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The Flight

Written by M. R. Hall

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THE FLIGHT

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THE FLIGHT is the fourth novel in M. R. Hall's CWA Gold Dagger shortlisted Coroner Jenny Cooper series.

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THE FLIGHT

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In memory of Sergeant Ronald Rex Hall,
9th Battalion Parachute Regiment

And limping death lashed on by fate
Comes up to shorten half our date.
This made not Daedalus beware,
With borrowed wings to sail in air;
To hell Alcides forced his way,
Plunged through the lake, and snatched the prey.
Nay scarce the gods, or heavenly climes
Are safe from our audacious crimes:
We reach at Jove's imperial crown,
And pull the unwilling thunder down.

The third ode of the first book of Horace (23 BC)
(trans. John Dryden, 1685)

ONE

RANSOME AIRWAYS FLIGHT 189 to New York was one of 753 scheduled to depart from London's Heathrow that Sunday in early January. During peak times at the world's busiest international airport, one plane would take off and another land every minute. There was little room for error either human or mechanical, still less in the uncertain realm where the two connected.

At forty-six, Captain Dan Murray was one of the oldest pilots on the payroll. With a wife and three teenagers to support, he had chosen to sacrifice union representation and the perks he had enjoyed with his former company for the money in hand offered by Guy Ransome's buccaneering airline. His basic salary barely covered the weekly groceries bill, and stopovers were spent in the cheapest airport hotels, but each transatlantic return trip earned him a little over £2,500. In a shrinking industry you had to make your money while you could.

Departure was scheduled for nine a.m. Murray hauled himself out of bed at five, slowly came to life in the shower, and minutes later was behind the wheel of his eight-year-old Ford. The persistent headache that had been bothering him lately had thankfully failed to take hold, and for once he didn't have to spend his morning commute waiting for the painkillers to kick in.

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It was an hour's drive to Heathrow, and even at this ungodly hour of the day the motorway was filling up with angry traffic. He pulled into the car park of the Ransome building on the outer fringes of the airport at a little after six-thirty, collected his flight case from his locker and took a shuttle bus to Terminal Four. The short journey was shared with a dozen drowsy cabin crew dressed in Ransome's trademark purple uniforms. Some would join him on the flight to New York; others were bound for Dubai, Abu Dhabi or Taipei. The younger hostesses discussed rumours of staff cuts on long-haul flights, but the older ones and Captain Murray kept their thoughts to themselves. Experience had taught them that Ransome Airways had little patience with gossips or trouble-makers.

First Officer Ed Stevens was already hard at work in the landside crew room when Murray joined him for breakfast. The twenty-eight-year-old had a newborn daughter and a wife who had been made redundant as soon as her pregnancy had started to show. He needed his job even more than his captain did and was keen to impress. After a few moments' chat, Murray opened his company laptop, hooked into the firm's intranet and listened while Stevens talked him through the flight plan.

The precise route they would follow from London to New York was contained in the electronic flight information pack, a series of files in an email issued in the early hours of the morning by Sky Route. The company's sophisticated software was designed to get aircraft to their destinations as cheaply as possible, taking account of the weather, and passenger and cargo payload. 10 per cent of flight costs were incurred in landing fees and over-flight charges, 90 per cent in aviation fuel. A strong headwind could add 30 per cent to the cost of a flight and turn it into a loss-maker for the

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company; finding the cheapest route on a given day was critical.

Sky Route had taken account of all the satellite-generated weather data and decided on a southerly course to avoid strong winds in the north Atlantic. They would fly due west from Heathrow, level off at 31,000 feet over the Severn estuary and make their way towards the southern tip of Ireland. Midway across the Irish Sea they would climb to their cruising altitude of 39,000 feet and follow an almost direct line across the ocean. An estimated flight time of eight hours would have them on the ground at New York's JFK at midday, Eastern Standard Time. Having talked his captain through the main points, Stevens drew his attention to several Notices to Airmen (NOTAMS) that warned of pockets of thunder cloud over the western British Isles and Irish Sea. It was unremarkable weather for the time of year and nothing to cause either pilot anxiety.

Captain Murray had always preferred flying the Atlantic to complex routes over a patchwork of countries. Beyond Irish airspace there would be no air traffic controllers to deal with until they skirted southern Canada. And once aloft the Airbus virtually flew itself; in fact, if correctly programmed, it would even land and come to a halt on the JFK runway without human intervention.

