

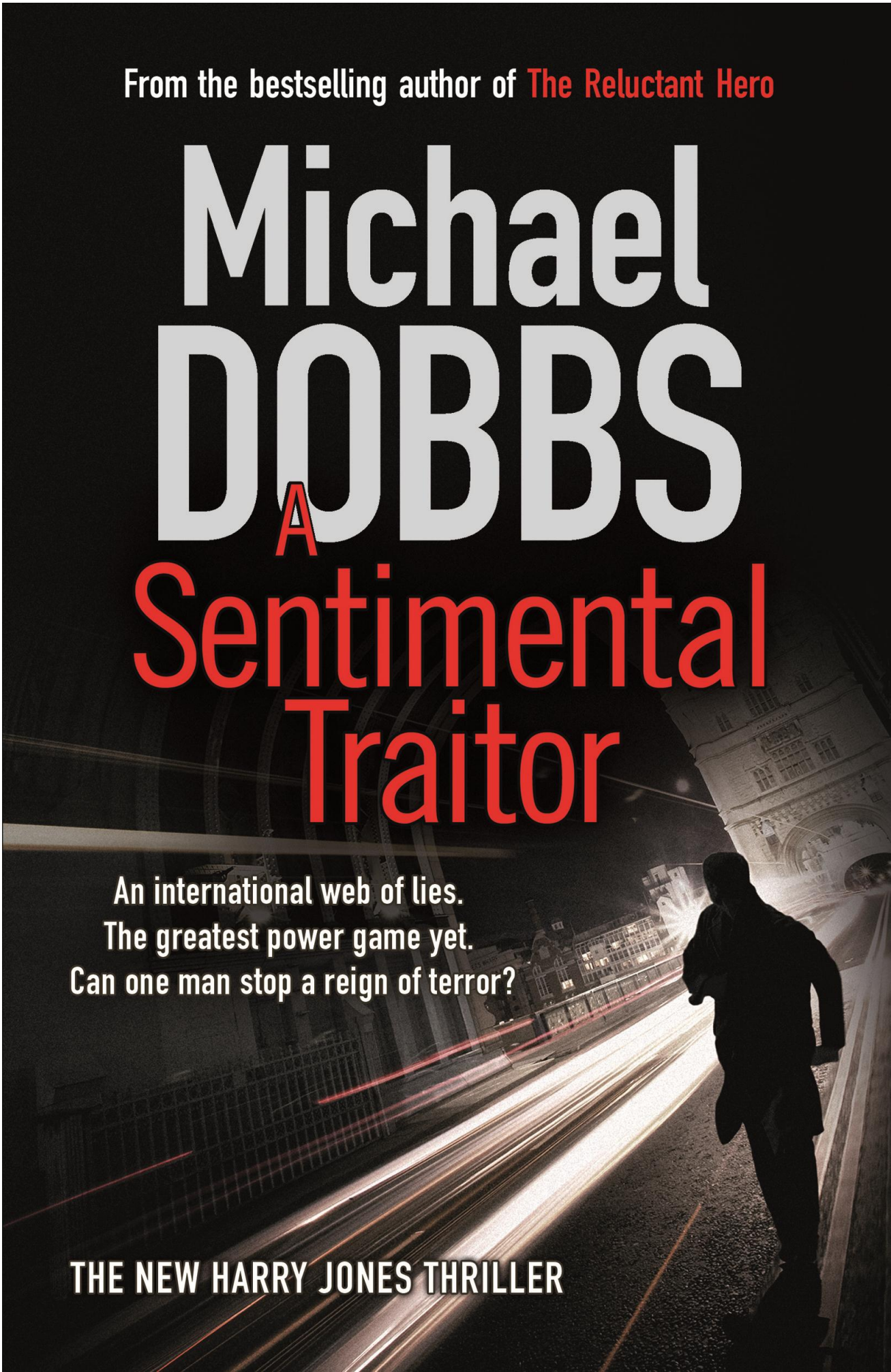
From the bestselling author of *The Reluctant Hero*

Michael DOBBBS

A Sentimental Traitor

An international web of lies.
The greatest power game yet.
Can one man stop a reign of terror?

