

PROLOGUE

SETTING UP

John Clark had more time in airplanes than most licensed pilots, and he knew the statistics as well as any of them, but he still didn't like the idea of crossing the ocean on a twin-engine airliner. Four was the right number of engines, he thought, because losing one meant losing only 25 percent of the aircraft's available power, whereas on this United 777, it meant losing *half*. Maybe the presence of his wife, one daughter, and a son-in-law made him a little itchier than usual. No, that wasn't right. He wasn't itchy at all, not about flying anyway. It was just a lingering . . . what? he asked himself. Next to him, in the window seat Sandy was immersed in the mystery she'd started the day before, while he was trying to concentrate on the current issue of *The Economist*, and wondering what was putting the cold-air feeling on the back of his neck. He started to look around the cabin for a sign of danger but abruptly stopped himself. There wasn't anything wrong that he could see, and he didn't want to seem like a nervous flyer to the cabin crew. He sipped at his glass of white wine, shook his shoulders, and went back to the article on how peaceful the new world was.

Right. He grimaced. Well, yes, he had to admit that things were a hell of a lot better than they'd been for nearly all of his life. No more swimming out of a submarine to do a collection on a Russian beach, or flying into Tehran to do something the Iranians wouldn't like much, or swimming up a fetid river in North Vietnam to rescue a downed aviator. Someday maybe Bob Holtzman would talk him into a book on his career. Problem was, who'd believe it—and would CIA ever allow him to tell his tales except on his own deathbed? He was not in a hurry for that, not with a grandchild on the way. Damn. He grimaced, unwilling to contemplate that development. Patsy must have caught a silver bullet on their wedding night, and Ding glowed more about it than she did. John looked back to business

class—the curtain wasn't in place yet—and there they were, holding hands while the stewardess did the safety lecture. *If the airplane hit the water at 400 knots, reach under your seat for the life preserver and inflate it by pulling . . .* he'd heard that one before. The bright yellow life jackets would make it somewhat easier for search aircraft to find the crash site, and that was about all they were good for.

Clark looked around the cabin again. He still felt that draft on his neck. Why? The flight attendant made the rounds, removing his wineglass as the aircraft taxied out to the end of the runway. Her last stop was by Alistair over on the left side of the first-class cabin. Clark caught his eye and got a funny look back as the Brit put his seat back in the upright position. Him, too? Wasn't that something? Neither of the two had ever been accused of nervousness.

Alistair Stanley had been a major in the Special Air Service before being permanently seconded to the Secret Intelligence Service. His position had been much like John's—the one you called in to take care of business when the gentler people in the field division got a little too skittish. Al and John had hit it off right away on a job in Romania eight years before, and the American was pleased to be working with him again on a more regular basis, even if they were both too old now for the fun stuff. Administration wasn't exactly John's idea of what his job should be, but he had to admit he wasn't twenty anymore . . . or thirty . . . or even forty. A little old to run down alleys and jump over walls. . . . Ding had said that to him only a week before in John's office at Langley, rather more respectfully than usual, since he was trying to make a logical point to the grandfather-presumptive of his first child. What the hell, Clark told himself, it was remarkable enough that he was still alive to gripe about being old—no, not old, *older*. Not to mention he was respectable now as Director of the new agency. Director. A polite term for a REMF. But you didn't say no to the President, especially if he happened to be your friend.

The engine sounds increased. The airliner started moving. The usual sensation came, like being pressed back into the seat of a sports car jumping off a red light, but with more authority. Sandy, who hardly traveled at all,

didn't look up from the book. It must have been pretty good, though John never bothered reading mysteries. He never could figure them out, and they made him feel stupid, despite the fact that in his professional life he'd picked his way through real mysteries more than once. A little voice in his head said *rotate*, and the floor came up under his feet. The body of the aircraft followed the nose into the sky, and the flight began properly, the wheels rising up into the wells. Instantly, those around him lowered their seats to get some sleep on the way to London Heathrow. John lowered his, too, but not as far. He wanted dinner first.

"On our way, honey," Sandy said, taking a second away from the book.

"I hope you like it over there."

"I have three cookbooks for after I figure this one out."

John smiled. "Who done it?"

"Not sure yet, but probably the wife."

"Yeah, divorce lawyers are so expensive."

Sandy chuckled and went back to the story as the stewards got up from their seats to resume drink service. Clark finished *The Economist* and started *Sports Illustrated*. Damn, he'd be missing the end of the football season. That was one thing he'd always tried to keep track of, even off on a mission. The Bears were coming back, and he'd grown up with Papa Bear George Halas and the Monsters of the Midway—had often wondered if he might have made it as a pro himself. He'd been a pretty good linebacker in high school, and Indiana University had shown some interest in him (also for his swimming). Then he'd decided to forgo college and join the Navy, as his father had before him, though Clark had become a SEAL, rather than a skimmer-sailor on a tin can . . .

