

Squawk 7700

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Cover Image by Matt Kaye
Cover Design by Khadijah Ali

First Printing, 2025

“When going through hell it’s best to
keep going”

-- Winston Churchill.

PROLOGUE

Syria, Earlier.

“Today is a great day,” Hassan began as he entered the room, with two men in white lab coats trailing behind him, and looking nervous. Immediately the men in the room stopped their work. The room in which they labored was once a large storage space with a sand floor, but it had been converted into what Hassan called a lab, though the sand floor remained. The room seemed to balk at its shiny, modern lab equipment and furnishings: gurneys, portable sinks, and shelves of first aid equipment.

The two men arranging equipment had long black beards and rough, swarthy features. Hassan waved forward the taller man in the room.

Nervous, he walked on his long legs, stiff as stilts. Hassan introduced him simply as Ali, the surgical nurse from Jordan. The other was the bald, brawny George, who was an anesthetist from Tripoli. The doctors who had arrived with Hassan were introduced as the brothers Samid and Amir. Hassan let everyone shake hands and exchange pleasantries, then, once everyone had been seated at the simple wooden table at the back of the room, he brought the meeting to order.

“We are going to take the enemy by the thousands. No one will be left to dig their graves,” Hassan said with glee, his black eyes hot

with the prospect.

“Hassan, please, I have been thinking...” Ali, the surgical nurse, bowed his head as he spoke quietly, to not seem so tall. He humbly looked at the floor to avoid Hassan’s fierce gaze. “The intended targets are not military and will not stop the enemy’s advancement. Further, by attacking civilians, including women and children, we may be seen by the world as violating war conventions. Is there a way that we can use this weapon to attack military targets?”

“That way brings us many risks,” Hassan replied quickly, having already thought this through. “Foremost, is that we would make ourselves, our people, and our families a target. A terrible fate.”

Hassan rallied and put his hand on Ali’s shoulder, like a father to a son who was learning the ropes. “But, we must respond with resolve as well.” Then, he pulled a Glock .45 from under his shirt, jammed it against Ali’s right ear, and squeezed the trigger.

Ali sank to the floor like a doll that had been dropped. It happened so fast, with such casual violence that everyone in the room was stunned.

Except for Hassan.

“If you are with us, stand up, if you are not...” Hassan jerked his head toward the dead Ali on the floor, blood flowing around his head as if the sand was sucking in his red halo.

Everyone stood up.

CHAPTER 1

New York City, February.

Freshly shaved, Arnaud saw in the washroom mirror that he looked just like the other men. His COVID-19 mask, the type still being worn by travelers worried by the continued lurking of the virus, further disguised him. The deadly virus had become his competitor.

His mission, after all, was to kill an awful lot of people, too.

Arnaud had perfected his Americanized look. His prep team had shaved his beard and cut his hair, then oiled it down with product. The aim was to make him look Latinx in a Miami Heat team jersey, a gold chain hanging from his neck, and a pair of pristine, lime green Nike KD VII sneakers which were actually comfortable. Arnaud tucked a popular sports magazine, *SLAM*, under his arm to show that he was a sports guy, in case the jersey, bling, and shoes didn't shout that message.

Arnaud even stopped with a cocked eyebrow to watch the American president, Martin Summers, shining off a massive TV screen in the airport sports bar. He was greeting some head of state with his wife, who looked like this was her proudest moment. How can she be proud? Arnaud seethed. To see a woman who exposed her hair like that. It was shameful.

He walked to security and gave them an it's-good-to-see-you smile. He got one back from the African American screener, who added, "Have

a good flight.”

Arnaud promised that he would. After all, he was heading to Paradise.

He grabbed his bag and rose when the gate agent called for first class passengers to board. “But first we want to welcome aboard the new Mrs. and Mr. Smith-Bonneur!”

In the crowd, the newlyweds made themselves known by pulling down their matching “just married” masks and diving on each other with a kiss. Then to the cheers of the entire departure lounge, they marched down the jetway to the plane.

Arnaud followed with a casual walk, which he had practiced, and onto Air Atlantic Flight 452. He made sure to bid the attendant at the door a pleasant “Good morning!”

Casually, he slid his backpack under the seat in front of his own. He pretended to read his magazine as he checked his surroundings and seatmates. He noted that the Aero Force 800 aircraft looked new. Too bad the plane, Arnaud, and everyone around him would be gone.

At the thought, his nerves pricked. He felt perspiration on his lip and under his arms. It was annoying, though his team said to expect to be anxious. He looked around the cabin to see if anyone was looking at him.

That smiling attendant was staring right at him.

Carol had been flying for more than thirty years. With her round face and good posture on her tall frame, she looked a decade younger than

fifty-five. She had clocked Mr. Miami Heat as potentially helpful if there was trouble. He was athletic and seemed friendly. But there was something that didn't seem right with the guy. Too friendly. His hair was too neat and shiny for his sporty look. And why was he watching others, as if he cared what they thought of his buff ego?

As she was hanging up a coat in first class, his face declared he had been caught doing something wrong. It gave Carol a chill. She was never wrong about a passenger, and that look in the man's eye sent a winter storm up her spine.

"What's up, Carol?" asked Lou-Anne, the chief purser. They had flown together countless times, and so she was able to gauge Carol's worry.

Carol nodded. "Mr. Miami Heat in 4C. He's pinged my paranoia." Lou-Anne looked at Arnaud. His dark eyes zinged back into the *SLAM* magazine, pretending not to notice that they were looking at him.

Lou-Anne also caught the maybe-trouble-maybe-not buzz about this passenger. "Could be too much Miami blow before heading home."

"OK, but any trouble and he's out of here."