THE NEW HARRY JONES THRILLER



CHAPTER ONE

Five days before Christmas.

They were young, innocent, excited, pumped high on an overload of Cola and fries. They were also vulnerable and entirely undeserving of great misfortune. Kids – thirty-seven of them and none older than fifteen, wrapped in brightly coloured ski jackets and scarves against the December cold, their arms laden with the plunder they had snatched from the stalls of the Christmas Fair during their day trip to Brussels. These were the children of the US diplomatic community in London: pampered, privileged, and now headed home.

One of them, Cartagena, named after the town of her conception, was crying, wiping tears from her cherry cheeks and still complaining about the tumble she'd taken on the outdoor ice rink, but no one appeared to be taking much notice so she gave up. Even at the age of eight she was wise enough to realize she had already lost the sympathy vote and wouldn't have any tears left to impress her parents if she kept this up. Soon she had put aside her -dramatic hobble and was skipping along with the rest of the crowd as they made their way to the departure gate. An ancient Tiger Moth biplane in the colours of the Swedish air force was suspended from the rafters high above their heads. Cartagena looked up, incredulous. Did they really used to fly that stuff?

It was a scheduled flight, departing on time, not always what was expected at this time of year, but in any event it wouldn't have mattered very much to the outcome. The men of evil intent who were waiting for it were already in position.

It had been a makeshift affair, organized at the last minute. The three men had hired the boat the previous day at IJmuiden on the Dutch coast, an Aquabell thirty-three-footer, a fishing boat with its cabin up front, substantial deck aft, and three-hundred-horsepower diesels that could get it out of trouble in the push of a throttle. It had been hired with few words and only the most cursory inspection of the three men's paperwork. As soon as they got on board it was clear to the owner they knew how to handle it, and any lingering doubts he might have entertained were buried beneath the substantial wad of euros they produced, although the strange box-object in its canvas shroud that was lugged on board had nothing to do with fishing. Most likely a drugs run, he reckoned, or perhaps people smuggling, dropping Middle Eastern filth off on some deserted stretch of East Anglia. He couldn't care less, not at almost double his usual rate and in a bundle of cash that was already forming a bulge in his pocket. If the British couldn't keep an eye on their own coastline, why the hell should he lose sleep? He scratched his crotch and hurried off to the nearest bar.

Now the three men waited anxiously, the boat turning into the swell of the North Sea, keeping station beneath the flight path. On another night and in a less chaotic world they would have taken more time, employed more sophisticated equipment to track the plane, but they had to make do with an iPhone loaded with a Plane Finder app. Yet it was a remarkable tool. Press a button and tiny red icons began creeping across a map with the details and destinations of almost every commercial flight in the air including their call signs, flight paths, positions, heights, speeds. Everything in real time,

and all a terrorist in a hurry would need. As they waited, they unwrapped their cargo from its polystyrene shroud, checking and rechecking every part of the gear they had brought on board. They had spent wisely. The shoulder-held surface-to-air missile they had acquired was the latest Russian model, an SA-24 Grinch, one of the best in the business, its sophistication so simple that operating it was easy enough even for ragheads: one as a spotter, the other the shooter. And as they waited, on their tiny iPhone screen the red marker of Speedbird 235 began its crawl across the map towards them.

The Airbus was climbing, its twin CFM engines burning eighty-three litres of fuel a minute through the crystal air of the winter night. Soon they were crossing the coast slightly to the south of Ostende, and even as they passed into the dark embrace of the North Sea, the pilots could see the gentle glow of the English coast more than sixty miles away. The flight would be short, a little over the hour, cruising at twenty-two thousand feet before descending and flying almost directly west along the Thames estuary and across London to Heathrow.

‘God’s light,’ the captain whispered as the lights of the English coast began to emerge on the horizon, like a thousand candles being waved in greeting. On a night like this a man could gaze all the way to Heaven. Karl was a family man, four teenage girls, and crammed into the aft hold was a bulging bag full of presents he’d grabbed in a frantic half-hour through the crew duty-free at Brussels. Every year as they grew older the struggle to find something they appreciated got more difficult, but he didn’t complain. All too soon they would be gone. Damn.

