

JACK BOWMAN

By definition planes fly. Except when they don't.

Which is where aircrash investigator Tom Patrick comes in.

HIGH ROLLERS



WARNING
DON'T READ
THIS BOOK
ON A PLANE

About the Book

When the engine of a 737 tears itself apart at Los Angeles Airport, Tom Patrick is in the wrong place at the wrong time - playing poker at a nearby casino.

He's been losing at cards and probing pipeline leaks ever since his big mouth led to his spectacular fall from grace as the National Transportation Safety Board's top air-crash investigator. Now he wants to come in from the cold.

Sidelined by the official investigation, Tom starts to dig anyway. And when another 737 crashes for what look like similar reasons, it's clear that something could be terribly wrong with the world's most popular passenger jet.

Risking everything, Tom Patrick sets out on a global paperchase, racing against time and ruthless killers - before planes and people start falling out of the sky like bloody confetti . . .

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HIGH ROLLERS

Jack Bowman

To John Chandler - whether you like it or not

1

HALO JACKSON GRINNED at Chris Stern as the blades started to turn lazily in the fan casing of the CalSuperior Cargo 737.

He walked back into Hangar Six, put the snap-on wrench carefully back in its place in his roll cabinet, fastened the door firmly, then joined his friend squatting beside it. In the time it took him to perform those few simple actions, the sound of the jet had risen to alarming proportions. Half a dozen techs, who had been scurrying around the gleaming blue-and-silver giant, now dropped away from the unglamorous 737, grandly named *Pride of Maine*, pulled their Predator protectors from around their necks and dropped them securely over their ears. The triple layer of dense foam insulation with rubber seal deadened the rising howl to a stomach-wrenching roar but, still, an instinct for self-preservation made them back away, as though the few extra feet would protect them from the sound.

Under a large No Smoking sign, Chris pulled a Camel from his top pocket and put it between his lips without lighting it.

Cal Lemanski frowned at Halo and Chris and flapped his hands at his own ear protectors. Chris gave him the thumbs-up, and he turned away.

Kids. Cal was a bear of a man - big, bearded, barrel-chested. He was fifty-four and called anyone under forty 'kid'.

Halo and Chris grinned at each other - an unlikely-looking pair of friends. Halo was black, skinny, toothy, and with a non-haircut that verged on an Afro; Chris was as

broad, blond and pink-cheeked as a drunken Minnesota hunter.

The roar gripped them like something physical. Halo cracked first - he usually did. He grabbed his Predators and clamped them on. Chris held on for another split second, to make a point, his eyes screwed up, his cigarette flattened between his gritted teeth. Then he pulled on his ear protectors, holding them firmly, like Munch's *The Scream*, crowing silently at Halo. He took a long fake drag on his cigarette - eyes narrowed, cheeks hollow - and breathed out luxuriously, as if he could still see the smoke leaving his nostrils in decadent trails.

Inside the huge engine the titanium-alloy fan blades - machined to a thousandth of an inch, in a feat as near perfect as makes no difference - sliced through the air at 5,500 revolutions per minute, a mere eighth of an inch from the lining of the engine casing, creating a diverse world of vacuum and violent turbulence.

Now, forty feet from Halo's head - but far below the nearly unbearable roar of power - there came another sound. Light and delicate. A sound like a gentleman toastmaster calling for silence, with the silver tines of the best fork against the finest crystal. A single tone: so small that it was immediately sucked into the stomach of the engine, so genteel that it might have passed for imagination in a library.

And another revolution of the blades began.

Slowed a half-million times, a single blade swept past the tiny sound in a headlong suck of air and, safely cocooned by its neighbours' shrouds, spun laconically around to meet that crucial point once more. The point where the rubberized lining of the fan casing was abraded above and beyond the call of duty. Like old friends, another tink of greeting. Was it louder this time?

Halo and Chris were engaged in a silent game of Rock, Paper, Scissors when the number-two engine of the *Pride of Maine* tore itself apart.

Thirty-eight titanium-alloy blades, each shaved to a cutting edge and exerting an escape force equivalent to the weight of a Mack truck, shattered from the fan casing and ripped free in a catherine-wheel formation at a speed approaching 700 m.p.h. Some gouged troughs in the reinforced-concrete apron; others ricocheted backwards, kicking off the ground and slicing through the hangar. Some found even softer targets, then continued their escape stained red.

