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RICHARD CASTLE

WILD STORM

A Derrick Storm Thriller

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TO MY ALWAYS.
YOU MAKE SAVING THE WORLD MAGICAL.

WILD
STORM

CHAPTER 1

NINETEEN THOUSAND FEET ABOVE YORK, Pennsylvania

At the very moment Flight 937 was targeted—the moment when the three-hundred-plus souls aboard were brought into a peril whose magnitude they did not understand—the man in seat 2B was thinking about a nap.

Seat 2B was partially reclined, and he was breathing deeply. A rakish sort, tall, dark, and broad-chested, he had his thick hair swept fashionably to the side. Beyond his apparent physical allure, there was also an ineffable quality to him—call it charm, charisma, or just natural magnetism—that made the flight attendants pay him more attention than was strictly necessary.

His face was tanned, albeit in something of a windburned way. He had just spent several weeks climbing in the Swiss Alps, finishing his trek by solo-climbing the sheer north face of the Eiger in a shade under four hours. Not record territory. But also not bad for a man who didn't make his living as a climber.

He still wore his hiking books. Some of his gear was stowed above him in a weathered rucksack. The rest was packed below, in the belly of the Boeing 767-300 that had been plowing dutifully through the sky since Zurich.

They had been making a long, slow descent toward Dulles International Airport and the man in seat 2B was looking

forward to the evening, when he planned to take his father to an Orioles game. It had been two months since they had seen each other, which was too long. They had bonding to catch up on.

The 767 banked slightly to the right, then straightened. It was a sturdy aircraft and the flight had been smooth, with only the barest hint of turbulence as the plane had passed under a high ceiling of clouds a few minutes earlier. The man in seat 2B had his eyes closed, though he was not quite asleep. He was in that transitional period, when the conscious part of his brain was slowly ceding control to the subconscious.

Then came the loud *chunk*.

His eyes opened. It was definitely not among the sounds one wants or expects to hear on an airplane. It was followed by voices, plaintive and panicked, coming from behind him on the left side of the aircraft. From above him, the seat-belt sign chimed. The plane was no longer flying smooth or straight. It had entered a shallow, wobbly dive to the left, pitched at roughly ten degrees.

Physiologists have identified the two possible reactions to a threatening stimulus as being fight or flight. But those are, in fact, merely the instinctive responses, the ones gifted to humans by their simian ancestors. Fancying themselves members of a more evolved species, *H. sapiens* have learned to overcome those base, brutish urges. They are polite, civilized, especially when surrounded by many other *H. sapiens*. They value decorum—even over survival, at times.

As a result, most people's response to an emergency is to do nothing.

The man in seat 2B was not most people.

As the other first-class passengers exchanged nervous glances, the man in seat 2B unfastened his seat belt and walked back toward the midsection of the plane. His fight-or-flight juices were flowing—heart rate increased, pupils dilated, muscles bathed in red blood cells and ready for action—but he had long trained himself how to harness that chemistry in a productive manner.

Passing through business class into coach, he reached the

emergency exit rows. Without speaking to the passengers, all of whom had their necks craned to see outside, he bent low and took his own gander out the window. It took perhaps a second and a half for him to assess what he saw, perhaps another two seconds to decide what to do about it. He walked back toward the first-class cabin. There he found a flight attendant, a pretty ash blonde whose name tag identified her as PEGGY. She was clutching the side of the fuselage.

The man's voice did not rise as he said, "I need to speak to the pilot."

"Sir, please return to your seat and fasten your seat belt."

"I need to speak to the pilot now."

"I'm sorry, sir, that's not—"

His tone remained calm as he interrupted her again: "Respectfully, Peggy, I don't have time to argue with you. Whether you want to recognize it or not, we have entered into what pilots call a death spiral. It's just a slight pull now, but there's nothing your pilot is going to be able to do to stop it from getting worse. Unless you let me help him, the spiral is going to get tighter and tighter until we hit the ground at what will likely be a steep bank and a very high rate of speed. Trust me when I tell you it won't end well for either of us, whether we're wearing our seat belts or not."

He finally had Peggy's attention—and cooperation. She walked unsteadily toward a phone, lifted it, and spoke into the receiver.

"Go ahead," she said, nodding toward the door to the cockpit. "It's unlocked."

The pilot had the gray hair and crow's-feet of a veteran flier. But in his many thousands of hours of flight time, he had never faced anything quite like this. He was leaning his weight against the flight stick, the muscles in his arms straining. The plane was responding, but not nearly enough.