It was the last flight of the day. The milk run. There were one hundred and eight passengers on board, two pilots and five hosties, making a total of one hundred and fifteen on the manifest. The hosties – cabin crew – were moving down the aisle serving the boxes of antiseptic sandwiches and snacks that passed as in-flight refreshment. The napkins had dreary motifs of holly printed on them, the sole concession the PC brigade at corporate headquarters had made to the festive season, so the hosties had retaliated and were wearing reindeer horns with flashing red lights on the tips.

‘Time to make an idiot of myself,’ the captain muttered as he rose from his seat and pulled a Santa Claus hat over his head.

‘But, Karl, you do it so brilliantly,’ Bryan, his first officer, replied.

‘Just make sure you don’t crash the bloody thing while I’m gone.’

‘Haven’t done that in almost months,’ Bryan said, smiling.

The captain disappeared, but only for a few minutes. Not much scope for distraction on a short flight. By the time he returned, the first officer was already talking to air traffic control and confirming the details of their course adjustment and descent, twisting the control knobs to set the coordinates into the flight computer. ‘Speed: two-two-zero, flight level: one-five-zero,’ he was repeating.

‘Glad you managed to keep us in the sky this time,’ the captain muttered, draping his hat over the clothes hook behind him. As he slipped back into his seat, from the corner of his eye he saw the hat fall forlornly to the floor. He sighed. His wife kept telling him he was getting too old to fly, but too old to play Santa Claus? He thought about retrieving it, but decided it could wait. He would tidy up later if Abi, the senior attendant, didn’t find it first. She was always complaining about his untidiness. He fastened his harness. ‘I have control,’ he declared, reasserting his authority. Yet no sooner had the

words been acknowledged by his colleague when from somewhere behind they heard a crash – no, a series of crashes, an extended, evil noise, like the gates of Hell swinging open. In the same heartbeat the master alarm began to chime out a warning, and the Airbus started to bounce around the sky like a sweet wrapper caught in an updraught.

From their vantage point fifteen thousand feet below, the three attackers gazed on, in glorious anticipation, which slowly froze to disbelief. The spotter had acquired the target, through night-vision goggles bought on the Internet. The skies in this part of the world were lonely at night and Speedbird 235 stood out starkly against the clutter of distant stars. The Grinch was a one-shot throwaway system, almost kid's stuff; all the shooter had to do was clip on the power unit, press a button, and they were set. As he tracked the aircraft through the eyepiece he engaged it with a half-trigger, then another gentle squeeze. Nothing more. The missile did the rest. The eruption of sound and light battered the two men's wits. By the time they had recovered and the fug of smoke had disappeared, the missile was already at a great distance, its trail a distinctive spiral through the night sky as it went in pursuit, constantly adjusting its attitude to stay locked on to the heat signature of the engines. They watched it closing in. They saw it strike. They even witnessed the sharp flare of impact. Then Speedbird 235 carried on.

No explosion. No ripping of the wing away from its mounting. No tattered fuselage tumbling from the sky. Above them, the strobe lights of the Airbus were still -flashing from the wingtips. A malfunction, a dud perhaps, always a risk when these things were bought on the black market, or was it because the missile was at the very limit of its effective range, and even beyond? The plane continued on its path through the night. They had failed, catastrophically, and in their line of business there was always a price to be paid for failure. For a few minutes they argued, screamed, hurled curses at each other, threatened to drag each other's mothers from the whorehouse, frantically interrogated the screen of their iPhone and stretched their necks until they could no longer see the lights of the aircraft as it flew on, and on. In despair, the phone was hurled overboard, as far as it could be thrown. Then they hit the throttle and sped back into the darkness.

Back in the cockpit, there was no sense of panic. An engine had gone, that was the obvious answer, and they had practised for that any number of times on the simulator at Cranebank. Anyway, the ECAM aircraft monitoring system was telling them all they needed to know.

'Eng Fail. Eng One Fail,' the screen reported.

The captain reached forward to switch off the distracting howl of the master alarm. 'I have control. Read ECAM,' he instructed the first officer, his voice formal, unflustered. ECAM was a brilliant device, designed not only to tell them what the trouble was but how to fix it. In an equally formal tone the first officer began calling out the instructions from the screen when, without warning, the instructions changed.