Satisfied with their proposed course, Murray ordered a second cup of coffee and set about checking the fuel-load calculations. Operating on the tightest of margins, Ransome Airways insisted its captains take on only the regulation minimum 3 per cent of total fuel load as a contingency, which amounted to approximately thirty extra minutes in the air. If a captain chose to take on more and didn't use it, he would be fined according to a sliding scale: every two litres of fuel taken on board required another litre just to

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keep it airborne. Satisfied that there were no weather systems reported over the Atlantic likely to require a significant deviation, Murray confirmed Sky Route's suggested order for 105 tonnes of kerosene and hit the send button, filing his flight plan with the company dispatcher.

It was ninety minutes before take-off.

Greg Patterson was having a bad weekend. His ten-year-old daughter, Amy, was in tears, people were staring, and nothing he said would console her. To make matters worse, he could feel his wife's disapproval across the three thousand miles of ocean that separated them. Taking the vice-president's post in London had seemed to him just the sort of fillip his tired marriage had needed, but Michelle had refused to leave Connecticut. A professor in applied mathematics at Hartford University, she had been offered a visiting lectureship at King's College, London, but when departure day loomed she claimed she couldn't bring herself to desert her elderly mother. Greg knew full well there was more to it than that, but for the sake of his daughter he had agreed to go alone, and to suffer a monthly intercontinental commute.

Michelle had brought Amy over for Christmas but had had to fly home four days early to look after her mother, who, with impeccable timing, had broken a hip during her absence. Greg had persuaded Michelle to let Amy stay on with the promise that he would fly to New York with her en route to a business meeting to Washington. He had seen very little of his daughter during the previous eight months and relished the prospect of a few days alone with her. All had been well until the previous Friday morning, when, in typically autocratic fashion, Greg's CEO cancelled his Washington trip, dictating that he had more pressing business to attend to in London. Greg had briefly toyed with the crazy idea of flying to New York with Amy on Saturday and back

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to London twenty-four hours later, but his plan was skewered when late on Friday evening the airline bumped them onto a Sunday flight, claiming that their Saturday departure had been unwittingly overbooked. Michelle had failed to be understanding. As far as she was concerned, Greg's intention to fly their daughter home as an unaccompanied minor was tantamount to child abuse.

Amy clung on to him and wept at the desk in the departure hall as he completed the forms entrusting her to the airline. The Ransome hostess tried her best to soothe the child, promising movies, video games and an endless supply of treats until she met her mother at the other end, but Amy wouldn't be mollified. Greg attempted and failed on three separate attempts to get her to put on the purple tabard that singled her out as a child travelling alone, and it was the hostess who finally insisted that he just go and leave them to it. With a lump in his throat he disappeared into the crush of travellers with his daughter's tearful pleas ringing in his ears.

One aspect of service on which Ransome didn't skimp was its VIP lounge. Cattle-class tickets barely covered costs; the airline's profit was made in business and first class. Attracting wealthy customers was the chief priority. One such was Jimmy Han – a name the young entrepreneur had adopted for the benefit of his Western business associates – who had clocked up more miles with Ransome Airways than any other customer. Once every two weeks he travelled from his company's manufacturing plant in Taipei to its offices in Frankfurt and London. This week, for good measure, he was adding a three-day hop across the Atlantic to his schedule. He had spent the previous night at the Savoy, but its luxurious spa had felt a little tired compared with the one he was currently enjoying in the newly overhauled Ransome

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lounge: lying face-down on a massage couch, he drifted into a doze as a beautiful young woman kneaded his back with scented oils.

The semi-educated boy from Shanghai had come a long way in twenty years. He had worked hard, been lucky and grown exceedingly rich. There was much he intended to give back in return for his success, but that was no reason not to enjoy his wealth. When an interviewer had once asked him if he ever tired of the high life, Han had replied that those who came from nothing appreciated luxury like no one else, for at the back of their minds was always the thought that it might all be suddenly snatched away.

The Airbus A380 was the world's largest commercial airliner. 73 yards long, 24 yards high and with a wingspan the length of a football pitch, it dwarfed the 747s that stood alongside it. Designed to carry 525 passengers in a normal three-class configuration, Ransome Airways bunched things up a little more tightly in economy to squeeze in closer to six hundred.

Pre-flight preparations were in full swing. Outside in the freezing drizzle a pumping truck transferred fuel from underground containers into the tanks in the aircraft's wings, while the ground engineers carried out their final inspections. Inside a team of cleaners was working against the clock as the eighteen cabin crew checked that the galleys had been correctly loaded and searched the passenger manifests for those with special requirements: the 'problems'. There were unusually few: three in wheelchairs and a smattering of fussy eaters. Amy Patterson was the only unaccompanied minor. The words 'Will need attention!' had been entered next to her name. The crew unanimously decided that she would be the responsibility of Kathy Flood, the newest and youngest of their number, whether Kathy liked it or not.