It was as if the devil himself had reached up from Hell to spray Number Six Service Hangar at Los Angeles International Airport with a short burst from an apocalyptic Uzi.

It was over so fast that when Halo got shakily to his feet he still had his 'paper' hand ready to go. He looked around him, at first unable to comprehend what he was seeing.

In an instant, the jet's fuselage had been all but severed fore of the starboard wing. Twisted metal, heavy drapes of colour-coded wiring and dark blue patterned carpet were exposed, festooned with fluffy white insulation. The wing itself had collapsed onto the ground, buckled and broken. Over Halo's head the hangar was split open in a rough line of gashes, each spikily framing twenty-foot blue swathes of the cloudless LA sky.

The number-one engine whined down slowly to a point at which a human voice could be heard. But there were no voices – not then, nor in the eerie silence that followed its complete cessation. Men in blue coveralls started to move, picking themselves off the floor, peering in disbelief from behind gleaming testing gear at the plane silhouetted in the giant doorway of the hangar.

Halo turned to share his amazement with Chris. But Chris wasn't there. In his place was a shapeless red-and-

blue lump. Halo frowned down at it until his brain finally registered that the red-stained chunk of blue cloth was wearing Chris Stern's Nikes.

Then he fainted.

*

Tom Patrick felt his stomach lurch as the river card appeared on the scuffed green baize. Jack of diamonds - turning the pocket jacks he'd been nursing into something even more valuable.

If his gut rolled over, his expression was unchanged. The other players searching his face for clues saw only what they'd been seeing for the thirteen hours since the start of the tournament - weary, red-rimmed green eyes set deep in a pale face, darkened by the shadow that told of more than one day away from a razor.

Tom regarded the five cards on the baize carefully. Nothing else on. No straights, no flushes, no pairs showing. The only thing that could beat him: someone holding pocket kings to match the one on the table.

He glanced briefly at the other players.

After years of playing, he had this knack. He needed only a glance, almost over their heads - as if he was about to call for chips or food - to take in the faces of his remaining opponents. Other players would stare at a challenger, seeking the clues that might give them an edge. It wasn't necessary - not in Tom's book. This quick glance, perfected over years, was all he needed to size up the opposition left at this final table.

To his left was Corey Clump, big and bluff and easy, with his fat ass hanging off his seat and his dopey smile fooling everyone; but Tom had been watching Corey at the river, and he'd seen that little slump of disappointment. Corey would fold his hand.

Next to Corey was a player he'd seen around but whose name he didn't know. Same age as Tom - maybe thirty-six - clean-cut, wearing sunglasses day and night and with white iPod cables running from his ears. In his head, Tom called him the Pinball Kid, kinda like that deaf, dumb and blind guy in the movie. Except this Pinball Kid wasn't dumb. Not in the head and not in the mouth. This Pinball Kid was one of those players who couldn't shut the fuck up. It was like a tic.

Now he was grinning at Tom.

'Pocket jacks? I got the kings, man. Better fold, man, cos I got you beat ...'

Tom let the guy drone on, filling the air. He knew it meant nothing. The Pinball Kid might have the kings, he might not.

Behind the Pinball Kid stood a sexy dark blonde, with smoky eyes and a tight dress showing off spectacular curves. She'd been there most of the day, sometimes with a hand on the guy's shoulder, loose but proprietorial, a standout in a casino filled with a thousand men and maybe twenty women - and those generally over fifty and crammed into velour sweatpants. She met Tom's eyes briefly but neutrally. She must know what the Pinball Kid had, but her face gave nothing away.

Next to the Pinball Kid was Mr Ling, his face a cliché of inscrutability, but he had a big fat tell, and right now Tom could see Mr Ling's fingers sizing up his dwindling chips, estimating how many hands he could still play after losing this one. Tom was amazed Mr Ling had got this far in the tournament with such an obvious weakness.

He had his own weakness, of course ...

