

CHAPTER ONE

Martha Conant traveled regularly for her job with Hewlett-Packard in Denver. On that Wednesday, she was on her way to Philadelphia to work with a client. She didn't even look at her ticket until she was at the airport. She had been assigned a seat in the last row. She checked the display boards and saw that she could wait a couple of hours for a nonstop flight instead of this one, which was making a stop in Chicago. After thinking it over, she decided that she could get some work done on the plane. She kept her reservation for United Flight 232. The date was July 19, 1989.

Conant took the second seat in from the port* aisle in the center section at the back of the plane. She wore a black skirt and a pink sweater. She carried a briefcase and a purse. Conant anticipated people milling around the bathrooms behind her as flight attendants bustled about with their carts in the galley. She resigned herself to a few unpleasant hours and decided to lose herself in her work. Martha Conant opened her briefcase.

She didn't pay much attention to the preparations for departure and the takeoff: a routine flight among many routine flights. She glanced up once or twice at the in-flight movie, a documentary

* Looking forward from the back of the aircraft, *port* refers to the left side and *starboard* refers to the right.

about the Kentucky Derby or the Triple Crown—something about horseracing narrated by a sportscaster named Jim McKay. The in-flight meal was a “picnic” lunch, as United Airlines called it that summer: a plastic basket with a red-and-white-checked napkin in which were nestled greasy chicken fingers, a package of Oreo cookies, and a paper cup with a few cherries in it. Conant had just eaten one of the chicken fingers when an explosion shook her from her reverie. Her first thought was that a bomb had gone off, and her heart went into her throat. Susan White, the young flight attendant in the port aisle, went to her knees with an armload of drinks as the plane slewed to the right. Conant felt the tail drop out from under her as the plane began climbing.

At forty-six, Conant had curly auburn hair, brown eyes, and an endearing smile. She had hoped to have a good portion of her life ahead of her as well, yet she realized that she was likely going to die that day. Fear contracted within her torso like a black spider. After a minute, though, a steady male voice came over the loudspeakers and explained that they had lost the number two engine, the one that ran through the tail above and behind Conant’s head. But, said the voice, the plane had two other engines, one on each wing. They could proceed to Chicago at a slower speed, a lower altitude.

Conant tried to think. She tried to convince herself of the reassuring story Dudley Dvorak, the second officer, or flight engineer, had broadcast throughout the cabin. Shortly after the explosion, the four flight attendants in her part of the plane disappeared into the galley to whisper among themselves. Now they emerged again with their carts and resumed serving drinks. Five rows ahead of Conant, Paul Olivier, a businessman who was also the mayor of Palmer Lake, Colorado, was surprised that the flight attendants continued serving. He would later recall Susan White, who would turn twenty-six that October but looked like a teenager. “She was just shaking,” said Olivier, “visibly shaking.” She asked if he wanted something to drink, and he ordered a vodka. White opened the liquor drawer on her cart. It was neatly lined with mini liquor bottles, all arranged by type. She selected a vodka, placed it on his table with a glass of ice, and closed

the drawer. "Make it a double," said Olivier. When White pulled out the service drawer the second time, her shaking hand seemed to have a mind of its own, and the little liquor bottles scattered all over the floor. On her hands and knees, she gathered up the bottles as they rolled around on the carpet. Once she collected herself and her bottles, she stuffed them into the drawer any way they'd fit and slammed it shut. Observing her rattled state, Olivier told White, "It really looks like *you* need one of these."

Embarrassed, White hurried to the galley and started straightening up. She raised her eyes from her work and saw the head flight attendant, Jan Brown, coming toward her. From Brown's face, White knew that the situation was much worse than her friend Dvorak had let on in his announcement.

"Pick everything up," Brown said sharply.

In an attempt at levity, White said, "No second coffees?"

At forty-nine, Brown was a seasoned flight attendant, having been on deck a dozen years. At the age of twenty-one, she had been hired as the flight attendant on John F. Kennedy's family airplane, *The Caroline*. To Brown, Susan White seemed as eager and good-natured as a puppy. "Susan always half-laughed, half-cried," Brown said many years later. But Brown, who had been frightened out of her wits by something—White did not yet know what—was in no mood for joking. "No, no second coffees." White could see that she was dead serious and felt a knot form in her stomach. Brown, though technically her boss, liked to joke around. And they always served second coffees. White quickly began securing the galley, as Jan Brown briefed the three flight attendants and then hurried back up the aisle to attend to her duties.