The man from seat 2B did not bother with introductions.

"One of your ailerons on the left side is gone and another is just barely attached," he said.

"I've added power to the port engines and applied the rudder, but I can't keep us straight," the pilot replied.

"And you won't be able to," the man from 2B said. "I don't think I'll be able to get your aileron functioning. But I think I can at least get it back in place."

"And how are you going to do that?" the pilot asked.

The man from seat 2B ignored the question and said, "Do you have any speed tape in your flight kit?"

"Yeah, it's in the compartment behind me."

"Good," the man said, already heading in that direction.

"We're not the only ones," the pilot said.

"What do you mean?"

"Three planes have already crashed. No one knows what the hell is going on. Air traffic control is calling it another nine-eleven. Planes just keep dropping out of the sky."

The man from seat 2B paused over this news for a moment, then drove it from his mind. It was not pertinent to his present circumstances, which would require all of his concentration. "What's our altitude?" he asked.

"One-eight-six-two-five and falling."

"Okay. I'm going to need you to reduce airspeed to a hundred and forty knots, lower to fourteen thousand feet, and depressurize the plane. Can you do that for me?"

"I think so."

"What's your name, Captain?"

"Estes. Ben Estes."

"Captain Estes, I'm going to get you back some control of this aircraft. Hopefully enough to get us down safely. Just keep it as steady as you can for me for the next five minutes. No sudden moves."

"Roger that. What's your name, son?"

But the man from seat 2B had already departed the cockpit. He stopped briefly at his seat, opening the overhead bin and bringing down his rucksack. He pulled out a Petzl Hirundos

climbing harness, several carabiners, and a seventy-meter length of Mammut Supersafe climbing rope. The plane had slowed. It was now tilted roughly fifteen degrees to the left. The man in seat 2B felt his ears pop.

The woman in seat 1B was peppering him with questions: "What's going on? Are we going to crash? What are you doing?"

"Just trying to avoid deep vein thrombosis," the man in seat 2B said finally. "It's a silent killer, you know."

With that, he was on the move again, back to the coach section, toward the emergency exit rows. In this part of the plane, real terror had set in among the passengers. They had seen the wing. They felt the plane's bank. Some were sobbing. Some had grabbed on to loved ones. Others were praying.

"I'm going to need you folks to clear out of here," he said to the people seated in the exit rows. "There's much less chance of your being sucked out of the airplane if you do."

Those words—*sucked out of the airplane*—and the image they produced—had an immediate effect. The four seats, two in each row, emptied as the man from seat 2B stepped into his harness and attached one of his ropes to the front of it. He took the other end, looped it several times around seat 20B, and tied the sturdiest knot he knew.

He yanked hard to test it. The man from seat 2B could bench press 330 pounds and squat at least twice as much. He knew those numbers were nothing compared to the forces that might soon be exerted on this rope. He just had to hope it would hold.

Clamping the roll of speed tape in his teeth, he removed the seal from the emergency door, grasped it in both hands, and threw it out of the plane. He ignored the screams from several nearby passengers and concentrated on his next task.

As a kid, the man from seat 2B had enjoyed rolling down the window of his father's Buick—always a Buick—and cupping his hand against the wind that rushed at him, pushing at it in a test of his young strength. At 60 miles an hour, it was a struggle. The

plane was moving more than twice as fast—140 knots is equal to 160 miles an hour. But he wasn't a kid anymore. He flattened himself against the floor, took one deep breath.

And then he began to crawl onto the surface of the wing.

He was pointed forward, toward the plane's nose, keeping one foot braced against the side of the porthole. The wind tore at him, doing its best to pry him loose. Only by keeping his profile flat could he keep himself from being swept away. The rope that tethered him to the plane might or might not hold his weight if called upon. The man from seat 2B was not especially keen to find out.

His objective, as he continued creeping ahead, was to reach the leading edge of the wing. He worked his way there slowly, with hands made strong and calloused by weeks in the mountains.

When he reached the edge he grasped it, then began inching away from the body of the plane, toward the tip of the wing. He slid one hand, then the other, not daring to move too quickly, until he reached the section of the wing where he could hear the aileron flapping behind him.

Now came the first hard part: getting himself turned around.

As if he was doing a pull-up, he yanked himself toward the leading edge of the wing. Then he hooked his right arm around it, followed by his right leg. The force of the wind was now keeping at least part of him pinned to the plane. Trying not to think about how much of his body was dangling fourteen thousand feet above southern Pennsylvania farmland, he reached his left hand out behind him. He followed it with his right hand until he was facing behind the plane. He wriggled toward the back edge of the wing.

