

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

**MICHAEL
CRICHTON**

AIRFRAME

AIRFRAME

A NOVEL BY

Michael Crichton

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

Sale of this book without a front cover may be unauthorized. If this book is coverless, it may have been reported to the publisher as "unsold or destroyed" and neither the author nor the publisher may have received payment for it.

Copyright © 1996 by Michael Crichton

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

<http://www.randomhouse.com>

Although based on real events, this is a work of fiction. Characters, companies, organizations and agencies in this novel are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously without any intent to describe their actual conduct. Descriptions of certain aircraft systems have been altered to protect proprietary information. Descriptions of real aircraft incidents involving Aloha Airlines, American Airlines, Continental Airlines, and USAir have been taken from the findings of the National Transportation Safety Board.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 97-97002

ISBN 0-345-40287-1

The edition published by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Ballantine Books International Edition: May 1997

First Ballantine Books Domestic Edition: November 1997

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The damn things weigh half a million pounds, fly a third of the way around the world, and they carry passengers in greater comfort and safety than any vehicle in the history of mankind. Now, are you fellas really going to stand there and tell us you know how to do the job better? Are you going to pretend you know anything about it at all? 'Cause it looks to me like you boys are just stirring folks up for your own reasons.

Aviation legend Charley Norton, 78,
speaking to reporters in 1970 after
an airplane crash

The irony of the Information Age is that it has given new respectability to uninformed opinion.

Veteran reporter John Lawton, 68,
speaking to the American Association
of Broadcast Journalists in 1995

MONDAY

ABOARD TPA 545

5:18 A.M.

Emily Jansen sighed in relief. The long flight was nearing an end. Morning sunlight streamed through the windows of the airplane. In her lap, little Sarah squinted in the unaccustomed brightness as she noisily sucked the last of her bottle, and pushed it away with tiny fists. "That was good, wasn't it?" Emily said. "Okay . . . up we go . . ."

She raised the infant onto her shoulder, began to pat her back. The baby gave a gurgling belch, and her body relaxed.

In the next seat, Tim Jansen yawned and rubbed his eyes. He had slept through the night, all the way from Hong Kong. Emily never slept on planes; she was too nervous.

"Morning," Tim said, looking at his watch. "Just a couple of hours more, hon. Any sign of breakfast?"

"Not yet," Emily said, shaking her head. They had taken TransPacific Airlines, a charter from Hong Kong. The money they saved would be useful when they set up housekeeping at the University of Colorado, where Tim was going to be an assistant professor. The flight had been pleasant enough—they were in the front of the plane—but the stewardesses seemed disorganized, the meals coming at odd times. Emily had turned down dinner because Tim was asleep, and she couldn't eat with Sarah sleeping in her lap.

And even now, Emily was surprised by the casual behavior of the crew. They left the cockpit door open during the flight. She knew Asian crews often did that, but it still struck her as inappropriate; too informal, too relaxed. The pilots strolled

around the plane at night, kibitzing with the stewardesses. One was leaving right now, walking to the back of the plane. Of course, they were probably stretching their legs. Stay alert, all of that. And certainly the fact that the crew was Chinese didn't trouble her. After a year in China, she admired the efficiency and attention to detail of the Chinese. But somehow, the whole flight just made her nervous.

Emily put Sarah back down in her lap. The baby stared at Tim and beamed.

"Hey, I should get this," Tim said. Fumbling in the bag under his seat, he brought out a video camera, trained it on his daughter. He wagged his free hand to get her attention. "Sarah . . . Sar-ah . . . Smile for Daddy. Smi-le . . ."

Sarah smiled, and made a gurgling sound.

"How does it feel to be going to America, Sarah? Ready to see where your parents are from?"

Sarah gurgled again. She waved her tiny hands in the air.

"She'll probably think everybody in America looks weird," Emily said. Their daughter had been born seven months ago in Hunan, where Tim had studied Chinese medicine.

Emily saw the camera lens pointed at her. "And what about you, Mom?" Tim said. "Are you glad to be going home?"

"Oh, Tim," she said. "Please." She must look like hell, she thought. All those hours.

"Come on, Em. What are you thinking?"

She needed to comb her hair. She needed to pee.

She said, "Well, what I really want—what I have dreamed about for months—is a cheeseburger."

"With Xu-xiang hot bean sauce?" Tim said.

"God *no*. A cheeseburger," she said, "with onions and tomatoes and lettuce and pickles and mayonnaise. *Mayonnaise*, God. And French's mustard."

"You want a cheeseburger too, Sarah?" Tim said, turning the camera back to their daughter.

Sarah was tugging at her toes with one tiny fist. She pulled her foot into her mouth, and looked up at Tim.

"Taste good?" Tim said, laughing. The camera shook as he laughed. "Is that breakfast for you, Sarah? Not waiting for the stewardess on this flight?"

Emily heard a low rumbling sound, almost a vibration, that seemed to come from the wing. She snapped her head around. "What was that?"

"Take it easy, Em," Tim said, still laughing.

Sarah laughed, too, giggling delightfully.