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After twenty years flying US-made Boeings, Captain Murray had found retraining to fly the Airbus a challenge. But having conquered his initial scepticism at the aircraft's semi-robotic flight control systems, he was now a fully committed convert. It wasn't perfect – he would have preferred a conventional centre stick to the arcade-style electronic joystick positioned at his right side, and a nostalgic part of him would have liked at least a few mechanical analogue instruments for use in the last resort – but he accepted that he was flying an incomparably safe machine. Fly-by-wire technology meant that all the vital systems were controlled by a highly sophisticated network of computers and electronics. Rather than the rudder, spoilers and tail elevators being moved by cables and hydraulics operated manually from the cockpit, the pilot's controls transmitted only electronic signals to the various moving parts.

Instead of conventional instruments, the Airbus captain and first officer each sat before a console containing a number of LCD screens. Directly in front of each of them was an identical primary flight display, which showed the aircraft's attitude in the air in relation to an artificial horizon and its flight mode. Each also had a navigation display providing a constant visual of the aircraft's position, the weather up ahead and constant readings of ground speed and true airspeed. An onboard information terminal contained the electronic tech logs and manuals that in older aircraft were contained in thick and unwieldy paper files. In the middle of the centre console that ran between the pilots' seats were the engine/warning and system displays, and beneath them the four thrust levers. On either side of the levers was a multi-function display – the pilots' main interface with the aircraft's computers. Using a keyboard and tracker ball, each pilot could flip between pages relaying the status of various on-board systems or send and receive

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messages to and from air traffic control and the airline's home base.

The intention behind this bewildering array of technology was simple: insofar as it was possible, to remove pilot error. If a pilot made a mistake, the computers would detect and correct it. And the Airbus's computers would make constant minor automatic adjustments to the roll and pitch of the aircraft. Whether the pilot wished it or not, his commands were constantly being modified or overridden. By far the most controversial of the Airbus's fail-safe features was its refusal to allow the pilot any more than thirty degrees of pitch up, fifteen degrees down and sixty-seven degrees of bank. This was intended to prevent a potentially catastrophic stall by keeping the plane within the safe limits of speed, attitude and altitude, but left some pilots feeling that in an emergency they would have one hand tied behind their backs. The aircraft's designers took a dispassionate view based on many years' worth of hard evidence: in a crisis, a computer flies better than a human. A computer is rational. It has no desire to be a hero.

The chief ground engineer, Mick Dalton, arrived in the cockpit thirty minutes before take-off to brief Murray and Stevens on the few defects he had found. He advised them that an intermittent fault with an actuator operating one of the spoilers on the starboard wing had failed to recur, but warned them to keep an eye out for it and scheduled a precautionary repair to take place on the aircraft's return. There was the usual crop of niggles from inside the passenger cabin – several faulty video screens, a malfunctioning toilet pump – and a report from the previous flight crew of an anomalous autopilot action. While autopilot one had been engaged it had apparently skipped a pre-programmed level-off on ascent, climbing straight through to cruising altitude.

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Dalton was dubious. He suspected that the first officer, a new recruit to the airline, had mis-programmed the system. Ed Stevens promised he wouldn't make the same mistake and double-checked the flight data. Despite his misgivings, Dalton recorded the reported error and certified the aircraft fit for flight.

Half an hour before take-off, the three wheelchair-bound passengers together with a sniffling Amy Patterson were brought along the gantry by ground staff and handed over to the cabin crew. Kathy Flood led the little girl to a seat near an exit door in the mid-section of the lower cabin where she could keep a close eye on her. She showed her where to find the kids' movies on the seat-back screen and how to press the call button any time she needed something. Before joining Ransome Airways Kathy had spent two years as an au pair to a wealthy Italian family with six spoilt children, and compared with them Amy Patterson was a delight. Kathy helped her to send a text message to her mother saying the plane was due to leave on time, and handed her some sweets to suck during take-off. After a few minutes of Kathy's reassuring attention, Amy's mood lifted and she finally smiled.

First-class passengers embarked ahead of the crowd and were ushered upstairs into a spacious cabin that resembled the interior of a Manhattan boutique hotel. Forty luxury pods, with fully reclining seats upholstered in cream leather, were arranged around a kidney-shaped champagne and seafood bar. At the very front of the aircraft were six self-contained 'ultra suites' – glorified versions of the first-class pods – separated from the main cabin by sliding perspex doors.

