

FROM THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *FALLING*

DROWNING

A commercial airplane is shown flying through a dark, stormy sky, viewed through a window with vertical bars. The sky is a mix of dark blue and black, with some lighter, hazy areas. The airplane is white and is positioned in the center of the frame, flying towards the viewer. The vertical bars are black and run from top to bottom, creating a sense of confinement and tension.

THE RESCUE OF FLIGHT 1421

"Pure adrenaline and
all heart."

—MEG GARDINER

"Reads like *Apollo 13*
underwater."

—DON WINSLOW

T.J. NEWMAN **A NOVEL**

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D R O W N I N G

THE RESCUE OF FLIGHT 1421

A NOVEL

T. J. NEWMAN

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For the weasels, Grant and Davis

The term *last-ditch* is used to describe an effort that is made at the end of a long line of failures. It is the final attempt and is not expected to succeed.

In aviation, the emergency landing of an aircraft on water is called a *ditching*.

CHAPTER ONE

WILL KENT OPENED HIS EYES just in time to see the engine explode.

His arm shot up to protect the passenger seated at the window, but his daughter Shannon didn't seem to notice. The eleven-year-old girl just watched the flames spewing out of the back of the engine's tail cone and uttered an uneasy *whoa*.

Will sat up straight and looked over the tops of the seats. The emergency exit was two rows up. A flight attendant sat there in a rear-facing jump seat staring at the passengers. He could just make out her name bar. Molly. Will caught her eye.

Molly didn't say a thing. She didn't have to.

The aircraft shook. Panic gripped the cabin as everyone craned for a look out the windows. Flames. Chunks of metal ripping off, flying by.

Will leaned over Shannon for a better view. The engine was on fire. Parts of the wing were shredded. Below the plane, crystal-clear turquoise water.

Shannon looked to her dad. "Why aren't we turning back to Honolulu?"

Will had been wondering the same thing.

In the cockpit, every pilot's worst nightmare was coming true.

"We lost thrust in engine one," First Officer Kit Callahan radioed to ATC, her voice rising involuntarily as the plane dropped. "And all hydraulic fluid in all three systems."

"Say again, fourteen twenty-one?"

The air traffic controller sounded skeptical. Even the captain glanced over to see for himself. Any other day, all this second-guessing would have pissed her off.

Not today.

Kit triple-checked the ECAM, barely believing the display herself. System failures were listed in order of severity. Level 3 failures, the most crucial, were first, in red. Red filled the screen. Every time she cleared one, another would pop up. All were Level 3. The digital screen looked like it was bleeding out.

They'd been airborne for less than two minutes. Engine one was dead. So were the hydraulics. This extended beyond their training. Pilots don't run situations like this in the simulator.

There'd be no point.

"Fourteen twenty-one, ah, did you say all three? All three hydraulic—"

"Goddamn it, dead stick!" Captain Miller said.

No hydraulic fluid. No hydraulic power.

The plane was dead in the air.

Green. Blue. Yellow. The aircraft's three hydraulic lines. Two layers of redundancy in case of a system failure. It's *that* important. The display should have shown three green lines at 3,000 PSI. Kit was looking at three amber lines with 0 PSI. Her best guess was that when the engine blew, fragments of metal sprayed like buckshot through the hydraulic lines and drained the fluid. Any moving component on the aircraft—ailerons, flaps, spoilers, rudder—everything that let them fly the plane, had frozen in place.

The pilots couldn't command the Airbus A321 to do anything. They had no control.

"We can't turn back," Kit told the controller. "Requesting an alternate in front of us."

Will ripped open one of the plastic pouches he'd just pulled from the compartments under their seats. He passed it to Shannon.

She turned the pouch over, looking at the folded yellow life vest tucked inside.

"Are we going to crash?"

Several passengers looked at her. She'd voiced their worst fears.

"Shannon," Will said, shifting in his seat to face her. "We've lost an engine. I don't know why we're not turning back. It may be because we can't."

Will pulled the vest out and shook it open, slipping it over her head before cradling her face in both his hands.

