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FINAL APPROACH

**The airline told passengers flying to Kansas City
the skies were safe. They lied.**

JOHN J. NANCE

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John J. Nance

FAWCETT CREST • NEW YORK

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A Fawcett Crest Book
Published by Ballantine Books
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The fictional major U.S. airline, North America Air, which appears in this work, does not exist. Its background, structure, route system, management, and philosophy have all been fabricated for dramatic purposes, and bear no resemblance or relation to any certificated U.S. airline operating now or in the past. This fictional airline should not be confused with the newly certificated North American Airlines of New York City, which began operations in 1990.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 90-41140

ISBN 0-449-22035-4

This edition published by arrangement with Crown Publishers, Inc.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Ballantine Books Edition: March 1992

Cover photo © 1991, John Terence Turner, FPG International Corp.

To My Mother, Margrette Nance Lynch,
Who laid the foundation,

and

To my Aunt, Martha Nance Kanowsky,
My first editor.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Without all those folks at the NTSB who helped by example and otherwise over the years (some 300 dedicated pros who try to do so much with so little), this story could not have come to life with such “real” people against a background of such vivid reality.

Without all my fellow airline professionals who spend their lives trying to achieve perfect safety in an industry that never before realized it was based on the performance of human beings, the human struggles reflected here would not be credible.

1

Friday, October 12

A lightning flash blinded Dr. Mark Weiss momentarily through the rain-smeared windshield, illuminating his wife Kimberly in the passenger seat of the family's station wagon as she turned in his direction. A rumble of thunder followed in rapid succession.

"Honey, we don't have a choice. Dad may not . . ." Kim stopped, choking on the recognition that her father's heart attack several hours before on a Dallas golf course had left him at death's door.

"I know, but I still wish we could wait. This is a lousy night to be traveling anywhere." Mark found her hand and squeezed it gently.

For nearly an hour the nighttime thunderstorm had whipped the Missouri countryside, swelling the streams and threatening to block their path to Kansas City's International Airport, a delay they couldn't afford: the last flight to Dallas was already preparing for departure.

Mark felt the gusting winds competing with him for control as he maneuvered along the crown of the rain-slicked rural road, his concentration divided by the nagging worry over the last-minute reservations he'd made on Flight 170 for Kim and the boys. He hated the thought of them flying alone. They always seemed so vulnerable.

Kim squeezed his hand in return, a flicker of a smile crossing her face. She knew he had to stay for his Saturday meeting.

Mark was very good at helping others overcome all sorts of fears and phobias in his practice as a clinical psychologist, yet Kim knew how quickly he turned into a basket case of anxiety

when *his* family flew anywhere without him. Working with airline people had made it worse. For two years he had treated the traumatized employees of a major East Coast airline sliding toward bankruptcy. Kim knew the plight of those people was on his mind. Tomorrow's meeting was an attempt to renew the foundation grant which had kept the program going.

"I should be able to join you in Dallas tomorrow by six," he said simply.

Kim studied her husband of seven years as she reached into the backseat to collar six-year-old Aaron, who had hit the breaking point listening to the marathon wailing of his four-year-old brother.

"Mom! Greg won't shut up!"

"Both of you quiet down! I mean it!" Kim commanded. Greg was reacting to the tension in the air. So was Aaron, for that matter, but he was handling it differently—firing a steady barrage of questions at his father and waving his favorite toy, a plastic jet fighter, a replica of the F-15, on which Mark had stenciled the name Aaron had given it: "Millennium Falcon."

"That's the airport, right Daddy?" Aaron strained at his seatbelt, waiting for an answer, a wide-eyed look of excitement on his face.

In the distance, sodium-vapor lights were bathing Kansas City International with an orange glow, barely visible now between the urgent swipes of the windshield wipers as they fought a pitched battle against a sea of rain. In the foreground, Mark could almost make out the ghostly apparition of virga—hanging wisps of rain showers on rapidly descending columns of moisture-laden air—an indicator of violent downdrafts.

"Daddy?" Aaron was demanding an answer.

"Yes, Son, that's the airport," he managed, turning to Kim. "What was the departure time again?"

"10:05."

"And it's now . . . ?"

"9:40."

"I don't know if we'll make it or not," he said, "but we'll sure try." Mark pressed the accelerator down a bit harder as another burst of lightning caught the distant outline of a TWA maintenance hangar, the distinctive aroma of fresh rain filling the car.

