streaming through the window . . . their bodies writhing together . . . '

'Don't you remember, darling?'

He turned to face her, mind reeling, pulse beating faster. What was happening to him? Cheryl edged closer, lifted her face, kissed his unresisting lips. The thunder rumbled above them, momentarily blotting out the Tchaikovsky, echoing Armstrong's inner turmoil.

Cheryl's arms encircled him, caressing him. She ran her fingers through his hair. Her lips pressed more firmly on his and now he began to respond, reaching to hold her in his own arms. The mouths worked together and their tongues met, probing each other. The warning klaxon in Armstrong's mind was too weak to break through the carnal arousal.

Cheryl yielded to his touch with a low moan. The Capriccio was nearing its finale in a clamorous crescendo of sound.

'We're in Paris, darling,' breathed the girl. 'The door's locked, no one can disturb us.' She reached a hand inside his shirt.

Armstrong grunted as he felt for the buttons on her blouse.

'I'm yours,' whispered Cheryl, unfastening his belt and moving her hand inside the waistband, fingers inching downwards across his stomach. 'I want you inside me, John, deep inside . . . '

Armstrong had unfastened the blouse and he began to search for the bra clips. His heart was pounding as he felt the girl's hand sliding lower and lower.

'Yes . . . now, darling John . . . let's do it now . . . '

The Capriccio roared to its climax and then there was silence. Suddenly a vision of Melody's face appeared to Armstrong, the face he loved. The grey eyes were sad, vulnerable, craving protection, trusting.

'Cheryl . . . stop . . .' Against all the atavistic instincts propelling him onwards he let go of the girl and with a tremendous effort of will pulled her hand away from its lustful explorations.

'It's alright, darling,' urged Cheryl. 'Don't fight it. Let it happen. It was meant to happen. Make love to me . . . '

The klaxon was louder now, enough to bring Armstrong to his senses. The haunting face was fading but the timely apparition had done its work.

'Forget it, Cheryl.' Abruptly he stood up and started to refasten his belt. 'There's nothing for you and me. We're a million miles apart.'

The girl gaped unbelievingly, her breasts still visible inside the open blouse. Then reality struck her and her eyes narrowed.

'Okay, if that's your game, so be it,' she said icily. 'It was worth a try. I nearly hooked you again.'

'You nearly did,' he conceded, 'but I escaped. I think it's time for you to go. And please do yourself up.'

She ignored his instruction and her expression changed to a sinister smile which alarmed Armstrong. What was coming now?

'Go where?' she asked innocently.

'Anywhere, as long as it's out of this house.'

Cheryl nodded and played the next move.

'Do you expect me to walk home to Chiswick?'

Armstrong frowned in puzzlement. 'Walk? What do you mean? Where's your car?'

'At home. I came by taxi.'

'Taxi? . . Why?'

The smile broadened. 'So you couldn't send me away. I was planning to spend the night here, you see.'

'It won't work. I'll call for a taxi myself.'

'I shall refuse to go. I'm staying here all night. With you.'

'I'll call the police.'

'Will you? What will you tell them? That you want them to throw out a poor little girl who only wants shelter for the night? How heartless.'

It was Cheryl at her vindictive worst. What the hell was he supposed to do now?

'Cheryl . . . please go home,' he pleaded, knowing in advance it would be to no avail.

The girl shook her head tauntingly. 'No, I won't,' she purred.

Then Armstrong hit upon the solution. 'Okay, you can stay the night,' he said.

Cheryl couldn't stop the surprise registering on her face. Evidently she hadn't expected him to give in so easily.

'Thank you, John,' she replied. 'Can I sleep in your bed?' 'If you want.'

The scientist left the room and then reappeared a moment later donning his jacket. He took his car keys out of the pocket and weighed them in his hand. Suddenly Cheryl realised she had been outwitted.

'Where are you going?' she asked suspiciously.

'I think I'll spend the night at Jeanette's. It'll be a nice change. I haven't seen her for a while. Shall I give her your compliments?'
'You . . . sod.'

Armstrong laughed. 'I've played you at your own game and I've won, Cheryl. Please make yourself at home. I'll be back sometime tomorrow, or maybe the day after, or even the day after that. Who knows?'

'Bastard!'

'There's a phone directory in the hall. There are several cab companies round here when you do decide to leave.'

Cheryl marched over and slapped his face hard. The impact stung painfully.

'Get out of my sight,' she hissed with genuine hatred.

'Don't worry, I'm off.' He laughed again and left the room.

Cheryl stood firm, legs apart, hands on hips, blouse still unbuttoned. Wrath compressed her lips into a thin line. She heard the front door slam and the car engine starting.

'Bastard,' she echoed to herself, but it was a small, defeated voice.

A low roll of thunder boomed faintly in the distance. The rain was easing. The storm was over. Armstrong swung his car out

onto the road and drove off, cheerfully humming the Capriccio as he went through the gearbox.

CHAPTER 22

Melody ate two spoonfuls of cereal and then pushed the plate away. She had no appetite for breakfast. On her radio a sombre voice was summarising the main points of the nine o'clock news. It was the usual gamut of wars, economic depression, droughts, floods, unemployment, strikes. The girl heard not one word of it, distracted as she was by her own gloomy thoughts.

She had slept very badly, even worse than the preceding nights. The insomnia started the day of the *Today and Tomorrow* programme. She couldn't get John's words out of her mind. An act of sabotage. Although he had tried to dismiss what he had said in an unguarded moment, she wasn't convinced by his platitudes. She had been brooding about it ever since. He knew something about Echo Yankee that he hadn't told her. Obviously he was trying to shield her from some unpleasant fact. Well, it was time to find out the truth. She had to know.

Her first thought was to call John to talk about it but then she changed her mind. It was too important to discuss over the phone, the possibility that her father might have been deliberately killed. She would have to see him face-to-face. And that was exactly what she intended to do this Saturday morning. Should she phone to warn him that she was on her way? No, that would give him time to work out a strategy to fob her off

again. Better to confront him unexpectedly, to shock the truth out of him.

The television programme, compounded by John's inadvertent revelation, had brought about another effect. She had lost heart in her work. The airline scene was soured for her and she began to think again of resigning her job. She had felt the same way after the Galleon Enquiry, she remembered, but she had subsequently found her enthusiasm returning as the misery faded. This time it was different. She knew that she was through with flying. As soon as a suitable alternative came up she would hand in her notice.

The girl drank down the last of her coffee and then went to get dressed. The face reflected in the bathroom mirror was not a pretty sight. Bags under the eyes, pallid complexion, untidy hair. She'd better doll herself up a bit before John cast eyes on her.

It was getting on for ten o'clock before she finally left the house. She glanced in the hall mirror on the way out. Okay, she didn't look like Miss World, but she was a good deal less frightful than when she got up. There was more of the lady and less of the witch in her appearance.

The storms of the previous evening had cleared away, leaving only a few cotton buds in the summer sky. It was going to be a nice day later on. Perhaps if he had nothing else to do John would walk with her along the towpath. It was always so restful, so calming, to wander along the riverbank, with the Thames sweeping past.

Arriving at the scientist's house, the first thing Melody noticed was that his car was nowhere to be seen. The garage door was closed, but she knew that he never kept his car inside. It was impossible, for he used the garage as a storage space, mainly for items of model railway equipment and other junk. It looked as if John was away and her journey wasted.

When she rang the bell, then, she was somewhat surprised to see a movement through the distorting medium of the dimpled glass in the front door. He was obviously at home after all. Perhaps his car was away for servicing.

But it was not John who opened the door. Melody couldn't stop her jaw dropping in surprise. It was a woman, a little older than herself, attractive, brunette. What was weird was that she was wearing John's dressing gown, and not much else. What the hell was going on?

'Good morning,' said the brunette with a polite smile.

'Good morning,' replied Melody automatically, her mind confused. 'I was . . . I'm sorry . . . can I see Dr Armstrong if he's at home, please?'

'I'm afraid he isn't at the moment,' smiled back the brunette. 'Can I take a message, perhaps?'

This completely unanticipated turn of events flummoxed Melody. She struggled to sort out her thoughts. First of all, find out who this woman is. Maybe she should introduce herself.

'I'm sorry. My name is Melody Fairwood. I'm a friend of John's.'

The other girl clearly had no intention of inviting her inside. This was daft. What was going on here?

'Pleased to meet you,' responded the night-attired figure, holding out her hand. 'I'm Cheryl.'

Cheryl! John's old flame! What was she doing here, in John's house, wearing his dressing gown? Again Melody became confused. There must be a simple explanation for all this. Surely John wouldn't let her down. He wasn't that sort of man. Was he?

'Did you . . . are you staying with John?' she asked, half dreading to hear the answer.

Cheryl nodded. 'I stayed last night, but I'll probably go home today. It depends.' She tilted her head. 'Is there anything I can do for you?' Her tone was not sincere.

Melody began to feel faint. She couldn't believe this was happening to her. Surely John wouldn't be two-timing her? Not John. The only person in the world she trusted now that Peter was gone. She could feel her eyes stinging. She blinked her lids rapidly to hold back the welling of tears.

'Are you sure he's out?' she asked, pleading pathetically. She made a half-hearted effort to peer over Cheryl's shoulder to see if she could catch sight of him.

'I'm sure, dear. He's taken his car.'

Melody fumbled for a paper handkerchief in her handbag and blew her nose. Cheryl showed no concern that she was visibly upset. There she stood in the doorway, smiling sweetly, a picture of innocent charm. Summoning all her composure, Melody tried to keep her voice normal as she continued the strange conversation.

'Did he . . . did John mention anything about me to you?' Cheryl wrinkled her brow as if in contemplation. Was she

acting? Melody couldn't tell.

'No . . . I don't think so . . . not that I can remember, anyway.' Melody suddenly realised that she had had enough of this charade. She didn't know whether to believe what this woman was saying. Was John at home or wasn't he? She didn't know, and she didn't care either, not anymore. It was obvious to her that he had tricked her. All his professions of love for her, all his devoted affection, it was all a big act, a cruel sham. Here he was shacked up with his old girlfriend. Why, why, why had he deceived her, betrayed her unquestioning trust? The tears could no longer be stemmed. They streamed unchecked. Melody was quickly reduced to pitiful sobbing, barely able to speak.

'Are you alright, dear?' asked Cheryl, scarcely bothering to mask her insincerity. 'Is there anything I can do to help?'

'Yes,' whimpered Melody. 'You can tell him that . . . that he's . . . oh! . . .' The words dissolved into incomprehensible mumbling. She ran to her car and jumped in. The engine roared

into life and Melody took off with a squeal of tyres, only just missing the wing of a parked neighbour's car in her frantic effort to get away.

* * * * *

As Melody careered up the road, driving crazily, Cheryl slowly closed the front door. She climbed the stairs to Armstrong's bedroom with a smug smile of satisfaction. She had handled that episode really well. With a bit of luck she had really screwed things up between John and his stewardess tart. That would teach him to try to get the upper hand.

She showered and dressed and carefully made herself up, unable to resist a self-admiring glance in the mirror when she had finished. You're still a looker, Cheryl, she told herself. You're certainly more presentable than that stewardess hag.

The next thing to do was to call for a cab to take her home.

Before she could get to the phone book a shadow appeared through the front door glazing and Cheryl heard the sound of a key being turned in the lock. The door opened and Armstrong came in.

'I thought you would have gone by now,' were his words of greeting.

'I'm on my way, dearest, if you would get a cab for me.'

Armstrong hesitated, wondering whether to tell her to do it herself, but then decided he was not in any mood for aggravation. He picked up the phone and dialled. Cheryl approached and stood by his side, the kittenish smile returning to her face.

The scientist pointedly turned his back on her and made the arrangements with the taxi company. Then he replaced the phone and faced the woman.

'Were there any calls while I was away?' he asked as he took off his coat. The girl shook her head.

'Messages? Visitors?'

'No.'

Armstrong nodded. 'I think I'll make a coffee. Do you want one?'

'May as well, while I'm waiting. Oh, I helped myself to some corn flakes and toast. I hope you don't mind.'

The scientist didn't reply. He collected the papers and mail from the little table where Cheryl had put them and walked past her into the study, depositing himself on the sofa. Inside the newspaper was his monthly railway magazine, which he extracted. Absentmindedly he began to flick through the pages. Cheryl followed him into the room, still wearing her infuriating supercilious expression. She picked up the discarded paper.

'I thought you were making a coffee,' she mused, but he pointedly ignored her.

Cheryl sat down opposite him and started to read. There they were, a man and a woman, silently perusing the Saturday papers just like thousands of other couples throughout the land. Armstrong had turned about half the pages when he stopped. Here was something to take his mind off things. A feature article about the old broad gauge Great Western, one of Isambard Brunel's brainchildren, one of the few that didn't come off. The scientist studied the print of Bristol Temple Meads station in mid-Victorian times, noting the four-wheeled carriages and the Gooch outside-framed engines standing at the heads of their trains.