A few years earlier, in a tournament right here at the Bicycle Club off the 710 freeway, Tom had bluffed everyone out of a monster pot. He'd held a pathetic seven and a two - the worst hand in poker - but he'd decided to make a stand anyway. As the last man shook his head and threw

away his cards, they'd hit the dealer's over-eager hand and flipped over: pocket tens! The pair would have stomped all over his lousy hand if the other player had only had the guts to call his bluff. Just the memory sent a thrill up Tom's back as he debated his next move. So far, it was the pinnacle of his poker career - a moment to be taken out every now and then, pored over and savoured, then wound carefully in the soft cloth of memory and tucked safely away once more.

Four hands later, his own over-confidence had hustled him out of the game in a humiliating collapse.

It had been an invaluable lesson for Tom. His game could survive almost anything but his own ego.

But here and now sound judgement told him the Pinball Kid was his only danger. If he had pocket kings, Tom was finished. And, annoyingly, the sunglasses kept Tom from looking into the Pinball Kid's Hold 'Em soul and finding out.

All these thoughts flared in Tom's neurons in bare seconds, and he hardly paused before going all in, pushing what was left of his chips across to join the pot. He knew it would see off anything but pocket kings.

The Pinball Kid hesitated. Then laughed.

Then called his bet.

*

Tom was annihilating his sorrows when the smoky-eyed blonde was suddenly beside him. 'Bad luck,' she said, her voice turning it into a teasing question as she gestured to the barman.

He looked over her head to where the Pinball Kid, Mr Ling and Corey Clump were the only three left at the table, almost hidden by the throng of players and watchers looking for vicarious thrills.

Pocket fucking kings.

He shrugged. 'They say you've got to get lucky six times to win a tournament. I was up to four.'

'You ever been all the way?' she said, with a curious little smile.

He looked at her sharply. Was she coming on to him? Tom was tall, dark, but only borderline handsome, so he decided to err on the side of caution. 'Cashed a few times.'

She nodded approvingly and looked towards the table. He took the opportunity to glance down at the back of her neck, where a small, curved wisp of hair had escaped her chignon, and now waved gently over her flawless skin in the oxygen-rich breeze being pumped through the club. Something about it thrilled him: he wanted to curl it around his finger and feel the silken softness run across his skin.

He blinked the idea away, and ran his hand up the back of his own neck, feeling the stubble there against his palm. A nervous tic - a tell all of his own - but one he made a monster effort to keep at bay at the poker table. The blonde was sexy as hell but she was with someone else. Poker was fraught enough without banging another player's girl between hands.

His phone rang. 'Shit.' He fumbled it out of his pocket and looked at the number. 'Excuse me.'

She raised a surprised eyebrow: most people who played cards devoutly had nothing better to do on a Sunday or, if they did, they were there to avoid doing it.

They both turned at the shout that greeted the demise of another player. The Pinball Kid stood up from the table and looked around for his girl.

She walked away from Tom without another glance.

*

Tom strode into the bright sunshine, the California heat a shock to his air-conditioned skin. 'Yeah, Pete, what do you want?'

'Hey! How'd you know it was me?'

Tom sighed. Unless it was about planes, Pete LaBello was a Luddite. He'd only just mastered faxes; cell phones were all *Star Trek* to him. 'Your name comes up on the thing. What's up?'

'You at the Bicycle Club?'

Tom deferred answering his boss for the five seconds it took him to make it out of the parking lot and into the honesty zone.

'No.'

'Good. Go Team's about to leave for LAX - got a 737 blade off on the ground. Thought you might like to be first on the scene as you're right there.'

'I'm not on the Go Team.'

Hesitation.

Embarrassment for sure.

Pity, maybe?

'No. Munro's leading.'

Tom let it go. He was still out in the cold, but this was a small indication that a thaw might be on its way. He'd have to swallow his pride and start from the ass-end up if he wanted to stay in his job. And - despite everything - Tom did want to stay in his job. It was the only damned thing he'd ever been any good at. Not just good. Damn good. A helluva lot better than Lenny Munro could ever dream of being.

'Tom?'

'I'm here.'

'You got your flyaway with you, right?'

'Always.'

'Well, if you don't mind doing the donkey work for Lenny ...'

Pete tried to make it a joke but Tom couldn't humour him - it was still too raw. Pete must've heard that in his silence because he went on, 'Three dead. They're engineers. I thought it'd suit you.'