Beneath Gate 12 in the North America Airlines terminal, in an operations area never seen by passengers, Captain Pete Kaminsky stood in front of the pilots' bulletin board, shaking his head in resigned exasperation.

"Not again!" he said to no one in particular, unaware a fellow captain had stopped to peruse the same piece of paper that had caught his eye.

"You talking about the latest memo?"

Pete turned in the direction of the question, somewhat startled. The man's face was unfamiliar. "Yes, I was."

"More of the same. Now we're supposed to report, in writing no less, if we dare overrule maintenance and refuse to fly a broken airplane. In other words, you suckers fly anything maintenance says to fly, or we'll make your lives miserable."

Pete looked closely at his counterpart, startled by the sneer on the man's face as he continued, tapping the memo angrily with his uniform cap. "Look at this phrase. Anyone who ends each note to us with bullshit like—'compliance is mandatory and failure to comply will be met with severe disciplinary action, up to and including termination' is not fit to lead professionals in any field. I've had it with their threats."

Pete looked closely at the offensive phrase, startled he had overlooked it before. "I . . . guess I'm so used to seeing those words, I didn't even notice them this time."

"Everything we get from this goddamn company has that phrase in it." The man put on his captain's hat as he turned and scooped up his rectangular flight bag, opening the door to the hallway before hesitating and glancing back at Kaminsky, whose name he did not know. "You headed out?"

"Yeah," Pete answered. "You just come in?"

"Yep. Goin' home after four days on the road. Watch it out there, it's pretty bumpy. Thunderstorm cells were showing up on our radar in all directions."

"That's encouraging," Pete replied with a friendly snort, noticing a smile cross the other captain's face as he held the door with his shoulder and gave Pete a small wave with his free hand.

"Have a good one."

"Thanks."

Pete turned and moved farther into the crew room, feeling suddenly tired and depressed as he headed for the stack of pilot mailboxes lining one wall, pawing through the memos and tech-

nical revisions in his pigeonhole. He had fought hard to become an airline captain, and the position meant the world to him. At the age of forty-eight, his captaincy marked the apex of his professional accomplishments. He was proud of his four stripes—he loved his job—but he couldn't deny something was missing.

The crew room itself was depressing—heavily worn easy chairs and a stained rug allegedly designed by Halston. It had belonged to Braniff before their first bankruptcy in 1982, typically opulent with oak paneling, leather seats, South American tapestries on the walls, and even a huge console color television, long since broken. Now it was North America's, and therefore neglected. There was no money to be spent on flight crews in the midst of the competitive wars spawned by airline deregulation, so what had been a showplace was now a dowdy dump. Even the various hanging TV monitors displaying arriving and departing flights were in bad repair, their images dim and flickering.

“Hey Pete, what're you flying tonight?”

A fellow captain's voice wafted across the room, a pilot Pete had roomed with years ago in Minneapolis when they were both fresh out of the Air Force and making the grand total of four hundred dollars a month—barely paying for food, yet ecstatic to be airline pilots for North America. Those had been happy days.

“The infamous Flight 170 sequence. The Dallas Everywhere,” Pete shot back, a broad smile on his face. “Tonight the milk run to DFW through at least a couple of tornadoes, tomorrow the New York death march through Memphis, Nashville, Washington, and points north. But neither rain nor sleet nor snow nor dark of night shall stay this carrier from its appointed rounds.”

“Nor lack of airworthiness, apparently.” His friend pointed to another posted copy of the memo, and Pete nodded without comment as he moved on toward the sitting area and the closed glass partition which lined the wall at the far end of the room, separating the operations men from the pilots. His first officer/copilot, Jean Simonson, had already left to begin her walk-around inspection of the Boeing 737 they would be flying to Dallas. His job was to sign the flight plan, review the weather, and then go fly. The flying part he still loved. The rite of passage through the crew room at the beginning of each trip, however,

had become a trek through a swamp of lousy attitudes, diminishing outlooks, possible furloughs, base closures, and relocations, and letters about red ink—oceans of red ink—as North America hemorrhaged money. The fact was, his airline was in serious trouble, fighting competition from new-entry airlines by slashing operational budgets, fares, and personnel. It was depressing—almost as depressing as trying to talk to the glowering, overweight, angry operations agent, Mike Balzer, who was looking disgustedly at him from the other side of the operations desk.

“Awright, Captain, here’s the packet.”

Pete looked the man in the eye, noting the hatred there, and wondering how long it had taken old Balzer to come to loathe everyone on the pilot side of the window. Balzer’s attitude was legend among North America’s crews. He seemed to hate everyone.

