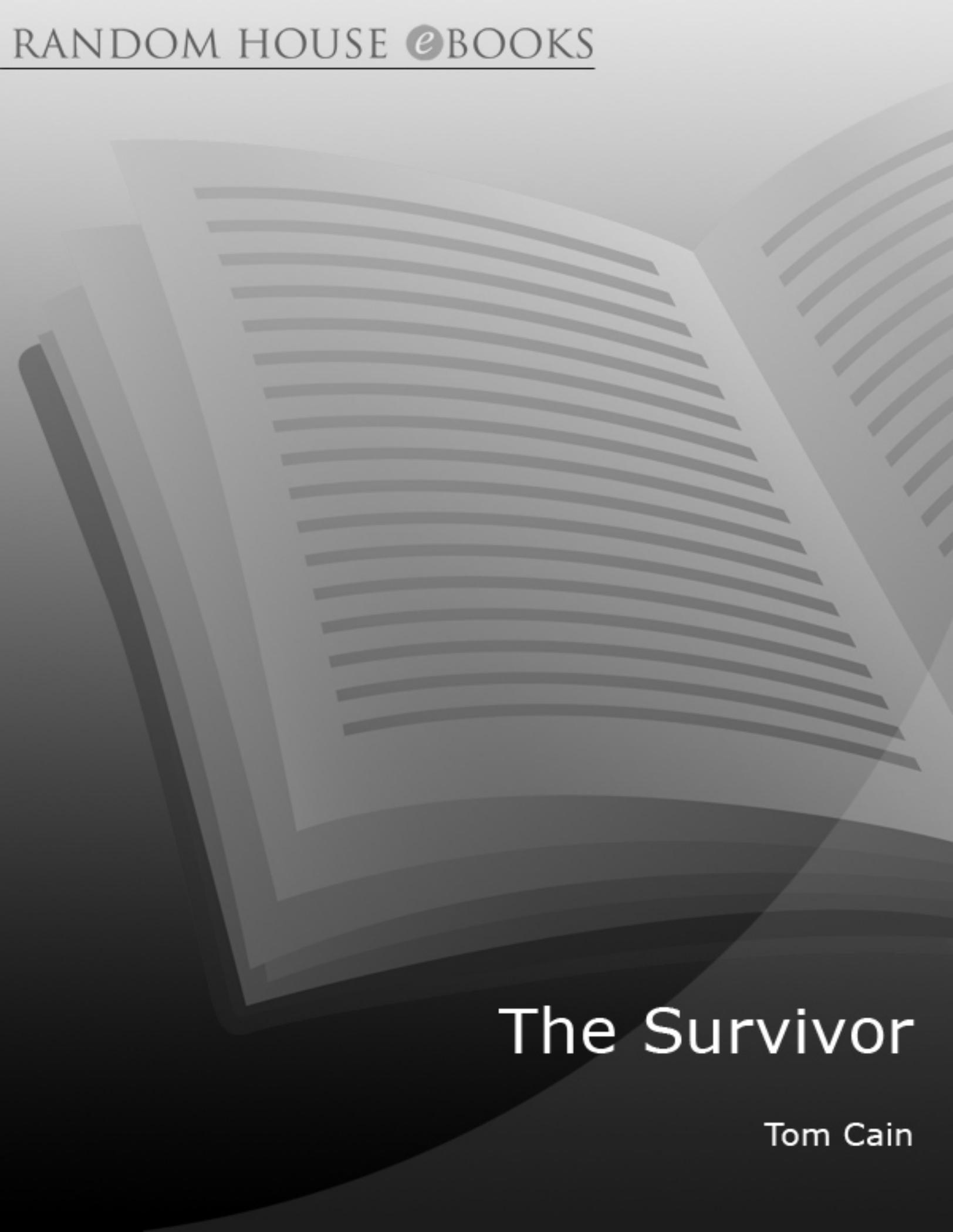


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# The Survivor

Tom Cain

Tom Cain is the pseudonym for an award-winning journalist with twenty-five years' experience of working for Fleet Street newspapers. He is the author of *The Accident Man*.