'HYD Green Reservoir Low Level.'

Bugger. One of the three hydraulic systems had gone down. Thank God the designers of this wonderful beast had built in three such systems – Green, Yellow and Blue – so they still had two left. Failsafe. Hell, this bird could fly on just one, no great problem, it had happened to most experienced pilots one time or another. But it was time to let others know of their little difficulty.

‘Speedbird 235, Speedbird 235,’ the captain spoke into his radio. ‘Mayday. Mayday. Mayday. Engine failure.’

The voice of an air traffic controller responded immediately. ‘Acknowledged, Speedbird 235. Let me know your intentions.’

Intentions? They would carry on, of course. No drama. The Green hydraulics were the primary system and controlled things like the steering of the nose wheel, the landing gear, the main braking system, lots of other things, too, but there were plenty of backups. The landing gear could be dropped manually, there was emergency braking available on Yellow. And ECAM was giving them the safety procedure, something they’d practised a hundred times on the simulators. Isolate the engine, pull back to idle, master switch off, activate the fire system that cut off the supply of fuel and air to the engine in case of a leak. Losing an engine and one set of hydraulics wasn’t much of a problem, but you didn’t want this sort of thing spreading. The Airbus flew on, her path straight and true.

They were still concentrating on the ECAM instructions when Abi appeared at the flight-deck door. They buzzed her through. She was frowning, twisting the antlers nervously in her hands.

‘Guys, stop screwing around. Please?’

‘We have an engine down, Abi.’

‘I know that! Bits of it are falling off the back of the airplane. The kids don’t know whether to scream or take photos. What should I tell them?’

The captain slipped into his formal briefing, reporting the engine and hydraulic failure to her, stating his intention to continue on to Heathrow, giving his estimate of timing. They were barely seventy miles from touchdown; they’d be on the ground in little more than a quarter of an hour. ‘It’ll be a normal landing, I think, Abi, but because of the hydraulics our steering’s stuffed, so we won’t be able to get off the runway. There’ll be a lot of vehicles to greet us and plenty of flashing blue lights. Totally normal for this sort of thing. No evacuation, no slides, we’ll just stop on the runway instead of taxiing to the gate. Understood?’

Abi repeated his instructions back to him in confirmation. ‘Tell me you’ve done this sort of thing before, Karl?’ she added when she had finished the routine.

‘Don’t worry, Abi, several times. You OK with this?’

‘It’ll give me something to talk about in the nail bar. Men drivers.’

‘Tell the other girls I’ll be buying drinks when we get down.’

‘To celebrate the fact you can land a plane with only a few bits falling off?’

‘Christmas. I was thinking Christmas. This is my last trip.’

‘Make sure it’s not ours, too,’ she replied, defiant. Dear Abi, she could give as good as she got. ‘And for Heaven’s sake, tidy up this cabin,’ she added, bending to pick up the fallen Santa hat. She tried to hang it back on its hook, but the hook was broken, flapping from its fixture. Perhaps the bang had been more severe than they’d thought. She folded it neatly and put it in her pocket.

‘Time for me to talk to the passengers,’ the captain said. ‘Tell them they’re in luck, going to get an early landing.’ He paused. ‘And if you see anything more going on back there’ – he meant falling off – ‘let me know. Secure the cabin, Abi, prepare for immediate landing. See you on the ground.’

‘Good luck, you guys.’ She placed a hand on the captain’s shoulder. He squeezed it tenderly, and for a fraction longer than was necessary. Then she disappeared back into the plane.

‘How many times you really done this before?’ the first officer asked, trying to sound nonchalant as the flight-deck door closed behind her.

‘Hundreds of times,’ his colleague replied. ‘In the simulator.’

‘And they told me *I* was a jerk.’

‘No point in putting the wind up her. You know how emotional these hosties get, but this is nothing we can’t handle.’

‘Tell me, Karl, you and Abi ever had a thing going?’ the first officer asked nonchalantly, his eyes still fixed on ECAM. ‘I always thought . □. □.’

Silence. The captain concentrated on his controls.