The agent reinserted his cigar and backed up, sliding the glass partition closed with a perfunctory bang as another drumroll of thunder shuddered through the crew room. Pete Kaminsky sighed and buttoned his impressive blue coat with the four gold stripes on each sleeve as he put on his hat with the “scrambled eggs” of gold braid on the bill. With long-practiced familiarity he checked the gate number of his flight on the TV monitor one last time, picked up his rectangular “brain bag” map case, and pushed open the heavy door to the rain-swept ramp beyond.

“Where are *you* sitting, Daddy?” Aaron Weiss watched his father’s face for the answer as Mark tightened the seatbelt around his son in the left window seat of row 12.

“I’m not, Aaron. I’m staying here until tomorrow. Remember?”

“Oh yeah. Will Uncle Bill be in Dallas?”

Kimberly Weiss settled into 12B next to their older son while Mark wrestled her carry-on bag into the crowded overhead compartment. They had been among the last to board.

“Yes, Aaron, Uncle Bill will be there to meet us. Greg, sit down.”

The four-year-old rubbed his eyes and hugged his mother from the edge of seat 12C as she looked up at his worried father, who had leaned down to kiss them good-bye.

“We’ll be okay, Mark. Really.”

“Call me? As soon as you get to the hospital?”

“Okay.”

“And if your brother isn’t at the gate, call me immediately.”

“He will be. Stop worrying. One of us will meet you at the airport in Dallas tomorrow night.” She raised up to kiss him, then motioned him on, watching half-amused as he backed up the aisle waving to her and the boys, then turned and moved toward the exit.

He had just the right balance now, she thought, between the look of experience and the hint of youth: a few wrinkles around his eyes and a forelock of sandy hair set over a broad, rectangular face. She was proud of him, and proud of herself for choosing such a good-looking, gentle husband. Strong and gentle—and protective.

“Kansas City clearance delivery, North America 170 to Dallas with information bravo.”

A disembodied voice on the overhead cockpit speakers replied to First Officer Jean Simonson’s request with a familiar litany:

“ATC clears North America 170 to the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport as filed. On departure fly runway heading for radar vectors, climb to 5,000, expect flight level three-five-zero ten minutes after departure, departure control one-twenty-six-six, squawk two-six-six-five.”

Mark Weiss had already made the decision to stick his head into the small 737 cockpit before he got to the front of the aircraft, slipping in quietly as Jean read back the clearance she had hastily scribbled on a notepad. As a private pilot with less than a hundred flight hours, he was well aware of the gulf between his own flight knowledge and that of airline pilots, but there was a camaraderie that cut across the lines, a unisex brotherhood whose rite of admission was an FAA-issued pilot’s license of whatever grade.

The atmosphere of a commercial airline cockpit was technologically intoxicating, the impressive little compartment a siren song, luring him to take a closer look every time he boarded an airliner—especially at night, with the soft glow of myriad dials and instruments all within a fingertip’s reach of the two pilots in the two-person cockpit, and the important hum of electronic cooling fans blending with the distant whine of hydraulic pumps. Who could fail to be impressed by such a place? A feeling of

awe washed over him now as Jean Simonson and Pete Kaminsky noticed him in the doorway, the aroma of fresh coffee wafting from a cup in the captain's hand.

"Hello!" Pete Kaminsky never tired of showing off his "office," but too many passengers feigned sophisticated disinterest. "Been up front in one of these birds before?"

"A few times, yes. I fly little Cessnas, though. All this seems overwhelming."

Kaminsky extended a huge right hand somewhat awkwardly from his left seat position.

"I'm ex-Air Force, but I started in Cessnas too, although it was a long time ago."

Mark shook the captain's hand, noting subconsciously how tiny the cockpit looked in comparison to the size of the fellow. As a psychologist, he had always been fascinated by personalities and the relationships between powerful, headstrong people working in such a small space under what he knew were often high-pressure conditions. Kaminsky's physical dimensions made the contrast even more acute.

"Is this wild weather going to be a problem?" Mark asked the question tentatively while nodding a greeting to Jean, but Pete knew instantly what he meant.

"In other words, are we going to fly in this stuff?" Kaminsky smiled at Weiss, who looked a tad sheepish. "Don't worry. We'll go ahead and push back from the gate on time, but we're going to swivel around at the end of the runway and take a hard look at this with our radar. If I see any red on that scope—in other words, if I don't see a clear path out of here—we're staying on the ground." Pete considered his visitor's level of expertise. "You may already know this, but on this digital radar, anything that shows up in red is severe weather, and we avoid severe weather like the plague."