"Mr. Clark?" The steward delivered the dinner menu. "Mrs. Clark?"

One nice thing about first class. The flight crew pretended you had a name. John had gotten an automatic upgrade—he had frequent-flyer miles up the yingyang, and from now on he'd mainly fly British Airways, which had a very comfortable understanding with the British government.

The menu, he saw, was pretty good, as it usually was on international flights, and so was the wine list . . . but he decided to ask for bottled water instead of wine, thank you. Hmph. He grumbled to himself, settled back, and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. These damned flights always seemed overheated to him.

The captain got on next, interrupting all the personal movies on their mini-screens. They were taking a southerly routing to take advantage of the jet stream. That, Captain Will Garnet explained, would cut their time to Heathrow by forty minutes. He didn't say that it would also make for a few bumps. Airlines tried to conserve fuel, and forty-five minutes' worth would put a gold star in his copy-book . . . well, maybe just a silver one . . .

The usual sensations. The aircraft tilted, more to the right than the left, as it crossed over the ocean at Sea Isle City in New Jersey for the three-thousand-mile flight to the next landfall, somewhere on the Irish coast, which they'd reach in about five and a half hours, John thought. He had to sleep for some of that time. At least the captain didn't bother them with the usual tour-director crap—*we are now at forty thousand feet, that's almost eight miles to fall if the wings come off and* . . . They started serving dinner. They'd be doing the same aft in tourist class, with the drink and dinner carts blocking the aisles.

It started on the left side of the aircraft. The man was dressed properly, wearing a jacket—that was what got John's attention. Most people took them off as soon as they sat down but—

—it was a Browning automatic, with a flat-black finish that said "military" to Clark, and, less than a second later, to Alistair Stanley. A moment later, two more men appeared on the right side, walking right next to Clark's seat.

"Oh, shit," he said so quietly that only Sandy heard him. She turned and looked, but before she could do or say anything, he grabbed her hand. That was enough to keep her quiet, but not quite enough to keep the lady across the aisle from screaming—well, almost screaming. The woman with her covered her mouth with a hand and stifled most of it. The stewardess looked at the two men

in front of her in total disbelief. This hadn't happened in years. How could it be happening now?

Clark was asking much the same question, followed by another: Why the hell had he packed his sidearm in his carry-on and stowed it in the overhead? What was the point of having a gun on an airplane, you idiot, if you couldn't get to it? What a dumbass rookie mistake! He only had to look to his left to see the same expression on Alistair's face. Two of the most experienced pros in the business, their guns less than four feet away, but they might as well be in the luggage stored below. . . .

"John . . ."

"Just relax, Sandy," her husband replied quietly. More easily said than done, as he well knew.

John sat back, keeping his head still, but turned away from the window and toward the cabin. His eyes moved free. Three of them. One, probably the leader, was taking a stew forward, where she unlocked the door to the flight deck. John watched the two of them go through and close the door behind them. Okay, now Captain William Garnet would find out what was going on. Hopefully he would be a pro, and he'd be trained to say *yes, sir—no, sir—three-bags-full, sir* to anybody who came forward with a gun. At best he'd be Air Force- or Navy-trained, and therefore he'd know better than to do anything stupid, like trying to be a goddamned hero. His mission would be to get the airplane on the ground, somewhere, anywhere, because it was a hell of a lot harder to kill three hundred people in an airplane when it was sitting still on the ramp with the wheels chocked.

Three of them, one forward in the flight deck. He'd stay there to keep an eye on the drivers and to use the radio to tell whomever he wanted to talk to what his demands were. Two more in first class, standing there, forward, where they could see down both aisles of the aircraft.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain speaking. I've got the seat-belt sign on. There's a little chop in the air. Please stay in your seats for the time being. I'll be back to you in a few minutes. Thank you."

Good, John thought, catching Alistair's eye. The captain sounded cool, and the bad guys weren't acting crazy—

yet. The people in back probably didn't know anything was wrong—yet. Also good. People might panic . . . well, no, not necessarily, but so much the better for everyone if nobody knew there was anything to panic about.

Three of them. Only three? Might there be a backup guy, disguised as a passenger? That was the one who controlled the bomb, if there was a bomb, and a bomb was the worst thing there could be. A pistol bullet might punch a hole in the skin of the aircraft, forcing a rapid descent, and that would fill some barf bags and cause some soiled underwear, but nobody died from that. A bomb would kill everyone aboard, probably . . . better than even money, Clark judged, and he hadn't gotten old by taking that sort of chance when he didn't have to. Maybe just let the airplane go to wherever the hell these three wanted to go, and let negotiations start, by which time people would know that there were another three very special people inside. Word would be going out now. The bad guys would have gotten onto the company radio frequency and passed along the bad news of the day, and the Director of Security for United—Clark knew him, Pete Fleming, former Deputy Assistant Director of the FBI—would call his former agency and get *that* ball rolling, to include notification of CIA and State, the FBI Hostage Rescue Team in Quantico, and Little Willie Byron's Delta Force down at Fort Bragg. Pete would also pass along the passenger list, with three of them circled in red, and *that* would get Willie a little nervous, plus making the troops at Langley and Foggy Bottom wonder about a security leak—John dismissed that. This was a random event that would just make people spin wheels in the Operations Room in Langley's Old Headquarters Building. Probably.

