

ONE

RAYFORD Steele's mind was on a woman he had never touched. With his fully loaded 747 on autopilot above the Atlantic en route to a 6 A.M. landing at Heathrow, Rayford had pushed from his mind thoughts of his family.

Over spring break he would spend time with his wife and twelve-year-old son. Their daughter would be home from college, too. But for now, with his first officer fighting sleep, Rayford imagined Hattie Durham's smile and looked forward to their next meeting.

Hattie was Rayford's senior flight attendant. He hadn't seen her in more than an hour.

Rayford used to look forward to getting home to his wife. Irene was attractive and vivacious enough, even at forty. But lately he had found himself repelled by her obsession with religion. It was all she could talk about.

God was OK with Rayford Steele. Rayford even

enjoyed church occasionally. But since Irene had hooked up with a smaller congregation and was into weekly Bible studies and church every Sunday, Rayford had become uncomfortable. Hers was not a church where people gave you the benefit of the doubt, assumed the best about you, and let you be. People there had actually asked him, to his face, what God was doing in his life.

“Blessing my socks off” had become the smiling response that seemed to satisfy them, but he found more and more excuses to be busy on Sundays.

Rayford tried to tell himself it was his wife’s devotion to a divine suitor that caused his mind to wander. But he knew the real reason was his own libido.

Besides, Hattie Durham was drop-dead gorgeous. No one could argue that. What he enjoyed most was that she was a toucher. Nothing inappropriate, nothing showy. She simply touched his arm as she brushed past or rested her hand gently on his shoulder when she stood behind his seat in the cockpit.

It wasn’t her touch alone that made Rayford enjoy her company. He could tell from her expressions, her demeanor, her eye contact that she at least admired and respected him. Whether she was interested in anything more, he could only guess. And so he did.

They had spent time together, chatting for hours over drinks or dinner, sometimes with coworkers, sometimes not. He had not returned so much as one brush of a finger, but his eyes had held her gaze, and he could only assume his smile had made its point.

Maybe today. Maybe this morning, if her coded tap on

the door didn't rouse his first officer, he would reach and cover the hand on his shoulder—in a friendly way he hoped she would recognize as a step, a first from his side, toward a relationship.

And a first it would be. He was no prude, but Rayford had never been unfaithful to Irene. He'd had plenty of opportunities. He had long felt guilty about a private necking session he enjoyed at a company Christmas party more than twelve years before. Irene had stayed home, uncomfortably past her ninth month carrying their surprise tagalong son, Ray Jr.

Though under the influence, Rayford had known enough to leave the party early. It was clear Irene noticed he was slightly drunk, but she couldn't have suspected anything else, not from her straight-arrow captain. He was the pilot who had once consumed two martinis during a snowy shutdown at O'Hare and then voluntarily grounded himself when the weather cleared. He offered to pay for bringing in a relief pilot, but Pan-Continental was so impressed that instead they made an example of his self-discipline and wisdom.

In a couple of hours Rayford would be the first to see hints of the sun, a teasing palette of pastels that would signal the reluctant dawn over the continent. Until then, the blackness through the window seemed miles thick. His groggy or sleeping passengers had window shades down, pillows and blankets in place. For now the plane was a dark, humming sleep chamber for all but a few wanderers, the attendants, and one or two responders to nature's call.

The question of the darkest hour before dawn, then, was whether Rayford Steele should risk a new, exciting relationship with Hattie Durham. He suppressed a smile. Was he kidding himself? Would someone with his reputation ever do anything but dream about a beautiful woman fifteen years his junior? He wasn't so sure anymore. If only Irene hadn't gone off on this new kick.

Would it fade, her preoccupation with the end of the world, with the love of Jesus, with the salvation of souls? Lately she had been reading everything she could get her hands on about the rapture of the church. "Can you imagine, Rafe," she exulted, "Jesus coming back to get us before we die?"

"Yeah, boy," he said, peeking over the top of his newspaper, "that would kill me."

She was not amused. "If I didn't know what would happen to me," she said, "I wouldn't be glib about it."

"I *do* know what would happen to me," he insisted. "I'd be dead, gone, *finis*. But you, of course, would fly right up to heaven."

He hadn't meant to offend her. He was just having fun. When she turned away he rose and pursued her. He spun her around and tried to kiss her, but she was cold. "Come on, Irene," he said. "Tell me thousands wouldn't just keel over if they saw Jesus coming back for all the good people."

She had pulled away in tears. "I've told you and told you. Saved people aren't good people, they're—"

"Just forgiven, yeah, I know," he said, feeling

rejected and vulnerable in his own living room. He returned to his chair and his paper. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m happy for you that you can be so cocksure.”