“I know you’re scared. But whatever happens, I’m going to be right here with you.”

Will heard a seat belt unbuckle. He waited for the refastening click after the passenger realized there was nowhere to run. Instead came heavy footsteps. He looked up just as a red-faced, middle-aged white guy in a blue polo shirt blew past their row on his way to the back. Angry male voices began to rise in the rear of the plane as the guy in the blue polo shirt yelled at a male flight attendant who was seated in a swing-out jump seat in the center of the aisle.

“Sir!” the flight attendant bellowed. “Sit down! *Sir!*”

Suddenly, the plane dropped sharply. Everything went down—
—blue polo went up.

His head smashed into the ceiling. Will turned away as the man slammed back to the floor—just in time to see Molly the flight attendant unbuckle her harness and head for the back of the plane. Another jolt made the plane thrash violently. Molly flew forward. Her head smacked into an armrest, with her chin taking the brunt of it. Crawling on all fours back to her jump seat, Molly strapped herself in while blood trickled from a split lip.

Will refocused on Shannon. “Shannon. We stay together. You understand? No matter what. We stay together.”

Shannon wasn’t listening to her dad. Will followed her gaze. Blue polo was on his feet again, stumbling back to his seat amid the turbulence, moaning in pain. He held his head while blood poured down his face in thick streaks. As he passed their aisle, the plane dipped. He braced himself, then continued on, leaving behind a bright red handprint stamped on the white overhead bin.

Shannon stared unblinkingly at the blood.

“We stay together,” she repeated.

Molly Hernandez winced as she wiped the blood off her chin with the arm of her uniform sweater. She tried to look calm as she blinked at the passengers from under her straight-cut bangs, but her hands would not stop shaking.

Another seat belt unbuckled. Molly turned. A woman in a long floral dress got up to let the guy in the blue polo back into their row just as the plane lurched again. Floral dress lost her balance and fell into the man. Their heads smacked against one another and the woman grimaced in pain, a streak of his

blood now covering her forehead. He sat clumsily, and with another jolt of the plane, she fell back into her own seat.

“Ma’am?”

I hate that guy, Molly thought, stewing. *Three people are now hurt and bloodied for no reason.*

“Excuse me—”

The only reason Molly had even gotten up was because she was worried about the unaccompanied minor. Flying all alone. Sitting in the last row of the plane. Poor kid had a front-row seat for all that screaming, all that blood—

A piece of the engine slammed violently against the plane. Everyone jerked away from the windows and Molly yelped. A few people screamed. Holy *shit* the passengers looked terrified. Holy *fuck* everything was happening so fast.

Molly closed her eyes. She was spinning out. *Calm down*, she thought, taking a breath. *Just review your commands. Heads down, stay down. Heads down, stay down. Release seat belts. Leave—*

“Excuse me! Ma’am!”

“What? What do you want?” Molly snapped at the woman sitting across from her. She immediately regretted it. “I’m sorry.”

“Where’s that vest?”

“Under your seat.”

The woman bent over and her waist-length braids pooled on the floor. She struggled with the compartment under her seat until the plastic seal broke off with a snap. The woman sat up with the plastic pouch, ripped it open, shook out the bright yellow life vest, and threw it over her head.

“But don’t—”

Grabbing the red T-handles, the woman yanked down like it was a parachute, inflating the vest with a loud hiss. Everyone watched the woman try to lean back in her seat. She now looked more like a raft than a passenger.

In the cockpit, Kit looked to the controls overhead. The whole panel was lit up. Every button in the hydraulics section glowed amber with a single word: FAULT. Above that, a large rectangular button labeled ENG 1 with FIRE printed on its plastic guard burned bright red. She double-checked the smaller buttons flanking it. They *should* have shown a glowing white SQUIB, meaning the

primary and backup fire-suppression systems had been armed. Instead, the buttons were dark.

“Push button didn’t activate,” Kit said.

The pilots had no way to fight the engine fire or cut off the fuel that was feeding it.