Tom felt the unintentional sting of the words before he answered, 'I owe you one.'

'Nah!'

He could almost hear Pete wave away the debt with his generous Italian hands.

He hung up and stood in the unrelenting LA sun, frowning. Pete was kind but transparent.

They're engineers.

Tom knew what his boss had been saying. That he wasn't good with civilians.

*

Tom Patrick wasn't good with civilians. That was why Pete LaBello hadn't called him last night when a Jetstream 31 had gone down in Nevada with seven passengers on board - including a woman flying to see her oilman boyfriend with their six-year-old daughter along for the ride.

But engineers weren't civilians, they were industry, so Tom's investigative powers - which were held in some esteem throughout the National Transportation Safety Board, despite his recent history - would be invaluable. And unsullied by his second and more infamous characteristic: his monumental lack of tact.

Six months ago, Tom Patrick had been lead on a Learjet emergency landing during which a New York stockbroker got his neck snapped. At a press conference, in the full glare of the publicity that only the death of rich people brings, he had bluntly told the hysterical widow - who was demanding the pilot's head - to 'Hold your horses, ma'am.' He'd already established, un officially, that her husband had not been wearing a seatbelt on touchdown due to a combination of bravado, belligerence and Bell's whisky. And - breaking all NTSB protocols - he'd told her that right there and then. Live. On air.

He had been immediately suspended - and his replacement had taken another two months to make the same version of events a matter of official record. The hysterical widow - still stinging from her halogen humiliation - had tried her best to sue the department for a hundred million dollars. She'd lost, of course, but a rich and humiliated woman's best is usually pretty damn good, and can take a lot of money to beat off. After three months, Tom was quietly reinstated by the back door - on probation and half-pay.

In NTSB terms, the back door was - fittingly - pipelines. For three months and fourteen days, he had been investigating pipeline leaks and fires across the continental United States. Pete hated like hell to lose him from planes, but jumping the gun on probable cause was a cardinal sin at the NTSB - and jumping it on live TV while bad-mouthing a dead millionaire to his grieving widow was always going to mean more than a slap on the wrist for Tom Patrick.

The Learjet was only his most high-profile foot-in-mouth incident. Just from Pete's personal memory - and at fifty-nine his memory was not even that great - he could recall Tom being quoted variously saying that passengers in a stricken 727 were now 'in little tiny chunks all over the Gulf of Mexico'; that the pilot of a wounded DC10 had saved the lives of all those on board through 'brute force and ignorance'; and that a frozen-solid teenaged stowaway who'd dropped out with the landing gear over Casper, Wyoming, had killed a couple in their Ford Taurus 'like a big meat popsicle'.

Pete LaBello was ten months from his gold watch. He and Ann were going to spend their declining years in Vermont and fully expected to live out their retirement in the same unspectacular way they had hitherto achieved in their respective careers. His time at the NTSB and hers teaching

high-school physics were unspoiled by drama or particular distinction, and that was the way they liked it.

Pete liked Tom Patrick - he really did. But Tom didn't make even that easy, and the closer to the watch he got, the more wary he was about putting Tom back on planes. At the same time, he knew he couldn't continue indefinitely to waste him on pipelines when they so badly needed his expertise elsewhere. Which was why, when the report came in from LAX shortly after the Jetstream went down, Pete figured sending Tom Patrick north across LA instead of east to Nevada would make the fewest possible waves.

Pete LaBello was wrong.

*

Tom stood on the apron outside Hangar Six and looked around in awe. He'd been with the NTSB for eleven years, but the scale of plane accidents still left him humbled. And this one hadn't even fallen out of the sky or ploughed through a city. This was minor. And yet there was barely a piece of flesh or metal left in the wake of the number-two engine that hadn't been wrecked, ruined or wrapped around another piece of flesh or metal somewhere else.

The plane had been wheeled out of the hangar for an engine run, and had been turned at forty-five degrees to it so the turbulence wouldn't blast the hangar clear into the Pacific Ocean.