It was time to move a little. Clark turned his head very slowly, toward Domingo Chavez, just twenty feet away. When eye contact was established, he touched the tip of his nose, as though to make an itch go away. Chavez did the same . . . and Ding was still wearing his jacket. He was more used to hot weather, John thought, and probably felt cold on the airplane. Good. He'd still have his Beretta .45 on . . . probably . . . Ding preferred the small of his back, though, and that was awkward for a guy strapped into an

airliner seat. Even so, Chavez knew what was going down, and had the good sense to do nothing about it . . . yet. How might Ding react with his pregnant wife sitting next to him? Domingo was smart and as cool under pressure as Clark could ever ask, but under that he was still Latino, a man of no small passion—even John Clark, experienced as he was, saw flaws in others that were perfectly natural to himself. He had *his* wife sitting next to him, and Sandy was frightened, and Sandy wasn't supposed to be frightened about her own safety. . . . It was her husband's self-assigned job to make certain of that. . . .

One of the bad guys was going over the passenger list. Well, that would tell John if there had been a security leak of some sort. But if there were, he couldn't do anything about it. Not yet. Not until he knew what was going on. Sometimes you just had to sit and take it and—

The guy at the head of the left-side aisle started moving, and fifteen feet later, he was looking down at the woman in the window seat next to Alistair.

“Who are you?” he demanded in Spanish.

The lady replied with a name John didn't catch—it was a Spanish name, but from twenty feet away he couldn't hear it clearly enough to identify it, mainly because her reply had been quiet, polite . . . cultured, he thought. Diplomat's wife, maybe? Alistair was leaning back in his seat, staring with wide blue eyes up at the guy with the gun and trying a little too hard not to show fear.

A scream came from the back of the aircraft. “Gun, that's a gun!” a man's voice shouted—

Shit, John thought. Now everybody would know. The right-aisle guy knocked on the cockpit door and stuck his head in to announce this good news.

“Ladies and gentlemen . . . this is Captain Garnet . . . I, uh, am instructed to tell you that we are deviating from our flight plan. . . . We, uh, have some guests aboard who have told me to fly to Lajes in the Azores. They say that they have no desire to hurt anyone, but they are armed, and First Officer Renford and I are going to do exactly what they say. Please remain calm, stay in your seats, and just try to keep things under control. I will be back to you

later.” Good news. He had to be military trained; his voice was as cool as the smoke off dry ice. Good.

Lajes in the Azores, Clark thought. Former U.S. Navy base . . . still active? Maybe just caretakered for long over-water flights flying there—as a stop and refueling point for somewhere else? Well, the left-side guy had spoken in Spanish, and been replied to in Spanish. Probably not Middle Eastern bad guys. Spanish speakers . . . Basques? That was still perking over in Spain. The woman, who was she? Clark looked over. Everyone was looking around now, and it was safe for him to do so. Early fifties, well turned out. The Spanish ambassador to Washington was male. Might this be his wife?

The left-side man shifted his gaze a seat. “Who are you?”

“Alistair Stanley” was the reply. There was no sense in Alistair’s lying, Clark knew. They were traveling openly. Nobody knew about their agency. They hadn’t even started it up yet. Shit, Clark thought. “I’m British,” he added in a quaky voice. “My passport’s in my bag up in the—” He reached up and had his hand slapped down by the bad guy’s gun.

Nice play, John thought, even if it hadn’t worked. He might have gotten the bag down, produced the passport, and then had his gun in his lap. Bad luck that the gunman had believed him. That was the problem with accents. But Alistair was up to speed. The three wolves didn’t know that the sheep herd had three dogs in it. Big ones.

Willie would be on the phone now. Delta kept an advance team on round-the-clock standby, and they’d be prepping for a possible deployment now. Colonel Byron would be with them. Little Willie was that kind of soldier. He had an XO and staff to follow things up while he led from the front. A lot of wheels were spinning now. All John and his friends really had to do was sit tight . . . so long as the bad guys kept their cool.

More Spanish from the left side. “Where is your husband?” he demanded. He was pretty mad. Made sense, John thought. Ambassadors are good targets. But so were their wives. She was too sharp-looking to be the wife of just a diplomat, and Washington had to be a premier post.

Senior guy, probably aristocracy. Spain still had that. High-profile target, the better to put pressure on the Spanish government.