"We're almost home, honey," Tim said.

But even as he spoke, the plane seemed to shudder, the nose of the plane turning down. Suddenly everything tilted at a crazy angle. Emily felt Sarah sliding forward off her lap. She clutched at her daughter, pulling her close. Now it felt like the plane was going *straight down*, and then suddenly it was going up, and her stomach was pressed into the seat. Her daughter was a lead weight against her.

Tim said, "What the hell?"

Abruptly she was lifted off the seat, her seat belt cutting into her thighs. She felt light and sick to her stomach. She saw Tim bounce out of his seat, his head slamming into the luggage compartments overhead, the camera flying past her face.

From the cockpit, Emily heard buzzing, insistent alarms and a metallic voice that said, "Stall! Stall!" She glimpsed the blue-suited arms of the pilots moving swiftly over the controls; they were shouting in Chinese. All over the aircraft, people were screaming, hysterical. There was the sound of shattering glass.

The plane went into another steep dive. An elderly Chinese woman slid down the aisle on her back, screaming. A teenage boy followed, tumbling head over heels. Emily looked at Tim, but her husband wasn't in his seat any more. Yellow oxygen masks were dropping, one swinging in front of her face, but she could not reach for it because she was clutching her baby.

She was pressed back into her seat as the plane descended steeply, an incredibly loud whining dive. Shoes and purses

ricocheted across the cabin, clanging and banging; bodies thumped against seats, the floor.

Tim was gone. Emily turned, looking for him, and suddenly a heavy bag struck her in the head—a sudden jolt, pain, blackness, and stars. She felt dizzy and faint. The alarms continued to sound. The passengers continued to scream. The plane was still in a dive.

Emily lowered her head, clutched her infant daughter to her chest, and for the first time in her life, began to pray.

SOCAL APPROACH CONTROL

5:43 A.M.

"Socal Approach, this is TransPacific 545. We have an emergency."

In the darkened building that housed Southern California Air Traffic Approach Control, senior controller Dave Marshall heard the pilot's call and glanced at his radar screen. Trans-Pacific 545 was inbound from Hong Kong to Denver. The flight had been handed over to him from Oakland ARINC a few minutes earlier: a perfectly normal flight. Marshall touched the microphone at his cheek and said, "Go ahead, 545."

"Request priority clearance for emergency landing in Los Angeles."

The pilot sounded calm. Marshall stared at the shifting green data blocks that identified each aircraft in the air. TPA 545 was approaching the California coastline. Soon it would pass over Marina Del Rey. It was still half an hour out of LAX.

Marshall said, "Okay, 545, understand you request priority clearance to land. Say the nature of your emergency."

"We have a passenger emergency," the pilot said. "We need ambulances on the ground. I would say thirty or forty ambulances. Maybe more."

Marshall was stunned. "TPA 545, say again. Are you asking for *forty* ambulances?"

"Affirmative. We encountered severe turbulence during flight. We have injuries of passengers and flight crew."

Marshall thought, Why the hell didn't you tell me this before? He spun in his chair, beckoned to his supervisor, Jane

Levine, who picked up the extra headset, punched in, and listened.

Marshall said, "TransPacific, I copy your ground request for forty ambulances."

"Jesus," Levine said, making a face. "Forty?"

The pilot was still calm as he replied, "Ah, roger, Approach. Forty."

"Do you need medical personnel, too? What is the nature of the injuries you are bringing in?"

"I am not sure."

Levine made a spinning gesture: Keep the pilot talking. Marshall said, "Can you give us an estimate?"

"I am sorry, no. An estimate is not possible."

"Is anyone unconscious?"

"No, I do not think so," the pilot answered. "But two are dead."

"Holy shit," Jane Levine said. "Nice of him to tell us. Who is this guy?"

Marshall hit a key on his panel, opening a data block in the upper corner of the screen. It listed the manifest for TPA 545. "Captain's John Chang. Senior pilot for TransPacific."

"Let's not have any more surprises," Levine said. "Is the aircraft all right?"

Marshall said, "TPA 545, what is the condition of your aircraft?"

"We have damage to the passenger cabin," the pilot said. "Minor damage only."

"What is the condition of the flight deck?" Marshall said.

"Flight deck is operational. FDAU is nominal." That was the Flight Data Acquisition Unit, which tracked faults within the aircraft. If it said the plane was okay, it probably was.

Marshall said, "I copy that, 545. What is the condition of your flight crew?"

"Captain and first officer in good condition."

"Ah, 545, you said there were injuries to the crew."

"Yes. Two stewardesses have been hurt."

"Can you specify the nature of the injuries?"

"I am sorry, no. One is not conscious. The other one, I don't know."

Marshall was shaking his head. "He just told us nobody was unconscious."

"I'm not buying any of this," Levine said. She picked up the red phone. "Put a fire crew on level one alert. Get the ambulances. Order neuro and ortho teams to meet the plane and have Medical notify the Westside hospitals." She looked at her watch. "I'll call the LA FSDO. This'll make his damn day."

LAX

5:57 A.M.