The door bell rang. It was the cab driver.

'Well, John, I suppose it's au revoir,' said Cheryl in the hallway.

'No, it's not. It's goodbye.'

The girl nodded slowly. 'Perhaps,' she said mysteriously. She slung her handbag over her shoulder and went outside, where the driver was waiting in his car.

Armstrong closed the door behind her and breathed a deep sigh of relief. Thank God that was over. Let's hope she had at last got the message to stay out of his life . . . for good. Should he tell Melody about his unwelcome visitor? Probably best not to. Why give the poor girl something else to worry about? She would never meet Cheryl and Armstrong himself would never see her again. He was sure of that now. The matter was closed. Now then, he thought, let's get back to the broad gauge article. After that, phone Melody to see if she wanted to come round for the afternoon. It would be nice to go rowing at Richmond again.

CHAPTER 23

By the time Melody arrived home her eyes were dry, but the blood-shot whites were proof that she had been crying not long before. Her mind was now blissfully numb. It had at last anaesthetised itself against the miseries which were piling on top of her faster than she could bear them.

The last straw was being stopped by a police car for speeding. The young officer seemed unmoved by her state of distress and had written out a ticket as she sat slumped weeping over her steering wheel.

Perhaps he thought she was putting on an act. But at least he had brought her to her senses. The suicidal way she had been driving, it would not have been much longer before she smashed up the car.

Now, as she let herself in, she was in a kind of dream. It was if she were detached from the world, even from her own body, because she no longer wanted anything to do with them. She thought back to the speeding incident and laughed sardonically. Would it really have mattered if she had crashed the car? Would it have mattered if she had killed herself in the process? What was the point in being alive anyway? It only prolonged one's exposure to misfortune.

The stewardess sat down, immobile. For five minutes, ten, twenty, she stared ahead of her, not moving a muscle. She could have used a glass of water but she couldn't be bothered to get it. She just sat . . . and sat . . . At one stage she was aware that her phone was ringing. She even counted the rings. She couldn't make the effort to get up and answer it. It rang eight times and then she heard her own voice begin the announcement that she was not in but please leave a message and she would get back to you. But the caller hung up instead. Then her mobile rang in her handbag. She ignored it. The house was silent again.

For another ten minutes Melody sat as still as a statue. Having shut herself off from ponderous thoughts, she found herself observing trivial details in her surroundings. She watched a spider weaving its web between two adjacent corners of a picture frame. Her eyes strayed to the pipes leading to the radiator. Look at those funny little hardened drips of paint where the pipes curved from vertical to horizontal. She had never noticed them before. And the cracked plaster near the door jamb. Was that the phone again? No, it was her door bell. Someone was at the door.

The girl pulled herself to her feet and floated to the door. Yes, she really felt as if she were floating through the air, as though the legs moving beneath her didn't belong to her.

It was Teddy Andrews. The Andrews family lived further down the road. Teddy was about ten years old.

'Hello, Teddy,' said Melody, smiling, making a conscious attempt at normal behaviour in her dream-like state.

'Hello, Miss. I've come to tell you about Winston,' said the boy gravely.

'Winston?' said Melody, still wearing her foolish smile, her dazed mind not receiving the danger signals. 'What about Winston?'

'He's been run over, Miss. I think he's dead.'

'Winston? No, he's not dead, Teddy. He was here eating his breakfast earlier this morning.'

'He's been run over,' repeated the boy, more earnestly this time. 'It was a lorry. He ran out in front of it. The wheels went right over him. He won't move. I carried him to the pavement, but he won't move. There's blood coming out of his mouth.'

The message finally got through and Melody's heart froze.

'Oh my God,' she whispered, 'not my Winston. Don't take my Winston away from me.' For a moment her normal adult sensibilities returned. She reached down to touch the boy's shoulder, trying to hold on to her composure.

'Show me where he is, Teddy.'

The corpse was only fifty yards away. Teddy had reverently lain the cat on the pavement beside his garden fence. It was as he had said. The ooze of blood from the mouth had thickened to a dark clotted streak. The eyes were misty, lifeless. Melody's hand went out to stroke the fur. Already the body was stiffening. The petrifaction of death.

'Yes, he's dead, Teddy,' said Melody distractedly, still caressing the luxuriant tortoiseshell fur and fondling the tipless ear.

'What are you going to do, Miss?' asked the boy.

'We'll have to bury him,' replied Melody as her mind selfprotectively reverted to its dreamy state. There was no water in her eyes, no feeling in her soul.

'Is your Dad in? Maybe he would help us.'

'No, he's out fishing. Mum's in though. Shall I get her?'

Melody shook her head. 'No, we'll do it, you and me. Will you help me?'

'Okay. Have you got a spade?'

They interred Winston at the bottom of her garden, by the willow tree. Melody propped the spade against the fence while the boy fashioned a cross from two pieces of cane, binding them

together with plastic ties. Solemnly he inserted the cross into the mound of fresh brown earth.

'Thank you, Teddy. Would you like a glass of orange squash?'

'No thanks, Miss. I'd better go home now. It's lunch time.'

'Yes, of course. Give my regards to your Mum, won't you?' 'Okay. G'bye.'

The boy let himself out through the back gate, leaving the stewardess standing by the new grave. After a few minutes Melody turned her back on her companion of nine years and walked slowly back into the house, automatically locking the French windows.

Indoors, she slumped back into the armchair again. Before long she had resumed the fixed staring, but this time the eyes were unseeing. She was beginning to realise the meaning of it all. Winston's death was the final message in a lengthy transcendental communication which she had been too dim to comprehend before. For some reason, God wanted the Fairwoods to be taken away from this world. He had called her mother and her father already. And the manner of her father's death was the first summons for her. God wanted to take Melody too. All the worldly unhappiness she had endured—it was only God persuading her that her destiny was to be elsewhere, perhaps in heaven with her parents. Why didn't she understand before? It should have been obvious.

First of all there was Dad's sudden death . . . then the blame for the Galleon crash unfairly falling on him . . . there was Peter's death . . . would she meet him in heaven too? And she had fallen in love with a man who had cheated on her . . . and now she knew that her father might have been deliberately killed by a saboteur . . . and now her beloved Winston was gone, crushed by the wheels of a lorry.

Well, it was time for her to leave, too. Then she would find peace at last, the peace that had eluded her for too long.

What would be the best way to go about it? Clinically Melody considered the options. The best method would be sleeping tablets and alcohol. There were a couple of bottles of tablets in the bathroom cabinet remaining from prescriptions her GP had written for her during her earlier insomnia after her Dad's death. They would send her on her journey to tranquillity. If she sank half a bottle of gin as well, there would be no chance for misjudgement. She had heard of attempted suicides in which victims had survived only to incur terrible brain damage. She would not make that mistake.

A tiny voice told her she was on the wrong lines. She listened to it reminding her that there had been happy moments in her past. Hadn't she enjoyed her childhood, even though she had never had any brothers or sisters to share it with? She'd had lots of friends at school, and other children living in the same road to play with. Remember how she and Ernie Wattsham used to climb that huge oak tree in the park. She could reach the top faster than Ernie, much to the boy's chagrin.

And remember when she started flying with Blue Planet. The glamour of jetting around to far flung places. Night stops and standover days in first class hotels with allowances to pay for a good time. How could the airline ever make a profit?

But now a gloomier spirit spoke to her, bringing her back to the present. Things had not gone so well this last year or so. Her life had degenerated into a miserable catalogue of calamity. The only ray of sunshine had been her affair with John. Oddly enough, she had experienced her happiest moment in memory during this otherwise grey existence. The night she and John had first made love at the Internacional hotel in Funchal was the supreme pinnacle of joy.

How could he have deceived her like that? She was so sure he loved her, absolutely certain of it. How could she have been so wrong about him? This man, the only person alive who really cared about her, or so she thought. Now he had destroyed the only good thing left in her world. There would never be any more sunshine, only dark, malevolent clouds.

Well, the clouds would not smother her much longer, for it was time to leave this unhappy life. Now.

The girl stood up slowly and clenched her fists in determination.

You've got to go through with this, Melody, she told herself. Her gaze chanced to light on the framed photograph on her sideboard. Mum, Dad and her in Antigua. She walked over and picked it up, her lips curling into a faint smile. Remember Dad showing her how to sail a catamaran, how they laughed when a capsize tossed them into the warm blue Caribbean sea, each blaming the other for the mishap. The three faces grinned back at her and her eyes began to sting. Don't worry, Mum and Dad, I'll be with you soon! She replaced the picture and then turned away.

She found the bottles, one full, one nearly so. Those tiny white shapes would release her to blissful oblivion. Their potent ingredients would gently attenuate the vital force and she would slip painlessly into eternal sleep.

She carried the little bottles back to the lounge and put then on the table. Now, the gin. She poured a complete half bottle into a tumbler and added a generous measure of lime cordial to make the lethal cocktail palatable. What about those tablets? Would she be able to swallow so many without choking on them? Why not make a sandwich? A sleeping tablet sandwich. What a clever idea.

The girl took the bottles to the kitchen and methodically buttered a slice of bread. She was about to scold herself for her calorie intake but then smiled at her unnecessary invocation of caution. She neatly added the pills. It made a pretty polka dot pattern. A new thought occurred to her and she spread on a thick layer of raspberry jam. Another slice to cover it and the preparation was complete. She carried the plate into the lounge.

There it was. The sandwich and the drink. Her final meal. For a moment the first voice returned to plead with her. *This is wrong. Don't do it. Where there's life there's hope.* But she firmly dismissed it. *Don't be a coward. There is no hope. Now is the time to go.*

Gingerly she picked up the bread and took the first bite, wondering what It would taste like. She had always had a predilection for raspberry jam. She chewed the mouthful ruminatively, feeling the tablets crunching between her teeth. There, that wasn't so bad, was it? There was the merest hint of bitter chemical taste but it didn't overpower the flavour of the jam.

She took a second bite, and then another, and another. Now some gin to wash it down. The strength of the drink burnt her throat and made her eyes water again but she forced herself to take some more.

Four minutes later the meal was over. Only crumbs remained on the plate. The stewardess drank down the last of the gin and put back the empty glass on the table. Already she could detect the alcohol seeping into her bloodstream. Well, she wouldn't suffer any hangover, that was sure.

Her head began to swim as she made her way to the bedroom to lie down and she found that she was losing her balance. She had to reach out to steady herself against the wall as she tried to maintain verticality.

She got to the bed and flopped down onto it. The room was starting to spin around her and she felt her eyelids drooping as she laid herself out and rested her head on the pillow. Soon she would be unconscious, and then . . . where would she wake up? Would she meet God, the God who had been calling her? Would she be reunited with her dear mother and darling father? Suppose there was no life after death, just an infinite black void of nothingness. Too bad! She had taken the gamble and before long she would know the answer.

John . . . John . . . why did you let me down? You do love me. I know it. Why did you resurrect Cheryl to destroy everything? Wasn't my love enough for you? You couldn't even bring yourself to face me this morning.

The girl's eyes closed. Now she was well and truly drunk. The bed felt as if it were tilting, like a ship rolling in stormy seas. Her thought processes were becoming incoherent, but something In the back of her mind was niggling her, and she couldn't put her finger on it. Something that had to be resolved before she slipped away.

What would happen to the house after she was gone? There would be no Fairwoods left, and she had no relatives, apart from a second cousin who lived in Canada and with whom she had all but lost contact over the years. Whose property would the house become? Damn! She should have remembered to throw out the food in the fridge. Now the milk would turn sour and the eggs would go rotten. Pity. Someone else would have to clear it all up.

What was it that was agitating her thoughts? Whatever it was, it almost surfaced then, but she hadn't been able to grasp it.

Suppose John really hadn't been in when she called. Suppose Cheryl had turned up the previous evening for some reason and asked to stay overnight. Out of courtesy, John would have agreed, but understandably he may not have wanted to stay himself. Perhaps he went to a friend's house for the night. Perhaps . . . yes . . . that was what was bothering her . . . perhaps he hadn't been unfaithful to her after all. Despite her dazed mind, the enormity of her supposition struck her with sudden force. Oh John . . . oh God . . . could it be that she had made a monumental blunder . . . a terrible mistake which would now cost her her life? John . . . darling John . . . I want you . . . I want to live for you . . . John . . . help me . . . HELP ME . . .

Got to get to the phone . . . got to call John . . . must get to the phone . . .

Trying to overpower her drugged brain, Melody stirred and managed to prop herself up on her elbow. With tremendous determination she succeeded in forcing open her eyes. The walls were rotating crazily, as if she were on a fairground roundabout.

Her breathing was strained. Panting, shallow gulps of air. She forced her legs to swing round off the bed and found the floor with her feet. Her first attempt to stand up was abortive and she slumped back onto the bed again. You've got to get up, Mel . . . you've got to . . .