Now the second hard part: grabbing the aileron.

The sheet of metal was a moving target, and there was no way he could reach it anyway—not without losing what little purchase he had on the wing. He grasped, instead, for the narrow strip of metal that had kept the aileron from flying away. Once he had it in his right hand, he began pulling it toward himself—right hand, left hand, right hand, left—until he had it.

He was thankful for the rubberized toes of his hiking boots. He doubted loafers would have had enough grip to keep him on the wing, especially as it continued its inexorable downward tilt. The death spiral was setting in. If the wing got much more pitch to it, his job was going to become impossible.

With the aileron finally in his hands, he moved on to the third hard part: securing it back in place.

Trapping the aileron under his body, he peeled a length of speed tape. While it looked like duct tape, speed tape was made from aluminum. It first came into heavy use during the Vietnam War, when it was used in the field to temporarily fix helicopters that had been damaged by small arms fire. In air force slang, it was called Thousand-MPH tape.

The man from seat 2B hoped the name wasn't overselling the tape's abilities as he attached the first strip of it to the sheet metal of the aileron. Then another strip. Then another. It was heavy tape, and it had a heavy job to do. When he felt he had used enough, he moved the aileron into what he judged was close to its original position. Or at least close enough. He pressed it down, keeping it there with his wrists as he unspooled more tape with his hands. He added several more pieces until he had something like confidence in his jury-rigging.

Then came the critical moment, the one when he needed to take his hands off the aileron. If it didn't stay in place, he might as well just jump off the plane. There wouldn't be time to repeat what he had just done before the death spiral took them down. This was the moment of truth for him and every other man, woman, and child aboard.

He let go.

The aileron held.

AS THEY MADE THEIR FINAL APPROACH TO DULLES AIRPORT, A phalanx of fire trucks and ambulances were lining the runway. Battling valiantly, with at least some control returned to him,

Captain Estes had willed the plane to limp through the final hundred miles of its journey. It was later opined that only one of America's finest pilots could have pulled off what he had done. He was destined for a *Time* magazine cover, a book deal, even a guest appearance on a highly rated ABC television crime drama.

The man who made it possible had returned to seat 2B, as if nothing at all had happened, as if he were just another passenger. Even when his fellow travelers tried to thank him, he just shook his head, gestured toward the cockpit, and said, "I'm not the one who landed this thing." The plane touched down to the sound of boisterous cheering. When Peggy the flight attendant—who was already planning her own special thank you to Captain Estes—came on the public-address system and said, "Welcome to Dulles airport," the passengers burst into applause again.

The man in seat 2B felt hands pounding his back. He experienced no special euphoria, no thrill of being alive, only dread. The other passengers did not know about the larger tragedy that was unfolding outside the plane's doors. They were unaware that whereas they had escaped certain death, hundreds of other passengers on this day had not been so lucky.

Peggy announced that they could turn on their approved portable electronic devices, though most had already done so. They were already sending a feverish onslaught of *you'll-never-believe-what-happened-to-me* texts and *I'm-okay-yes-I'm-okay* e-mails.

The man in seat 2B did not share in their joy. He could have easily guessed what was waiting for him when he powered up his phone.

It was a text from a restricted number. It said only: *Cubby. Now.*

Being summoned to the cubby meant only one thing: a job awaited.

There would be no Orioles game for him.

The man in seat 2B did not even bother retrieving his carry-on luggage, which would only slow him down; nor did he wait for the main cabin door in the middle of the plane to be opened. He

opened it himself before the Jetway extended, dropped from the plane, then commandeered a passing baggage trolley. He was soon off airport property, heading to his destination.

Captain Estes was accepting tearful hugs and grateful handshakes from all the passengers who exited in the usual manner. He would hear many of their stories in the upcoming weeks and months and get a deeper understanding of all the lives he had helped save: a woman who was pregnant with twins, a seven-year-old on the way to visit her grandmother, a medical research scientist who was helping to cure cancer, a nun who had given her life to the poor, a father with six adopted children—remarkable people, all of them.

But in that moment, Captain Estes was only thinking of one man, a man who had already slipped away.

"I never even got his name," he said to the flight attendant when all the passengers were gone.

"He was seated in 2B," Peggy told him. "Why don't you check the manifest?"

The captain returned to his cockpit and scanned down the list of the passengers.

The man from seat 2B was named Derrick Storm.