“I only believe what the Bible says,” Irene said.

Rayford shrugged. He wanted to say, “Good for you,” but he didn’t want to make a bad situation worse. In a way he had envied her confidence, but in truth he wrote it off to her being a more emotional, more feelings-oriented person. He didn’t want to articulate it, but the fact was, he was brighter—yes, more intelligent. He believed in rules, systems, laws, patterns, things you could see and feel and hear and touch.

If God was part of all that, OK. A higher power, a loving being, a force behind the laws of nature, fine. Let’s sing about it, pray about it, feel good about our ability to be kind to others, and go about our business. Rayford’s greatest fear was that this religious fixation would not fade like Irene’s Amway days, her Tupperware phase, and her aerobics spell. He could just see her ringing doorbells and asking if she could read people a verse or two. Surely she knew better than to dream of his tagging along.

Irene had become a full-fledged religious fanatic, and somehow that freed Rayford to daydream without guilt about Hattie Durham. Maybe he would say something, suggest something, hint at something as he and Hattie strode through Heathrow toward the cab line. Maybe earlier. Dare he assert himself even now, hours before touchdown?

Next to a window in first class, a writer sat hunched over his laptop. He shut down the machine, vowing to get back to his journal later. At thirty, Cameron Williams was the youngest ever senior writer for the prestigious *Global Weekly*. The envy of the rest of the veteran staff, he either scooped them on or was assigned to the best stories in the world. Both admirers and detractors at the magazine called him Buck, because they said he was always bucking tradition and authority. Buck believed he lived a charmed life, having been eyewitness to some of the most pivotal events in history.

A year and two months earlier, his January 1 cover story had taken him to Israel to interview Chaim Rosenzweig and had resulted in the most bizarre event he had ever experienced.

The elderly Rosenzweig had been the only unanimous choice for Newsmaker of the Year in the history of *Global Weekly*. Its staff had customarily steered clear of anyone who would be an obvious pick as *Time's* Man of the Year. But Rosenzweig was an automatic. Cameron Williams had gone into the staff meeting prepared to argue for Rosenzweig and against whatever media star the others would typically champion.

He was pleasantly surprised when executive editor Steve Plank opened with, "Anybody want to nominate someone stupid, such as anyone other than the Nobel prizewinner in chemistry?"

The senior staff members looked at each other, shook their heads, and pretended to begin leaving. "Put the

chairs on the wagon—the meetin’ is over,” Buck said. “Steve, I’m not angling for it, but you know I know the guy and he trusts me.”

“Not so fast, Cowboy,” a rival said, then appealed to Plank. “You letting Buck assign himself now?”

“I might,” Steve said. “And what if I do?”

“I just think this is a technical piece, a science story,” Buck’s detractor muttered. “I’d put the science writer on it.”

“And you’d put the reader to sleep,” Plank said.

“C’mon, you know the writer for showcase pieces comes from this group. And this is not a science piece any more than the first one Buck did on him. This has to be told so the reader gets to know the man and understands the significance of his achievement.”

“Like that isn’t obvious. It only changed the course of history.”

“I’ll make the assignment today,” the executive editor said. “Thanks for your willingness, Buck. I assume everyone else is willing as well.” Expressions of eagerness filled the room, but Buck also heard grumbled predictions that the fair-haired boy would get the nod. Which he did.

Such confidence from his boss and competition from his peers made him all the more determined to outdo himself with every assignment. In Israel, Buck stayed in a military compound and met with Rosenzweig in the same kibbutz on the outskirts of Haifa where he had interviewed him a year earlier.

Rosenzweig was fascinating, of course, but it was his

discovery, or invention—no one knew quite how to categorize it—that was truly the “newsmaker of the year.” The humble man called himself a botanist, but he was in truth a chemical engineer who had concocted a synthetic fertilizer that caused the desert sands of Israel to bloom like a greenhouse.

“Irrigation has not been a problem for decades,” the old man said. “But all that did was make the sand wet. My formula, added to the water, fertilizes the sand.”

Buck was not a scientist, but he knew enough to shake his head at that simple statement. Rosenzweig’s formula was fast making Israel the richest nation on earth, far more profitable than its oil-laden neighbors. Every inch of ground blossomed with flowers and grains, including produce never before conceivable in Israel. The Holy Land became an export capital, the envy of the world, with virtually zero unemployment. Everyone prospered.

The prosperity brought about by the miracle formula changed the course of history for Israel. Flush with cash and resources, Israel made peace with her neighbors. Free trade and liberal passage allowed all who loved the nation to have access to it. What they did not have access to, however, was the formula.