She took a deep breath, screwed her eyes tightly closed and willed her muscles to obey. Using the bed as a fulcrum she twisted round and pushed down with her hands. Groggily her legs straightened and . . . she made it. She was standing.

For several seconds she rested, heart racing, legs trembling, hand against the wall for lateral support.

She tried an experimental step forward and almost fell, just managing to save her balance in time. Take smaller steps, girl! She began to shuffle unsteadily towards the door, inching her hand along the wall as she went.

As she clutched the door jamb she could see her objective, the telephone in the hallway only a few feet away. A wave of nausea and dizziness attacked her and her eyes closed involuntarily. Her legs started to buckle and she was only just able to prevent them collapsing completely.

Against tons of resistance she opened her eyes again. She was hanging onto the door frame with both hands now, taking some of her weight from her weakening legs. Stupid girl! Why don't you get down on your hands and knees? It would be easier then.

Gratefully her legs sagged and she sank clumsily to the floor. Not far to go now! Yes, it was easier on all fours, even though the floor was rocking frighteningly beneath her. Slowly she edged forwards a few inches at a time. Got to get to the phone . . . MUST get to the phone . . .

Only two feet to go now. Momentarily she had to stop to fight off another onslaught of giddiness. She tried shaking her head to clear it, but that only made things worse. Her eyes had lost their focus but she could still make out the vague grey blur that was literally the most vital thing in her ebbing life. *Must press on*. She covered two more inches, four, a foot and . . . at last! Thank God. She had made it. She dropped onto the floor and propped herself against the little table on which the phone sat.

Slowly she raised her arm and picked it up. This curved plastic shape would save her life, a life she would share with her beloved John. She pressed the call button and heard the beautiful sound of the dialling tone. Now, what was his number? .. Memory, don't let me down now . . . WHAT THE HELL IS HIS NUMBER?

It was no good. She would have to look it up. *No, wait a moment. John's number must be on the list of callers the phone kept in its log. How do you access the list? One of these buttons . . . but which one? No, she was wasting time.* She rested the phone on the table and reached for the notebook beside the phone. It was difficult to focus on the writing but she finally managed to find the correct page. *There. There it was.*

She fumbled for the phone again, dropped it, picked it up. Valiantly fighting incipient unconsciousness, she coped with the first four figures. But then grey mist clouded her vision and she knew she could no longer sit up. The phone slipped out of her grasp and fell to the floor. Her dialling finger traced a downward erratic path through the air and dropped uncontrollably.

Melody Fairwood slumped to the floor and sank into black, unknowing oblivion. On the floor the phone was silent, waiting for the incomplete number to be dialled.

CHAPTER 24

'More tea, Maurice?'

'Yes please. That was an excellent lunch. Thank you very much.'

'More tea for you, Robert?'

'No thanks, Mum. Can I be excused from the table?'

'Yes, of course. What did you say you were going to do this afternoon?'

'I'm playing football. I'm going to call for the others right now.'

'I hope you have an enjoyable game, Robert.'

'Thanks, Mr McVay. See you later. Bye.'

The boy left the room and the two adults were now alone.

The lunch invitation was the upshot of Jeanette's burning curiosity. She hadn't been able to put the teacher out of her mind after their last meeting at the Academy. She wanted to know more about him. Eventually she decided to take action. She wrote to him to ask him 'and Mrs McVay' to lunch, ostensibly to chat informally about her son's progress at school.

The reply accepted her invitation with gratitude, but informed her that as he was a widower would Jennette mind if he arrived on his own? Jeanette responded by expressing sorrow over Mrs McVay's demise, but reaffirming that she would be delighted if Mr McVay would come to lunch by himself. And delighted she was, even more so now that she had spent two additional hours in his company. Her first impressions of dignity and charm were reinforced by his quiet, unassuming nature.

She heard the front door close as her son went off to see his friends. Now she really had Maurice to herself. Having topped up his cup, she replaced the teapot on the table and restarted the conversation with a question about the boy. The teacher told her that Robert's personality was developing well and that he was showing embryonic talent in science and maths. He ventured an opinion that if the trend continued, the boy might at a later stage consider civil or mechanical engineering as a career. Jeanette told him about Robert's enthusiasm for matters aeronautical and Maurice nodded, explaining that he had already noted the boy's preferences and that he would encourage him in whatever serious interests he wished to pursue. Not for the first, Jeanette marvelled at the professional attention that the Academy staff showed towards their pupils' education. What a contrast from the primary school he was at before. What a pity that the state system could not provide such excellent facilities for all children.

Gradually Jeanette steered the conversation towards Maurice himself and his background. It appeared that his wife had contracted leukaemia and had died at the age of thirty-nine, leaving him to bring up their two sons, both of whom were at Laleham, although the teacher confessed that he did not think the arrangement ideal.

'Why not?' asked Jeanette.

Maurice took a sip of tea. 'Well, for two reasons really. For one thing, I must make sure that my boys don't exploit the fact that their father is on the staff. I've impressed upon them that they must expect no favours or special advantage, that they must consider themselves as the equal of the other students. That's why I arranged for them to be allocated to another

housemaster, rather than myself. So far as is possible I also try to ensure that I do not teach the classes which they're in, although sometimes it's unavoidable.'

'What's the other reason?'

The schoolmaster regarded her with friendly eyes. 'It's related to what I just told you. There's always the danger of resentment on the part of the other pupils. It's a child's instinctive reaction, I suppose, a natural suspicion that my boys might derive unfair favoured treatment because of my position.'

'Have your sons been teased by the other pupils, then?' asked Jeanette.

'There have been no major upsets, at least none that I know of. Certainly my sons haven't been harassed. Bullying is absolutely ruled out at the Academy, under pain of expulsion. Perhaps there is the odd snide remark or tease now and again, but never anything serious. As I say, the situation is acceptable, but not ideal. Personally, I would have liked them to attend a different school, but there isn't a satisfactory one within practical travelling distance. I even considered switching to another school myself, leaving the boys at Laleham. But I would hate to do that. I've been there for twenty years and it would be painful to leave after such a long and pleasant association.'

'Thinking about Robert,' said Jeanette, 'do I need to be worried about SATs? I take it the Academy has to do these tests?'

'Yes, it's a legal requirement, although myself I'm one of those old fashioned teachers who think there's too much testing in schools and not enough learning.'

'So Rob will do the Key Stage Two exams next year?'

'Yes, but I don't think they'll be a problem for him, based on what we've seen so far.'

'The Academy is doing well in the league tables,' said Jeanette.

'You would expect that, given the standard of teaching and the restricted class sizes. But I'm not a fan of league tables, any more than I'm a fan of SATs. My view is that politicians interfere too much in academic curriculums.'

'So you're a bit of a rebel,' said Jeanette with a smile.

The teacher snorted. 'I don't think rebelliousness is part of my make up. Although I do vigorously support the campaign for spelling reform. If English were more phonetic in spelling we wouldn't have such a problem with dyslexia, which for some pupils . . . forgive me, Jeanette, I'm on my high horse again. You probably find this stuff boring—'

'Don't be silly, Maurice. I'm all ears. Do go on.'

'No, that's enough schools and politics.'

'Okay, we'll change the points.'

'What do you mean?'

'Sorry. It's an expression my brother uses when he wants to talk about something else. He's a bit of a railway freak.'

'Ah, yes,' said the teacher. 'Robert's told me all about him. Inventor of the Memotron, I understand. I use it all the time.'

'Yes. Clever chap. The Memotron royalties are paying Robert's school fees.'

'I know. And his uncle has also supplied new computers for the IT labs. We're very grateful.'

'Well, changing the points again, can I be personal?' 'Of course.'

'You told me you live alone? Do you have someone to look after your house?'

'I've got a lady who comes in twice a week to tidy up. She does the vacuuming and dusting and so on.' He smiled ruefully. 'She's not very reliable, though. I think she just redistributes the dust from one part of the house to another. Sometimes she breaks things too. She's a little clumsy, I'm afraid.' He shrugged. 'I lost a coffee pot last week. Not very valuable in itself, but it was

one of our wedding presents. I'm reluctant to sack her, though. She's honest and I think she needs the money.'

Jeanette's heart swelled. Suddenly she wanted to look after this man, to afford the affection and protection that . . . yes, that a wife would provide. Sadly she warned herself to keep her feelings in check. After all, they had only met a few times, and besides, she didn't know if there was another woman in his life, or even what he thought of Jeanette herself. If indeed he did think about her at all. She would just have to wait and see how things turned out.

The teacher finished his tea and momentarily lowered his eyes in thought. What was going on in his mind, wondered Jeanette.

Maurice looked up again and spoke.

'Jeanette, I hope you don't object to what I'm about to ask you.'

The woman's mouth opened with surprise. What was coming now?

'Ask away,' she responded with a smile.

The teacher clasped his hands together, and for a moment he appeared a trifle uneasy, even nervous.

'Next Saturday I'm going to Brighton to visit my brother and his family. I was wondering if you would like to accompany me. I'm planning to take lunch with them, but afterwards we could go for a stroll along the promenade if the weather's suitable. It would be a pleasant day at the seaside.' He smiled at her hopefully,

'Maurice, I'd love to come. It's ages since I've been to the coast.' Jeanette could scarcely believe her good fortune.

And the words were true. She would indeed love to go to Brighton with him.

'That's excellent,' said the schoolmaster as he settled back in his chair, clearly relieved that she had accepted his invitation. 'I'll be taking Geoff, my younger boy. His brother is away on a

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trip. By all means bring Robert if wants to come too. Might be company for Geoff. They'll know each other from school.'

Jeanette nodded happily. 'That would be nice. A day out at the seaside. It'll be like my younger days. What a lovely idea.'

'Good. That's settled then. Let's hope that the gods favour us with propitious weather.'

CHAPTER 25

Sue Kristiansen started her car and edged out of the aircrew car park. Soon she was cruising along the Bath Road, window open, the warm summer air ruffling her hair. What a lovely day.

It had been an enjoyable standover in Stockholm. The crew had really got on well together, really clicked, and they had had a lot of fun. She smiled in reminiscence. That First Officer, Jimmy, what a super fellow he was. If it wasn't for the fact that she was married to Gustav . . . well . . . who knows what might have happened? It was just as well that she had the fortitude to resist temptation. She could think of several girls who might not have done!

No, so far she had been faithful to Gustav and she had no intention of spoiling the record. She loved him and she would not contemplate any straying from the straight and narrow. He was too precious to risk losing. Of course, there was nothing wrong with a little innocent flirtation now and then, so long as it didn't get out of hand. She smiled to herself again. What a shame she couldn't have two husbands, Gustav and Jimmy. It was an exciting notion.

Gustav wouldn't be there when she got home. He and his buddies would be ploughing their trials motorbikes through some muddy field somewhere, a competition event. To see who could bring home the most dirt, no doubt. Never mind, a lazy day at home on her own wouldn't do any harm. She could treat herself to a couple of hours on a sun lounger, doing absolutely nothing.

On the other hand, maybe an empty house would be a bit too quiet. A new idea blossomed. Melody Fairwood was on days off. Why not pop over to Wooburn Green to find out if she was in? Have a bit of a gossip and a glass of wine. It wasn't much of a detour. See how she was getting on with that new man of hers. She had heard all about the Madeira episode from Wendy Lansday, and happily it looked as if everything was working out nicely for Melody.

Well, she didn't have to make up her mind for another quarter of an hour, until she got to Burnham. Then she would either continue straight on towards her own home, or turn right to Mel's.

There was only one cloud to spoil Sue's otherwise cheerful frame of mind. Before leaving work she had happened to check the crew notices and was rather peeved to discover that Oily Longman had got away with it yet again. Now, as she drove home, she reviewed the latest situation. After her own recent unpleasant episode with him, several senior crew members had met to discuss the problem, the upshot of which was that a petition had been presented to the management demanding his replacement.

Well, they had got what they asked for. Longman was indeed being moved from his present job. But the plan had misfired slightly because, in the time-honoured Blue Planet fashion, he had been promoted out of trouble to a higher management level in a different department, on a bigger salary of course. Such was the logic of our masters, Sue thought bitterly. Obviously Longman still had friends in high places.

So be it. At least the repulsive little turd would no longer be involved with the airline's cabin crews. Perhaps everyone should be grateful that they'd never see his horrible face in the operations building again.

Sue wondered if Melody knew about Longman's promotion. She could tell her when she arrived. There again, maybe she should forget about dropping in. Maybe go straight home after all . . .

She didn't make her decision until the last moment. She was on the A4 in the outer lane, stopped at the traffic lights at Burnham. The lights changed from red to amber. On impulse, Sue flicked the indicator switch, swung the wheel round and accelerated along the road to Wooburn.