Blown mission was the next thought. They wanted him, not her, and they would not be happy about that. *Bad intelligence, guys*, Clark thought, looking at their faces and seeing their anger. *Even happens to me once in a while*. Yeah, he thought, like about half the fucking time in a good year. The two he could see were talking to each other . . . quietly, but the body language said it all. They were pissed. So, he had three (or more?) angry terrorists with guns on a two-engine airplane over the North Atlantic at night. Could have been worse, John told himself. Somehow. Yeah, they might have had Semtex jackets with Primacord trim.

They were late twenties, Clark thought. Old enough to be technically competent, but young enough to need adult supervision. Little operational experience, and not enough judgment. They'd think they knew it all, think they were real clever. That was the problem with death. Trained soldiers knew the reality of it better than terrorists did. These three would want to succeed, and wouldn't really consider the alternative. Maybe a rogue mission. The Basque separatists hadn't ever messed with foreign nationals, had they? Not Americans anyway, but this was an *American* airliner, and that was a big black line to step over. Rogue mission? Probably. Bad news.

You wanted a degree of predictability in situations like this. Even terrorism had rules. There was almost a liturgy to it, steps everyone had to take before something really bad happened, which gave the good guys a chance to talk to the bad guys. Get a negotiator down to establish rapport with them, negotiate the little stuff at first—*come on, let the children and their mothers off, okay? No big deal, and it looks bad for you and your group on TV, right?* Get them started giving things up. Then the old people—who wants to whack grandma and grandpa? Then the food, maybe with some Valium mixed in with it, while the response team's intel group started spiking the aircraft with microphones and miniature lenses whose fiber-optic cables fed to TV cameras.

Idiots, Clark thought. This play just didn't work. It was almost as bad as kidnapping a child for money. Cops were just too good at tracking those fools, and Little Willie was sure as hell boarding a USAF transport at Pope Air Force Base right now. If they really landed at Lajes, the process would start real soon, and the only variable was how many good guys would bite the big one before the bad guys got to do the same. Clark had worked with Colonel Byron's boys and girls. If they came into the aircraft, at least three people would not be leaving it alive. Problem was, how much company would they have in the hereafter? Hitting an airliner was like having a shoot-out in a grammar school, just more crowded.

They were talking more, up front, paying little attention to anything else, the rest of the aircraft. In one sense, that was logical. The front office was the most important part, but you always wanted to keep an eye on the rest. You never knew who might be aboard. Sky marshals were long in the past, but cops traveled by air, and some of them carried guns . . . well, maybe not on international flights, but you didn't get to retire from the terrorist business by being dumb. It was hard enough to survive if you were smart. Amateurs. Rogue mission. Bad intelligence. Anger and frustration. This was getting worse. One of them balled his left hand into a fist and shook it at the entire adverse world they'd found aboard.

Great, John thought. He turned in the seat, again catching Ding's eye and shaking his head side to side ever so slightly. His reply was a raised eyebrow. Domingo knew how to speak proper English when he had to.

It was as though the air changed then, and not for the better. Number 2 went forward again into the cockpit and stayed for several minutes, while John and Alistair watched the one on the left side, staring down the aisle. After two minutes of frustrated attention, he switched sides as though in a spasm, and looked aft, leaning his head forward as though to shorten the distance, peering down the aisle while his face bounced between expressions of power and impotence. Then, just as quickly, he headed back to port, pausing only to look at the cockpit door in anger.

There's only the three of them, John told himself then, just as #2 reappeared from the front office. Number 3 was too hyped. Probably just the three? he wondered. Think through it, Clark told himself. If so, that really made them amateurs. *The Gong Show* might be an amusing thought in another context, but not at 500 knots, 37,000 feet over the North Atlantic. If they could just be cool about everything, let the driver get the twin-engine beast on the ground, maybe some common sense would break out. But they wouldn't be very cool, would they?

Instead of taking his post to cover the right-side aisle, #2 went back to #3 and they spoke in raspy whispers which Clark understood in context if not content. It was when #2 pointed to the cockpit door that things became worst of all—

—*nobody's really in charge*, John decided. That was just great, three free-agents with guns in a friggin' airplane. It was time to start being afraid. Clark was not a stranger to fear. He'd been in too many tight places for that, but in every other case he'd had an element of control over the situation—or if not that, at least over his own actions, such as the ability to run away, which was a far more comforting thought now than he'd ever realized. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Number 2 headed aft to look at the woman sitting next to Alistair. He just stood there for a few seconds, staring at her, then looking at Alistair, who looked back in a subdued way.

“Yes?” the Brit said finally, in his most cultured accent.

“Who are you?” Number 2 demanded.

“I told your friend, old man, Alistair Stanley. I have my passport in my carry-on bag if you wish to see it.” The voice was just brittle enough to simulate a frightened man holding it together.

“Yes, show it to me!”