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# The Survivor

TOM CAIN



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Version 1.0

Epub ISBN 9781446421215

[www.randomhouse.co.uk](http://www.randomhouse.co.uk)

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS  
61-63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA  
A Random House Group Company  
[www.rbooks.co.uk](http://www.rbooks.co.uk)

**THE SURVIVOR**  
**A CORGI BOOK: 9780552155533**

First published in Great Britain in 2008 by Bantam Press a  
division of Transworld Publishers Corgi edition published  
2009

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To the members of the 17 January  
Birthday Club

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## Preface: These are the facts ...

On 6 September 1997, the Princess of Wales was laid to rest on an island in the Oval Lake at Althorp, her ancestral home.

On 7 September 1997, General Alexander Lebed, former National Security Adviser to Russia's President Yeltsin, appeared on the prime-time American television news show *60 Minutes*. He revealed that his government no longer knew the whereabouts of many of their small-scale nuclear weapons, commonly described as suitcase nukes.

'More than a hundred weapons out of the supposed number of two hundred and fifty are not under the control of the armed forces of Russia,' Lebed said. 'I don't know their location. I don't know whether they have been destroyed or whether they are stored or whether they've been sold or stolen. I don't know.'

On 23 February 1998, Osama bin Laden used the London-based newspaper *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* to issue a declaration of war against what he termed 'the crusader-Zionist alliance'. Bin Laden declared that: '[The] crimes and sins committed by the Americans are a clear declaration of war on God, his messenger, and Muslims ... On that basis, and in compliance with God's order, we issue the following fatwa to all Muslims: The ruling to kill the Americans and their

allies - civilians and military - is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it.'

On 20 October 1999, the FBI released Project Megiddo, a long-term investigation into fundamentalist Christian cults who 'believe the year 2000 will usher in the end of the world and who are willing to perpetrate acts of violence to bring that end about'. In its section on 'Apocalyptic religious beliefs', it noted that: 'Many extremists view themselves as religious martyrs who have a duty to initiate or take part in the coming battles against Satan.' The report also commented that: 'There is no consensus within Christianity regarding the specific date that the Apocalypse will occur. However, within many right-wing religious groups there is a uniform belief that the Apocalypse is approaching.'

\* \* \*

That much is true. Everything and everyone else in this book is pure fiction.

# Prologue: March 1993

# 1

The airport mechanic was a shade under six feet tall, and the body beneath his overalls and padded cold-weather vest was lean and athletic. The deep line that bisected his strong, dark brow suggested a determined fixity of purpose, and his clear green eyes conveyed a calm, almost chilly intelligence. A woollen knitted cap covered his short brown hair. The lower part of his face was hidden behind a beard.

There was a badge on his chest. It gave his name as Steve Lundin.

The badge was fake. The mechanic's real name was Samuel Carver.

No one in the hangar batted an eyelid when Carver unscrewed the hatch at the tail end of the executive jet and hauled himself up into the rear equipment bay for a standard pre-flight inspection.

This apparently unimportant section of the fuselage couldn't be reached from the cabin. So once the plane was airborne, whatever happened in the rear equipment bay, no one could do anything about it. Not that anything was supposed to happen there. It was simply a place filled with ugly but functional components, much like the basement of a building. Things like bundles of wires linking the plane's electronic circuits; the cables and hydraulic lines that controlled the rudder and elevators; the accumulator that held the hydraulic fluid that got pumped out through the

system; the pipes that carried superheated, high-pressure air off the engines and sent it for use in the plane's cabin heating system. None of these things were much to look at, or remotely exciting - until, of course, they went wrong.

It was the air pipes that interested Carver. They were covered in thick silver-coloured cladding, held with plastic clips, and they formed a network through the plane via valves and junctions, pretty much like a domestic water system. So he messed with the plumbing, loosening one of the junctions so that the hot air would leak from it. The junction in question was barely a hand's breadth away from the hydraulic accumulator.

By the time Carver closed the equipment bay hatch and walked away, the fate of the aircraft was sealed.

There was a TV on in the passenger lounge. The CNN reporter was having a hard time holding back his tears as he stood in front of a blackened, burned-out church.

'We can't show you what it looks like inside the smoking charnel-house behind me,' he said, an undertone of barely restrained passion colouring his lyrical Irish brogue. 'The scenes are too appalling, too sickening. The charred and mutilated corpses of four hundred innocent women and children lie in there. The scent of their burned flesh fills the air all around.