Buck had not even asked the old man to reveal the formula or the complicated security process that protected it from any potential enemy. The very fact that Buck was housed by the military evidenced the importance of security. Maintaining that secret ensured the power and independence of the state of Israel. Never had Israel enjoyed such tranquility. The walled city of Jerusalem was only a

symbol now, welcoming everyone who embraced peace. The old guard believed God had rewarded them and compensated them for centuries of persecution.

Chaim Rosenzweig was honored throughout the world and revered in his own country. Global leaders sought him out, and he was protected by security systems as complex as those that protected heads of state. As heady as Israel became with newfound glory, the nation's leaders were not stupid. A kidnapped and tortured Rosenzweig could be forced to reveal a secret that would similarly revolutionize any nation in the world.

Imagine what the formula might do if modified to work on the vast tundra of Russia! Could regions bloom, though snow covered most of the year? Was this the key to resurrecting that massive nation following the shattering of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics?

Russia had become a great brooding giant with a devastated economy and regressed technology. All the nation had was military might, every spare mark going into weaponry. And the switch from rubles to marks had not been a smooth transition for the struggling nation. Streamlining world finance to three major currencies had taken years, but once the change was made, most were happy with it. All of Europe and Russia dealt exclusively in marks. Asia, Africa, and the Middle East traded in yen. North and South America and Australia dealt in dollars. A move was afoot to go to one global currency, but those nations that had reluctantly switched once were loath to do it again.

Frustrated at their inability to profit from Israel's for-

tune and determined to dominate and occupy the Holy Land, the Russians had launched an attack against Israel in the middle of the night. The assault became known as the Russian Pearl Harbor, and because of his interview with Rosenzweig, Buck Williams was in Haifa when it happened. The Russians sent intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear-equipped MiG fighter-bombers into the region. The number of aircraft and warheads made it clear their mission was annihilation.

To say the Israelis were caught off guard, Cameron Williams had written, was like saying the Great Wall of China was long. When Israeli radar picked up the Russian planes, they were nearly overhead. Israel's frantic plea for support from her immediate neighbors and the United States was simultaneous with her demand to know the intentions of the invaders of her airspace. By the time Israel and her allies could have mounted anything close to a defense, it was obvious the Russians would have her outnumbered a hundred to one.

They had only moments before the destruction would begin. There would be no more negotiating, no more pleas for a sharing of the wealth with the hordes of the north. If the Russians meant only to intimidate and bully, they would not have filled the sky with missiles. Planes could turn back, but the missiles were armed and targeted.

So this was no grandstand play designed to bring Israel to her knees. There was no message for the victims. Receiving no explanation for war machines crossing her borders and descending upon her, Israel was

forced to defend herself, knowing full well that the first volley would bring about her virtual disappearance from the face of the earth.

With warning sirens screaming and radio and television sending the doomed for what flimsy cover they might find, Israel defended herself for what would surely be the last time in history. The first battery of Israeli surface-to-air missiles hit their marks, and the sky was lit with orange-and-yellow balls of fire that would certainly do little to slow a Russian offensive for which there could be no defense.

Those who knew the odds and what the radar screens foretold interpreted the deafening explosions in the sky as the Russian onslaught. Every military leader who knew what was coming expected to be put out of his misery in seconds when the fusillade reached the ground and covered the nation.

From what he heard and saw in the military compound, Buck Williams knew the end was near. There was no escape. But as the night shone like day and the horrific, deafening explosions continued, nothing on the ground suffered. The building shook and rattled and rumbled. And yet it was not hit.

Outside, warplanes slammed to the ground, digging craters and sending burning debris flying. Yet lines of communication stayed open. No other command posts had been hit. No reports of casualties. Nothing destroyed yet.

Was this some sort of a cruel joke? Sure, the first Israeli missiles had taken out Russian fighters and caused

missiles to explode too high to cause more than fire damage on the ground. But what had happened to the rest of the Russian air corps? Radar showed they had clearly sent nearly every plane they had, leaving hardly anything in reserve for defense. Thousands of planes swooped down on the tiny country's most populated cities.

The roar and the cacophony continued, the explosions so horrifying that veteran military leaders buried their faces and screamed in terror. Buck had always wanted to be near the front lines, but his survival instinct was on full throttle. He knew beyond doubt that he would die, and he found himself thinking the strangest thoughts. Why had he never married? Would there be remnants of his body for his father and brother to identify? Was there a God? Would death be the end?

He crouched beneath a console, surprised by the urge to sob. This was not at all what he had expected war to sound like, to look like. He had imagined himself peeking at the action from a safe spot, recording in his mind the drama.