Lou-Anne squeezed her friend's arm, seconding the vote. If Mr. Miami even cussed, he would be off the plane while it was on the ground. If it was in the air, well, they would land and turn him over to a welcoming committee with handcuffs. Lou-Anne thought,

“Had this been thirty-five years ago when I started, when people wore their Sunday best to fly, this grown man in a team jersey, bling, and pricey ball shoes would have been laughed off the plane.”

Thirty-five years on the job also meant Lou-Anne had two weeks left before she got out of these troubled skies and retired far away from the entitled jerks, comfort pets, and drunks that she’d had to deal with. She didn’t need any trouble today. Or for the next two weeks.

She moved back to the door to greet a man who had been flying almost as long as she had, one of her favorites. “Mr. Durante, how good to see you,” Lou-Anne said warmly. With a wave, she escorted him to his favorite spot, a window seat in row four.

“Good to see you, too, now that the coffee filter mask is gone from your lovely face.”

He tucked his hat and cashmere coat in the overhead bin. Jack thought about actually putting a mask on to protect him from the virus and probably save his career. Jack was a sommelier and knew his vintages. He would not miss the hint of eglantine in the bouquet of a Napa Rutherford. So far, he had not been infected with COVID-19, and so he had not lost his sense of smell.

Just as he was pulling on his mask, Jack caught the scent of something that he’d never want to smell in a wine, a sharp odor like bug spray mixed with perspiration. It seemed to be wafting off the man in the Miami Heat shirt.

Jack adjusted his mask and dipped into the new edition of the wine magazine *Vinoble*.

Push back was smooth, and Flight 452 was cleared for takeoff.

“Morning all. Captain Kryz Parker here, and that’s Kryz as in Krystal! I’m expecting a smooth ride on the way down to Miami, folks.” She had one of those reassuring mom voices that made you think she was about to pack your lunch, not about to launch you and 100 tons of Aero Force 800 into the wild blue. “I anticipate having you at the gate about ten minutes ahead of schedule, so let’s make sure we’re buckled up for takeoff. Will you do that for me?”

As the plane climbed to 7,000 feet, passengers read, watched TV, or nodded to whatever was sounding in their earbuds. Arnaud craned his neck to check on that tall flight attendant. She sat in the jump seat at the front, focused on her cellphone. Then, her eyes rose to check her passengers. To check him.

He took a breath and tried not to think about the swelling feeling in his near-bursting bladder. He kept his focus on that seatbelt sign and counted back from 100. He made it to 49 before his bladder won out.

Yanking off his seatbelt, he hurried uphill to the lavatory. He wanted to execute his plan while the plane was still rising over metropolitan New York. Attacking at this moment would maximize collateral damage, but it was his bladder more than his logic that was moving him toward the forward lavatory.

Carol saw Mr. Miami out of his seat, and shook her head, silently acknowledging that her sixth sense was spot on.

"Sir, you have to sit down until the seatbelt sign is turned off." Arnaud kept coming.

Carol unbuckled her seatbelt and stood up to block his path. Arnaud firmly pushed her back down in the jump seat. He entered the bathroom, slammed the door shut, and locked it.

Furious, Carol leaped to her feet. She picked up the phone to call the flight deck while waving to Lou-Anne at the back of the plane. It didn't matter to Carol if the man had a hyperactive bladder. He had crossed a red line. If Carol wasn't safe, no one was.

The co-pilot answered, his voice suggesting that this better be life or death.

"The passenger in 4C just assaulted me," Carol said. "He's locked himself in the bathroom."

The co-pilot relayed the news to the pilot, who asked if Carol was all right.

"I'm fine, but that guy is not."

"OK, I'm coming," said the co-pilot. They wanted to solve this and keep going, and not have to turn back to LaGuardia, where they might have to wait all day.

Carol banged on the bathroom door. Lou-Anne arrived to help.

On the other side of the door, Arnaud was in a hyper-attentive state, where everything seemed to slow down. He peed a bright yellow stream into the toilet as he listened to the

thundering fists on the door and the people yelling at him to get out. It was as if they were underwater.

He opened his backpack he dragged in with him and, as he had practiced a hundred times, he extracted an emery board and sturdy wooden matchstick. Scraping the matchstick across the board, he smiled at the tongues of flame that licked up. He dropped the match, folded his hands, and closed his eyes as he silently mouthed his final words: "I am the bomb."

Outside the washroom, Carol and Lou-Anne pounded on the door, and the burly co-pilot stood ready to put Arnaud in plastic cuffs when the blast from inside knocked the door off its hinges. The co-pilot's head took the brunt of the blow. He was out cold before the door landed on Carol, pinning her to the floor, with Lou-Anne sprawled down the aisle.

Arnaud had expected to be blown to smithereens, but there he was, staring out from the washroom with his pants down. For a moment, he didn't know what to do. Dazed, his ears ringing like alarm bells, he looked at the newlyweds and the other passengers who couldn't believe what they saw: a half-nude man framed by flames that were devouring the first class lavatory. The fire was burning through the bulkhead, and into the cockpit, with dark clouds of smoke spreading down the aisle.

Then Arnaud smelled barbeque. He was on fire. Flames were burning through what was left of his shirt and pants. Stumbling, he began

running toward the back of the plane. Passengers started screaming, some grabbing for their phones to send texts and snap photos. The newly wedded couple clung to each other.

Jack Durante saw all of this, but he didn't believe his eyes. A man on fire, running along the aisle of a plane isn't real. It's a hallucination. Arnaud knew how real it was as he smelled his own burning skin.

He was going uphill with the plane in a steep dive. As the plane tipped down, Arnaud was weightless, flying inside a plane. Then, he began a free fall toward the front of the plane. Moments later the nose of the plane smashed into a snowy patch of forest in New Jersey.

Flight 452 was down and all on board were dead.