‘Hell, I would,’ the first officer added.

The captain sighed. ‘Just concentrate on your job and give me the readings, jerk.’

In front of them, the lights of the Thames estuary were burning bright and already the pilots could see the dark snake of the river that would lead them home.

Then ECAM started pinging again. For a single heartbeat the first officer thought it was a repeat of the earlier information, but it wasn’t going to be that easy.

‘Shit, we’ve lost Yellow,’ he spat.

The second hydraulic system was losing pressure. That was the moment when they both knew they were in trouble – not desperate trouble, but deepening. It meant they had no brakes, no flaps, the landing would be very fast and there was an excellent chance they’d run right out of tarmac. The emergency services wouldn’t be there as spectators any longer.

‘You know, Karl, I’m hoping this is a sim.’

‘I’ll rip the balls off someone if it is.’

‘On the other hand . □. □.’

‘Nothing we haven’t done before. On the sim.’

‘Yeah, I almost got down in one piece last time I tried it.’

The banter was heavy, but they knew they now faced a serious task – and some tough decisions.

‘So where are we going to put her down?’ the first officer asked.

‘You tell me. Is Stansted an option?’

If they diverted north, it would mean they’d avoid flying over central London.

‘I don’t think so,’ the first officer replied, flicking rapidly through the plates of his airfield handbook. ‘Runway Zero Four there is only three thousand and fifty-nine metres,’ he read out loud. ‘We’ll need more than that.’

‘So Heathrow it is.’

‘Heathrow Two Seven Right is three thousand nine hundred metres. That should do it.’

‘It will bloody well have to.’

The Airbus was now becoming difficult to control, the pilot’s sidestick refusing to cooperate. Every time it was shifted or turned, the plane decided to do something else, its own thing. It was like trying to command a wayward cat. They flew on through the night, but with much less certainty.

The two men weren’t frightened, they had their training to fall back on. Anyway, there was too much for them to do, no time for thought or fear. There was air traffic control to inform, Abi to brief once more – this would be an emergency landing, the passengers would have to be set in the brace

position, not an easy task with so many kids on board. But they could still make it on one engine and one hydraulic system.

They were flying over the mouth of the estuary. Ten thousand feet, two hundred and twenty knots, two hundred and fifty miles an hour. Only ten minutes to landing. Ahead of them they could see the lights of the Dome and Kings Cross station, and beyond that the towers of the Parliament building and the stacks of Battersea Power Station. Everything was set out before them, dressed in its finery, London getting ready to celebrate Christmas.

Abi answered the summons to the cockpit. She listened quietly and very intently as the captain gave her the fresh briefing, repeating it back to him to show she had understood.

‘Soon home, love,’ the captain concluded, trying to reassure her.

But it wasn’t destined to be that simple.

The missile hadn’t exploded, yet the damage it inflicted had been catastrophic. The missile had hit the front part of the engine, sending shards of searing-hot metal into the hydraulic bay that lay just behind the wing. The missile itself had broken up and part of that, too, had bounced off the engine and been hurled into the bay, where it had made a direct hit on the first hydraulic reservoir. These were about the size of industrial pressure cookers, and Green had been destroyed immediately. Meanwhile the turbine discs in the rear of the crippled engine – that part of the engine where the energy was concentrated – had begun to spin out of control, speeding up until they shattered and flew apart. It was a fragment of one of these discs that had punctured the second reservoir. Green was dead, Yellow was dying.

The Blue System had survived intact, at first, but even though the hoses feeding it were made of stainless steel, in the intense slipstream that was ripping through the damaged fuselage, one of these had been bent and forced up against a fragment of missile casing that had lodged in the bay. As the plane flew on, the hose was pounded ceaselessly, remorselessly, against the razor-sharp shard of metal, until it, too, failed.

They were down to five thousand feet. Not much more than six minutes to Heathrow. They knew they weren’t going to make it.

No discussion, no time for that, and nothing in the manual for this, it was all instinct, an instantaneous throw of the dice.

‘I’m going for the river,’ the captain said.

‘Better that than another Lockerbie.’

‘I agree. Particularly when we’re doing the flying.’