* * * * *

It looked as if Mel was in anyway. Her little blue car was parked outside the front door. Sue eased her own vehicle alongside and switched off. She got out and stood for a second or two surveying the garden. It was still as well-kept as Sue remembered from the past, but of course Mel's lodger used to attend to the horticultural side of things. Who would look after the garden now that he was no longer around?

The stewardess walked to the front door and rang. No answer. She rang again. There was no sign of life and so she strolled round to the back of the house to see if her friend was sunning herself in the garden. But there was no-one there either. Perhaps Mel had popped into a neighbour's house or was having lunch in the pub. More probably she was out with her fellow. They would have driven off somewhere in his car. That would be it. A wasted journey, sighed Sue. Never mind, she'd just have to indulge in a glass of wine on her own when she got home.

Sue went back to the car and opened the door. Then she paused. Why not text Mel to say she had called, and inviting her and her man to come round for a drink one evening? That would

be a nice friendly gesture. Sue took out her mobile and then realised Mel was not in her contacts list. Okay, she could write a message instead.

Sue took out a notepad from her handbag and scrawled a few words, resting the pad on the car roof as she wrote. She tore the top page off, folded the note in half and made her way to the front door again. The paper was too flimsy to push the letter flap in and so the girl had to use her hand to force it open.

This she did, while the other hand dropped in the note. Sue was about to release the flap again when she happened to glance in to the hall. Her startled eyes registered a stockinged leg stretched out on the floor. She lowered her head and peered through the aperture. Her mouth opened. 'Oh God!' she whispered.

It was Melody, prone on the floor, apparently asleep or unconscious or . . .

Sue moved her mouth up to the flap and yelled. 'Melody! Melody! Can you hear me?'

There was no response. The girl's figure lay inert, lifeless. Sue could not make out whether Melody was breathing or not.

'Oh God!' she repeated. She wheeled round and stood up. Recovering from the initial shock her mind sprang into action. She fished out her mobile again. Good, there was a signal. She punched the '9' key three times and demanded an ambulance.

Got to get into the house, Sue ordered herself, suppressing her panic. She tried the door handle but it was obviously locked. What about round the back?

The kitchen door and the French windows were also locked. Frantically she searched about her for inspiration. There was no time to lose. She saw a spade leaning against the fence and ran to pick it up. Back at the house she took aim, closed her eyes and swung the tool with all her might. The glass panels exploded into a million splinters. Sue threw the spade down and kicked in the broken edges, not feeling the laceration on her leg from a

protruding shard. Oblivious to the trickle of blood dripping from the wound she dashed inside.

'Melody, are you okay?' she called as she went.

The girl was lying on the carpet. By her side was the phone. Sue lifted it to her ear and listened. Silence. 'Hello, is anybody there?' she asked before realising that she was being silly. There were far more imperative things to do. Roughly she replaced the phone on the little table and then bent down over her prostrate friend.

'Melody, can you hear me?' she said, desperately praying for the miraculous resurrection which did not occur. Sue couldn't tell if Melody was breathing. She felt for a pulse. Yes, there was something there. Tentatively she shook the quiescent form, but drew no reaction. Clearly the girl was unconscious. But why? How? Had she fallen and hit her head on something? Maybe she had just fainted. Thinking more clearly now, Sue's first aid training directed her thoughts and actions. 'Airway, breathing, circulation,' she muttered to herself, repeating the mantra she had been taught. Must get Mel in the recovery position. If her heart was beating then hopefully she was getting oxygen to the brain. Better get a blanket or a duvet to keep her warm, then give her some mouth-to-mouth ventilation until the ambulance arrived, just to make sure.

Now, which room was Mel's bedroom? Sue reckoned it might be the one opposite the phone table. The door was ajar, and Sue opened it further to look inside. No, that was the lounge. The bedroom must be . . . just a second . . . what were those little bottles on the table?

Sue crept forward, terrible thoughts crowding into her mind as she recognised the objects for what they were. Medicine bottles. Empty. With shaking hand she picked one up and read the label. Oh . . . NO!

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In slow motion she replaced the bottle and lifted the empty glass sitting alongside. Her nostrils caught the scent of gin. NO! . . . IT CAN'T BE . . . MELODY . . . WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?

CHAPTER 26

Armstrong parked in the Wycombe General Hospital visitors' car park and gathered the bunch of chrysanthemums, the bag of strawberries and, most important, the newspaper lying on the passenger seat. He locked the car and made his way straight to the ward. He knew the way well now. The surrounding buildings were drab and dilapidated and long overdue for renovation, thought Armstrong as he went inside.

A stern-faced nurse passed him in the corridor. Above his head the ceiling was invisible through the maze of pipes of varying gauge running along it. It was like being in a submarine. A curious all-pervading odour blended of medication and decrepitude filtered into the scientist's nose.

The Ward Manager, an attractive woman in her forties, led Armstrong to one of the private rooms at the far end of the main ward. The scientist averted his eyes from the patients and their visitors as he strode past the beds. The atmosphere of infirmity and decay made him shudder. He hated hospitals.

'How's she doing?' he asked anxiously.

'She's coming along fine, Dr Armstrong. It won't be long before she's home again.'

At the door, the nurse peered in through the glass.

'She seems to be sleeping just now,' she said quietly to Armstrong. 'But it won't do any harm if you want to go in. We'll have to wake her soon to feed her, anyway.'

'Thank you.'

The nurse switched on a brief reassure-the-patient's-kin smile and marched off.

Armstrong slowly opened the door and entered. There were already several vases of flowers on the window sill and the bedside table was bedecked with 'get well' cards. The scientist deposited the fruit and flowers he had brought. Holding onto the newspaper, he crept over to the bed and looked down on the tranquil face reposing on the crisp white pillow.

'Melody,' he whispered, 'are you awake?'

The eyelids flickered, then gradually opened. A smile began to mould itself on the girl's lips. The grey eyes looked up at the visitor and her hand reached out to touch him.

'Hello, darling. I was just dozing.'

Armstrong leant forward and kissed her on the forehead.

'How are you feeling today?' he asked.

'Much better. Doc Weissholz thinks I'll be able to go home tomorrow or the day after.'

'Excellent. Have you got your appetite back?'

The girl nodded. 'It's coming back slowly. I had a lunch of soup and salad today,'

'That's good. I'll make you one of my stroganoffs as soon as you're home.'

'Now that is an incentive to get well again,' said Melody.

Armstrong smiled back at her, not for the first time offering a mental message of gratitude to Sue Kristiansen, who had saved Melody from almost certain death by her prompt action.

Melody had been comatose for two days after her emergency admission to the hospital, and at first the doctors would not even guarantee that she would ever regain consciousness. From the electroencephalograph analysis it was feared that she might have suffered damage to the brain tissues.

Armstrong was distraught when Sue phoned to tell him what had happened. He had dashed to the hospital, only to be informed he would not be able to see Melody as she was unconscious and under intensive care. He had met Sue there and the stewardess had related her dramatic story to the scientist. Armstrong was doubly grieved, for not only was Melody hanging tenuously onto life with her fingertips, but he could not understand why she had done what she did. Was it his fault? Something he had said or done? He had searched in vain for an answer. It just didn't make sense, not now that things were going so well between them.

On the third morning, Melody's brain activity had suddenly begun to show signs of perking up and her pulse strengthened. In the afternoon she had sleepily opened her eyes and asked the doctor standing at her bedside whether the milk in her fridge was still fresh. Now, two days later, her incredible recovery was almost complete. The medics thought that she had probably been saved by the dilution of the barbiturates with bread, and the gin with lime juice. The dilutants had slowed the rate of absorption of the drugs into her blood stream before her stomach was pumped out. No doubt her will to recuperate was considerably boosted by Armstrong's explanation of how Cheryl came to be at his house and by the happy knowledge that he had not cheated on her. There was something to live for after all.

Not even Armstrong's revelations about Echo Yankee could daunt her progress. Melody had warned him that unless he told her everything he knew about the Galleon, then as soon as she was well again she would start digging for the truth herself. Eventually he had given in to her threats and told her the conclusion he and Mackelbury had come to. Her first reaction was disbelief, then anger. Afterwards her mood had become

pensive, but luckily the scientist's conjecture had not demoralised her, as he was afraid it might. Obviously her old strength of character was returning. It gratified Armstrong to think that perhaps it was his attention to her that was pulling her through.

Evidently the subject was still uppermost in her thoughts for as Armstrong pulled up a chair to sit at the bedside she said, 'John, this Echo Yankee thing. What first made you suspect sabotage?'

'Well,' he replied, 'it was the background information about the passengers that Transec—the government's transport security department—had researched. Mack got a copy from his friends in the Met. I just put two and two together to work out that Hepworth was responsible for the depressurisation.' The scientist went on to explain how he had arrived at his deduction from the circumstantial evidence they had gathered.

'What about this golf club connection. You said something about that yesterday, didn't you?'

'Again, just supposition. It's unlikely Longman was pally with Hepworth purely from their Blue Planet connection—they moved in different circles. Except for the Mimbridge golf club. Let's say they happened to meet by chance at Mimbridge. Maybe they got chatting in the bar or maybe they played a round of golf together. Longman wants to get rid of his wife. He knows she frequently flies to Cyprus to stay with friends. So perhaps he gets to thinking, is there some way of killing her on one of these flights? He knows how the pressurisation works on Galleons and so does Hepworth. Suppose he sounds out Hepworth at the golf club. You know, my wife is a real nuisance. If only there was some way she could be removed. I'd pay good money for that. If the plane could be depressurised and someone cut off her emergency oxygen she wouldn't survive. I wonder how it could be done.'

Melody took a strawberry from the bag. 'So then . . . '

'So then Hepworth takes the bait. He says, look, how about I arrange to be on one of the flights Tricia Longman is on. I nobble the outflow valve and when it opens I clamp the tube of her oxygen mask. In the confusion nobody will see what I'm doing. The cabin crew won't suspect me of interfering. They'll know I'm a technician on Galleons and they'll assume I'm trying to help. After the emergency descent I'll get rid of the clip and the timer that opened the outflow valve. Everyone's okay, apart from Longman's dear wife, who has unfortunately expired due to oxygen starvation . . . okay, says Hepworth to Longman, shall we talk money?'

Melody's eyes narrowed in hatred and she compressed her lips. 'Longman . . . the bastard . . . he killed my father.' She looked up at her visitor. 'John, why haven't the police arrested him?'

'Well, as I told you yesterday, there's still no firm evidence against him. Not enough for a successful prosecution, anyway. Mack and I have worked out what we think happened to the Galleon, but it's still only a theory.'

'That bastard,' hissed Melody again. 'I couldn't bear it if he got away with this.'

The scientist stroked her arm to soothe her. 'Well, maybe he won't. Have a look at this.'

Armstrong handed the girl the newspaper and pointed to one of the columns.

GALLEON BLACK BOX FOUND

Scottish fishermen yesterday netted what experts believe is one of the 'black box' flight recorders from the Galleon airliner which crashed into the Atlantic last year. The men were fishing 100 miles northwest of the Outer Hebrides when the catch was made. The captain of one of the ships radioed ashore with a

description of the object and its serial number, which identified it as the cockpit voice recorder of the crashed aircraft.

Today a Coastguard helicopter will fly out from Lossiemouth to recover the recorder from the boat. It will be taken to the Air Accident Investigation Branch at Farnborough, where the task of processing the data will commence immediately.

A spokesman for the Civil Aviation Authority told reporters yesterday that it was hoped that the CVR will finally clear up the mystery which still surrounds the accident. The spokesman said that the equipment would have recorded all conversation between the crewmen in the flight deck for the two hours preceding the crash, together with all radio transmissions and extraneous noise. He added that although the CVR was designed to withstand impact forces and prolonged immersion in the sea, it would not be known until the processing began whether the recordings had been damaged by several months' exposure to the elements.

Melody lowered the paper. 'Do you think there'll be anything incriminating on the recorder tapes?' she asked.

Armstrong shook his head. 'Impossible to say until they've been processed. I did some research, looking at the accident report. It so happened that Echo Yankee's CVR had been replaced about a year before the crash, so it was one of the newer solid state recorders.'

'Solid state?'

'No moving parts. No tapes. Data recorded digitally. So more likely to have survived immersion.'

'Presumably the police will be interested.'

'Very much so. Mack phoned me today to tell me that the Met and Transec will get transcripts as soon as the CVR has been decoded.'

Melody pointed to the newspaper. 'I wonder what Oliver Longman will make of that.'

'Well, he'll be in the same waiting game that we are, but for different reasons, of course. He'll want to know if there is any damning conversation on the tapes. If he's guilty, he'll be in a dilemma at the moment. He can't run off without arousing police suspicion that he's got something to hide. On the other hand, I doubt if he likes the idea of waiting around to see what will turn up on the recording.'

'Serves him right,' said Melody with acrimony. 'Let him stew in his own juice.'

'Exactly. In the meantime I think we should keep our theory to ourselves. No point yet in broadcasting it to the world.'

'If you say so.'

