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DROWNING

THE RESCUE OF FLIGHT 1421

"Pure adrenaline and
all heart."

—MEG GARDINER

"Reads like *Apollo 13*
underwater."

—DON WINSLOW

T.J. NEWMAN

A NOVEL

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D R O W N I N G

THE RESCUE OF FLIGHT 1421

A NOVEL

T. J. NEWMAN

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For the weasels, Grant and Davis

The term *last-ditch* is used to describe an effort that is made at the end of a long line of failures. It is the final attempt and is not expected to succeed.

In aviation, the emergency landing of an aircraft on water is called a *ditching*.

CHAPTER ONE

WILL KENT OPENED HIS EYES just in time to see the engine explode.

His arm shot up to protect the passenger seated at the window, but his daughter Shannon didn't seem to notice. The eleven-year-old girl just watched the flames spewing out of the back of the engine's tail cone and uttered an uneasy *whoa*.

Will sat up straight and looked over the tops of the seats. The emergency exit was two rows up. A flight attendant sat there in a rear-facing jump seat staring at the passengers. He could just make out her name bar. Molly. Will caught her eye.

Molly didn't say a thing. She didn't have to.

The aircraft shook. Panic gripped the cabin as everyone craned for a look out the windows. Flames. Chunks of metal ripping off, flying by.

Will leaned over Shannon for a better view. The engine was on fire. Parts of the wing were shredded. Below the plane, crystal-clear turquoise water.

Shannon looked to her dad. "Why aren't we turning back to Honolulu?"

Will had been wondering the same thing.

In the cockpit, every pilot's worst nightmare was coming true.

"We lost thrust in engine one," First Officer Kit Callahan radioed to ATC, her voice rising involuntarily as the plane dropped. "And all hydraulic fluid in all three systems."

"Say again, fourteen twenty-one?"

The air traffic controller sounded skeptical. Even the captain glanced over to see for himself. Any other day, all this second-guessing would have pissed her off.

Not today.

Kit triple-checked the ECAM, barely believing the display herself. System failures were listed in order of severity. Level 3 failures, the most crucial, were first, in red. Red filled the screen. Every time she cleared one, another would pop up. All were Level 3. The digital screen looked like it was bleeding out.

They'd been airborne for less than two minutes. Engine one was dead. So were the hydraulics. This extended beyond their training. Pilots don't run situations like this in the simulator.

There'd be no point.

"Fourteen twenty-one, ah, did you say all three? All three hydraulic—"

"Goddamn it, dead stick!" Captain Miller said.

No hydraulic fluid. No hydraulic power.

The plane was dead in the air.

Green. Blue. Yellow. The aircraft's three hydraulic lines. Two layers of redundancy in case of a system failure. It's *that* important. The display should have shown three green lines at 3,000 PSI. Kit was looking at three amber lines with 0 PSI. Her best guess was that when the engine blew, fragments of metal sprayed like buckshot through the hydraulic lines and drained the fluid. Any moving component on the aircraft—ailerons, flaps, spoilers, rudder—everything that let them fly the plane, had frozen in place.

The pilots couldn't command the Airbus A321 to do anything. They had no control.

"We can't turn back," Kit told the controller. "Requesting an alternate in front of us."

Will ripped open one of the plastic pouches he'd just pulled from the compartments under their seats. He passed it to Shannon.

She turned the pouch over, looking at the folded yellow life vest tucked inside.

"Are we going to crash?"

Several passengers looked at her. She'd voiced their worst fears.

“Shannon,” Will said, shifting in his seat to face her. “We’ve lost an engine. I don’t know why we’re not turning back. It may be because we can’t.”

Will pulled the vest out and shook it open, slipping it over her head before cradling her face in both his hands.

“I know you’re scared. But whatever happens, I’m going to be right here with you.”

Will heard a seat belt unbuckle. He waited for the refastening click after the passenger realized there was nowhere to run. Instead came heavy footsteps. He looked up just as a red-faced, middle-aged white guy in a blue polo shirt blew past their row on his way to the back. Angry male voices began to rise in the rear of the plane as the guy in the blue polo shirt yelled at a male flight attendant who was seated in a swing-out jump seat in the center of the aisle.

“Sir!” the flight attendant bellowed. “Sit down! *Sir!*”

Suddenly, the plane dropped sharply. Everything went down—
—blue polo went up.

His head smashed into the ceiling. Will turned away as the man slammed back to the floor—just in time to see Molly the flight attendant unbuckle her harness and head for the back of the plane. Another jolt made the plane thrash violently. Molly flew forward. Her head smacked into an armrest, with her chin taking the brunt of it. Crawling on all fours back to her jump seat, Molly strapped herself in while blood trickled from a split lip.

Will refocused on Shannon. “Shannon. We stay together. You understand? No matter what. We stay together.”

Shannon wasn’t listening to her dad. Will followed her gaze. Blue polo was on his feet again, stumbling back to his seat amid the turbulence, moaning in pain. He held his head while blood poured down his face in thick streaks. As he passed their aisle, the plane dipped. He braced himself, then continued on, leaving behind a bright red handprint stamped on the white overhead bin.

Shannon stared unblinkingly at the blood.

“We stay together,” she repeated.

Molly Hernandez winced as she wiped the blood off her chin with the arm of her uniform sweater. She tried to look calm as she blinked at the passengers from under her straight-cut bangs, but her hands would not stop shaking.

Another seat belt unbuckled. Molly turned. A woman in a long floral dress got up to let the guy in the blue polo back into their row just as the plane lurched again. Floral dress lost her balance and fell into the man. Their heads smacked against one another and the woman grimaced in pain, a streak of his blood now covering her forehead. He sat clumsily, and with another jolt of the plane, she fell back into her own seat.