“Of course, sir.” In elegantly slow movements, the former SAS major slipped out of his seat belt, stood, opened the overhead bin, and extracted his black carry-on bag. “May I?” he asked. Number 2 replied with a nod.

Alistair unzipped the side compartment and pulled the

passport out, handed it over, then sat down, his trembling hands holding the bag in his lap.

Number 2 looked at the passport and tossed it back into the Brit's lap while John watched. Then he said something in Spanish to the woman in 4A. "Where is your husband?" it sounded like. The woman replied in the same cultured tones that she'd used just a few minutes earlier, and #2 stormed away to speak with #3 again. Alistair let out a long breath and looked around the cabin, as though for security, finally catching John's eye. There was no movement from his hands or face, but even so John knew what he was thinking. Al was not happy with this situation either, and more to the point, he'd seen both #2 and #3 close up, looked right in their eyes. John had to factor that into his thought processes. Alistair Stanley was worried, too. The slightly junior officer reached up as though to brush his hair back, and one finger tapped the skull above the ear twice. It might even be worse than he'd feared.

Clark reached his hand forward, enough to shield it from the two in the front of the cabin, and held up three fingers. Al nodded half an inch or so and turned away for a few seconds, allowing John to digest the message. He agreed that there were only three of them. John nodded with appreciation at the confirmation.

How much the better had they been smart terrorists, but the smart ones didn't try stuff like this anymore. The odds were just too long, as the Israelis had proven in Uganda, and the Germans in Somalia. You were safe doing this only so long as the aircraft was in the air, and they couldn't stay up forever, and when they landed the entire civilized world could come crashing in on them with the speed of a thunderbolt and the power of a Kansas tornado—and the real problem was that not all that many people truly wanted to die before turning thirty. And those who did used bombs. So, the smart ones did other things. For that reason they were more dangerous adversaries, but they were also predictable. They didn't kill people for recreation, and they didn't get frustrated early on because they planned their opening moves with skill.

These three were dumb. They had acted on bad intel-

ligence, hadn't had an intel team in place to give them a final mission check, to tell them that their primary target hadn't made the flight, and so here they were, committed to a dumb mission that was already blown, contemplating death or life-long imprisonment . . . for nothing. The only good news, if you could call it that, was that their imprisonment would be in America.

But they didn't want to contemplate life in a steel cage any more than they wished to face death in the next few days—but soon they'd start to realize that there was no third alternative. And that the guns in their hands were the only power they had, and that they might as well start using them to get their way . . .

. . . and for John Clark, the choice was whether or not to wait for that to start. . . .

No. He couldn't just sit here and wait for them to start killing people.

Okay. He watched the two for another minute or so, the way they looked at each other while trying to cover both aisles, as he figured out how to do it. With both the dumb ones and the smart ones, the simple plans were usually the best.

It took five minutes more until #2 decided to talk some more with #3. When he did, John turned enough to catch Ding's eye, swiping one finger across his upper lip, as though to stroke a mustache he'd never grown. Chavez cocked his head as though to reply *you sure?* but took the sign. He loosened his seat belt and reached behind his back with his left hand, bringing his pistol out before the alarmed eyes of his six-week wife. Domingo touched her right hand with his to reassure her, covered the Beretta with a napkin in his lap, adopted a neutral expression, and waited for his senior to make the play.

"You!" Number 2 called from forward.

"Yes?" Clark replied, looking studiously forward.

"Sit still!" The man's English wasn't bad. Well, European schools had good language programs.

"Hey, look, I, uh, had a few drinks, and—well, you know, how about it? *Por favor,*" John added sheepishly.

"No, you will stay in your seat!"

"Hey, whatcha gonna do, shoot a guy who needs to

take a leak? I don't know what your problem is, okay, but I gotta go, okay? Please?"

Number 2 and #3 traded an oh-shit look that just confirmed their amateur status one last time. The two stews, strapped in their seats forward, looked very worried indeed but didn't say anything. John pressed the issue by unbuckling his seat belt and starting to stand.

Number 2 raced aft then, gun in front, stopping just short of pressing it against John's chest. Sandy's eyes were wide now. She'd never seen her husband do anything the least bit dangerous, but she knew this wasn't the husband who had slept next to her for twenty-five years—and if not that one, then he had to be the other Clark, the one she knew about but had never seen.

"Look, I go there, I take a leak, and I come back, okay? Hell, you wanna watch," he said, his voice slurred now from the half glass of wine he'd drunk alongside the terminal. "That's okay, too, but please don't make me wet my pants, okay?"

What turned the trick was Clark's size. He was just under six-two, and his forearms, visible with the rolled-up sleeves, were powerful. Number 3 was smaller by four inches and thirty pounds, but he had a gun, and making bigger people do one's wishes is always a treat for bullies. So #2 gripped John by the left arm, spun him around and pushed him roughly aft toward the right-side lavatory. John cowered and went, his hands above his head.