Mark nodded, and Pete Kaminsky watched his eyes as they swept appreciatively over the instrument panel. Pete decided not to mention the nearby tornado watch. There was an awkward silence, and Pete filled it at last. "What takes you to Dallas tonight?"

"Oh, I'm not going with you," Mark began, gesturing to the cabin behind them, "but my wife and two little boys are on board. My father-in-law just had a heart attack in Dallas. He's in critical condition."

"Sorry to hear that." Kaminsky studied the concerned look on Weiss's face. He knew the meaning behind it. He had stood in other cockpit doorways himself years ago, trying to find a diplomatic way of asking a fellow airman to be extra cautious with those he loved—a concern long since a thing of the past.

"Don't worry. We'll take very good care of them. We may be forced to make on-time departures from the gate, but there's no force in hell that's gonna get me off the ground if I don't like the weather—and I'll tell you, right now I don't like the weather."

Mark thanked them and made his exit, moving slowly up the jetway and eventually appearing on the other side of the rain-washed terminal windows at Gate 14 as the senior flight attendant appeared in the cockpit door with a cup of tea for the copilot, her silver hair in stark contrast to Jean's young face, her half-lens reading glasses hanging precariously on the tip of her nose, the computer list of first-class passengers in her hand.

"How ya doing, Barb?" Pete asked with a friendly smile.

Barbara Shubert, mother of three, grandmother of six, private pilot, and twenty-four-year veteran with the airline, smiled and peered over the top of her glasses, a top sergeant inspecting her troops. "Fine, Pete. Sorry I didn't say hello when you two came aboard. We've been battling maintenance for a replacement oxygen bottle in the back."

"Need my help?"

She shook her head. "Not this time. They finally surrendered."

Barbara turned away to greet a late-boarding passenger as Jean reached behind her to pull the folding cockpit door shut for a private discussion.

"Pete, I've got a problem with number three main tire."

"Oh?" The captain looked startled. They had been sitting together in the cockpit for nearly ten minutes. Why had she waited this long to say something about a maintenance problem?

"I found two deep cuts on my walk-around and called maintenance. This character comes out with a disgusted attitude, takes a quick look, and says, 'Honey, you'd better learn something about tires, there's nothing in the world wrong with this one,' and walks off. I followed him back to the maintenance office to talk to the supervisor, and it turns out this jerk is the supervisor."

Pete shifted in his seat, trying to find a diplomatic way to reply, but Jean raised her hand to stop him.

"I know what you're going to say, I already know. If the damn supervisor won't agree it needs changing, we haven't got a leg to stand on. I just wanted you to know what happened so if the tire blows out on us, you'll know why."

Pete nodded and shifted his gaze out the windscreen, noticing Mark Weiss as he stood on the other side of the heavy plate-glass window, looking lonely. Suddenly Pete felt lonely, too. Lonely and old.

"There was a time, Jean, when all a captain had to do was tell them once to change it, and it would be changed. Period."

"I know. I read. Even with a wing missing we couldn't ground the airplane without management approval. We don't control a damn thing anymore."

Pete Kaminsky felt an unfamiliar wave of anger welling up in his stomach at the invasion of his cockpit by the reality of the tawdry shell his once-proud company had become. He drew himself up and half-swiveled toward Jean, his right index finger raised in the air and a feigned, half-maniacal look on his face.

"The hell we *can*'t control things, Jean. I may have to let this airplane be pushed back on time, but like I told the man, we aren't flying anywhere until *we* decide it's safe!"

The sound of the gate agent closing the Boeing 737's forward entrance door punctuated his words.

2

Friday, October 12, Kansas City International Airport— Kansas City, Missouri

Thunder from somewhere above the airport almost covered the crisp sound of the airline reservationist's voice. Flight 255, she confirmed, was on time. Kell Martinson thanked her and punched the disconnect button, turning off the speaker and the remote microphone—the odd image of an otherwise perfectly sane man talking to his car's sun visor flickering across his mind as silence returned to the cushioned interior of the Riviera.

On the other side of the windshield the sheets of rain had decreased to a mere downpour, but the junior U.S. senator from the state of Kansas was still having trouble making out the moving shapes of buses and rental-car shuttles through the rain-smeared glass as they darted back and forth in front of him on the semicircular airport drive, each pursuing some appointed round at the North America terminal. Officially he was supposed to be at his family's old farmhouse near Salina, Kansas, not splashing through a traffic jam at the Kansas City Airport. Since he wasn't officially there, he couldn't afford to be seen, which was why he couldn't meet his inbound administrative assistant at the gate when her flight arrived in fifteen minutes. His face was too familiar to midwesterners. She would have to find him at the curb.