The conversation turned to lighter matters and Armstrong and the girl nibbled at a bunch of grapes someone from work had brought her. Sue Kristiansen, never one to lose control of her tongue, had told Melody's friends that she had collapsed at home 'because of nervous exhaustion'. Melody had been inundated with good wishes and bombarded with cards, fruit and presents.

'Are you still thinking of leaving Blue Planet?' asked the scientist.

Melody threw back her head and looked at the ceiling. 'I don't know. I think I want to give up flying, but I don't want to lose contact with my friends. And I think I'd get bored if I had no work to do.'

'Well, if you do leave the airline, I have a proposition for you.'

'A proposition?' responded the girl with a smile, eyebrows raised. 'That sounds intriguing.'

'It was Howie that set me thinking.'

'Howie? The steward on our Funchal crew?'

'Yes. Remember I said I'd help with the cost of his pilot training?'

'Yes. Very generous of you. You told him it was your company that would supply the funding so he wasn't embarrassed.'

'Well, I thought of turning a little white lie into a big white truth.' 'Meaning?'

'I had words with one of our senior accountants and suggested that Holmyard set up a foundation to finance good works such as the thing Howie wants to do. Told him I was willing to divert future royalties from the Memotron and such like directly into the foundation. If Holmyard were to match it from company profits it would be a tidy sum available for projects.'

'What was the response?'

'He was an accountant, so he didn't leap up and down with joy at the thought of giving away money. But he said he'd bring it up at the next Board meeting. So then I said something that was either very clever or very stupid.'

'Go on.'

'Well, I told him if Holmyard didn't pick up the idea then I would take it—and myself—to a company who would. So then I had to wait for either the launch of the Holmyard Foundation or my redundancy notice.'

'And?'

'They agreed. I think the Board liked the idea of offsetting some of the donations against tax liability. Everyone's a winner. Except the tax man. So now I have to report to you as Manager of the foundation.'

'John, what are you talking about?'

'Part of the deal was that Melody Fairwood would be running the show. I extolled your virtues to the Board and they left me to set it up with you. By a strange coincidence, your salary would match what you told me you get paid by Blue Planet. What do you think?' The girl narrowed her grey eyes thoughtfully. 'I'm flattered. It sounds appealing. Trouble is, I'm a bit limited on managerial qualifications.'

'You don't need qualifications, you need common sense.'

Melody paused. 'Are you sure your company wants to take on a failed suicide?'

'Hey, that's enough of that. When they asked me for background information I explained that your life had been unsettled since your father's death but that you were now coming to terms with it. In the end they left it to me to make the choice. And I chose you.'

'You're right, John,' responded the girl slowly, 'I've got to think positively. Thanks for going to all that trouble. Let me consider the job. I'll decide within the next day or so whether to take up your offer.'

'Take your time. I've got a print-out of Howie's plan for you to read when you're ready. If you become manager of the Holmyard Foundation it'll be your first application.'

Melody squeezed his hand.

'I love you.'

CHAPTER 27

Armstrong reviewed his response and then clicked on 'Send'. 'Email message sent to Artie Mackelbury', announced his laptop.

The exchange had started when the scientist's police officer friend had informed him that Echo Yankee's cockpit voice recorder data had been processed successfully. With terrorism not ruled out as a contributory factor to the disaster, the Air Accident Investigations Branch had released the transcript to Transec and the police and intelligence services. Mackelbury had seen the transcript, which confirmed that Nigel Hepworth had been behaving strangely. But, he informed Armstrong, there was as far as anyone could make out no connection to Tricia or Oliver Longman. The actual recording had now been prepared as a digital audio file and would Armstrong like a copy sent over the wires? Not for release into the public domain yet, Mack instructed his friend, pending further investigation.

Melody arrived mid-morning and made coffee for the two of them. She was recovering well after her hospitalisation, although Armstrong noted a quieter, more introspective woman than he had previously known. As he had predicted—and hoped—she had taken up the post of manager of the Holmyard Foundation. Now she took a letter from her bag and showed it Planet. The decision had not been too difficult, Melody told him. Although it would be a terrible wrench to leave the airline after seven years with them she believed she would enjoy the new job if she took it up, particularly as it would mean helping other people. She had made up her mind. It was time for a change. She would post the resignation letter that very day.

'A wise choice,' said the scientist.

The next email from Mack arrived as they drank their coffee. The first attachment was the transcript of the CVR and the second the audio recording.

The two lovers sat next to each other to view the laptop screen together.

TRANSCRIPT OF CVR RECORDING RECOVERED FROM BLUE PLANET GALLEON REGISTRATION GQXEY

INTRODUCTION

ABBREVIATIONS

ATC Air Traffic Control

CVR Cockpit Voice Recorder

MP Monitoring Pilot

OP Operating Pilot

QRH Quick Reference Handbook (non-normal checklists)

TCAS Traffic Conflict Avoidance System

The CVR installed in this aircraft is of the solid state 120 minute continuous recording type. If the flight duration exceeds 120 minutes old data is overwritten by new data. In the case of Echo Yankee, the crew appear to have become incapacitated about 100 minutes before the aircraft hit the sea. This

transcript therefore relates to the first 20 minutes of the last two hours.

On this flight First Officer Sidhu is acting as operating pilot (OP). His primary duties are therefore responsibility for aircraft control (manually or using the autopilot) and navigation. Captain Fairwood is in overall authority but on Flight 935 he is acting as monitoring pilot (MP). His primary duties are monitoring OP, radio communications and systems operation and monitoring.

Rapid depressurisation of the cabin would be detected by the aircraft occupants as possible ear distress and sudden lowering of temperature as the residual air expanded adiabatically. Air escaping from the cabin would flow rapidly to the exit point, scattering light objects and debris in its wake. The automatic dropping down of oxygen masks in the cabin would add to the confusion.

In the flight deck, blow-out panels in the door would detach to equalise the air pressure almost instantaneously to avoid damage to the surrounding structure arising from differential air pressure, so the pilots would experience the same conditions as the passengers. Additionally, a computer generated voice caution would announce cabin altitude exceeding 10,000 feet.

When the pilots realised that the cabin had depressurised, the CVR transcript confirms that they immediately started to action the relevant checklist. The initial items of this checklist are completed by recall, that is, the pilots carry out these actions from memory. This procedure ensures a rapid response rather than taking time locating the QRH and referencing the checklist. At 43,000 feet aircraft altitude (6000 feet cabin altitude) loss of cabin air pressure would result in incapacitation of crew and passengers within 15 seconds from hypoxia. It is therefore essential that all occupants in the aircraft don oxygen masks without delay.

Having donned their masks, the next action for the pilots is to cancel the cabin altitude warning to minimise distraction and check the pressurisation system to see whether they can restore cabin air pressure. If they are unable to restore pressure they must start an emergency descent at high rate to bring the aircraft down into breathable air, usually 10,000 feet or lower, subject to terrain clearance. There is a complication here. If the air traffic is heavy in the area it would be unwise for the pilots to initiate a high rate descent without ATC clearance when the risk of collision with other aircraft below them could be significant. They would therefore declare a distress ('Mayday') status and request clearance for the emergency descent. If ATC did not respond or were unable to offer a clearance the pilots would before too long have to initiate descent regardless and rely on their TCAS display to avoid traffic in the vicinity, which could cause confusion to the crews in these other affected aircraft, in that their own TCAS systems might demand inappropriate responses.

Due to the empty crew emergency oxygen reservoir on Echo Yankee, the pilots quickly became incapacitated while they were carrying out the recall items in the depressurisation checklist.

ABBREVIATIONS (CVR RECORDING)

CAPM	Captain William Fairwood (headset mic)
CAPA	Captain William Fairwood (flight deck area mic)
CAPOM	Captain William Fairwood (oxgen mask mic)
FOM	First Officer Vayalar Sidhu (headset mic)
FOA	First Officer Vayalar Sidhu (flight deck area mic)
FOOM	First Officer Vayalar Sidhu (oxygen mask mic)
CMA	Cabin Manager Jennifer Thompson (flight deck
area mic)	
AREA	Flight deck area mic, other inputs

GALM Forward galley crew interphone mic UNK Flight deck area mic, unknown source

The CAPM and FOM inputs are from the pilots' headset boom microphones. These inputs are usually for inter-pilot communication or communication with air traffic control (ATC). The ATC inputs are from the pilots' headset earphone sources. All other inputs are generated from the flight deck area microphone located in the overhead panel. When known the sources are identified. Unidentified sources are annotated UNK (unknown).

ABBREVIATIONS (OTHER)

ADF Automatic Direction Finding radio equipment

ATIS Automatic Terminal Information System

FMC Flight Management Computer

NDB Non-directional Radio Beacon

pax passenger(s)

VOR Very High Frequency Omni-directional Radio Beacon

Vref Landing speed (knots)

NOTES

- (1) ***** signifies non-pertinent word or phrase
- (2) unclear words or phrases are included in brackets ()
- (3) indecipherable words or phrases are annotated [------]
- (4) radio transmissions to and from ATC are printed in **bold type**; those from ATC are printed in **CAPITALS**; non-relevant transmissions have been deleted
- (5) explanatory notes and miscellaneous AREA mic inputs are printed in *italics*
- (6) all times are UTC in HOURS: MINUTES: SECONDS (to convert to British Summer Time add 1 hour)

(7) time periods during which no significant inputs are recorded have been deleted

Armstrong opened the audio file and with his mouse positioned the screen cursor over the 'play' button.

'Ready?'

Melody nodded.

12:37:31

Recording starts.

12:37:33

FOM: I've just about paid off my training costs. Maybe I can start thinking about buying a flat now.

CAPM: Good idea. It's difficult for young people now, getting on the property ladder.

FOM: Tell me about it. Me and my girlfriend are thinking about—someone climbing below us on TCAS.

CAPM: Yes, I'm watching it. I've got a visual on it.

The relative position and altitude of aircraft with active transponders in the vicinity are shown by TCAS on the subject aircraft's navigation display.

12:37:52

CAPM: He's levelling off.

FOM: Yeah.

12:38:33

FOM: (Maybe) buy a flat. Prices might be going up again. Ah, look at that. That's better.

CAPM: It was forecast to swing round.

FOM: Saves us a minute at Abbeville.

FOM: Map checks.

CAPM: Okay.

12:38:56

ATC: PLANET NINE THREE FIVE CONTACT REIMS ONE THREE THREE EIGHT THREE, GOODDAY.

CAPM: One three eight three, Planet 935, au revoir.

12:39:14

CAPM: Reims bonjour, Planet 935, level four three zero.

ATC: BONJOUR NINE THREE FIVE, ROUTE DIRECT MIKE TANGO DELTA.

CAPM: Direct Montdidier, 935.

12:40:25

FOM: I've put in a standard Biggin Three Bravo and standard profile.

CAPM: [-----] too busy. We might get something more fuel efficient.

FOM: Yeah, then twenty minutes holding at Biggin.

CAPM: Yeah, como siempre.

FOM: Si, señor.

12:40: 48

FOM: What do you reckon?

CAPM: Looks good to me. Epsom both ADFs?

FOM: For two seven left.

CAPM: Okay. I'll get some more ATIS before the drop.

FOM: Right.

The crew are expecting a Biggin 3B standard arrival at London Heathrow for landing on runway 27L. The NDB at Epson has been tuned on the aircraft's ADF receivers for navigational back-up in the event that the aircraft must break off its approach and fly the missed approach procedure.

12:41:10

CAPM: Panels checked. Systems are good.

FOM: Thanks.

CAPM: Except the weather radar. It's spiking again.

FOM: Something inside (the radome?) CAPM: Could be. I'll put it in the book.

FOM: Hey, we've got a techie on board haven't we? I'm sure Jen said there was one on the staff pax list. Shall we ask him to take a look?

CAPM: No, leave him in peace.

FOM: Probably nothing he can do anyway.

CAPM: Quite. Weather's fine. No prob if the radar's dodgy.

12:41:53

AREA: Sound of crew call chime.

FOM: Okay? It's Jen.

AREA: Sound of flight deck door lock operating.

CMA: Hello boys. (Everything) okay?

CAPA: Yes thanks, Jen. Landing ten to three local if there's no holding.

CMA: Nice. Drinkies?

FOA: We're okay.

CMA: Haven't seen (Mel for a while), Bill. When's the wedding?

CAPA: She hasn't mentioned it [------]

CMA: Do you approve?

CAPA: He's okay. I can think of someone better.

CMA: Oh yeah. Anyone we know?

FOM: Can I balance the fuel?

CAPM: Yes . . . let's see . . . three minutes?

FOM: Agreed.

FOM: Crossfeed open.

CAPM: Check.

At this stage of the flight the aircraft's fuel system will be configured tank-to-engine, the left tank feeding the left engine and ditto for the right. If the crew observes tank quantities differing they have the option of feeding both engines from one tank by opening the crossfeed valve and selective use of the fuel pumps until the imbalance is corrected.