'While western politicians turn their eyes away from this insignificant corner of West Africa, a ten-year civil war has descended into genocide. The rebel forces mounting this ruthless campaign are better trained and equipped than ever before. Their leaders are showing levels of organization and strategic planning far ahead of anything they have displayed before. Somehow, somewhere, these merciless killers have acquired new resources, new expertise. And so, as the village's few survivors search

among the corpses for their loved ones, one question comes inevitably to mind: who is backing the rebels? For whoever they are, and whatever their motivation, they have the blood of an entire people on their hands.'

'Shit, this boy's a friggin' comedian!'

Waylon McCabe slapped a hand against his thigh as he addressed the three other men in the room. Most of the time McCabe's eyes were mean and flinty, narrow slits in wrinkled folds of leathery skin that seemed permanently screwed up against the glare of his native Texan sun. But he was letting his guard down now, opening up a little, taking it easy with his buddies.

'Man, I swear he's about to cry, just to show how sensitive he is. But I'll bet he don't care about a bunch of dead niggers any more'n I do. He's just in it for hisself, thinkin' on the prizes he's gonna git for being such a damn humanitarian ... Hell, he might make almost as much money outta this war as me.'

'I seriously doubt that, boss,' said one of the other men, swigging from a bottle of Molson Canadian.

'Well, I don' know, Clete,' replied McCabe with a grin. 'Sure, my diamonds'll pay better. But you gotta consider the costs. He ain't had to ante up for guns 'n' ammo, instructors to train them native boys ... Here, throw me one of them beers afore I die of thirst.'

McCabe was a long way past sixty, but for all the lines on his face he was still tougher and possessed of more energy than most men half his age. He had spent the past three days on the coast of the Yukon and Northwest Territories. From there on up to the North Pole it was pretty much just ice. Now he was sitting in a private room in the terminal at Mike Zubko airport, right outside the

town of Inuvik, waiting on the plane that would take him home.

He was trying to decide whether to pursue his hunch that there were significant oil deposits in the region. The major corporations had all pulled out of the area. Oil was cheap, extraction would be expensive and the local Eskimos – Waylon McCabe was damned if he'd call them Inuits, screw them if they felt offended – were getting uppity about their tribal lands getting despoiled. The way they saw it, the upside wasn't worth the aggravation.

McCabe, however, looked around the world at where all the oil was, and where all the trouble was, and saw they were pretty much the same places. Sooner or later, between the towel-heads in the Middle East and the commies down in South America, supplies would be threatened. Meanwhile, there were billions of Chinese and Indians buying automobiles and building factories, so demand could only go up. High demand and insecure supply would mean rocketing prices, and fields that were only marginal now would become worth exploiting. At that point, who gave a damn what a bunch of seal-hunters thought? A few bucks in the right pockets and that problem would be solved. And anyone who refused to take the money would soon find out they'd made the wrong decision.

There was a knock on the door, and Carver walked into the room. His normal, relaxed stride had disappeared. The way he carried himself was tentative, his expression hesitant and nervous. He gave the clear impression that he felt uneasy in the presence of a man as wealthy and powerful as McCabe.

'Plane's checked, filled up and ready to go,' he said. 'Don't mind me saying so, sir, you'd best be on your way. There's weather coming in.'

McCabe gave a single, brusque nod that at once acknowledged what he'd said and dismissed him from the room.

Carver paused briefly in the doorway, though nobody seemed to notice or care.

'Have a good flight, sir,' he said.

## 2

The plane was routed out of Inuvik to Calgary, three hours and 1,400 miles away to the southeast, most of it over mountainous wilderness.

The moment the engines were fired up, air started leaking from the pipe, gaining all the time in temperature and pressure. It was directing its heat right on to the hydraulic accumulator, which was filled with very sensitive, highly flammable fluid. As the minutes rolled by, and the plane rose to its cruising altitude at around 30,000 feet, heading out over the Selwyn mountain range, that fluid got hotter and hotter. Finally, about forty minutes out of Inuvik, the temperature became critical and the accumulator burst open with an explosive blast that shook the rear of the plane. The airframe was strong enough to withstand the detonation, but the flames from the burning fluid greedily found more fuel in the plastic sheaths around the wires; the ducting within which the circuits were bundled; the cladding around the air pipes - all manner of combustible materials.