"Hey, *gracias, amigo*, okay?" Clark opened the door. Dumb as ever, #2 actually allowed him to close it. For his part, John did what he'd asked permission to do, then washed his hands and took a brief look in the mirror.

Hey, Snake, you still got it? he asked himself, without so much as a breath.

Okay, let's find out.

John slid the locking bar loose, and pulled the folding door open with a grateful and thoroughly cowed look on his face.

"Hey, uh, thanks, y'know."

"Back to your seat."

"Wait, let me get you a cuppa coffee, okay, I—" John took a step aft, and #2 was dumb enough to follow in

order to cover him, then reached for Clark's shoulder and turned him around.

"*Buenas noches*," Ding said quietly from less than ten feet away, his gun up and aimed at the side of #2's head. The man's eyes caught the blue steel that had to be a gun, and the distraction was just right. John's right hand came around, his forearm snapping up, and the back of his fist catching the terrorist in the right temple. The blow was enough to stun.

"How you loaded?"

"Low-velocity," Ding whispered back. "We're on an airplane, 'mano," he reminded his director.

"Stay loose," John commanded quietly, getting a nod.

"Miguel!" Number 3 called loudly.

Clark moved to the left side, pausing on the way to get a cup of coffee from the machine, complete with saucer and spoon. He then reappeared in the left-side aisle and moved forward.

"He said to bring you this. Thank you for allowing me to use the bathroom," John said, in a shaky but grateful voice. "Here is your coffee, sir."

"Miguel!" Number 3 called again.

"He went back that way. Here's your coffee. I'm supposed to sit down now, okay?" John took a few steps forward and stopped, hoping that this amateur would continue to act like one.

He did, coming toward him. John cowered a little, and allowed the cup and saucer to shake in his hand, and just as #3 reached him, looking over to the right side of the aircraft for his colleague, Clark dropped both of them on the floor and dove down to get them, about half a step behind Alistair's seat. Number 3 automatically bent down as well. It would be his last mistake for the evening.

John's hands grabbed the pistol and twisted it around and up into its owner's belly. It might have gone off, but Alistair's own Browning Hi-Power crashed down on the back of the man's neck, just below the skull, and #3 went limp as Raggedy Andy.

"You impatient bugger," Stanley rasped. "Bloody good acting, though." Then he turned, pointed to the nearest stewardess, and snapped his fingers. She came out of her

seat like a shot, fairly running aft to them. "Rope, cord, anything to tie them up, quickly!"

John collected the pistol and immediately removed the magazine, then jacked the action to eject the remaining round. In two more seconds, he'd field-stripped the weapon and tossed the pieces at the feet of Alistair's traveling companion, whose brown eyes were wide and shocked.

"Sky marshals, ma'am. Please be at ease," Clark explained.

A few seconds after that, Ding appeared, dragging #2 with him. The stewardess returned with a spool of twine.

"Ding, front office!" John ordered.

"Roge-o, Mr. C." Chavez moved forward, his Beretta in both hands, and stood by the cockpit door. On the floor, Clark did the wrapping. His hands remembered the sailor knots from thirty years earlier. Amazing, he thought, tying them off as tight as he could. If their hands turned black, too damned bad.

"One more, John," Stanley breathed.

"You want to keep an eye on our two friends."

"A pleasure. Do be careful, lots of electronics up there."

"Tell me about it."

John walked forward, still unarmed. His junior was still at the door, pistol aimed upward in both hands, eyes on the door.

"How we doing, Domingo?"

"Oh, I was thinking about the green salad and the veal, and the wine list ain't half bad. Ain't a real good place to start a gunfight, John. Let's invite him aft."

It made good tactical sense. Number 1 would be facing aft, and if his gun went off, the bullet was unlikely to damage the aircraft, though the people in Row 1 might not like it all that much. John hopped aft to retrieve the cup and saucer.

"You!" Clark gestured to the other stewardess. "Call the cockpit and tell the pilot to tell our friend that Miguel needs him. Then stand right here. When the door opens, if he asks you anything, just point over to me. Okay?"

She was cute, forty, and pretty cool. She did exactly as

she was told, lifting the phone and passing along the message.

A few seconds later, the door opened, and #1 looked out. The stewardess was the only person he could see at first. She pointed to John.

“Coffee?”

It only confused him, and he took a step aft toward the large man with the cup. His pistol was aimed down at the floor.

“Hello,” Ding said from his left, placing his pistol right against his head.

Another moment’s confusion. He just wasn’t prepared. Number 1 hesitated, and his hand didn’t start to move yet.

“Drop the gun!” Chavez said.

“It is best that you do what he says,” John added, in his educated Spanish. “Or my friend will kill you.”