“Ma’am?”

I hate that guy, Molly thought, stewing. Three people are now hurt and bloodied for no reason.

“Excuse me—”

The only reason Molly had even gotten up was because she was worried about the unaccompanied minor. Flying all alone. Sitting in the last row of the plane. Poor kid had a front-row seat for all that screaming, all that blood—

A piece of the engine slammed violently against the plane. Everyone jerked away from the windows and Molly yelped. A few people screamed. Holy *shit* the passengers looked terrified. Holy *fuck* everything was happening so fast.

Molly closed her eyes. She was spinning out. *Calm down*, she thought, taking a breath. *Just review your commands. Heads down, stay down. Heads down, stay down. Release seat belts. Leave—*

“Excuse me! Ma’am!”

“What? What do you want?” Molly snapped at the woman sitting across from her. She immediately regretted it. “I’m sorry.”

“Where’s that vest?”

“Under your seat.”

The woman bent over and her waist-length braids pooled on the floor. She struggled with the compartment under her seat until the plastic seal broke off with a snap. The woman sat up with the plastic pouch, ripped it open, shook out the bright yellow life vest, and threw it over her head.

“But don’t—”

Grabbing the red T-handles, the woman yanked down like it was a parachute, inflating the vest with a loud hiss. Everyone watched the woman try to lean back in her seat. She now looked more like a raft than a passenger.

In the cockpit, Kit looked to the controls overhead. The whole panel was lit up. Every button in the hydraulics section glowed amber with a single word: FAULT. Above that, a large rectangular button labeled ENG 1 with FIRE printed on its plastic guard burned bright red. She double-checked the smaller buttons flanking it. They *should* have shown a glowing white SQUIB, meaning the primary and backup fire-suppression systems had been armed. Instead, the buttons were dark.

“Push button didn’t activate,” Kit said.

The pilots had no way to fight the engine fire or cut off the fuel that was feeding it.

Kit cleared the engine failure and a new Level 3 failure popped up on the ECAM explaining why the fire-suppression system hadn’t activated. There, like a bright red, all-caps middle finger: ENG 1 FADEC FAULT.

“FADEC fault.”

“Goddamn it,” Captain Miller mumbled.

The Full Authority Digital Engine Control was a small computer affixed inside the engine that acted as the link to the pilots. Any action in the cockpit went *first* to the FADEC, *then* the engine responded. Engine one’s FADEC was dead. Without it, there was no communication between the two. The pilots couldn’t tell the engine to do anything—and they also had no idea what the engine was doing.

“I need eyes,” Captain Miller said.

Kit punched a button.

Three high-low chimes sounded throughout the cabin as a red light lit up on the ceiling above the emergency exit row. Will watched Molly rip a phone from a

cradle and press it to her ear without saying a word.

Shannon took her own phone out of airplane mode, brought up a text thread, and began typing. Will noticed the contact. MOMMY, with a pink heart emoji.

There was a loud bang. Will grabbed his armrests as the plane dipped to the left. The phone flew from Shannon's hands, dropping to the floor with a thud. Just as she bent to get it, the plane dove, and the phone slid forward.

"No!" Shannon cried, reaching out. Like every eleven-year-old, her phone was her life. Being without it was unthinkable. She grabbed at her seat belt but Will's arm pinned her down.

"Leave it," he said.

"I want to tell her—"

"You'll tell her in person."

He was firm. He wanted her to take it as confidence that they were going to be okay.

But he also knew she was smarter than that.

Further up, strapped into his jump seat in row eight, Kaholo Kapule did what all the flight attendants were doing: holding the interphones to their ears and not saying a word.

In emergencies, flight attendants are trained to wait. The pilots will be busy. They'll communicate as soon as they can, *if* they can. Do not distract or interfere by calling them. They will call you.

While Kaholo waited, that nice young couple was watching him with wide eyes, so the flight attendant gave them an easy half smile. They held hands, knuckles turning white next to shiny new wedding bands. Another couple up in first class was celebrating their fifty-fifth anniversary. Colleen, the lead flight attendant, had made an announcement for both.

"Who can see the engine?" came Kit's voice through the interphone.

"I can," Kaholo said, unbuckling his harness and standing for a better look. The passengers leaned back so he could see. The Hawaiian native could surf

before he could walk, so even in an uneasy ride, he never had to hold on to anything. But as he bent and saw what was on the other side of the window, he instinctively grabbed a seat back.

Will stared at Molly.

She'd had that phone to her ear for nearly a minute now but hadn't said a thing. She was just sitting there. Listening.

Will leaned into the window. It was hard to assess the engine since he was sitting behind it, but flames now covered all that was left of it. Most of the outer cowling had been blown off or ripped apart by the airstream. Mechanical inner workings were exposed. The inlet cowl, the massive circular section of metal covering the front of the engine, clung to the bottom, swaying precariously, looking like it might fall any second.

Suddenly the plane dropped like a brick thrown off the roof of a building. A baby started to wail. The mother held her tight and sang a soft song into her ear. No one had a clue what was going to happen. Uncertainty brought fear. Fear created anxiety. They prayed. They cried. They texted goodbye to their loved ones.

But Will's attention had turned back to Molly. And so he was the only one who saw the blood drain from her face at something said to her by someone on the other end of that phone.

Molly's mouth parted. She blinked a couple times. Then, without saying a word, she hung up the phone and just sat there very, very still.

Will reached over and took Shannon's hand. He knew what came next.

A chime rang throughout the cabin.

"This is the captain. Prepare to ditch."