Feeling warm and insulated in his own high-tech cocoon, its windows opaque from the falling rain, Senator Martinson sat there for a moment in thought—his still-youthful face bathed in the greenish glow of the Riviera's computerized dashboard. He loved his car, but he'd really bought it for the touch-sensitive computer screen system—a consistent purchase, he felt, for a

pilot-senator from an aviation state like Kansas, who was already a well-teased lover of electronic gadgets. Cynthia Collins, the legislative aide who would be arriving shortly, delighted in needling him about his "toys"—as much, he suspected, as he enjoyed her taunting. She had labeled his new Riviera a "Star Wars" car, and greeted the installation of his mobile speaker-phone with the suggestion that he should go all the way and have the cellular equipment surgically implanted. His suggestion in response had caused her to blush—while hurriedly closing his office door.

Now the thought of Cynthia sitting in a darkened airliner cabin at the exact moment, quite possibly engaged in unprofessional thoughts about him, filled his mind. Her flight would have already started its descent—dropping right into the middle of the thunderstorms making up a small line moving east across the Kansas-Missouri border. That realization shook him out of his reverie. The fury of that advancing cold front had worried him for the last two hours as he drove beneath it into Kansas City from Wichita, nearly two hundred miles to the southwest. Cynthia Elizabeth Collins—who permitted the diminutive "Cindy" when they were alone—was not a confident flyer, and her flight would be bumpy tonight.

Kell put the car in gear and left the terminal drive, deciding to wait out the remaining quarter hour somewhere within view of the runway. It seemed a bit silly, but no pilot in love with flying ever tired of watching airplanes land, and he was no exception. Kell drove past the airport hotel and headed toward the ramp operations area along Burns Street, intending to park close to the fence near the general aviation ramp where he had arrived in private airplanes many times in past years. The sight of an airline-crew shuttle bus approaching the security gate just ahead gave him another idea, however, and as the bus driver activated the automatic gate with a radio control, Kell cut his headlights and glided up behind it, shadowing the lumbering bus as it moved through. A bit dangerous, he thought. It would be embarrassing to get caught, but at least leaving the area would be no problem—the gate opened automatically for departing cars. Wichita's airport had the same system.

Once inside, Kell broke off to the right, keeping out of the bus driver's rain-splattered mirrors as he found a parking place along Ottawa Avenue, a spot with a commanding view of Run-

way 19. He switched off the engine, childishly proud of beating the security system, yet aware that if *he* could do so with such ease, so could a terrorist or saboteur.

To his right, a giant Air Force C-5B sat on the air cargo ramp, bathed in lights, its huge cargo doors open, loading or unloading something important, Kell figured. He could see security guards around the nose of the 747-sized airplane, and large trucks were parked at the far end. Strange, he thought, to see the Military Airlift Command's largest transport at Kansas City's commercial airport. Kell made a mental note to ask what was going on when he got back to Washington, just out of curiosity. He had access to such information as a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

With a start he looked at the security guards more closely, wondering if he was too close for *their* comfort. If they were Air Force security police, they had no sense of humor when it came to unauthorized cars, even those driven by unauthorized senators. The C-5B was at least 800 yards away, however, and none of the security team seemed to be looking his way.

Kell read 10:06 P.M. on his watch as he reached to the glove compartment to pull out a hand-held scanner radio from within, punching the digital VHF frequency of Kansas City approach control into the control pad—a frequency copied from one of his aeronautical charts earlier in the day. The sound of a pilot's voice filled the car's interior almost instantly.

"Kansas City approach, North America 255 with you, out of 19,000 now for one-zero thousand."

Perfect timing! The flight was Cindy's.

Kell looked across the runway into the murky night sky with a happy rush of anticipation at the thought of spending the next two days in her arms. Cindy his aide; Cindy his lover.

"North America 170, roger, taxi to Runway 19, altimeter 29.23."

Captain Pete Kaminsky pushed the two thrust levers forward, careful not to exceed a reasonable power setting for taxiing as he manipulated the nose wheel steering tiller located next to his left knee.

He glanced at Jean as she extended the wing flaps to the takeoff setting and began reading the before-takeoff checklist, waiting for his responses. Such routines were vital in preventing