

THE FLIGHT

by Charles Rzepka

PROLOGUE

Wednesday, May 10, 2023

As the Boeing 757 picked up speed, spiraling toward the ground somewhere above a cornfield in Iowa, Fletcher ("Fletch") Kraft was surprised to discover two things.

First thing: he felt no dizziness or weightlessness. The horizon was spinning almost vertically past his window, dividing it fore and aft into earth and sky, but his body thought he was still firmly attached to his seat and flying parallel to the surface of the planet at a steady 600 mph, just like the tiny, black screen in front of him had said a minute ago. The seat belt had nothing to do with it.

Second thing: unlike the other passengers on UA 1008, or at least the passengers he could see, he felt calm.

He'd imagined this moment on every transcontinental flight he'd ever taken, and he'd flown this route many times. He'd read the statistics proving that flying was safer than walking past a construction site or crossing the street. How your chances of being struck by a falling I-beam or hit by a car were greater than dying in a plane crash. That is, he remembered the words "street," and "I-beam." He could never remember the exact numbers. Which was odd, because he'd always been good with numbers. And statistics.

Even knowing how improbable it was, Fletcher could never help imagining, at some point above a town like Fostoria—which was, just now, the nearest town to the cornfield surging up at him—what a plane crash would feel like. An engine starts burning, or a bomb explodes in the cargo hold, or an important circuit board controlling a crucial wing flap goes "phhht" and the whole machine flips over with a stomach-fluttering lurch. The panic of the inevitable. Then your seat suddenly breaking free with you strapped in as the plane comes apart—if you haven't already been vaporized. You look over the armrest, or above your head, where the sky should be, and see the ground getting nearer, but taking its time. Or trapped inside, as he was now, with two hundred screaming, weeping, fainting, praying fellow passengers spiraling down toward what he pictured as a big, black doorway in the earth, sliding open to receive them.

Now that it was happening, he was surprised to discover how little he cared, especially considering how much was riding on this trip. It wasn't courage. It wouldn't even qualify as indifference. It was just nothing. As though he'd already fallen through that big, black, gaping hole. He didn't pass out. He didn't

see things in slo-mo or have an out-of-body experience. He just didn't care. It was like half watching an in-flight movie while doing accounts. Soon this scene would end, but then another scene would begin and the rest of the movie would continue with no end in sight because you weren't really paying attention. You weren't really there.

Never having missed a pre-flight safety demonstration, however, Fletch Kraft put on his oxygen mask.

It wasn't until he was waiting with the rest of the passengers at a gate in the Fort Dodge Regional Airport (one of the few nearby where you could land a Boeing 757), that Fletcher remembered to call his wife. He didn't know why it hadn't occurred to him. Long before the plane touched down, the woman next to him—a petite brunette, 30s-ish, with hair fastened up in back by an amber claw clip—had opened her handbag and pulled out her phone, waiting obediently until the moment they landed (and cheers broke out) to swipe up the screen.

"Todd?"

Twenty minutes earlier she'd been clutching her armrests, shoulders raised in a shrug of horror, gasping like a toddler about to blow out a birthday candle. She'd hyperventilated and passed out just as Fletcher reached for the yellow cone dangling in front of her. He slipped the thin elastic bands behind the woman's head and centered the mask over her nose and mouth. At that instant, the one hundred and twenty tons of aluminum, titanium, steel, polyurethane, wool, Formica, polyester, fiberglass, precious metals, curried chicken, deviled egg,

lettuce, filtered water, toothpaste, hand sanitizer, human excrement, urine, blood, bone, muscle, entrails, brain tissue, phlegm, plush-toys, and TicTacs stopped spinning and began to level itself into a wide arc.

The horizon resumed its customary position.

Looking out, Fletcher saw rows of corn marching in lock-step below the window, like in an old, speeded up newsreel, then growing smaller as the nose of the jet angled up and he was pressed further down into his seat. The roof of a barn passed below, followed by a silo and then a sty full of white pigs lying on their sides. Gradually, a square mile of patchwork green and brown began to reveal itself, mottled by cloud shadows and outlined on four sides by grey, ruler-straight roads. Then the plane entered a cloud and there was just grey. The lights came on. Fletcher could see his face in the glass, still wearing his oxygen mask. He took it off.