Kit cleared the engine failure and a new Level 3 failure popped up on the ECAM explaining why the fire-suppression system hadn’t activated. There, like a bright red, all-caps middle finger: ENG 1 FADEC FAULT.

“FADEC fault.”

“Goddamn it,” Captain Miller mumbled.

The Full Authority Digital Engine Control was a small computer affixed inside the engine that acted as the link to the pilots. Any action in the cockpit went *first* to the FADEC, *then* the engine responded. Engine one’s FADEC was dead. Without it, there was no communication between the two. The pilots couldn’t tell the engine to do anything—and they also had no idea what the engine was doing.

“I need eyes,” Captain Miller said.

Kit punched a button.

Three high-low chimes sounded throughout the cabin as a red light lit up on the ceiling above the emergency exit row. Will watched Molly rip a phone from a cradle and press it to her ear without saying a word.

Shannon took her own phone out of airplane mode, brought up a text thread, and began typing. Will noticed the contact. MOMMY, with a pink heart emoji.

There was a loud bang. Will grabbed his armrests as the plane dipped to the left. The phone flew from Shannon’s hands, dropping to the floor with a thud. Just as she bent to get it, the plane dove, and the phone slid forward.

“No!” Shannon cried, reaching out. Like every eleven-year-old, her phone was her life. Being without it was unthinkable. She grabbed at her seat belt but Will’s arm pinned her down.

“Leave it,” he said.

“I want to tell her—”

“You’ll tell her in person.”

He was firm. He wanted her to take it as confidence that they were going to be okay.

But he also knew she was smarter than that.

Further up, strapped into his jump seat in row eight, Kaholo Kapule did what all the flight attendants were doing: holding the interphones to their ears and not saying a word.

In emergencies, flight attendants are trained to wait. The pilots will be busy. They'll communicate as soon as they can, *if* they can. Do not distract or interfere by calling them. They will call you.

While Kaholo waited, that nice young couple was watching him with wide eyes, so the flight attendant gave them an easy half smile. They held hands, knuckles turning white next to shiny new wedding bands. Another couple up in first class was celebrating their fifty-fifth anniversary. Colleen, the lead flight attendant, had made an announcement for both.

"Who can see the engine?" came Kit's voice through the interphone.

"I can," Kaholo said, unbuckling his harness and standing for a better look. The passengers leaned back so he could see. The Hawaiian native could surf before he could walk, so even in an uneasy ride, he never had to hold on to anything. But as he bent and saw what was on the other side of the window, he instinctively grabbed a seat back.

Will stared at Molly.

She'd had that phone to her ear for nearly a minute now but hadn't said a thing. She was just sitting there. Listening.

Will leaned into the window. It was hard to assess the engine since he was sitting behind it, but flames now covered all that was left of it. Most of the outer cowling had been blown off or ripped apart by the airstream. Mechanical inner workings were exposed. The inlet cowl, the massive circular section of metal covering the front of the engine, clung to the bottom, swaying precariously, looking like it might fall any second.

Suddenly the plane dropped like a brick thrown off the roof of a building. A baby started to wail. The mother held her tight and sang a soft song into her ear. No one had a clue what was going to happen. Uncertainty brought fear. Fear created anxiety. They prayed. They cried. They texted goodbye to their loved ones.

But Will's attention had turned back to Molly. And so he was the only one who saw the blood drain from her face at something said to her by someone on the other end of that phone.

Molly's mouth parted. She blinked a couple times. Then, without saying a word, she hung up the phone and just sat there very, very still.

Will reached over and took Shannon's hand. He knew what came next.

A chime rang throughout the cabin.

"This is the captain. Prepare to ditch."

CHAPTER TWO

LEAD FLIGHT ATTENDANT COLLEEN BENNETT knew the ditching evacuation commands by heart—but not the ditching preparation announcement. With no time to look it up, she had to improvise. She took a deep breath and tried to steady her voice.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we will be making an emergency landing... on the water. There’s a pouch containing a life vest under your seat. Place the vest over your head and buckle the strap. Do *not* inflate the vest. Only inflate the vest as you leave the aircraft.”