His eyes darted automatically around the cabin, looking for his colleagues, but they were nowhere to be seen. The confusion on his face only increased. John took a step toward him, reached for the gun, and took it from an unresisting hand. This he placed in his waistband, then dropped the man to the floor to frisk him while Ding’s gun rested at the back of the terrorist’s neck. Aft, Stanley started doing the same with his two.

“Two magazines . . . nothing else.” John waved to the first stew, who came up with the twine.

“Fools,” Chavez snarled in Spanish. Then he looked at his boss. “John, you think that was maybe just a little precipitous?”

“No.” Then he stood and walked into the cockpit. “Captain?”

“Who the hell are you?” The flight crew hadn’t seen or heard a thing from aft.

“Where’s the nearest military airfield?”

“RCAF Gander,” the copilot—Renford, wasn’t it?—replied immediately.

“Well, let’s go there. Cap’n, the airplane is yours again. We have all three of them tied up.”

“Who are you?” Will Garnet asked again rather forcefully, his own tension not yet bled off.

“Just a guy who wanted to help out,” John replied,

with a blank look, and the message got through. Garnet was ex-Air Force. "Can I use your radio, sir?"

The captain pointed to the fold-down jump-seat, and showed him how to use the radio.

"This is United Flight Niner-Two-Zero," Clark said. "Who am I talking to, over?"

"This is Special Agent Carney of the FBI. Who are you?"

"Carney, call the director, and tell him Rainbow Six is on the line. Situation is under control. Zero casualties. We're heading for Gander, and we need the Mounties. Over."

"Rainbow?"

"Just like it sounds, Agent Carney. I repeat, the situation is under control. The three hijackers are in custody. I'll stand by to talk to your director."

"Yes, sir," replied a very surprised voice.

Clark looked down to see his hands shaking a little now that it was over. Well, that had happened once or twice before. The aircraft banked to the left while the pilot was talking on the radio, presumably to Gander.

"Niner-Two-Zero, Niner-Two-Zero, this is Agent Carney again."

"Carney, this is Rainbow." Clark paused. "Captain, is this radio link secure?"

"It's encrypted, yes."

John almost swore at himself for violating radio discipline. "Okay, Carney, what's happening?"

"Stand by for the Director." There was a click and a brief crackle. "John?" a new voice asked.

"Yes, Dan."

"What gives?"

"Three of them, Spanish-speaking, not real smart. We took them down."

"Alive?"

"That's affirmative," Clark confirmed. "I told the pilot to head for RCAF Gander. We're due there in—"

"Niner-zero minutes," the copilot said.

"Hour and a half," John went on. "You want to have the Mounties show up to collect our bad boys, and call Andrews. We need transport on to London."

He didn't have to explain why. What ought to have been a simple commercial flight of three officers and two wives had blown their identities, and there was little damned sense in having them hang around for everyone aboard to see their faces—most would just want to buy them drinks, but that wasn't a good idea. All the effort they'd gone to, to make Rainbow both effective and secret, had been blown by three dumbass Spaniards—or whatever they were. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police would figure that one out before handing them over to the American FBI.

“Okay, John, let me get moving on that. I'll call René and have him get things organized. Anything else you need?”

“Yeah, send me a few hours of sleep, will ya?”

“Anything you want, pal,” the FBI Director replied with a chuckle, and the line went dead. Clark took the headset off and hung it on the hook.

“Who the hell are you?” the captain demanded again. The initial explanation hadn't been totally satisfactory.

“Sir, my friends and I are air marshals who just happened to be aboard. Is that clear, sir?”

“I suppose,” Garnet said. “Glad you made it. The one who was up here was a little loose, if you know what I mean. We were damned worried there for a while.”

Clark nodded with a knowing smile. “Yeah, so was I.”

They'd been doing it for some time. The powder-blue vans—there were four of them—circulated throughout New York City, picking up homeless people and shuttling them to the dry-out centers run by the corporation. The quiet, kindly operation had made local television over a year ago, and garnered the corporation a few dozen friendly letters, then slid back down below the horizon, as such things tended to do. It was approaching midnight, and with dropping autumn temperatures, the vans were out, collecting the homeless throughout central and lower Manhattan. They didn't do it the way the police once had. The people they helped weren't compelled to get aboard. The volunteers from the corporation asked, politely, if

they wanted a clean bed for the night, free of charge, and absent the religious complications typical of most “missions,” as they were traditionally called. Those who declined the offer were given blankets, used ones donated by corporate employees who were home sleeping or watching TV at the moment—participation in the program was voluntary for the staff as well—but still warm, and waterproofed. Some of the homeless preferred to stay out, deeming it to be some sort of freedom. More did not. Even habitual drunkards liked beds and showers. Presently there were ten of them in the van, and that was all it could hold for this trip. They were helped aboard, sat down, and seat-belted into their places for safety purposes.