The captain had to make a choice; he might still be left with some fragment of control before the last of the hydraulic fluid pissed away in the night air. Better the river than a crowded city centre, the scars on the landscape that had been left on Lockerbie. So, close the remaining thrust lever, shut down the final engine, trim the aircraft, try to glide her down. Damn it, that pilot had done it a couple of years back, the one who’d ditched in the Hudson, got everyone off alive when his engines had failed. But he’d still had hydraulics.

‘Shall I get Abi?’ Bryan asked.

‘Don’t see the point. No need to terrify the kids.’

‘Just us, then.’

‘Yes, just the two of us.’

Ahead of them, the Thames wound its way between the flare path of the riverbanks, twisting so sharply at points that on the ground it often deceived the eye, but from the cockpit they could see it all, laid out in spectacular and terrifying detail. They would have to get down before the bridges came into play. Hit one of those and . □. □. But the stretch leading up to Tower Bridge seemed about right. The captain lined her up, one last touch on the sidestick, and then all control was gone. They were gliding, their path set, for better or much worse. In the cockpit, without the engines, it seemed unnaturally quiet, except for a persistent banging that was coming from somewhere behind. He pushed home the ditching button that sealed off the cabin, gave them a chance of floating.

‘Should I go through the emergency ditching procedures?’ the first officer asked, holding the manual open, struggling to read in the dim emergency lighting.

‘I seem to remember it talks about making sure the galleys are turned off, useful stuff like that.’

Slowly, the first officer’s shoulders sagged, like an abandoned tent. He closed the book and put it aside.

‘London, this is Speedbird Mayday. I’ve lost all hydraulics and I’m trying to get into the river by Tower Bridge.’

Only the slightest hesitation before: ‘Er, Speedbird Mayday. Say again?’

‘Repeat, ditching near Tower Bridge. No hydraulics. We have one-one-five – repeat one-one-five – souls on board. That includes a whole playschool of kids.’

‘Speedbird Mayday, your message acknowledged. Emergency services will be informed.’ The controller’s voice had begun strong and matter of fact, but suddenly it ran out of breath. He had to clear his throat before he added: ‘Good luck.’

The captain found nothing to say in reply. He leaned down, cancelled the radio. The cockpit fell silent.

In the passenger compartment there was a surprising lack of panic. They’d been told they were only a few minutes from the airport and the change in the noise of the remaining engine wasn’t unusual as a plane prepared to land. Abi had done her job well. Yet she was too good to fool herself. Now she was strapped in her own seat, by the forward bulkhead beside another member of the cabin crew. She bowed her head in silent prayer and was struggling not to show her fear when through her tear-blurred eyes she saw a small girl appear in front of her. It was Cartagena. She was holding a glass-eyed teddy bear with a drooping, much-sucked ear.

‘We told them we’re all going to be OK, didn’t we, Edward?’ she lisped, interrogating the bear. She gazed up at Abi, her grey eyes filled with earnest. ‘My daddy told me he would never let anything happen to me.’

‘And who is your daddy, darling?’ Abi stammered, struggling desperately to hold back the tears.

‘He’s the ambassador.’

‘Would you and Edward Bear like to come and sit here on my lap?’ Abi asked. It defied every regulation, but there was no time to get the child back in her own seat. Anyway, there was no point.

Gratefully, Cartagena climbed into her arms as the other hostie looked on in horror, understanding all too well what this must mean.

‘You want to tell me about Edward Bear?’ Abi asked. ‘Does he have brothers and sisters?’

So Cartagena began to spell out Edward's complicated family history while Abi, her arms wrapped protectively around the little girl, her face buried in the child's hair, thanked God for the distraction.

Back in the cockpit, the two pilots stared ahead of them at the dark water that was now fast approaching. They were almost down to the height of the buildings scattered around Canary Wharf. The captain did a little mental arithmetic. They'd hit at around two hundred and twenty knots, and not quite level, around two degrees. Not a lot, but enough to spear the nose into the water and flip the plane on its back. That's if they didn't hit anything first. He'd once talked about these things with an old-timer, a retired test pilot who'd told him how it worked. You never drown, it seems. The plane hits the water and stops, but you don't. Your head is fired forward and snaps your neck; either that or it shakes your brain to jelly.