Will could see that Shannon was scared. He tried to reassure her with a look that appeared only to make her more nervous. He reached over and tightened the strap on her vest.

In the cockpit, there was another high-pitched ping as a new notification popped up on the primary flight display.

Kit had been flipping pages in the QRH for the third time but everything in the emergency quick reference handbook they’d either already done or couldn’t do—so she tossed the binder in a compartment behind her and leaned forward to read the new directive.

USE MAN PITCH TRIM

Kit looked to the captain.

“First time for everything,” he said, moving his right hand to the trim wheel on the center pedestal and palming it with a light grip. Pushing the trim wheel forward or backward would move the cables connected to the elevator and rudder on the tail. Meaning, in theory, a pilot could adjust the plane’s altitude and pitch.

The controls rattled. Captain Miller struggled to maintain the right amount of pressure on the trim wheel. On a small aircraft it’s a difficult task. The system is sensitive and imprecise. It’s easy to overshoot and then overcorrect. On a commercial jet it’s all but impossible.

ATC came back with two alternates: Maui and Kona.

Kit stared at the endless stretch of water that surrounded them and replied to both options in the same way.

“Unable.”

“Okay, stand by.”

The radio went silent as the controller scrambled to come up with another option the pilots knew wasn’t there.

They were four minutes into the flight. Zero hydraulic power. The plane refused to climb. They couldn’t turn back to Honolulu. Maui and the Big Island were too far. Directly ahead were Molokai and Lanai—but those islands were nearly uninhabited and almost entirely mountainous.

There was nothing the plane could reach except the water.

At the back of the plane, a chunk of the engine slammed against the window, splintering the outer layer of windowpane. The unaccompanied minor screamed and turned to face Ed Vernon in his jump seat. The little girl’s dark brown eyes became glossy. Bottom lip trembling, she blinked as two heavy tears slid down her cheeks.

Ed glanced at the lanyard around her neck. Printed across the fabric were the words TINY TRAVELER. Handwritten on the card in the clear plastic holder was her information. Maia Taylor. Eight years old. Her guardian’s contact info for when they landed. And Ed’s own signature, assuming responsibility for her.

Maia wiped her face with her sleeve. The hot pink plastic balls at the end of her pigtail twists swayed in the turbulence.

“Are we going to die?” she asked.

The radio crackled and the controller declared all runways at Honolulu were cleared and available for Flight 1421's return. Kit held her headset close to her mouth.

"Unable. We cannot turn around. We cannot climb. We have no hydraulic power. We have no control of this aircraft. Don't give us alternates. Get a rescue team ready to get us in the water."

The radio went silent.

Finally, there came static. Then only: "*Roger that.*"

Kit tried to get her eyes to bring the white digital altitude numbers into focus in the turbulence, but she didn't need exact figures to know the numbers were getting smaller, fast.

"Flaps?" Captain Miller said.

"Still at two," Kit said, glancing down at the levers on the center console.

"Landing gear?"

"Up."

"Ditching switch?"

A pause. "Sure."

She reached up, lifted the guard covering the button labeled DITCHING, pressed it, and an ON light illuminated. If it worked, the cabin pressure controller had just sent a "close" signal to the valves, vents, and fans across the outer surface of the airframe.

She'd shut all external openings in an attempt to make the plane watertight.

This was what it had come to. The ditch switch. Manual trim. They'd moved past Hail Marys into fool's errands. Kit didn't know a single pilot who had ever used these systems outside of the sim.

If you're pressing the ditch switch, you don't live to tell the tale.

"Show me again," Will said.

Shannon leaned forward, laying her chest flat against her thighs. Her arms wrapped under her legs behind her knees and she held on to opposite elbows. Her knees cradled her cheeks and she looked down to her toes.

"Good," Will said. "So when the pilot says, you get in that brace position." Shannon nodded. "Keep your heels forward in case the seats collapse. And

keep your tongue—”

“On the roof of my mouth so I don’t bite it,” Shannon finished.

“Good. And when the plane comes to a stop—”

“We get off the plane. Fast.”