The crew barely felt or heard the explosion over the juddering of air turbulence and roaring of the jets. The first thing the pilot knew for sure was the warning light telling him that fire had taken hold in the rear equipment bay. The second was that there was nothing whatever he could do to put it out. From this point he had a maximum of seven to eight minutes before the flames ate through the control systems for his rudder and elevators.

The moment McCabe's jet left the ground, Carver had got into the three-year-old Ford F-250 Heavy Duty truck he'd bought for cash two weeks ago in Skagway, Alaska, and headed to the nearest gas station. In the restroom, he shaved off Steve Lundin's beard and took off his overalls, which he dumped in a trash can out back. Then he turned south, on to the Dempster Highway. A short while down the road, the asphalt ran out. For the next 450 miles, crossing one Arctic Circle, two time zones, five rivers and a couple of mountain ranges, he'd be on nothing but rough shale and gravel.

They told you this kind of thing in Inuvik, the sheer, overwhelming scale of the local geography and the incredible absence of other people being the region's proudest features. The Yukon Territory alone was almost as big as Spain, but had just thirty thousand people in it. But Northwest Territories, next door, made Yukon look as impressive as a suburban back yard. Its forty thousand inhabitants were spread across an area bigger than Spain, France, Holland, Belgium and England put together.

Carver was perfectly happy to listen to these boastful recitals. He liked facts. He found their certainty reassuring, something reliably nonnegotiable in a world of compromise, betrayal and unpredictable emotion. They took his mind off the thing that was eating away at his conscience, the thought of all the other people on the plane who would die with Waylon McCabe. Carver was used to the concept of collateral damage. He understood that the innocent often died alongside the guilty. He grasped, too, the human mathematics that said it was better that a handful of people should die in a plane crash than hundreds of thousands be wiped out by acts of genocide. He could even tell himself that the people who worked for Waylon McCabe probably knew what he was doing and had

profited from his actions. That didn't mean he had to like any of it.

His secretive employers, who called themselves the Consortium, would not have been impressed by his principled qualms. They saw themselves as moral guardians in an immoral world, righting wrongs that defeated politicians and policemen, hidebound by laws and rules of engagement. The McCabe job was Carver's third assignment. A former Royal Marines officer who had fought with the corps' Special Boat Service, an élite within an élite, he had resigned his commission in disgust at the futility of his unit's efforts. The dictators he and his men had fought were still in power. The terrorists were treated like statesmen. The traffickers in drugs, guns and people had never paid for their crimes.

He could kill a man face to face, with a gun, a knife or his bare hands. But his employers preferred a more subtle, deniable approach. So Samuel Carver provided them with accidents, like the one he'd just prepared for Waylon McCabe.

### 3

The pilot had shut down the engines to slow the progress of the fire and the only sound was the eerie rush of the air outside. The flight attendant, perched on her fold-down seat, was biting her lip and trying desperately to suppress the tidal wave of panic, barely held in check by her training and professional pride. She was smoothing down her skirt with jerky, distracted movements that suggested she was unaware of what she was doing. But looking back down the cabin, towards the rear, she was the first to see the smoke as it seeped into the compartment, insinuating its way through air vents and between the gaps in floors and partitions like a plague of ghostly, toxic snakes. The smoke was shot with bilious yellows and dirty browns, a stew of chemicals given off by all the materials burning in the back of the plane. As the cabin filled with it, the passengers started to cough and retch.

‘Oxygen masks ...!’ croaked the attendant, hammering her fist on the flight-deck door, forcing the words out between desperate attempts to breathe. The co-pilot turned his head, caught a whiff of smoke and immediately hit the release switch that opened the trapdoors above each seat and let the masks dangle down by the passengers’ heads. Then the crew put on their own masks. They worked fine. The passengers were not so lucky.

There were six passenger seats in the cabin, plus the attendant’s position, making a total of seven masks. One of them did not deploy at all. Two dropped, but supplied no

oxygen. That left four masks between five people, and a life-and-death game of musical chairs began.

The attendant's mask was functioning. So was McCabe's. He'd inhaled a whole load of crap by the time he got it on, but finally he was breathing sweet, pure oxygen, and the heaving in his chest began to subside.