He became aware of the huddle of men behind him, waiting for him to say or do something. The airport manager, Duncan Hancock, cleared his throat very slightly. Off to his left, the paramedics who hadn't taken the injured to hospital were waiting to take the dead to the morgue. He recognized the looks on their faces: even though he'd shown his ID and it had been checked with DC by a doubtful assistant, they still thought it unlikely that someone who looked the way he did was about to

undertake an official investigation into a vending-machine malfunction, let alone this.

He knew he should have gone home first and got what the manual called 'appropriate clothing' – but what the hell? Lenny Munro and the rest of the team would be here in an hour or two and things would be taken away from him again. Every minute was precious to him, so he was wearing the same tattered jeans and Hollywood Park Casino T-shirt he'd played poker in for the past thirteen hours. He had his 'appropriate' NTSB cap, and that would have to satisfy their sartorial suspicions.

Tom bent down and unzipped the flyaway bag that investigators were required to keep with them at all times. It was packed with everything from paperwork, through a department-issue laptop, to his gym kit. Not that he went to the gym – or had ever been to the gym – but the track pants and T-shirt were good for watching TV in any motel in the south-western United States.

He took the digital video camera from its hard case and began to record the scene.

As always, once he'd started, the rest of the world melted away around him, and he felt the low-level adrenalin drip that made this job not unlike an afternoon at the Bicycle Club.

Tom panned across the scene once, then panned back with the camera pointed up at the destroyed hangar. Then he turned a slow circle, taking in the entire scope of the scene. Glancing at the LCD screen to ensure he was getting everything, he started to move and talk, giving time, date, location and brief circumstances of the incident so far.

'Six injured men have been removed from the scene to LA County Hospital. Two critical with amputations, two stable with open fractures, two with minor wounds and shock.'

He walked past the nose of the plane and into the hangar. The automatic aperture took a second to adjust to the gloomier interior.

'This is body number one - estimated to be twenty yards off the starboard side approximately in line with the ...' he looked up '... main accessory hatch aft of the nose-gear.'

Still shooting, Tom placed a bright orange flag on a small weight beside the body. It was face-down on the cement. He zoomed in. 'Few visible injuries. Minimal blood from the nose and minor cuts.'

He stepped over the man's body, glanced up briefly to see where he was heading next, and stepped into the cool darkness of Hangar Six.

'Body number two.'

Tom raised the camera to show the tattered remains hanging six feet up the wall on a hook made of twisted corrugated-iron sheeting.

When Tom was a kid the garbage men in his neighbourhood used to tie dolls and teddy bears they found in the trash to the front of their truck. Now he had to force that image out of his mind.

'Body is caught up on metal sheeting presumably torn loose by the incident. It is approximately eight yards from the tip of the starboard wing and approximately six feet from the floor.'

He placed a second flag in the puddle of blood under the dangling black work boots and stared up at the body.

'Cursory inspection shows multiple open wounds and massive loss of blood. Also ...' He stopped and squinted into the evening sunlight that streamed through the torn metal, then used the camera zoom to help him out. 'Also a substantial piece of metal embedded in the lower abdomen, possibly a fan blade.'

He turned away and looked for body three. As he crossed the floor, he bent down and looked at something small and white. The stub of a cigarette. He marked it and moved on.

Nearby, the lower half of what used to be a man was sprawled on the floor beside a large metal tool cabinet.

‘Body three.’ Tom placed a flag beside a blue-covered knee. ‘Part one.’ He looked around him and found part two – the upper half of a man, his left arm severed mid-forearm, the right crooked across his chest, his eyes half closed and a spray of his own blood under his chin. Tom frowned as he noticed the man’s right hand – frozen with its two forefingers extended like a V for Victory.

He became aware of someone standing beside him, and turned to see a wiry black man in blood-spattered coveralls and a blanket. He was also looking down at the dead man’s hand.

‘Sir, you need to get back behind the tape.’

But the man seemed not to have heard him.

‘Scissors,’ he murmured. Then – never taking his eyes from the body – he held up his own flattened ‘paper’ hand to explain to Tom. ‘He woulda won.’

2

IT WAS DARK by the time Lenny Munro led the Go Team through the small throng of reporters and out to Hangar Six.

Tom had already arranged eternal daylight, courtesy of high-beam magnesium arc-lights. That was the thing about working in LA - the town was never short of lighting equipment. One team of paramedics had departed with bodies one and two, and the pair who'd lost the toss were now picking up the disparate pieces of body three and placing them gingerly in the black bags.