“Where’s your exit?”

Shannon pointed at the exit two rows up.

“And if not there, where’s your next closest?”

The man sitting in the aisle seat next to Will pointed behind them. “Back of the plane.”

Will and Shannon both turned. The man shrugged.

“I’m following you guys.”

From her window seat in the first row of the plane, Ruth Belkin took her husband’s soft, wrinkled hand in hers.

“You know, Ira,” she said, “fifty-five years isn’t a bad run to ‘death do us part.’”

Across the aisle from them, a young woman sat at the window with a phone to her ear. “Mom, it’s me,” the girl said, a finger jammed in her other ear. She turned toward the orange flames outside, which matched her red hair. The engine shook. Another rivet attaching the cowling shot off. The massive chunk of metal dropped an inch more.

“Mom, I’m on the plane and something’s happened and I... I—”

Her voice broke.

“I don’t think we’re going to make it.”

Ruth could envision the moment when the mother would see she’d missed a call from her daughter. The mom would check her watch, confused: *Shouldn’t she be flying right now?* The mom would start the voicemail with a smile—but by the sound of her daughter’s breathing alone, she’d know something was wrong.

Ruth listened to the girl cry, knowing sometime soon, her mother’s sobs would join hers.

Ira took Ruth’s hand in both of his and kissed it.

Kit could hear muffled sounds coming from the cabin and wondered what the passengers were doing in these final moments. She assumed they were crying. Praying. Trying to make phone calls. Calls to say *I love you. I'm sorry. I forgive you.* Including herself and the captain, there were ninety-nine souls on board. And right now, the other ninety-seven were back there trying to do what needed to be done before the end. Ninety-seven men, women, and children she was responsible for.

Air traffic control squawked. "*Coastal fourteen twenty-one, all runways at all airports are cleared and available. Emergency services are standing by.*"

Kit felt a lump in her throat. ATC understood the situation. They knew the plane couldn't make an airport. ATC knew just as every pilot and controller listening on the radio knew.

Flight 1421 was going down.

But by stopping all traffic, by turning all attention to them, everyone was saying: *You're not alone.*

Kit cleared her throat. "Appreciate that. Unable. We're gonna be in the water."

The pilots stared at the approaching ocean as the radio crackled with dead air. Kit could imagine the controller looking to his colleagues. Knowing this would be the last conversation this flight crew ever had.

"*Ah, roger that,*" the controller responded. His voice cracked. "*We got you on radar. Coast Guard is standing by for rescue and recovery.*" There was a pause. "*Godspeed, fourteen twenty-one.*"

"Coastal fourteen twenty-one, good day," Kit said, the traditional sign-off sounding more like a goodbye.

Neither pilot spoke. She'd never flown with the captain before this trip. He was fine, but they hadn't really connected. With some guilt, she realized she was glad it was him here now and not a friend. She wondered if he was thinking something similar.

"All right," Captain Miller said.

Kit understood. She pushed a button. A ping rang out in the cabin. When she spoke, her voice was calm. Firm.

"Prepare for impact. Brace, brace, brace."

Immediately, the four flight attendants began shouting their brace commands over and over—*Heads down, stay down! Heads down, stay down! Heads down, stay down!*—and all around the aircraft, the passengers placed their bodies into positions that would give them the best chance at survival.

Colleen watched the old couple lean forward with their hands still entwined. Kaholo saw the newlyweds kiss one last time, deeply, before both folded their arms on the seat backs in front of them. The guy in the blue polo sat back, crossing his arms defiantly, while the woman sitting beside him held on to her legs as her tears soaked into her long floral dress. Molly's voice was going hoarse as she called out her commands, all the while watching the woman in the inflated life vest praying loudly to baby Jesus. Ed closed his eyes as he shouted. He couldn't stand to see that poor little girl looking up at him anymore.

Will checked Shannon's brace position one final time before leaning forward to assume his own. As his body shook with the plane, his jaw rattled against his knees. Outside of the flight attendants' shouts, the plane had gone eerily quiet. He stared down at their feet.

