

One steaming hot shower, two tubes of analgesic, four painkillers, and a long lunch did little to reduce the throbbing in Stu's left shoulder. But the ache was worth it, his pulse now running slow and steady. Much rather suffer the aching throbs than the mad pounding.

Strapped to the captain's seat of the flight simulator, Stu waited impatiently for *something* to go wrong. As an FFDO, a federal flight deck officer, his job was to protect the flight controls at any cost: his life, other lives, all lives on board. But as he waited, the real enemy worked tirelessly against him—boredom.

His first flight instructor preached that flying airplanes for a living meant hours and hours of abject boredom interspersed with moments of sheer terror. The simple act of paying attention, staying focused on the *here-and-now*, was the professional pilot's biggest test.

The simulator magnified that challenge. Nothing in this *here-and-now* was true. Everything, a manufactured reality. The throttles were hooked to a computer, and that same computer controlled the engine gauges, which fed information back into the computer, which produced the airspeed readouts that told the pilot he was going too fast, or too slow, and so the pilot moved the throttles, which fed information back into the computer, which....

It all seemed real enough. As did the men acting as terrorists. Well-rehearsed men performing the scripted scenarios of government-paid playwrights. Confidence-building terrorist plays based on ancient history. Plays crediting the enemy with no intelligence and no imagination. Worst of all—no patience. Every script a slightly different version of the same self-conceived story, hero pilot defeats crazed terrorists. Pilot after pilot, day after day, starred in these feel-good plays, everyone from playwright to terrorist-actor to computer technician deceived by simulator after simulator of simulated success.

The truth? Intelligent, imaginative men watched and waited. Patient men who defined their lives, their sons' lives, and all the sons of sons for lifetimes uncountable, by a single word—jihad—the struggle. Design one hundred scenarios, one thousand. No matter. These men had an entire lifetime to adlib one line, effect one plot twist, and the curtains came rushing down, the critics booing as the airplane crashed...into the towers...onto the banks of the Potomac...onto the amber waves of grain.

If a simulator crashed, nobody jumped from the top of the World Trade Center, or burned to death at the Pentagon, or plowed their graves into the Pennsylvania farmlands. Sure, men lost jobs, but no one died. And no matter how real the cockpit throttles, or how Oscar-worthy the performances of the terrorist-actors, some part of one's mind never let go of that fact. One's mind wandered.

But Stu knew all the tricks to remain *here-and-now*. After leveling at cruise altitude, he checked the list of diversion airports, picked the safest two based on terrain and weather. Close places to land in case *something* went wrong. In the simulator, *something* always went wrong.

Next he scanned the engine instruments looking for a fuel flow too high, an oil pressure too low, or any of the dozens of other abnormalities indicating impending *something*s. Between scans he scrutinized the cockpit door. In every scenario, the playwrights consistently followed the same plotline. The *something* that went wrong always started at that door.

Yet why? How about an empty airplane? Middle of the night. Patient men waiting for the ground crew's shift change. Sneaking aboard and starting the engines. Airborne in minutes. Crashing into the White House minutes later. Or the patient flight attendant, learning all the proper codes and procedures, already standing inside the cockpit, stabbing and stabbing for jihad. How does one stem the spurts from a severed carotid? That's the script Stu would write. That and many more just like it.

But that scenario doesn't make any sense, the playwrights would argue. Who would fly the airplane? Who would stop the passengers from retaliating? Sensible questions. But they were

yesterday's questions.

And yesterday, Stu would've rebutted their sensible questions with sensible questions of his own. Why can't a flight attendant learn to fly? If one flight attendant can fight for jihad, why not two or three? Why not the entire flight attendant crew? Stu's script made plenty of sense if one flight attendant flew while the others sliced up the passengers. But that was yesterday.

Yesterday, he married Angie. Yesterday, they raised Maggie and Andrew. Yesterday, everything made sense. As of zero seven hundred today, nothing did. Today, he'd rebut all of their sensible questions with just one. What crime does a child commit?