'Tom?'

Tom looked up from his notebook.

Lenny Munro was a heavy-set man of forty-nine, with a ridiculous buzz-cut that he fondly imagined made him look like a retired astronaut, but actually made him look like the hopeless dad in a 1950s sitcom.

'Pete told me he'd sent you.' It was a statement of fact, but Tom could tell Lenny was pissed. What the hell? Let him be pissed. Tom wanted back in on planes, and if he was prepared to swallow his pride and be first-on-scene for a dick like Lenny Munro, then that was Lenny's good fortune.

Tom rose off his haunches and shook his hand briefly. Lenny was flanked by two investigators in appropriate clothing - Jan Ryland, a slim, bookish woman in her early thirties, and Jim Crane, a tall, greying man with a salt-and-pepper beard.

'Hey, Jan, Jim.'

They nodded - embarrassed to see him. Lenny Munro got down to business.

'What are we looking at?'

'Secured area. Most of the injured were removed beforehand. Maintenance crew was ten-strong. Three dead inside, six in hospital, all hanging on.'

'What about the tenth man?'

'He's over there.' Tom pointed to Halo, who was now behind the tape.

'What's he doing here?'

'The paramedics have checked him out but he refused to go to hospital until his friend was accounted for.'

'Where's his friend?'

'Right there.' Tom pointed to the shapeless black body-bag being rolled into the nearest ambulance. 'And there.' Two paramedics carried a second bag between them.

'Talk to him yet?'

Tom looked at him soberly. 'Lenny, he's in two pieces.'

'You know who I mean.'

Tom shrugged. 'Hey, I'm just first-on-scene. You know I can't start an investigation without you.'

'Just asking. I'm not saying you'd do anything you shouldn't, Tom, you know that.'

'I know that, Lenny.'

They both knew they were being lied to.

*

Twenty-seven minutes before Lenny Munro made it to Hangar Six, Tom had finally finished initial documenting of the scene. He hadn't skimped and he hadn't hurried; he'd made sure that everything he did was done with the utmost efficiency. He'd asked the manager to inform him when the Go Team's scheduled Delta flight touched down from DC. Every time one of Hancock's staff came close to him he held his breath, but he managed to finish before word of the arrival. He'd done his job.

Everything he could glean now was a personal bonus.

Tom packed his flyaway bag, then ducked under the yellow tape to where Halo Jackson stood, holding his blanket tight around his throat. 'How you doing, Mr Jackson?'

'Fine.'

'You been to the hospital?'

'I'm fine.'

Tom glanced at the young woman paramedic who hovered near by. She rolled her eyes, and her silence said, 'Can't force him to go.'

Tom shrugged. If Halo Jackson wanted to live in denial, that was up to him. All it did was save Tom a drive to LA County and that sick, miserable feeling he always got in hospitals. A doctor taking his blood pressure once told him he suffered from 'white-coat hypertension'. Tom had been offended at the time, but once his ego had settled down he'd known the guy was right. Just being around doctors made him clammy.

'Mr Jackson, the—'

'Halo.'

Tom hesitated. 'The investigators will be here soon—'

'You're not the investigator?'

Tom handed him his card: 'I'm just first-on-scene - faster somebody gets here the better - while the Go Team gets together. They'll run the whole thing.'

Halo nodded.

'So,' said Tom, 'what can you tell me?'

Halo didn't say anything at first, and that alone endeared him to Tom. Everyone had an opinion and most people couldn't wait to share; he liked a man who thought about what he was going to say.

Then Halo Jackson shook his head slowly and looked straight into Tom's eyes. 'I have no idea.'

Some fucking bonus.

Munro and his team worked through the night, treading carefully around the worst of the drying blood as they started to number a thousand pieces of scattered metal. In the sunshine of the next morning they would go outside and log more. They would find a six-foot peel of engine casing creating havoc with commuter traffic on Sepulveda Boulevard, and a fan blade through the cab of an airport baggage-handling cart. The handler, Carson Holt, had been spared skewering by taking an illicit cigarette break. Later he would lose a day's pay because of it, and wouldn't even go to his union rep. Carson figured a hundred and twelve dollars was a small price to pay for escaping being pinned to his seat by flying debris, and lived his life better for a short time after that.