'Bryan, something I need to tell you.'

'Yes?' The first officer was startled from his thoughts, tearing his eyes away from the approaching water and the bridge beyond.

'You were right.'

'About what?'

'Me and Abi.'

The two men turned to face each other. Slowly, as though it were made of lead, the captain extended his hand. His first officer took it. Then, once more, they stared out at what lay ahead, and said not another word.

The captain had chosen a section of the river called the Pool of London. This was the old mercantile centre, the site of the once-great port of the capital city and deep enough for a World War Two destroyer and even small liners. It was also playing host to a Polish tall ship, its masts towering more than a hundred feet above its wooden decks as it waited for passage through Tower Bridge later that night to begin a Christmas goodwill visit. The wingtip of the Airbus brushed the tallest of the masts, causing the plane to yaw. The aircraft was no longer level, the port wing hit the water first, tearing away from the fuselage, which then cartwheeled twice. As the chaos of the crash subsided, only the tail was clearly distinguishable, sticking out defiantly above the river, surrounded by floating debris and a small oil fire.

Even after the waters had ceased their raging and settled to nothing more than a dark tidal ripple, there was no sign of anyone on board. They were all dead.

Lake Taupo, New Zealand

Benjamin Usher, the British Prime Minister, a face fashioned for caricature. As a boy he had taken a tumble down the slope of a Cumbrian fell near his home, which had left him with a squashed nose, ragged ear and a scar high on his cheek. The passage of later years had given him wrinkles that left him looking rather like a bulldog. Resilient. Determined. Even a little stubborn. He was going to need all those qualities in the coming weeks; he had an election to fight, and no Prime Minister takes such moments for granted, even when eight points ahead in the polls, as he was. He had never forgotten the words of one of his predecessors, Harold Macmillan, who had been asked to define what worried him most. 'Events, dear boy, events,' he had replied.

At the moment Speedbird 235 hit the water a short distance downriver from the Houses of Parliament, Usher was tucked far away from his problems, or so he thought, in a luxury resort beside Lake Taupo on New Zealand's north island, where he was attending the biennial meeting of Commonwealth heads of government. It had been a fruitful three days, swapping ideas and intimacies with leaders from vigorous economies like India, Canada, and Australia; countries that had escaped the economic -permafrost that seemed to have settled on Europe and its currency, and now the deliberations were almost at an end, time to wrap things up and head home for Christmas. It was early morning on Lake Taupo, and the Prime Minister was enjoying his breakfast, sitting on the verandah of his lodge soaking up birdsong, when a nervous steward spilled orange juice over the Prime Minister's immaculately laundered shirt. Only a few drops, but sufficient to drench the steward in embarrassment. Clumsy bugger. Yet Usher was an old hand, knew there would be a photographer's lens pointing at him from behind some bush or across the lake, so instead of succumbing to an instinctive scowl he burst into laughter, making sure that the steward and the wide world beyond realized he couldn't care less. It was to prove an unfortunate image, in the circumstances.

He first heard of the tragedy on the Thames while he was changing into a fresh shirt – only the sketchiest details, no one knew yet the scale of the disaster or the death toll, or even that there was a death toll, but it was not something that could be ignored. He immediately asked for an earlier flight home, but was told there was none. In any event there were still important details needing to be wrapped up at the conference, so with some misgivings he stayed on those few extra hours. Another misfortune.

The contrasting images of the wreckage and that smile were played side by side. The Prime Minister's refusal to walk out of the conference led to questions about his sense of priorities. And even before he had arrived back in London, two days after the tragedy, the media had already made up their collective mind about this act of callousness, Usher's failure to capture the sombre spirit of the moment, and on that point they were not for turning, no matter what the Downing Street press spokesman offered in explanation. Grossly unfair, of course, a despicable distortion, but such, in the end, is the fate of all prime ministers.