CMA: Anyway. (A man) for Melody.

CAPA: A friend of mine. Would be just (right) for her.

CMA: In Blooper?

CAPA: No. Electronics. Research scientist.

CMA: As long as she's happy.

CAPA: Quite . . . is Tricia alright?

CMA: Seems to be. I upgraded her to biz class. Had a (bit of a natter). She says she's well rid.

CAPA: I don't know her ex that well. He was okay as a first officer.

ATC: PLANET NINE THREE NINE . . . CORRECTION . . . NINE THREE FIVE ROUTE DIRECT ABBEVILLE.

CAPM: Direct Abbeville, Planet 935.

FOM: Okay? CAPM: (Yup.)

CMA: Okay, I'll leave you to it. CAPA: TVM. See you later.

AREA: Sound of flight deck door lock operating.

FOM: Minute to go.

CAPM: Okay.

12:44:41

FOM: (Huh). Double Frankfurt.

CAPM: Good allowances. When is it?

FOM: Next Friday. With Pierre Abri. Should be a good day out.

CAPM: He's a fine fellow.

FOM: Okay?

CAPM: Okay.

FOM: Crossfeed closed.

CAPM: Check.

Fuel balancing has been completed. Fuel system reconfigured tank-to-engine.

12:45:20

ATC: PLANET NINE THREE FIVE CONTACT NORTH SECTOR ONE THREE SIX THREE TWO.

CAPM: One three six three two, Planet 935 au revoir, monsieur.

CAPM: Reims bonjour, Planet 935, level four three zero. ATC: HELLO PLANET NINE THREE FIVE, PROCEED AS CLEARED.

CAPM: Roger.

12: 46:01

AREA: Sound of crew call chime.

CAPM: Okay.

AREA: Sound of flight deck door lock operating.

CMA: Sorry, Bill, I know you're busy [-----]

CAPA: Not at all. What can we do for you?

CMA: (It's) probably nothing.

ATC: PLANET NINE THREE FIVE, TURN RIGHT FIVE DEGREES, REPORT NEW HEADING.

CAPM: Right five degrees, 935, that will be three one one, monsieur.

FOM: Heading select, three one one.

First Officer Sidhu has changed the autopilot roll mode from Lateral Navigation to Heading Select so he can fly the heading change demanded by ATC. CAPA: What do you mean, Jen?

CMA: I was coming forward from the rear galley and I saw him talking to one of the other passengers, like they were (discussing something), but when they realised I was approaching . . .

ATC: PLANET NINE THREE FIVE, FLY HEADING THREE ZERO FIVE.

CAPM: Heading three zero five, Planet 935.

FOM: Heading select, three zero five.

CAPA: Go on, Jen.

CMA: The engineer was touching the PSU panel . . . like he was explaining it to the passenger. When they saw me they immediately stopped talking. They looked shifty, like kids being found out doing something they shouldn't.

The passenger service units (PSU) above the seats include technical items such as electrical cables and oxygen supply. If the cabin air pressure drops, the PSU panels open and release the individual masks for the passengers.

CAPA: Could you (hear what) they were saying?

CMA: No.

CAPA: Which passenger? Is he on his own?

CMA: Not sure. He was standing on his own in the aisle by an empty row when I saw them talking. Maybe he's travelling with others. Do you want me to ask him his name? I could say we're checking the manifest for errors.

CAPA: Um . . . maybe leave it just now. But keep an eye on things, would you?

CMA: Of course.

ATC: THANK YOU PLANET NINE THREE FIVE, OWN NAVIGATION ABBEVILLE.

CAPM: Own nav Abbeville, 935.

FOM: Lat nav, Abbeville.

First Officer Sidhu has reselected autopilot roll mode to Lateral Navigation. The FMC will now fly the aircraft direct to Abbeville VOR.

CAPA: What's his name, the techie?

CMA: Nigel something.

CAPA: Okay, if it looks like there's something dodgy going on

I'll ask you to ask him to talk to us over the cabin

interphone. He can explain himself.

CMA: Right.

AREA: Sound of flight deck door lock operating.

12:47:10

FOM: (What's all) that about, then?

CAPM: Jen's okay, one of the best. Doesn't get fazed easily. Something's worried her about this Nigel fellah and the pax.

FOM: Want me to check it out?

CAPM: No, SOPs say we both stay here if there's trouble.

That's why I told Jen to use the interphone rather than ask him to come to the cockpit.

FOM: Yeah. Don't feel like being a hero.

CAPM: So ops normal for the moment.

FOM: Right.

Blue Planet Airlines Standard Operating Procedures dictate that if there is any disturbance in the cabin the pilots should not intervene; they should remain in the flight deck and ensure that the flight deck door is locked. If the disturbance is serious they should report the occurrence to ATC. These SOPs are common to most airlines to ensure that any potential terrorist activity is confined to the cabin.

FOM: Stansted plus twenty-five.

CAPM: Should do us.

The nominated alternate airport for Flight 935 was London Stansted. First Officer Sidhu is confirming that they have sufficient fuel to divert from Heathrow to Stansted, with fuel available for holding prior to landing exceeding the minimum required (30 minutes) by 25 minutes.

12:48:22

FOM: Excellent.

CAPM: If there's no holding.

FOM: Can't be late. Going (out) tonight.

CAPM: Anywhere exciting?

FOM: Me and my girlfriend are going to a gig in Reading.

CAPM: Any (big names) [-----].

FOM: Dead Dogs. CAPM: Uh-huh.

12:49:25

FOM: What (stuff) do you like?

CAPM: Sixties, seventies.

FOM: [-----] reggae. And blues.

CAPM: Me too.

12:50:44 FOM: Okav.

CAPM: Should work.

12:51:27

FOM: Right, I've got one two nine as a V ref.

CAPM: That's what I make it. FOM: Minimums bugs parked.

CAPM: Check.

FOM: Landing alt set.

CAPM: Eighty.

FOM: Elevation bug set.

CAPM: Eighty-three

FOM: Happy with the briefing?

CAPM: Yessir.

FOM: Review just before top of the drop.

CAPM: Okay.

FOM: What about Nigel?

CAPM: Yeah, just thinking about that. When we get within range let's ask Ops to have Security meet us on stand and we can ask some questions.

FOM: Good plan.

The pilots are configuring the aircraft displays and systems for landing at London Heathrow. They have calculated landing speed based on expected aircraft mass, set altimeter reminders for the expected weather conditions and pressurisation for Heathrow's elevation (83 ft above sea level).

12:53:33

AREA: Sound of crew call chime.

CAPM: Yes, Jen.

GALM: You boys okay?

CAPM: Yeah. Are you making tea?

GALM: For you, anything.

CAPM: And a coffee for Vayalar.

GALM: Be right there.

CAPM: What about the techie? Behaving himself?

GALM: Nothing new to report. I think he's just gone to the loo.

CAPM: Well, he can't do much harm in there. (What about) our mystery pax?

GALM: He's sitting next to two other people down the back, seems to be dozing. I've found who they are on the manifest. Do you want their names?

CAPM: Yes, write their names down for me, would you? We're gonna get Security to check things out when we land.

GALM: [-----] (know it). I feel like a bit of an idiot now. (Making) a lot of fuss about nothing.

CAPM: No, you were right, Jen. These things should be dealt with.

GALM: Should I ask Nigel if he's got a problem?

CAPM: No, leave it just now. Like I say, we'll discuss it when we land.

GALM: Thanks, Bill.

12:55:12

CAPM: Panels checked. Systems checked. Didn't I do that a few (minutes) ago? Must be having a senior moment.

FOM: Thanks anyway, Grandad. Map's good on the nav.

CAPM: Didn't you do that a few minutes ago? You having a senior moment?

FOM: Sorry, who are you?

CAPM: I've forgotten.

12:56: 02

FOM: Stansted plus twenty-six.

CAPM: Not too busy FOM: Like TCAS (is off).

CAPM: They'll tell me off for carrying too much fuel.

FOM: Sod 'em.

CAPM: I agree. Sod 'em. FOM: Bloody managers.

12: 56: 59

CAPM: Hot off the press.

FOM: Straight down the runway at six knots. Recipe for disaster. I'm bound (to plant it).

CAPM: It'll be a greaser. FOM: Or a teeth cracker.

12:57:35

ATC: PLANET NINE THREE FIVE HEADING THREE ZERO ZERO TRAFFIC SPACING.

CAPM: Heading three zero zero, Planet 935.

FOM: Heading select . . . there he is.

CAPM: Contact.

FOM: (It'll pass ahead). CAPM: Left to right.

12:57:57

UNK: ******

UNK: (Hey).

CAPA: (Not right).

FOM: It's the (cabin).

AREA: Sound of two explosive releases of air pressure, probably the blow-out panels in the flight deck door detaching.

CAPM: Pressurisation's gone. Let's get on oxygen.

AREA: 'Cabin altitude, cabin altitude'.

This is a computer generated voice caution.

FOOM: Comms check. Can you hear me?

CAPOM: Comms check. Yes, how me?

FOOM: Loud and clear.

CAPOM: Depress checklist recall (items). FOOM: Masks on, check comms, done.

CAPOM: Check. What have we got?

AREA: 'Cabin altitude, cabin altitude'.

FOOM: (Cancelling). Crew oxygen.

CAPOM: Er . . . checked armed. What's [-----].

FOOM: (It's) [-----].

FOOM: (System).

No further inputs from any crew members are recorded after time 12:58:21.

13:04:02

ATC: PLANET NINE THREE FIVE, DIRECT ABBEVILLE.

13:04:13

ATC: PLANET NINE THREE FIVE, DIRECT ABBEVILLE SIR.

13:04:42

ATC: PLANET NINE THREE FIVE, HOW DO YOU READ?

13:04:59

ATC: PLANET NINE THREE FIVE, IF YOU READ, SQUAWK IDENT.

ATC is asking Planet 935 to push the 'IDENT' button on their transponder to confirm reception of ATC messages.

13:05:25

ATC: INTERFLIGHT ONE FOUR EIGHT TANGO, REIMS.

IF148T: GO AHEAD, SIR.

ATC: PLEASE RELAY TO PLANET NINE THREE FIVE.

IF148T: GO AHEAD.

ATC: THANK YOU. HE SHOULD CONTACT ONE TWO SEVEN EIGHT FIVE.

IF148T: OKAY, STANDBY, BREAK, PLANET NINE THREE FIVE, DO YOU READ ONE FOUR EIGHT TANGO? IF148T: PLANET NINE THREE FIVE, DO YOU READ?

IF148T: PLANET NINE THREE FIVE, IF YOU READ, CONTACT ONE TWO SEVEN EIGHT FIVE. IF148T: REIMS, ONE FORTY-EIGHT, NO REPLY, SIR. ATC: OKAY, THANKS.

Reims ATC is trying to make contact with Planet 935 using another aircraft on the same frequency to relay.

Apart from incoming radio calls from ATC centres and other aircraft, none of which are acknowledged by the crew of Flight 935, there are no further inputs to the CVR until various aural voice warnings are triggered by low fuel quantity and system malfunctions associated with subsequent run down of the right engine due to fuel starvation. In summary:

14:07:14 'Low Fuel'
14:12:16 'Low Fuel, Low Fuel'
14:17:19 'Low Fuel, Low Fuel'
14:22:20 'Low Fuel, Low Fuel'
14:25:01 'Right Generator Fail'
14:26:13 'Right Engine Hydraulic Pump Fail'
14:26:58 'Right Engine Oil Pressure Fail'
14:27:22 'Low Fuel, Low Fuel'
14:29:08 Sound of stall warning stick-shaker motor
14:29:15 'Check Bank Angle' continuous repeated warning
14:33:20 'Check Descent Rate' continuous repeated warning
14:33:33 Sounds of impact

Melody let go of Armstrong's hand to reach into her bag for a handkerchief. She had taken hold of it when she first heard her father's voice, clenching it tightly. The scientist found himself at a loss for words. If he found it upsetting to hear the last minutes of a doomed flight, how much worse for Melody to listen to the surreal, almost banal narration of her father's death. One minute anticipating an on time arrival back home, with the weather fine and no expected problems, the next sinking into unconsciousness and death because one passenger was trying to kill another. And then the violent end of Echo Yankee and its occupants.

Armstrong clicked on the 'stop' button. For long minutes the two of them sat silent, the tears running down Melody's face, the scientist squeezing her shoulder, not knowing how to comfort her.

Then the girl sighed. 'Well, I had to know. Dad was a professional, right up to the end. The recording proved it.'

'Yes. It must be some comfort to you.'

Melody blinked away her tears and forced a smile. 'Thank you for being with me. I couldn't have coped without you.'

'It's the least I could do. I love you.'

CHAPTER 28

'So where does that leave us?' asked Melody. She had regained her composure somewhat, dried her eyes and turned her mind to analysis of the CVR recording.