Shannon's tennis shoes were white with pink and orange zigzags. There was a grass stain on one of the toes and the laces had gotten dusty from the playground at recess.

"I love you, jelly bean," he whispered.

Up front, a robotic voice began to bleat through the cockpit: *Low terrain, pull up! Low terrain, pull up!* As the numbers on the altimeter got smaller, the voice seemed to get louder. Kit turned the volume counterclockwise until it clicked off.

Heads down, stay down! Heads down, stay down!

In the cabin, the passengers and flight attendants were bracing. In the cockpit, the pilots sat up straight and prepared to fly the plane as far into the crash as possible.

The whitecaps on the clear blue water had individual features. They were so close.

Kit looked up. A memory she hadn't thought of in years came to mind. "*Help me, Jesus*" buttons. She was nine. She sat in the first officer's seat. Her dad

sat in the captain's chair. He said all the bad buttons were on the panel overhead where you had to look up to push them. He said looking up reminds you to pray.

"Cause if you're pushing the 'Help me, Jesus' buttons—you're screwed."

Kit looked at the glowing buttons and shook her head.

He would get the last laugh. He always did.

Captain Miller pulled back the power on the right engine. It spooled down in the way engines do seconds before landing. The voices in the back stopped. It was quiet. Calm. Still. The plane seemed light. Suspended in the air.

Then, six minutes and thirty-seven seconds after it had taken off, Flight 1421 crashed.

The bottom of the aircraft hit the water squarely. The ocean's surface was unyielding, like slamming into concrete. The water didn't give. The metal did. The aluminum alloy bent inward, absorbing the force, but the impact was too great. Gashes dotted along the bottom of the plane like Morse code as water burst into the cargo holds.

The plane bounced, going airborne for two and a half seconds, before slamming back down. *Hard.* The right wing clipped the water. Metal sheared like torn paper as it ripped off the airframe. Mechanical entrails poured out as the snapped wing created drag and slowed the forward motion.

If the nose had dipped, if the plane had cartwheeled, if *anything* besides what happened had occurred, the airframe would have broken apart. All lives would have been lost.

But it didn't.

The plane moved across the surface like it was being dragged by the tip of its nose. The left wing—still attached—was raised high in the air. Its engine—still on fire—was a streak of orange flames. The right side took the most damage. Every structural limit was tested. The metal outer skin. The windows. The doors. The seals. Both in the cargo bay and in the cabin. Most held. Some did not.

From the moment of impact until the plane came to rest was nine seconds. Somehow, the plane was still in one piece. The passengers who'd survived the crash thought it was a miracle. They thought they were the lucky ones.

They had no idea that the worst was yet to come.

CHAPTER THREE

SHANNON KEPT SHAKING WILL—BUT he wasn't responding.

"Dad. *Dad.*"

His body was slumped over and tangled up with the man in the aisle seat. Neither moved. The row behind theirs had been ripped out of the floor and collapsed forward, pushing their seats up, pinning her in at the window.

Shannon turned and looked outside. Water was lapping at the windows. The plane was floating on the surface. The tip and end portions of the left wing were gone. But the rest was still attached. So was the engine, which remained on fire. It all hovered over the water's surface because the plane leaned to the right.

She watched the chaos unfolding inside the plane and didn't know what to do. People were bleeding. People were crying. Some were dead.

And she was alone.

"Dad!" Shannon cried in desperation, shaking him harder.

But he didn't open his eyes.

Something tickled on Kaholo's forehead. When he touched the spot and pulled back his hand, he found his fingertips were covered in blood.

Kaholo looked to the left. The engine was still running. The blades were still turning. The fire was still raging. Kaholo squinted into the brightness of the flames, the water, and the sky. That's when it hit him.

Holy shit. We're alive.

He gazed around the cabin, then looked up. An image came into focus.

A laptop. Lodged into the roof of the plane like an axe without a handle. *As we get ready to take off, please check that your seat belts are fastened, seat backs and tray tables are up, and electronics are secured.* The safety demo rattled