Daniel Greene was the duty officer at the FAA Flight Standards District Office on Imperial Highway, half a mile from LAX. The local FSDOs—or Fizdos, as they were called—supervised the flight operations of commercial carriers, checking everything from aircraft maintenance to pilot training. Greene had come in early to clear the paper off his desk; his secretary had quit the week before, and the office manager refused to replace her, citing orders from Washington to absorb attrition. So now Greene went to work, muttering. Congress was slashing the FAA budget, telling them to do more with less, pretending the problem was productivity and not workload. But passenger traffic was up four percent a year, and the commercial fleet wasn't getting younger. The combination made for a lot more work on the ground. Of course, the FSDOs weren't the only ones who were strapped. Even the NTSB was broke; the Safety Board only got a million dollars a year for aircraft accidents, and—

The red phone on his desk rang, the emergency line. He picked it up; it was a woman at traffic control.

"We've just been informed of an incident on an inbound foreign carrier," she said.

"Uh-huh." Greene reached for a notepad. "Incident" had a specific meaning to the FAA, referring to the lower category of flight problems that carriers were required to report. "Accidents" involved deaths or structural damage to the aircraft and

were always serious, but with incidents, you never knew. "Go ahead."

"It's TransPacific Flight 545, incoming from Hong Kong to Denver. Pilot's requested emergency landing at LAX. Says they encountered turbulence during flight."

"Is the plane airworthy?"

"They say it is," Levine said. "They've got injuries, and they've requested forty ambulances."

"Forty?"

"They've also got two stiff's."

"Great." Greene got up from his desk. "When's it due in?"

"Eighteen minutes."

"Eighteen minutes—Jeez, why am I getting this so late?"

"Hey, the captain just told us, we're telling you. I've notified EMS and alerted the fire crews."

"Fire crews? I thought you said the plane's okay."

"Who knows?" the woman said. "The pilot is not making much sense. Sounds like he might be in shock. We hand off to the tower in seven minutes."

"Okay," Greene said. "I'm on my way."

He grabbed his badge and his cell phone and went out the door. As he passed Karen, the receptionist, he said, "Have we got anybody at the international terminal?"

"Kevin's there."

"Beep him," Greene said. "Tell him to get on TPA 545, inbound Hong Kong, landing in fifteen. Tell him to stay at the gate—and *don't let the flight crew leave.*"

"Got it," she said, reaching for the phone.

Greene roared down Sepulveda Boulevard toward the airport. Just before the highway ran beneath the runway, he looked up and saw the big TransPacific Airlines widebody, identifiable by its bright yellow tail insignia, taxiing toward the gate. TransPacific was a Hong Kong-based charter carrier. Most of the problems the FAA had with foreign airlines occurred with charters. Many were low-budget operators that didn't match

the rigorous safety standards of the scheduled carriers. But TransPacific had an excellent reputation.

At least the bird was on the ground, Greene thought. And he couldn't see any structural damage to the widebody. The plane was an N-22, built by Norton Aircraft in Burbank. The plane had been in revenue service five years, with an enviable dispatch and safety record.

Greene stepped on the gas and rushed into the tunnel, passing beneath the giant aircraft.

He sprinted through the international building. Through the windows, he saw the TransPacific jet pulled up to the gate, and the ambulances lined up on the concrete below. The first of them was already driving out, its siren whining.

Greene came to the gate, flashed his badge, and ran down the ramp. Passengers were disembarking, pale and frightened. Many limped, their clothes torn and bloody. On each side of the ramp, paramedics clustered around the injured.

As he neared the plane, the nauseating odor of vomit grew stronger. A frightened TransPac stewardess pushed him back at the door, chattering at him rapidly in Chinese. He showed her his badge and said, "FAA! Official business! FAA!" The stewardess stepped back, and Greene slid past a mother clutching an infant and stepped into the plane.

He looked at the interior, and stopped. "Oh my God," he said softly. *"What happened to this plane?"*

GLENDAL, CALIFORNIA

6:00 A.M.

"Mom? Who do you like better, Mickey Mouse or Minnie Mouse?"

Standing in the kitchen of her bungalow, still wearing her jogging shorts from her five-mile morning run, Casey Singleton finished making a tuna sandwich and put it in her daughter's lunch box. Singleton was thirty-six years old, a vice-president at Norton Aircraft in Burbank. Her daughter sat at the breakfast table, eating cereal.

"Well?" Allison said. "Who do you like better, Mickey Mouse or Minnie Mouse?" She was seven, and she ranked everything.

"I like them both," Casey said.

"I know, Mom," Allison said, exasperated. "But who do you like *better*?"

"Minnie."

"Me, too," she said, pushing the carton away.

Casey put a banana and a thermos of juice in the lunch box, closed the lid. "Finish eating, Allison, we have to get ready."

"What's quart?"

"Quart? It's a measure of liquid."

"No, Mom, *Qua-urt*," she said.

Casey looked over and saw that her daughter had picked up her new laminated plant ID badge, which had Casey's picture, and beneath that C. SINGLETON and then in large blue letters, QA/IRT.