Makhachkala, inside the Russian Federation

There were other casualties. Even before the waters had time to settle above the fuselage of Speedbird 235, a small group of wind-scuffed portable cabins standing on a rocky outcrop overlooking the shore of the Caspian Sea were set ablaze. The spot was a little to the north of the dreary Russian city of Makhachkala, and the cabins were completely destroyed. The fire raised little local interest and was immediately attributed to unknown delinquents before it was filed away as being solved. The authorities had far more important things to attract their attention; the province of Chechnya was only down the road with its population of insurgents and suicide bombers, while the entire Caspian was a sea of troubles.

It was the world's largest inland sea, or lake, and beneath it lay an ocean of oil and gas worth trillions of dollars. That made the region even more unstable. The countries that clustered around the Caspian shore – Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan – were without exception led

by posses of adventurers and political bandits whose loathing was mutual. It was a region of irredeemable conflict, yet its peoples were never going to be left to fight it out amongst themselves, for there were too many others who were desperate to claim a share of the riches. There were plans to lay rival pipelines across the floor of the Caspian, which ensured that the neighbours fought amongst themselves ever more bitterly, arguing about where the pipelines should cross, and who should control them. And while they fought, the waters of the Caspian became more muddied, the sturgeon swam ever closer to extinction, and the Russians and Iranians ferried in warships to back up their rival claims. It was a desperate, bloody place, and nobody gave a damn about a Portakabin or two.

Mayfair, London

Even though he was only three miles away from the catastrophe beside Tower Bridge, Harry Jones heard nothing. He was in his mews house, his head bowed in concentration as he pored over the final draft of his election manifesto. He wasn't enjoying it, never did. As a former soldier he knew that wars always carried their share of casualties, and what was politics, except for war without the ethical bits? Careers in Westminster were never more than a headline away from disaster, and one day they would get him, too. People glibly assumed Harry was better protected than most Members of Parliament – he was independently and almost indecently wealthy, had a thumping parliamentary majority and every year received a personalized Christmas card from the Queen, yet he took none of this for granted. So he sat in his darkened study, with light cast from a solitary desk lamp, working and reworking every word.

'Harry, you going to be long?'

He looked up. Jemma was leaning against the doorjamb, yawning. A wisp of thick marmalade hair tumbled across her forehead and she was clad in nothing but a towel. Even in silhouette the effect was exceptionally distracting, the sort of woman men found difficult in describing without using their hands.

'Five minutes, Jem,' he said, returning to his typescript.

'Make them short minutes,' she suggested, dropping her towel before turning back to the bedroom.

He rewrote a couple of lines, marking corrections with his Parker Duofold, then reread the whole thing once more, but it was late, his brain too tired, he couldn't catch the subtleties or the pace. Part of him, the obsessive part, said it needed another few minutes, one last look, his career depended on it, but instead he screwed the cap back firmly onto his pen and put it to one side. It was Christmas, dammit, time to follow his star, or at least the trail of light that led towards the bedroom.

Avenue de Cortenbergh, Brussels

The lights were still blazing on the fifth floor of the anonymous office building, a block down from the Park du Cinquantenaire. That was unusual. This was the European Quarter, the heart of government, where officials administered an empire that stretched from the Black Sea to the Atlantic and up as far as the Arctic Circle, although many of them had fled Brussels and already returned to

their homes for Christmas. In any event, the business of running the Union of Europe was meant to be regular and methodical, it wasn't supposed to be in need of unexpected late nights.

Even more surprisingly, the lights were coming from EATA – the European Anti-Terrorist Agency. Not that EATA was like the CIA or MI6, or those thugs at the FSB in Moscow; it was a relative infant in the intelligence game, no teeth, no claws, no spies wandering abroad with poison-tipped umbrellas or exploding toothpaste. The remit of EATA was simple, its task was to gather information about matters of public security and put it in a form that their busy bosses could digest. Other intelligence agencies joked that most of the job consisted of pasting up press cuttings and could better be done by circulating *The Week* magazine or the *Wall Street Journal*, but European bureaucracy never willingly took a short cut. Or worked a late night.

Midnight struck, the avenue grew silent except for the passing of an occasional street-cleaning truck. The park was deserted, its trees bowing their bare branches, the birds asleep. Yet still the lights in EATA burned. That could mean but one of two possibilities. Either the cleaners had been very careless. Or something was going very badly wrong.