But for now the Go Team was there under the fake Hollywood daylight, starting the process of reassembling the plane so they could see what had gone wrong and where. It was a two-million-dollar jigsaw, with the pieces scattered in a half-mile radius.

But one piece interested Lenny Munro from the start: the quarter-inch piece of cigarette Tom Patrick had marked. Smoking was not banned in the airport for health reasons alone. More important - way more important to anyone who knew anything about flying - was FOD. Foreign Object Damage. It was a fancy term for litter. In most places litter was an eyesore; in airports it could be death. A knotted condom, a workman's dropped glove, a McFlurry cup: any of these could get sucked into an engine and bring down a plane, and airports around the world employed teams of cleaners - preferably with OCD - to avoid just such an outcome from a bout of minor litter-bugging.

So, Tom Patrick finding a cigarette in the hangar behind the *Pride of Maine* was a big deal to Lenny Munro. A very big deal. A cigarette alone was not enough. But cigarettes came in packs.

And when he presented his Air Accident Report four weeks later, Lenny Munro - quite understandably - placed the blame for the loss of the *Pride of Maine*, the deaths of three engineers and the injuries to six more squarely on the shoulders of maintenance engineer Christopher Stern.

Husband of Vee, father of Katy.
And best friend of Halo Jackson.

3

TOM COULD FEEL the heat still rising from the floor of Storage Tank Nine, Amoco farm, Santa Ana. All around him, charred and twisted metal smoked like a dung heap. Although pipelines were not his thing, he knew instinctively what had happened.

Storage Tank Nine had been emptied of gasoline at 06:30 hours. At 15:45 hours, some careless asshole had pumped diesel into it. At 15:59 a stray spark – probably caused by poor electrical bonding during the doomed transfer – had set the latent gas fumes off like a little bomb, and the brand-new diesel had fuelled the resulting conflagration.

Simple.

And yet it would take him a week of collating forensic details and interviews before he could present evidence of what was already as plain as the nose on his face. Tom sighed. There was no fun in pipelines, only grunt work. Now, take that storage tank, fill it with fuel, electrical circuitry, four thousand moving parts and three hundred passengers, then set it on fire as it hurtled across the sky at 500 m.p.h., and he'd be in business ...

He squinted at the sun, thought of the casino he'd seen on the way into Santa Ana, and wished he were flicking up the corners of his cards to check his hand. A tiny shiver of excitement ran through him – the same way just thinking of pickles made his mouth tingle.

He heard a clanging near the top of the storage tank and looked up. A hard-hatted man was waving at him. 'Your phone's ringing!'

'Well, how 'bout you answer it and set off what's left of the gas fumes in here?'

The man almost did just that, before he realized Tom was being sarcastic. Then he looked sheepish and disappeared, clattering down the iron ladder in what Tom could tell were *not* rubber-soled safety shoes.

The phone was still ringing fifteen minutes later when Tom clambered out of Storage Tank Nine. He could hear it all the way across the site. Tom never set his cell phone to voicemail - he hated returning calls and figured if people really wanted to speak to him they'd call back - but whoever this was had just hung on, listening to the phone ring.

'Patrick.'

'Hey, Mr Patrick. It's Halo Jackson.'

'Who?'

'Halo Jackson. From LAX?'

Tom's mind clicked back to a skinny black man in a blue blanket and was immediately wary. That job was done. The findings had been made public. Blame had been assigned. Why was Halo Jackson calling him now? 'I remember.'

Now that Halo had eventually got him on the line, he was apparently at a loss for what to say. Tom resisted the temptation to say, 'What can I do for you?' It implied that he might be prepared to do something for somebody, and he hated that kind of commitment. The silence stretched between them so long and tight that it became uncomfortable.

'What can I do for you?'

Dammit!

'I called you for a second opinion.'

'On what?'

'On what caused that 737 blade off.'

Tom hesitated. 'Mr Jackson, I don't even have a first opinion. I was just first-on-scene there. That really doesn't

involve any investigation. It just means preserving the evidence as early as possible for the Go Team. You'd need to speak to the lead investigator.'

'I already did. That Munro guy? No offence, but he seems kinda like an idiot to me.'