Jimmy Han usually made do with the relative comfort of a regular pod, but it had been a hectic few days in which he

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had already travelled more than halfway across the globe. As soon as he slid the door of his suite shut and drew the blind he knew that he had made the right decision. Kicking off his shoes, he eased into the seat and adjusted it just so, stroking the controls until it moulded to the small of his back. Today was a rest day, a time for reflection. He closed his eyes and recalled a long-forgotten moment from his childhood: his father had kicked a stray dog that lay sunning itself in the street outside their drab apartment building. When he had asked why, his father had said, 'Because he looks more comfortable lying on the hard ground than I'll ever be.' Han smiled. Even now he wasn't as relaxed as that flea-bitten bag of bones; but he was worth more than 700 million dollars.

At eight-fifty the last of the sixteen cabin doors was secured and Captain Murray turned the simple ignition switch which commenced the automatic start-up of the four Rolls-Royce Trent engines. He watched the changing images on the engine screen as the aircraft's computers started each of them in turn and pressurized the hydraulic systems. Sophisticated sensors relayed a constant stream of information: the computers finessed the many interconnected electrical and mechanical processes in a way no human ever could. It was as if the vast machine had a life of its own.

The ground crew disconnected the push-back tractor and radioed the cockpit to set the brakes to 'on'. The aircraft's computers calculated where its centre of gravity lay based on the size and distribution of the payload, and decided on the correct angle at which to attack the air: too shallow and it would struggle to leave the ground, too steep and the centre of lift would slip behind the centre of gravity, risking a disastrous stall. The wing flaps and stabilizer (the horizon-

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tal section of the tail) adjusted themselves accordingly. On older planes the pilot would feel his way into the air, instinctively responding to the feedback on his centre stick and the pressure on his rudder pedals, but the Airbus pilot had no feedback, no tactile sense of the air pressing against the flying surfaces. He relied instead on the streams of information on his visual displays. Among the many acts of faith the aircraft demanded, those required on take-off were the most profound.

First Officer Stevens received the go-ahead from the tower and Captain Murray manoeuvred the Airbus towards the start of runway two. Inside the cabin passengers temporarily denied the comfort of electronic distractions buried themselves in newspapers or uttered silent prayers. In the cockpit the pilots' focus narrowed to the rigid procedure that lay ahead. The Boeing 777 directly in front of them sped off along the greasy tarmac, passed the point of no return and lumbered into the air, shearing a little to the left as the pilot compensated for a sudden gust of cross-wind. Thirty seconds passed; the tower confirmed cleared for take-off and Captain Murray pushed the thrust levers fully forward to the take-off-go-around setting.

The aircraft started to accelerate; the windshield streaked with rain. First Officer Stevens called out, 'Eighty knots.' Both pilots cross-checked their airspeed instruments; both were in agreement. Had they not been, take-off would have been aborted immediately. Upwards of eighty knots the pilot was obliged to ignore any minor faults and abort only to avoid imminent disaster. An automated voice called out, 'V1', indicating that the critical speed of 122 knots had been reached. Captain Murray removed his hand from the thrust lever, now committed to take-off. As they reached 141 knots, First Officer Stevens called out, 'Rotate,' and Captain Murray pulled

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gently on the joystick, easing the nose up through three degrees per second until at twelve-point-five degrees the massive craft began to lift and climb.

At a hundred feet Captain Murray called for 'Gear-up', then 'AP one'. Like most pilots, he would have preferred to fly the aircraft manually to 10,000 feet before switching to autopilot, but Heathrow being a noise-restricted airport, any deviation from the Standard Instrument Departure – such as a sudden throttle up – could infringe volume regulations and trigger a hefty automatic fine, a portion of which under Ransome's rules would have been docked from his salary.

The autopilot engaged. Only a few hundred feet from the ground the two human pilots became virtual spectators as the aircraft banked left and headed out on a westerly course, slowly ascending towards 10,000 feet. Their displays showed the constant subtle movements of the rudder, spoilers and stabilizer countering the effects of a blustery north wind. To have flown the aircraft as skilfully by hand would have been a physical impossibility.