None of them knew that this was the *fifth* of the four vans operating in lower Manhattan, though they found out something was a little different as soon as it started moving. The attendant leaned back from the front seat and handed out bottles of Gallo burgundy, an inexpensive California red, but a better wine than they were used to drinking, and to which something had been added.

By the time they reached their destination, all were asleep or at least stuporous. Those who were able to move were helped from one truck into the back of another, strapped down in their litter beds, and allowed to fall asleep. The rest were carried and strapped down by two pairs of men. With that task done, the first van was driven off to be cleaned out—they used steam to make sure that whatever residue might be left was sterilized and blasted out of the van. The second truck headed uptown on the West Side Highway, caught the curling ramp for the George Washington Bridge, and crossed the Hudson River. From there it headed north through the northeast corner of New Jersey, then back into New York State.

It turned out that Colonel William Lytle Byron was already in the air in a USAF KC-10 on a course track almost identical to, and only an hour behind, the United 777. It altered course northward for Gander as well. The

former P-3 base had to wake up a few personnel to handle the inbound jumbos, but that was the least of it.

The three failed hijackers were blindfolded, hog-tied, and laid on the floor just forward of the front row of first-class seats, which John, Ding, and Alistair appropriated. Coffee was served, and the other passengers kept away from that part of the aircraft.

"I rather admire the Ethiopians' approach to situations like this," Stanley observed. He was sipping tea.

"What's that?" Chavez asked tiredly.

"Some years ago they had a hijacking attempt on their national flag carrier. There happened to be security chaps aboard, and they got control of the situation. Then they strapped their charges in first-class seats, wrapped towels around their necks to protect the upholstery, and cut their throats, right there on the aircraft. And you know—"

"Gotcha," Ding observed. *Nobody* had messed with that airline since. "Simple, but effective."

"Quite." He set his cup down. "I hope this sort of thing doesn't happen *too* often."

The three officers looked out the windows to see the runway lights just before the 777 thumped down at RCAF Gander. There was a muted series of cheers and a smattering of applause from aft. The airliner slowed and then taxied off to the military facilities, where it stopped. The front-right door was opened, and a scissors-lift truck moved to it, slowly and carefully.

John, Ding, and Alistair unsnapped their seat belts and moved toward the door, keeping an eye on the three hijackers as they did so. The first aboard the aircraft was a RCAF officer with a pistol belt and white lanyard, followed by three men in civilian clothes who had to be cops.

"You're Mr. Clark?" the officer asked.

"That's right." John pointed. "There's your three—suspects, I think the term is." He smiled tiredly at that. The cops moved to deal with them.

"Alternate transport is on the way, about an hour out," the Canadian officer told him.

"Thank you." The three moved to collect their carry-on baggage, and in two cases, their wives. Patsy was asleep and had to be awakened. Sandy had gotten back into her

book. Two minutes later, all five of them were on the ground, shuffling into one of the RCAF cars. As soon as they pulled away, the aircraft started moving again, taxiing to the civilian terminal so that the passengers could get off and stretch while the 777 was serviced and refueled.

“How do we get to England?” Ding asked, after getting his wife bedded down in the unused ready room.

“Your Air Force is sending a VC-20. There will be people at Heathrow to collect your bags. There’s a Colonel Byron coming for your three prisoners,” the senior cop explained.

“Here are their weapons.” Stanley handed over three airsick bags with the disassembled pistols inside. “Browning M-1935s, military finish. No explosives. They really were bloody amateurs. Basques, I think. They seem to have been after the Spanish ambassador to Washington. His wife was in the seat next to mine. Señora Constanza de Monterosa—the wine family. They bottle the most marvelous clarets and Madeiras. I think you will find that this was an unauthorized operation.”

“And who exactly are you?” the cop asked. Clark handled it.

“We can’t answer that. You’re sending the hijackers right back?”

“Ottawa has instructed us to do that under the Hijacking Treaty. Look, I have to say something to the press.”

“Tell them that three American law enforcement officers happened to be aboard and helped to subdue the idiots,” John told him.

“Yeah, that’s close enough,” Chavez agreed with a grin. “First arrest I ever made, John. Damn, I forgot to give them their rights,” he added. He was weary enough to think that enormously funny.

They were beyond filthy, the receiving team saw. That was no particular surprise. Neither was the fact that they smelled bad enough to gag a skunk. That would have to wait. The litters were carried off the truck into the building, ten miles west of Binghamton, New York, in the hill

country of central New York State. In the clean room, all ten were sprayed in the face from a squeeze bottle much like that used to clean windows. It was done one at a time to all of them, then half were given injections into the arm. Both groups of five got steel bracelets, numbered 1 to 10. Those with even numbers got the injections. The odd-numbered control group did not. With this task done, the ten homeless were carried off to the bunk room to sleep off the wine and the drugs. The truck which had delivered them was already gone, heading west for Illinois and a return to its regular duties. The driver hadn't even known what he'd done, except to drive.