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INK ROAD

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For Stanley. I started writing this for you
but couldn't have finished it without you!

In 2004, Japanese scientists at Nippon Telephone & Telegraph discovered that the body's electric field could be used to transmit and receive data at broadband speeds. (*Source: MIT Technology Review*)

CHAPTER ONE

Flight 39

If the plane got into trouble at over thirteen thousand feet, the cabin could lose pressure, spelling catastrophe. It was a simple matter of bend ratios and breaking points, cause and effect. Only three people on board the flight from New York's JFK to Los Angeles knew this: the two airline pilots with their combined three thousand hours of training, and the teenage boy with dark hair and dark clothes seated in 24D – listed on the passenger manifest as SIMMS, PORTER. Though exactly *how* he knew this wasn't all that easy to explain.

Despite having wisdom beyond his years, there were many things Porter didn't know, like why someone had targeted the airliner, or how this act of sabotage would be carried out. Maybe his boss didn't know herself. Or maybe she did, and she'd chosen not to tell him. After all, she'd only informed him of the threat *after* take-off, once the plane was airborne. *Very helpful*, he thought.

In any case, at the rate they were climbing, the desired altitude would soon be reached, and the question fatefully answered.

Meanwhile, the other passengers carried on watching their screens, sharing light conversation about final destinations, hopes and dreams, oblivious to the dark plans that were running like code in the background of their everyday reality, determining the event that was about to happen.

As if on cue, the plane banked sharply and an alarm bleated through the cabin, causing concerned yelps that quickly became screams. A moment later, the cries were muted when plastic panels flipped open overhead, dropping a shower of oxygen masks dangling from lengths of rubber tubing, swaying as gravity was challenged. The masks were snatched and hurriedly strapped on.

The plane rolled hard in the opposite direction, then seemed to yaw in a lazy circle, with the sickening glee of a roller-coaster ride. Unsecured items, bags, laptops and other devices, anything that wasn't tied down, took flight, sticking to the ceiling.

Amidst the chaos, for a split second, Porter thought again about his harsh boss, and her equally harsh daughter – and if he'd ever see the unusual girl again, or any other living soul for that matter. Then he reminded himself to push any irrelevant thoughts to the wall, confining them to the outer chambers of his mind to

make way for cold, hard logic. The passengers tightened their seat belts, adjusted their oxygen masks and held on to their armrests for dear life. Porter did the opposite, unbelted and slid out from his seat, staggering up the tilting craft like he was climbing a flight of stairs.

A flight attendant leaned out of her jump seat and attempted to wave him back down the aisle, then her head suddenly lolled as she slouched in her chair. It must have been the masks. Perhaps there was too much oxygen being fed to them: that would cause drowsiness. He knew this from climbing mountains back home.

Porter glanced behind him to see the rest of the passengers all sitting neatly in rows, frozen in time: asleep. He turned back, taking two more thudding strides to reach out and hammer on the cockpit door, but before he could do so, it opened by itself, as he was met by the masked co-pilot, who promptly fell headlong to the cabin floor, unconscious.

Porter grabbed hold of the door to steady himself, stepped over the smartly uniformed body and entered the cockpit to find a male pilot and female crew member slumped at their posts, with the night sky beyond. The joystick that was supposed to be controlling the craft was moving by itself, as if possessed, sending the plane into another uncontrolled roll – then pitching forward into a dive. The jet engines wailed in complaint. Porter

hauled the pilot aside and took his seat at the flightdeck, strapping himself in, his black jacket and jeans at odds with the uniformed crew sprawled unconscious around him. He closed his eyes for a moment and focused on what he had to do.

Frantic chatter from the control tower interrupted him. A man's urgent voice repeating: 'I say again, Flight 39 . . . maintain altitude. Do you read?'

Porter picked up the headset, adjusted the size and put it on, keeping a calm tone: 'Mayday, mayday, this is flight three-niner, declaring an emergency, request permission to land.'

'Wait . . . Who is this?'

'That doesn't matter.'

'How old are you?'

'That doesn't matter either.'

Porter blinked:

Searching . . .

His eyes still closed, he answered, 'The plane's been compromised. One hundred and five souls on board. Disengaging autopilot and moving to hands-on.' Porter opened his eyes, moving his hands over the controls, pressing a series of buttons and switches.

'Wait, what? You can't fly that plane!'

'Yes I can.'

He blinked again:

Connecting . . .

'Request vectors to departure airport,' Porter muttered. 'Roll equipment for landing.'

A pause, then the control tower answered, begrudging. 'Roger that . . . whoever this is. Standby for vectors.'

Porter exhaled and hauled back on the joystick, coasting through an opening in the clouds and levelling out into a controlled descent. The cockpit gauges rebalanced themselves. Neon light burst through the grey strata, revealing a tidy grid of rooftops and tree crowns spanning the suburbs below. The cockpit fell silent over the drone of the engines. Porter steadied his breathing, then a sharp pain jolted his head, until he blinked it away.

'Flight three-niner, you're cleared to land,' the controller's voice rattled.

The airliner rocked, buffeted by a strong wind as Porter gripped the stick with both hands and performed a wide circle, setting a return course for New York.