Tom tried not to laugh, and warmed to Halo Jackson for the second time. He wasn't about to volunteer to help him, but he certainly welcomed any anecdotal evidence against Lenny Munro. 'In what way?'

'In the way that means he's wrong. His report was all wrong. He said a cigarette pack got caught in the engine but that's bullshit.'

'How do you know?'

'I know cos Chris Stern din't smoke. He just kept one cigarette - not a pack - in his top pocket. He'd take it out now and then and have, like, a fake drag, then put it away and button his pocket down again. I saw him do it a million times.'

'Isn't it possible—'

'No. It ain't possible.'

Mentally, Tom rolled his eyes. He wasn't getting into this. 'You know, Mr Jackson, if you have any complaints you really need to be talking to the people in DC.'

'I already did. And the other team members.'

This surprised Tom. Jackson was a pretty persistent guy. 'So Munro didn't listen and DC didn't listen?'

'That's right.'

'And I'm your last port of call.'

'That's right.'

Tom was stung. He didn't want this man bothering him but, hell, if he was going to be bothered, he wanted it to be as a priority, not a last resort. The last vestige of his professional persona blew away like mist. 'Why do you give a shit?'

'He was my friend.'

'So? Being your friend doesn't mean he can't be careless. He shouldn't have been smoking.'

'He wasn't. He was giving up,' Halo countered, with spirit.

'Listen, I saw a cigarette myself - on the floor right next to his body.'

'You see a pack?'

'Could have disintegrated in the turbine,' said Tom.

'Not if it was in his pocket.'

'Listen,' Tom said impatiently. 'The guy was smoking. It's highly likely the cigarette was in a pack and just as likely the pack could have been sucked in. It wasn't found on his body.'

'You saw his body, Mr Patrick.'

Tom hesitated. He knew what Halo Jackson meant - Chris Stern's body had been severed mid-torso. The pocket of his coveralls was sliced in two. Who knew whether the cigarette and/or pack had spilled from it before or after the *Pride of Maine* had become a spectacular death machine? Lenny Munro's probable cause relied on circumstantial evidence, but then, this wasn't an exact science.

Halo continued doggedly: 'They've taken his death benefits. And his pension. His wife and kid can't have them. They've lost Chris and they're losing everything else too. Now Air Maintenance say they might sue his estate to recover the compensation they have to pay out. They could lose their home.'

'That's not my problem.'

Halo was silent for a long moment. 'I saw you on the TV a while back. You were on the news. Telling some New York witch to get off some pilot's back.'

'So?'

'You get into trouble for that?'

Tom paused, glancing out at the godforsaken fuel tanks. 'Some.'

'Yeah, I thought you would. Soon as I saw it.'

‘What’s your point, Mr Jackson?’

‘Well, my point is, I need someone who’s not afraid of trouble.’

‘Good luck finding him,’ said Tom, and hung up.

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The Rubstick was smaller and shabbier than the LA clubs, but once Tom sat down, everything was the same. Same game, same green tables, same people - men in net truckers’ caps or comped casino jackets, a few women, all too fat or painfully thin.

He bought in for two hundred dollars on a no-limit Hold ‘Em table. First hand, he was dealt pocket sevens. Another came up on the flop and Tom was off. He walked out at ten thirty p.m. a thousand dollars richer than he’d been at eight o’clock.

Tom wouldn’t have left if he hadn’t got to be at the Amoco farm tomorrow at eight and he was still buzzing from the high of winning. Half a mile from the Motel 6, he spotted the Sawmill, with its flickering pink neon sign and, underneath that, ‘Gentlemen’s Club’.

Tom didn’t want to sleep. He felt better than he had in a long time. Since his rapid demotion to pipelines. Since he’d come home to find Ella sitting on the couch with her bags packed around her, and a cab running its meter outside.

‘Hi,’ he’d said.

‘I’m going,’ she’d said.

‘Where?’

‘Somewhere else.’

Shit, why’d he have to think about that just when he was feeling so good?

He swung into the Sawmill’s parking lot.

Inside, it was cramped and foggy and cold from the dry ice wafting lazily across the stages. Two Vietnamese girls were dancing, their eyes half closed with concentration,