At 1,500 feet Captain Murray pulled the thrust lever back to the 'climb' setting as they entered low-lying cloud and encountered minor pockets of turbulence. First Officer Stevens swapped formalities with air traffic control and obtained permission to pass through the first altitude constraint of 6,000 feet. At 4,000, the flaps retracted from take-off position and the engines responded to the reduced lift with an increase in power, accelerating to 250 knots. The cloud was thick and dense, making for a bumpier ride than many passengers would be finding comfortable, but the weather radar showed conditions clearing over the Welsh coast. The latest reports from the mid-Atlantic were of a clear, bright, turbulence-free day.

At 10,000 feet, both pilots called out, 'Flight level one

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hundred': standard procedure designed to keep them working as a tight-knit team. Now high enough above the ground to be free of noise restrictions, the engines powered up to a more efficient climb speed of 327 knots. Captain Murray switched off the passenger seat-belt signs and enabled the in-flight entertainment system. First Officer Stevens checked in with air traffic control, who handed him over to Bristol. A brief exchange of messages secured permission to continue to an initial cruising altitude of 31,000 feet.

Both pilots began to relax; they were airborne. The hardest part of their day's work was already done.

As soon as the seat-belt signs were switched off, Kathy Flood came to check on Amy Patterson, and found the little girl so engrossed in her favourite video game that she barely noticed her. Relieved, Kathy went about her work. For the next seven hours she would be at full stretch tending to the sixty passengers in her section; there was simply not enough time to cope with a miserable child.

A polite tap at the door of Jimmy Han's suite signalled the arrival of a pretty stewardess who handed him the complimentary drinks menu. It was too early in the day for champagne, so he ordered freshly squeezed orange juice, giving her a smile which promised a handsome tip if she looked after him well. Reaching for the remote, he flicked to CNN, hoping for updates on the latest diplomatic spat between China and Taiwan. But the studio anchor was dwelling on another minor story and he impatiently scoured the ticker at the foot of the screen before a knot of tension stiffened his neck and reminded him that he was meant to be taking it easy. Business could wait. He switched across to the movie channels and picked out an old Clint Eastwood picture: *Dirty Harry*. It was one of his favourites. He had learned one

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of his most valuable lessons from American films: the good guys are ultimately more ruthless than the bad.

The altimeters ticked past 30,000 feet, prompting both pilots to call out, 'One to go,' affirming that their instruments were in sync and that they were nearing level-off. First Officer Stevens checked in with Bristol and learned that aircraft up ahead had reported a belt of thunder clouds, but that no deviation was necessary. At 31,000 feet the autothrust pulled back, downgrading to a softer mode which caused the engines to quieten to an almost inaudible whisper and settle to the optimum fuel-efficient cruise speed: a steady 479 knots.

'How's the baby?' Captain Murray asked his first officer. 'Getting any sleep?'

'Doing my best – on the sofa.' Stevens unbuckled his belt and rolled his stiff shoulders.

'Like that, is it?'

'I told her, I'll change all the dirty nappies you like, but getting up in the night, forget it. I've got a plane to fly.'

'Off the leash tonight, then? I hope she doesn't expect me to keep an eye on you.'

'In New York? You really think you'd keep up?'

'You'd be surprised.'

The interphone buzzed.

'Coffee time already?' First Officer Stevens glanced up at the entry screen and saw a stewardess standing beyond the outer of the two doors which separated the cabin from the cockpit. 'They could have sent the pretty one.'

'Who's that?' Captain Murray asked.

'You know – the little blonde one, Kathy, with the—' He held his hands out in front of his chest.

'Oh, yeah – *her*.'

Both men laughed.

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'You're definitely on your own tonight,' Captain Murray said. 'Not my responsibility.'

Stevens tapped in the entry code which would let the stewardess through the outer door.

'Speed! Speed!' The automated warning voice called out from speakers mounted in the instrument consoles.

'What the hell is that?' Captain Murray said, more puzzled than alarmed. 'We're at 470—'

'Speed! Speed!'

'Jesus—'

'Speed! Speed!'

There was a loud clatter and a scream of alarm from between the cockpit's two doors as the aircraft's nose pitched violently upwards and the stewardess was thrown off her feet.

'I'm sorry, say again, Skyhawk . . . Skyhawk, uh, are you still on?'

At his seat in the tower at Bristol airport Guy Fearnley saw Skyhawk 380 on his radar screen but heard only static through his headset.

'Skyhawk, are you there?'

The air traffic controller watched the numbers on his screen that indicated the aircraft's altitude was starting to fall; slowly at first, then faster and faster. He blinked twice to make sure he wasn't imagining it.

He wasn't.

The brief message from the Airbus had been too fractured to make out. He switched channels and tried again. 'Skyhawk this is Bristol eight-zero-nine—'

There was no reply.