From the way the flight attendants were moving, Conant knew something bad was happening. They looked pale and drawn. She had no idea that three of them were now holding hands and praying in the galley behind her. Conant's emotional system had come to full alert. She began taking more notice of her surroundings. A man sat on her left, a couple in their fifties or sixties on her right. She observed the last row of two seats against the window on her left. She

saw a handsome young boy in a Chicago Cubs baseball cap seated in the window seat with a woman next to him. Conant was looking at Dave Randa, nine, and his mother Susan, forty. The rows were staggered, so mother and son were ahead of Conant with nothing behind them but White's jump seat, which faced the lavatories. A few rows forward on her right, Conant noticed that she could sometimes see the ground where she expected to see only sky.

Her thoughts went to her family. She had a husband and three children. Rich, twenty-one, was her eldest. He was living at home and working at a job. Her middle son, Rob, had graduated from high school a month earlier. At the age of eighteen, he had taken a trip out to California. Patrick, sixteen, was at home on his summer vacation.

"I was thinking about what a not-very-good mother I was," Conant recalled. "And what a not-very-good wife I was. And I found myself bargaining with God." She had become preoccupied with her job, "and my values had gotten screwed up." She felt that she had put a distance between herself and her family. "I was not as connected with my family as I could have been. And in those moments when I was contemplating not returning to my family, it became crystal clear to me that I needed to make some changes." She was not a religious person. She belonged to no church. God had meant nothing to her before. Yet she said, "It felt like a time of reckoning." She had earned degrees in both chemistry and computer science. She was smart and attractive and worked for one of the great high-tech companies. She thought she had it all, as she sat there with the realization gnawing at her that the plane she had boarded was likely going to crash. She desperately longed to be back on the ground, to feel her feet touching the soil. To see the green earth and feel the heat of summer. To hug her children, her husband.

The aft cabin around her remained quiet during those seemingly endless minutes. With the engine in the tail silenced now, she could barely hear the other two engines squalling on the wings so far away. The air seemed to be whispering over the skin of the plane. The man on her left was silent, within himself. Conant didn't know him. His name was John Hatch. He was forty-six years old. He later

said that he went through “a lot of self reflection” in those moments. He thought of his family, his wife Sandra, and his three children, Sheila, twenty, Mark, fifteen, and ten-year-old Ryan. “I made a lot of promises that I probably haven’t totally kept,” Hatch said. He traveled extensively and worked hard. He silently promised to be a better husband, a better family man, to spend more time with his kids. “I knew we were in serious trouble.” A man who liked control in his life, he was abruptly and utterly without it.

The man and woman to Conant’s right were quietly whispering to each other. *What’s going on? What do you think will happen?* And like Hatch, Conant went into what she called “this state of review,” a kind of melancholy reverie in which she envisioned the life she would lead if she survived, a life in which she was devoted to her husband and children. Perhaps a life that included God in a more meaningful way. Her view of her life opened up to include her parents and her sisters, and she realized that she was mentally saying good-bye to each person she loved. She believed that her feet would never touch the earth again. And she was deeply saddened by what she felt was her imminent and final departure from this sweet old world. She said in her mind, “God, if you let me out of this alive, I’ll clean up my act.”

“Being in the last row of this massive tin can that didn’t seem to be under control,” she later said, “I was pretty convinced that I was not going to make it out of there.”

About twenty minutes had passed since the explosion, and now the passengers could see a mesmerizing mist spraying out from the wings as the crew dumped fuel in what Conant now understood was a last desperate bid for salvation.

Far ahead of Martha Conant and nine-year-old Dave Randa, nearly two hundred feet away on the flight deck, William Roy Records, the first officer, was flying the Denver-to-Chicago leg of the trip in this McDonnell Douglas DC-10, with Captain Alfred Clair Haynes in the left seat acting as his copilot. Behind Records, Dudley Joseph Dvorak was manning the gauges and monitoring all systems. Jerry Lee Kennedy, thirty-six, a deadheading pilot, recently hired by