Armstrong looked puzzled and slowly shook his head. 'There's a new complication now. The mystery passenger Nigel Hepworth was talking to. Where does he fit into all this? I thought Hepworth was doing the deed solo, using a timer to open the outflow valve. When the cabin depressurised it could be he intended to put on one of the portable oxygen cylinders from the overhead stowage and make his way to where Tricia was sitting to clip her tube, expecting that in the confusion no-one would realise what he was doing. He was probably assuming that the cabin crew would think he was helping in some way. He could have moved up and down the cabin ostensibly checking that everyone was wearing their mask.

'After the emergency descent they would have discovered that Tricia Longman was dead. But by then Hepworth would have surreptitiously removed the clip. Later on he would go back in the toilet, lift the hatch in the floor and remove the timer which controlled the outflow valve electrical power. So there would be no evidence to prove that any skullduggery was involved. He

might even have earned the praise of his fellow passengers and crew members for his help. Job done.'

'So what about the man he was talking to?'

'That's bothering me. Can't be a coincidence, can it? Maybe Hepworth doesn't use a timer to open the valve. He stays in the toilet and opens the valve, having donned the drop-down toilet mask. Our mystery man somehow stops Tricia's oxygen when the cabin depressurises. But how? She was up front in Business class, he was back in Economy. Did Hepworth brief him on where to locate one of the portable bottles?'

'Bit risky, though, John. Bringing in an extra person. More complication. More chance of things going wrong. It would obviously have to have been somebody who had a link to either Longman or Hepworth. How would they have found somebody who would help them to kill Tricia? It's not the sort of thing you can look up in Yellow Pages.'

'Quite. And what about witnesses? Surely the other passengers would notice what was happening. Hepworth could get away with it because he was a Blue Planet technician ostensibly helping the crew. But a random passenger . . .'

'Maybe there's some other explanation we haven't thought of.'

'You're right,' said Armstrong. 'I'm wondering . . . maybe Tricia wasn't the intended victim. Maybe it was someone else. Looks like we're back to square one.'

'Shall I make some coffee? I think I need a break from—' Melody was interrupted by the door bell.

'Will you get that?' asked Armstrong, scrolling through the CVR transcript on his laptop. He heard voices in the hall and then Melody reappeared with two men in tow. One looked to be mid-twenties, casually dressed with an open-necked sport shirt and light slacks. In his hand he carried a folded document. The man other was more burly, with cropped hair. In his thirties,

Armstrong thought, wearing a smart lounge suit and tie despite the warm summer temperature.

'John, this is Simon Ketteridge,' she said, indicating the younger man.

'Ah, the legal chap,' said Armstrong, rising from his seat to shake the proffered hand.

'Pleased to meet you,' said Ketteridge with a smile. 'This is my associate, Paul.'

'I forgot to tell you, John,' said Melody. 'Simon called earlier, wanting to see me and I told him I was coming round here. I said it would be okay if he showed up. Hope you don't mind.'

'Not at all. You're most welcome. Would you like tea or coffee?'

'No, we won't keep you long,' said Ketteridge. 'It was just to update you on the settlement, Melody. Although I've spoken to you several times on the phone I thought that as I've never met you in person before it would be nice to meet face-to-face as we probably won't get the chance again.'

'Yes.'

'Well, the whole deal is explained in this document.' Ketteridge opened the folded pages and held it out for Melody to take.

'Was it satisfactory?' asked the scientist as Melody read the pages.

'I think so, yes,' said Ketteridge. 'The various groups finally stopped bickering and came up with some sensible numbers. I think they were all frightened of going to court and being murdered by liability lawyers.'

'Excellent,' said Melody. 'More funds for the Holmyard Foundation.'

'I'm trying to remember,' said Armstrong. 'You lost two relatives in the crash, didn't you?'

'Three. My father, my stepmother and my step-grandmother.'

'My condolences,' said the scientist. But suddenly his jaw gaped open and his eyebrows rose in surprise.

'Good God . . . it must have been you!' he said.

'Pardon?'

'It wasn't Longman . . . it was you! You made the plane crash! You killed them all!'

It was Melody's turn to look shocked.

'John, what are you talking about?'

'Mel, look at the logo on his shirt!'

All eyes turned to Ketteridge's chest. On the dark blue shirt material on the left side were embroidered in red the letters 'MGC'.

Ketteridge snorted. 'Melody, I think your friend's gone mad.' 'John,' said the girl, 'can you explain?'

'MGC. Mimbridge golf club. That's what linked Nigel Hepworth to Oliver Longman, or so we thought. But the link was actually Hepworth and friend Ketteridge here.'

The visitor shook his head. 'Utter nonsense! Yes, I knew Oliver Longman and Nigel Hepworth. Of course I did. They were both members of the club. But you can't go around accusing people of murder. It's unacceptable. Slanderous. How did I murder someone on a plane when I wasn't even on it?'

'You got Nigel Hepworth to do it.'

'And who was I supposed to be murdering?'

'One of your relatives.'

'And why?'

'I don't know. Because you hated them? Or to get money. You tell me.'

Melody was wide-eyed.

'Simon, say it's not true.' Her gaze turned to Armstrong. 'John, is this some sort of joke? If it is it's in very bad taste.'

'Okay, Melody. Why has Simon showed up here?'

'I told you. He phoned this morning, asking to meet me. I told him I was coming round here and said you wouldn't mind if he met me here.'

'But why did he need to see you in person? He could have phoned or emailed.'

'I've already told you,' broke in Ketteridge. 'The case was settled so I probably wouldn't be in touch again. I thought it would be nice to meet you.'

'No, that's not the reason. Melody, did Simon ask you about the CVR?'

'Yes, he asked if we'd seen the transcript.'

'And you said . . . '

'That we were expecting to see it this morning when Mack sent it to you.'

'And that's why he's turned up. To see if there's anything incriminating on the recording.'

'Which there obviously isn't,' said Ketteridge. 'Otherwise you'd have said something before your silly outburst about the golf club.'

'No, I've only just worked it out. We listened to the recording and we heard the cabin crew talking about Hepworth, saying he was behaving strangely. He was heard to be plotting something suspicious with another passenger.'

'And what's that got to do with me?'

'You tell me.'

'Look, I've had enough of this nonsense,' said Ketteridge with pursed lips. 'I come here to bring you good news and you respond by falsely accusing me of a plot to kill one of my relatives. It's absurd. I'll accept your apology and then I'll leave you to wallow in your own wild fantasies.'

'But now we've got proof.'

'What?'

'It's on the recording. I didn't realise at first but now I've figured it out.'

'Do go on,' said Ketteridge with sarcasm.

The scientist turned to Melody.

'Do you remember, Mel? When the cabin manager was talking about Hepworth? She said he was talking to a passenger in row thirty-two.' Armstrong glanced at the girl, hoping the penny would drop. For an agonising second Melody looked perplexed and the scientist's heart sank. Then she turned to him, eyes suddenly bright with understanding.

'Yes, you're right, John. Row thirty-two.'

'So?' said Ketteridge.

'The authorities have got a copy of the seat allocations document on Flight 935. All we have to do is check the names against the seat numbers and we'll have all the proof we need. You know what it'll show, don't you, Simon? Nigel Hepworth was talking to whoever was going to cut off the oxygen to the mask of whichever relative you wanted dead.'

'You're completely mad, both of you,' said Ketteridge.

'Or else it was a family feud. Nigel Hepworth was showing your father how to interrupt the oxygen supply to his wife's or his wife's mother's mask when the cabin pressure failed.'

Ketteridge glanced at his accomplice and Armstrong knew they had hit the nail on the head.

'Tell them to standby,' said Ketteridge to 'Paul'. 'Tell them we may be out soon with two extra people.'

The man in the suit nodded and took out a mobile to carry out his instructions.

Armstrong's phone rang and he started to move towards it.

'Leave it,' said Ketteridge.

'No, I'm going to answer it,' said the scientist.

Ketteridge nodded to 'Paul'. The man stepped forward and punched Armstrong hard in the face. The scientist reeled back and fell over, blood streaming from his mouth.

Melody rushed over and crouched down by him. 'John!' She turned and shouted hysterically at Ketteridge.

'What are you doing!' she screamed.

'Be quiet,' ordered Ketteridge, 'or you'll get the same.'

Armstrong's phone went to voicemail and his greeting message started to play but the caller rang off.

CHAPTER 29

It was decision time. Robert selected 'ROUNDHOUSE DOOR OPEN' on the control panel. Obediently the large door at the entrance to the locomotive shed slid sideways on its guide rails, revealing the dull gleam of the turntable track and handrails inside. There were two things Robert didn't understand. Why was it called a 'roundhouse' when it was mainly square with only two curved corners? And why had Uncle John deliberately discoloured the glass roof panels with grime? It meant you couldn't see the engines clearly by looking down through the roof. It was something to do with realism, which his uncle seemed guite keen on. Engines were dirty things and their dirt had to be spread around on buildings and things. There was even soot painted onto the parts of the bridges which the engine funnels passed under. The railway layout was supposed to represent the London, Midland and Scottish Railway in the years before the Second World War. So all the engines had to be black or maroon coloured, when Robert preferred green.

And yet the electronic controls were right up to date. So even if you couldn't see the engines clearly in the roundhouse you could tell which was which by checking the data screen by the control panel. Each loco was fitted with a device which told you where it was. For the express Robert had just assembled with

the little tank engine shunter he could use 'Talisman', the new Claughton, which seemed to be Uncle John's favourite. But it was such a wimpy engine compared to the 'Duchess of Buccleuch', survivor of the famous crash. Uncle John would probably tell him off for including an ex-London and North Western dining car in the train, when he should really have put in a more modern LMS car, but Robert liked the six-wheeled bogies of the older coaches.

The damage from the crash was merely a memory now. The station, the footbridge, the signal box, the suburban coach stock were all restored. Only one carriage had had to be scrapped and Robert himself had painted the replacement Uncle John had built. A crash was impossible now—the system wouldn't let trains run over points set against them or even get close to each other on the same track unless you deactivated the proximity protection circuits. Deactivated controls lit up flashing LEDs on the control panel to remind you that you had removed the protection. You'd have to be a real wally to mess up now.

There had been changes in Robert's life recently. His new school was okay after all. At last he knew how to do long division properly and his spelling was much better thanks to Mr McVay, who told him, 'English spelling is illogical, and some of us are trying to change it to make it easier. In the meantime, we're stuck with it as it is and you are going to learn how to do it.'

Robert liked sport better now, too. He didn't have to do athletics, which he didn't enjoy, and he could choose which exercises he wanted to do in the gym. And it turned out he was quite good at tennis. He was now in the reserve team for Year 5 at Laleham. And his confidence at cricket was improving as well.

Of his four best friends at his old school, three had stuck with him and one had not. Toby Winchester told him he was a loser, going to a school where you had to pay to get special lessons because you were thick. Robert was surprised, and hurt, but his other friends told him that it was probably Toby's parents who made him like that because they were jealous. And anyway, Robert was making good friends at his new school.

And Uncle John had stopped smoking cigars, which Robert thought was a good thing. He liked the smell of the smoke when he came round to play with the trains but he knew that it was not good to breathe it in and his Mum was always going on at his uncle to stop. And now there was a new girlfriend, a flight attendant with Blue Planet Airlines. Robert had liked Angie and was sad when his uncle had split up with her. But Melody seemed really nice, although sometimes a bit sad. But that was because her Dad was killed in the plane crash that Uncle John had become interested in. Melody had been in hospital recently but seemed to be better now. When she smiled at you it was like there was a glow inside her which made you feel happy. When she was in the room you felt sort of cosier. Sometimes she brought flowers when she came to visit his uncle. When Robert had said it was usually men who bought flowers for women, wasn't it, Melody had said the flowers were for the house. Robert liked that. Melody was downstairs with Uncle John now. He had told Robert that when she arrived they would be doing stuff on the computer, so could he run the trains on his own. Of course he could!

And what about his Mum and Mr McVay? They seemed to be very good friends now. He came round to their house quite often and his Mum called him 'Maurice'. Robert was put in a bit of a spot. Should he also call Mum's new friend by his first name or should it be 'Mr McVay'? The teacher solved the problem. 'At school I'm Mr McVay, otherwise I'm Maurice'. Robert was getting used to the idea now. On two or three occasions Mr McVay—Maurice—had stayed overnight in their house. But he always slept in the spare room, not in Mum's bedroom. Robert had a pretty good idea of what men and women did when they slept together so the separate rooms arrangement was probably for the best.

Okay, it's going to be the Duchess. Track 4 in the roundhouse, it said on the data screen. Robert set the turntable accordingly using the automatic alignment control. Peering in through the entrance, he selected low gear on the speed controller and carefully backed the big locomotive onto the turntable. Then he rotated it until it was aligned with the exit track, smokebox leading. A centimetre forward on the loco controller and out trundled the Duchess.