Several minutes into the holocaust, Buck realized he would be no more dead outside than in. He felt no bravado, only uniqueness. He would be the only person in this post who would see and know what killed him. He made his way to a door on rubbery legs. No one seemed to notice or care to warn him. It was as if they had all been sentenced to death.

He forced open the door against a furnace blast and had to shield his eyes from the whiteness of the blaze. The sky was afire. He still heard planes over the din and

roar of the fire itself, and the occasional exploding missile sent new showers of flame into the air. He stood in stark terror and amazement as the great machines of war plummeted to the earth all over the city, crashing and burning. But they fell between buildings and in deserted streets and fields. Anything atomic and explosive erupted high in the atmosphere, and Buck stood there in the heat, his face blistering and his body pouring sweat. What in the world was happening?

Then came chunks of ice and hailstones big as golf balls, forcing Buck to cover his head with his jacket. The earth shook and resounded, throwing him to the ground. Facedown in the freezing shards, he felt rain wash over him. Suddenly the only sound was the fire in the sky, and it began to fade as it drifted lower. After ten minutes of thunderous roaring, the fire dissipated, and scattered balls of flame flickered on the ground. The firelight disappeared as quickly as it had come. Stillness settled over the land.

As clouds of smoke wafted away on a gentle breeze, the night sky reappeared in its blue-blackness and stars shone peacefully as if nothing had gone awry.

Buck turned back to the building, his muddy leather jacket in his fist. The doorknob was still hot, and inside, military leaders wept and shuddered. The radio was alive with reports from Israeli pilots. They had not been able to get airborne in time to do anything but watch as the entire Russian air offensive seemed to destroy itself.

Miraculously, not one casualty was reported in all of Israel. Otherwise Buck might have believed some

mysterious malfunction had caused missile and plane to destroy each other. But witnesses reported that it had been a firestorm, along with rain and hail and an earthquake, that consumed the entire offensive effort.

Had it been a divinely appointed meteor shower? Perhaps. But what accounted for hundreds and thousands of chunks of burning, twisted, molten steel smashing to the ground in Haifa, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Jericho, even Bethlehem—leveling ancient walls but not so much as scratching one living creature? Daylight revealed the carnage and exposed Russia's secret alliance with Middle Eastern nations, primarily Ethiopia and Libya.

Among the ruins, the Israelis found combustible material that would serve as fuel and preserve their natural resources for more than six years. Special task forces competed with buzzards and vultures for the flesh of the enemy dead, trying to bury them before their bones were picked clean and disease threatened the nation.

Buck remembered it vividly, as if it were yesterday. Had he not been there and seen it himself, he would not have believed it. And it took more than he had in him to get any reader of *Global Weekly* to buy it either.

Editors and readers had their own explanations for the phenomenon, but Buck admitted, if only to himself, that he became a believer in God that day. Jewish scholars pointed out passages from the Bible that talked about God destroying Israel's enemies with a firestorm, earthquake, hail, and rain. Buck was stunned when he read Ezekiel 38 and 39 about a great enemy from the north

invading Israel with the help of Persia, Libya, and Ethiopia. More stark was that the Scriptures foretold of weapons of war used as fire fuel and enemy soldiers eaten by birds or buried in a common grave.

Christian friends wanted Buck to take the next step and believe in Christ, now that he was so clearly spiritually attuned. He wasn't prepared to go that far, but he was certainly a different person and a different journalist from then on. To him, nothing was beyond belief.

Not sure whether he'd follow through with anything overt, Captain Rayford Steele felt an irresistible urge to see Hattie Durham right then. He unstrapped himself and squeezed his first officer's shoulder on the way out of the cockpit. "We're still on auto, Christopher," he said as the younger man roused and straightened his headphones. "I'm gonna make the sunup stroll."

Christopher squinted and licked his lips. "Doesn't look like sunup to me, Cap."

"Probably another hour or two. I'll see if anybody's stirring anyway."

"Roger. If they are, tell 'em Chris says, 'Hey.'"

Rayford snorted and nodded. As he opened the cockpit door, Hattie Durham nearly bowled him over.

"No need to knock," he said. "I'm coming."

The senior flight attendant pulled him into the galleyway, but there was no passion in her touch. Her

fingers felt like talons on his forearm, and her body shuddered in the darkness.

“Hattie—”

She pressed him back against the cooking compartments, her face close to his. Had she not been clearly terrified, he might have enjoyed this and returned her embrace. Her knees buckled as she tried to speak, and her voice came in a whiny squeal.