The other three men started scrambling through the ever-thickening smoke, shouting, screaming and coughing in their desperate search for clean air. One managed to kick, punch and elbow his way to a chair that had a working mask. Another was overcome by the smoke and sank to the floor, bent double on his knees, where he took his last few breaths. Then he collapsed, stone dead, in the aisle.

The third man, meanwhile, had finally found a working mask, but his brain seemed unable to give his hands the necessary instructions, his fingers fumbling helplessly as they tried to stretch the elastic strap over his head. He was coughing so hard now that he was bringing up blood: a scarlet spume that foamed from his mouth, bubbling and wheezing, until he, too, was still.

And all the while, the plane kept dropping through the sky, the wind howled and buffeted around it, and the cables controlling the elevator flaps were eaten away by the flames.

The flight crew, meanwhile, were too busy to be afraid. There was barely any light in the sky now, and the mountains through which they were descending were just black silhouettes, outlined against a deep blue horizon. They were 7,000 feet up, less than 5,000 feet above the lowest ground in the region, giving them maybe ten miles to play with at most, and no way to go but down. They'd dumped all their fuel to save weight and reduce the risk of any further fires. They'd deployed the undercarriage. All

they were missing was their landing site. Then one last faint glint of light reflected off a sheet of flat white ice and they saw a frozen lake up ahead.

It looked like a giant pair of spectacles. Two large, open areas at either end formed the lenses, linked by a curved channel. A small island stood right in the middle of the left-hand, westernmost lens. But it was too close and they were still too high. They were going to overshoot.

The pilot muttered a string of expletives into his oxygen mask and pushed the plane into an even steeper dive. He'd wanted to come in at a steady, shallow glide. Now he had to swoop down towards the lake like a dive-bomber, pull up at the final moment and pray that the controls could take the strain.

Down the plane plunged, closing in on the lake, till the cockpit windscreen seemed filled with nothing but ice.

They were over the first round lens of the lake now, still 500 feet up, the pilot frantically pulling at the joystick to get the elevator flaps to lift and pull the plane out of the dive.

In the rear equipment bay, the cables connecting the pilot to the elevators had been burned and frayed to little more than wire strands, and all the time, the demand for more lift was putting more pressure on the cables, stretching them tighter.

The nose wouldn't come up. They were going to crash straight into the ice.

The cables were unravelling.

The ice was barely a hundred feet below them.

And then, at last, the plane pulled out of its dive, the descent flattened and at that precise moment the final strands of cable snapped, the elevators lost all control and the plane fell the last 50 feet on to the frozen lake in a spectacular belly-flop that buckled the undercarriage and

sent the craft skittering across the ice like a giant hockey puck.

Somehow it found a straight-line path across the curved channel between one half of the lake and the other. But the impact had been enough to throw the attendant from her flimsy seat, ripping her mask away from its moorings and throwing her in a flurry of arms and legs down the cabin, between the chairs, till she collided with the back wall and slumped motionless to the ground.

Waylon McCabe thought only of his own survival. They'd got back down to earth in one piece. He figured that had to be a good sign.

Then the tip of the starboard wing caught against the rock face of the island, which jutted up out of the ice in the middle of the lake. The wing sheared right off and sent the rest of the plane spinning off at a new angle.

It came ashore in the centre of a small cove, riding up the frozen beach till the port wing hit a massive boulder, crumpled and left the fuselage arrowing into the rocks and trees, burrowing a deep trench through the thick winter snow and flattening the smaller saplings until the nose of the fuselage hit a much older, bigger pine.

The point of impact was slightly off centre, to the pilot's side, and he was squashed like a bug on a windscreen as one half of the flight deck was obliterated and a huge gash was torn down the side of the plane. McCabe's last surviving companion was flung out into space, still attached to his chair, till he came to rest, impaled by a tree branch, 50 feet away.

The last final intact section of the plane caromed off a rock outcrop. The rest of the flight deck disintegrated, taking the co-pilot with it, and the main length of the cabin simply snapped in two, like a broken twig. The last of the

smoke escaped into the sub-zero air. And Waylon McCabe slumped in his backwards-facing chair.

He was unconscious. But he was alive.

Five years later:  
January 1998