Downstairs Robert heard the phone ring. The phone in the Railway Room was always in silent mode. Robert looked at it in case it was his Mum but he didn't recognise the number so he left it. He could faintly hear Melody's voice calling out but obviously Uncle John was still busy on the laptop because Robert could hear the voicemail greeting cutting in. Then there was silence again apart from the clicking of locomotive wheels on track joints.

So, start the express and set it for twenty circuits of Main Loop C. While it was running he would assemble a mixed goods train, a long one, with a parcels van next to the guard's van. His Mum was going to pick him up in an hour's time. Robert thought he would do trains for half an hour and then see what was happening on Facebook on his uncle's desktop computer.

Oops! The Duchess had come to a halt. Why? *Oh, you wally, Rob, you forgot to pull the signals off for exiting the branch.* There, that's better. Off you go. Now, he could use the Claughton to haul the goods train but it would be more 'appropriate', as his uncle would say, to bring out the Fowler 0-6-0 tender engine, which had also been 'grimed' for realism. Yeah, run the freight on Main Loop B and then he could hitch the Claughton to the 6-car suburban rake on Platform 2 and do a few shuttles.

A good plan!

CHAPTER 30

'Well, we've worked out what happened,' said Melody. 'Now we'll have to tell the police.'

Ketteridge answered with a threatening voice. 'No, you won't be doing that.'

'So what happens—' Armstrong was interrupted by the phone ringing again. Still sitting on the floor he rubbed his injured face and looked at Ketteridge but Ketteridge shook his head.

The four of them listened to the phone ringing and then switching to voicemail.

' . . . please leave your name and number.'

'John, it's Mack. Just calling to see if you've listened to the CVR. As we suspected, it looks like Nigel Hepworth was probably up to no good but we can't identify the man he was talking to because the cabin manager didn't say his name or which seat he was in . . . er . . . they're going to go through the passenger list again to look into their backgrounds . . . all of them . . . not just the ones on the list I showed you, to see if there's any clues we've overlooked . . . er . . . have you had any thoughts yourself . . . sorry, I think I'm rambling on a bit . . . anyway, give us a call when you can . . . oh, I'm going to the P and M on Wednesday, they're steaming the J50 . . . fancy going along? . .

. have a spot of lunch in Midhurst? . . . anyway, talk soon. Cheers.'

The phone clicked off.

'You bastard!' shouted Ketteridge. 'You lied to us. You had no idea which seats my family was in.'

'No, we didn't. But it was kind of you to confirm what happened,' said Armstrong.

'It's only your word against ours and I'll deny everything. Not only that, but I think Paul will have to give you a bit of a smack to punish you for annoying me.' He nodded to his henchman.

'Paul' smiled in anticipation and started to walk across to where the scientist was sitting.

'No!' shouted Melody, standing up and positioning herself in front of the scientist. 'Leave him alone!'

The big man lifted his hand as if to hit the girl but Armstrong called out, 'Wait, we can come to an arrangement.'

'Hold it, Paul,' said Ketteridge. 'Let's hear what he's got to say.' He grinned at Armstrong. 'I'm all ears.'

'Everything that's been said in this room since you arrived has been recorded.'

'What?'

'Look at the bookshelf over there. That little black plastic thing. It's a microphone.'

Ketteridge went to get a close up view of the object Armstrong was referring to.

'It doesn't look like a mike to me,' he said. 'What's it connected to? There aren't any wires. Are you bluffing me again? If you are I'll get very, very angry. And Paul will get very, very angry too, if you get my drift.'

'Haven't you heard of the Electrolog?'

'The what?'

'Electrolog. It's a wireless recording device. I invented it.'

'So how is this alleged Electro whatsit supposed to work? And why would you have switched it on when we arrived? You didn't know anything about us.'

'I always have it switched on, for test purposes. It's not ready for production yet.'

'So where is the recording saved?'

'It goes into my laptop. Whenever my laptop's on, it opens a channel to the Electrolog mike and sends everything it picks up to a data storage facility on my ISP.'

'Your what?'

'Internet Service Provider. Everything that's been said has been sent over my broadband connection to my ISP data store.'

Ketteridge nodded, thinking things over. 'I'm inclined not to believe you, but what was the arrangement you were thinking about?'

'I access the data store and delete today's recording. I normally do that anyway every couple of days to free up storage space. So I delete the recording, you leave us in peace and we never meet again.'

Ketteridge nodded again, then paused and shook his head. 'No, that won't work. There's no way I can check where the recording's stored or whether you've deleted it or how many copies there are.'

'You can watch me do it,' said Armstrong.

'No, I can't take any chances, even if you're talking complete bollocks. I'm afraid you'll have to go on a little journey with us.'

'You can't just kidnap us,' snorted Armstrong.

'It's your own fault,' said Ketteridge. 'If that recording really exists then it would be a big problem. A big problem for you, not for us. I assume you're the only person who can access it?'

'Yes . . . no . . . '

Ketteridge laughed. 'I thought so. You're making it up as you go along. Now, here's a poser for you. Suppose I ask you if there

really is a recording. If you answer 'yes' then we can't afford to let you go in case you send it on to the police.'

'And if I say 'no' . . . '

'You might be lying. It comes to the same thing.'

'So what are you going to do?'

'Whatever's necessary.'

'But if I went missing the police would check my computer files. They would find the recording with your admission on it.'

Ketteridge come over to the scientist and snarled, 'I've had enough of this. We all know there's no recording. But either way, you're finished. You've become a nuisance. Let's go.'

He nodded to 'Paul'. Melody gasped as she noticed that the big henchman was now holding a gun, pointed at Armstrong. Ketteridge took his mobile out of his pocket and pressed some keys. 'Reverse into the driveway and open the back doors,' he said into the phone. 'We're coming out.' To Armstrong he ordered, 'Get up.'

The scientist stood up, wondering what was coming next. Melody put her arms around him and they looked into each others' eyes. He stroked her head protectively. 'Don't worry,' he said, 'We'll get out of this by somehow.' He wished he knew how.

'I don't think so,' said Ketteridge. 'It's the end of the line as far as you're concerned.'

In a flash Armstrong decided the 'now or never' moment had arrived. In one movement he disengaged himself from Melody and made a lunge for the gunman, clenching his fist to punch the big round face on the jaw.

It nearly worked. The man reeled away from the blow. He staggered backwards, almost losing his balance. But Ketteridge quickly responded to the challenge. He gave Armstrong a violent shove and sent him flying. As the scientist crumpled onto the floor Ketteridge snatched Melody's arm and twisted it behind her back. The girl screamed with pain.

'Sort him out,' barked Ketteridge to his henchman.

Armstrong began to pick himself up but by now the big man had the initiative back. He stomped over, raised the gun and brought it down smartly on the scientist's skull. There was a sickening thud and Armstrong collapsed again, out cold.

'Now what, Simon?'

'The same for her.' Ketteridge pushed Melody towards him. 'Then we'll take them outside when we're sure no-one's watching. They're waiting for us.'

The big man grabbed Melody and lifted the gun. Struggling, the girl opened her mouth to scream again. Her eyes were tightly closed, anticipating the blow.

'Hold it right there. Drop the gun or you're dead, mate.'

All three heads turned in the direction from which the command had come. Framed in the doorway were two police officers wearing helmets and flak jackets. Both held guns in a two-handed grip. The barrels were targeted on the big man's chest. The gun which was about to knock Melody into senselessness was now released from the paw of a hand and fell to the floor. A third policeman entered the room and retrieved it.

'You alright, Miss?' he enquired of Melody.

'Yes, I think so.' The girl was in a daze, unable to comprehend fully what was going on.

'Good. What about him?' He pointed to the still unconscious Armstrong.

'Oh God, John.' The girl dropped to her knees and cradled the head from which a new trickle of blood oozed onto the carpet.

'He's not dead.' It was Ketteridge speaking. 'He got a blow on the head. He'll be alright.'

The policeman regarded him with disdain for a second or two. Then he turned to speak to Melody.

'There's an ambulance outside. We'll get your friend off to the hospital and the medicos can check him over.' He turned to

address Ketteridge and the gunman, now being handcuffed to each other.

'You two are naughty boys, aren't you? We'd better cart you off to the nick before you get into any more trouble.'

Ketteridge smiled faintly and looked at the unconscious Armstrong. 'Case dismissed. Insufficient evidence. We must meet again sometime soon to continue our—'

'That's enough, fellah,' said the police officer. 'You'll be wanting to join your friends waiting for you in our luxury van. Although it's probably not quite as comfortable as your friends' MPV.'

'My friends?'

'They tried to do a runner when we turned up but they gave themselves up when they saw our resources were better than theirs.'

The villains were marched out and their place was taken by two ambulance men with a stretcher. Quickly they lifted Armstrong into position and he too was taken away.

'Wait,' said Melody to the remaining police officer. 'I want to go to the hospital with him.'

'Okay, but I'll send an officer with you to take a statement. We might want you down at the station later on.'

'Right, I'll just lock up then . . .' Suddenly the girl remembered Armstrong's nephew. 'Robert . . . he must still be upstairs . . . '

The police officer smiled. 'No Miss, he's in my car outside. It was him that told us about your spot of bother here. If it hadn't been for him, who knows what those nasties might have got up to?'

'I shudder to think,' murmured the girl. Then the words got through. 'Robert? He told you?'

'That's right, Miss. You can thank him for your rescue. He's a very smart lad, that boy.'

'Yes,' acknowledged Melody. 'He certainly is.'

* * * * *

Armstrong regained consciousness in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. Melody and Robert were travelling with him. The girl silently offered up a prayer of gratitude as the scientist opened his eyes, blinked several times and then complained of a thundering headache.

Scans revealed that there was no skull damage and no internal bleeding and after treatment for scalp lacerations and concussion Armstrong was allowed to return home. Melody called a taxi for the three of them and Robert phoned his mother to say they wouldn't be back at Uncle John's house until later.

'You look like you've been in the wars,' said the cab driver as they got in, referring to the bandage round the patient's head. After they arrived home Robert revealed what had happened earlier on.

'One of the points failed on Branch Line A. They wouldn't work at all on the controller and I thought they'd jammed. I thought I'd better tell you about it. When I came downstairs the study door was slightly open and I saw those two men. I listened to your voices and I heard you accuse one of the men of being a murderer and that he'll killed all those people on that plane. I thought you and Melody might be in some sort of trouble.'

Armstrong winced. The recollection started his head throbbing again.

'Luckily,' continued the boy, 'the men didn't see me. I was going to go out of the front door but I could see a big car in the driveway with two men in it and I thought they might be bad people, so I tiptoed out of the back door instead, leaving it open behind me so they wouldn't hear the lock. I walked slowly down the side path and when I knew they couldn't see me I ran up the road to the public phone box to call the police.'

'You did well,' said Melody. 'You saved our lives. Thank you.'

The boy blushed. 'It was nothing. Anybody would have done the same, Auntie Mel.'

The girl and the scientist looked at each other. It was the first time Robert had referred to her that way.

'I have to admit, it's partly my fault we got into that mess,' said Armstrong.

'What do you mean, John?' asked Melody.

'I was trying to outsmart them. Remember when I bluffed them about knowing where Simon's family had been sitting in the plane.'

'Yes,' said the girl, 'I'm sorry I was a bit slow to catch on. But that's what made them indirectly admit the plot to kill the wife or stepmother, if that's what happened. There are three witnesses now, including Robert.'

'Yes, but then I told them I'd recorded their admission. Not clever. I didn't think it through. I didn't realise it could put us in more danger.'

'Well, you didn't have a lot of thinking time. You were trying to stop them hurting us. It was just an honest mistake.'

'A reasonable defence. Thankyou.'

'I take it that black thing you told them about wasn't a microphone.'

Armstrong laughed. 'No it's a light sensor. It automatically closes the window blinds when the light drops below a set level.'

Melody raised her eyebrows whimsically but said nothing.

'Yes, I know what you're thinking,' said the scientist. 'Okay, I admit it. It's nerdish.'

'Right, I'm going to put the kettle on,' said Melody. 'I'm sure we could all do with a cup of tea.'

Armstrong spoke up, addressing his words to his nephew.

'Robert, would you like Mel to be your aunt, your real aunt?' The boy nodded. 'Cool.'

'How about it, Melody?'

'How about what?' she said, feigning nonchalance, not very successfully.

Armstrong grinned despite the pain in his head.

'How about the name Mrs Melody Armstrong. Does that sound good to you?'

Melody smiled. 'It sounds very good.' She came over and hugged him, eyes watering.

The boy watched, amused, the way children do when they see adults making fools of themselves.

'Robert,' commanded his uncle, '. . . kettle, and when it boils . . . tea!'

'Okay, Uncle,' replied the boy with a wide grin. 'I'll leave you two lovebirds to it.'

'Out!'

THE END

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