“People are missing,” she managed in a whisper, burying her head in his chest.

He took her shoulders and tried to push her back, but she fought to stay close. “What do you m—?”

She was sobbing now, her body out of control. “A whole bunch of people, just gone!”

“Hattie, this is a big plane. They’ve wandered to the lavs or—”

She pulled his head down so she could speak directly into his ear. Despite her weeping, she was plainly fighting to make herself understood. “I’ve been everywhere. I’m telling you, dozens of people are missing.”

“Hattie, it’s still dark. We’ll find—”

“I’m not crazy! See for yourself! All over the plane, people have disappeared.”

“It’s a joke. They’re hiding, trying to—”

“Ray! Their shoes, their socks, their clothes, everything was left behind. These people are gone!”

Hattie slipped from his grasp and knelt whimpering in the corner. Rayford wanted to comfort her, to enlist her help, or to get Chris to go with him through the plane. More than anything he wanted to believe the woman

was crazy. She knew better than to put him on. It was obvious she really believed people had disappeared.

He had been daydreaming in the cockpit. Was he asleep now? He bit his lip hard and winced at the pain. So he was wide awake. He stepped into first class, where an elderly woman sat stunned in the predawn haze, her husband's sweater and trousers in her hands. "What in the world?" she said. "Harold?"

Rayford scanned the rest of first class. Most passengers were still asleep, including a young man by the window, his laptop computer on the tray table. But indeed several seats were empty. As Rayford's eyes grew accustomed to the low light, he strode quickly to the stairway. He started down, but the woman called to him.

"Sir, my husband—"

Rayford put a finger to his lips and whispered, "I know. We'll find him. I'll be right back."

What nonsense! he thought as he descended, aware of Hattie right behind him. "*We'll find him*"?

Hattie grabbed his shoulder and he slowed. "Should I turn on the cabin lights?"

"No," he whispered. "The less people know right now, the better."

Rayford wanted to be strong, to have answers, to be an example to his crew, to Hattie. But when he reached the lower level he knew the rest of the flight would be chaotic. He was as scared as anyone on board. As he scanned the seats, he nearly panicked. He backed into a secluded spot behind the bulkhead and slapped himself hard on the cheek.

This was no joke, no trick, no dream. Something was terribly wrong, and there was no place to run. There would be enough confusion and terror without his losing control. Nothing had prepared him for this, and he would be the one everybody would look to. But for what? What was he supposed to do?

First one, then another cried out when they realized their seatmates were missing but that their clothes were still there. They cried, they screamed, they leaped from their seats. Hattie grabbed Rayford from behind and wrapped her hands so tight around his chest that he could hardly breathe. “Rayford, what is this?”

He pulled her hands apart and turned to face her. “Hattie, listen. I don’t know any more than you do. But we’ve got to calm these people and get on the ground. I’ll make some kind of an announcement, and you and your people keep everybody in their seats. OK?”

She nodded but she didn’t look OK at all. As he edged past her to hurry back to the cockpit, he heard her scream. *So much for calming the passengers*, he thought as he whirled to see her on her knees in the aisle. She lifted a blazer, shirt and tie still intact. Trousers lay at her feet. Hattie frantically turned the blazer to the low light and read the name tag. “Tony!” she wailed. “Tony’s gone!”

Rayford snatched the clothes from her and tossed them behind the bulkhead. He lifted Hattie by her elbows and pulled her out of sight. “Hattie, we’re hours from touchdown. We can’t have a planeload of

hysterical people. I'm going to make an announcement, but you have to do your job. Can you?"

She nodded, her eyes vacant. He forced her to look at him. "Will you?" he said.

She nodded again. "Rayford, are we going to die?"

"No," he said. "That I'm sure of."

But he wasn't sure of anything. How could he know? He'd rather have faced an engine fire or even an uncontrolled dive. A crash into the ocean had to be better than this. How would he keep people calm in such a nightmare?

By now keeping the cabin lights off was doing more harm than good, and he was glad to be able to give Hattie a specific assignment. "I don't know what I'm going to say," he said, "but get the lights on so we can make an accurate record of who's here and who's gone, and then get more of those foreign visitor declaration forms."

"For what?"

"Just do it. Have them ready."

Rayford didn't know if he had done the right thing by leaving Hattie in charge of the passengers and crew. As he raced up the stairs, he caught sight of another attendant backing out of a galleyway, screaming. By now poor Christopher in the cockpit was the only one on the plane unaware of what was happening. Worse, Rayford had told Hattie he didn't know what was happening any more than she did.

The terrifying truth was that he knew all too well. Irene had been right. He, and most of his passengers, had been left behind.