The woman revived as the captain was explaining where they were about to land "for maintenance."

"Todd?" she repeated, as they taxied to the gate. And then, "Uh-huh, it's Amy." After a pause, she began talking, calmly but in a raised voice, the way tourists do when speaking English in a foreign country.

Fletcher tried to guess what Todd was saying. He could hear the man's voice uncoiling out of the phone, but he couldn't make out the words. That's how he became distracted—wondering what Todd was saying—and forgot to call his wife.

At the gate, waiting for a replacement jet from Nashville, he remembered. Reaching into his jacket, he noticed Amy sitting three rows away and felt a sudden urge to go over and see if he'd guessed right. Plenty of time to call home. His wife was in her studio anyway. Her phone was in the kitchen and she wouldn't leave the barn to eat lunch and go through the mail until 1 pm. Then she'd check her inbox and talk to her agent before leaving to pick up the girls. No chance she'd see or hear anything about UA 1008 until the evening news, supposing she watched the evening news, and supposing the flight made the evening news. No one was hurt, and she wouldn't expect to hear from him until he'd checked in at the Fairmont. With the delay, that would be long after the fog began flowing around Nob Hill, but perhaps just in time for him to say goodnight to the girls before they went to bed.

"Excuse me?"

It was a man in a white shirt and dark trousers. He was holding out a cell phone.

"Did you leave this on your seat?"

She put down her Colleen Hoover and glanced at it.

"No, sorry," she said. "I have mine."

The man stared at her blankly, then looked down at the phone in his hand.

"It's locked. I can't tell who it belongs to."

Amy wanted to tell him to take it to the desk. They'd make an announcement. But the man put the phone in his shirt pocket and continued.

"I can't find my phone. I must have left it on the plane. I guess I was pretty shaken up. They had the plane searched, but they couldn't find it. I need to call home and tell my wife I'm alright."

The plea, though silent, was unmistakable. Amy didn't want to surrender her phone, but then she recognized the man. She hadn't at first because he wasn't wearing his suit jacket.

"You were sitting next to me, weren't you?"

He was the one who put the oxygen mask on her face when she passed out. After what had happened, or almost happened, this struck her as an unmerited act of tenderness. She felt tears coming to her eyes, but refrained from wiping them away and calling attention to them.

"You can use mine." She took her phone out of her purse. "Facial recognition," she said, looking into it, then handed it up.

The man stared at Amy's phone as if he wanted it to recognize him, too. Amy peered into her bag for a Kleenex.

When she looked up again, the man was tapping the screen with his thumb and then moving it up and down. He kept putting the phone to his ear and listening, and then hanging up and jabbing again. "I keep getting the wrong number," he said. "And I can't find her in my contacts."

Amy took her phone and looked at the screen.

"Those are my contacts," she said. She was getting annoyed. "What's her name? Is she on *Twitter*? *What's App*?"

The man looked at her.

"Is it Marilyn?" he asked.

PART I: BOSTON

Wednesday, May 31—Friday, June 2, 2023

Chapter 1

The "ping" came as he was biting into the second half of a Reuben with extra dressing. He laid it down and looked around for his paper napkin. Missing. Not on his lap, either. There it was, between his feet.

"Ping."

Knowing he'd never reach it in time, he stood up, squeezed his way down the aisle with his hands raised, and reached for the napkin holder. After scrubbing at himself with a wad of three, he took out his phone and looked at it.

"mp asap"

He pulled out a twenty from his pants pocket. "Alan," he called to the man behind the counter as he slapped it down. Then he flew out the door into the rain.

It was a ten-minute walk across Fort Point Channel to Continental's Boston office, in the Seaport, but he managed to lumber through it in eight. It wasn't just the rain, which had been threatening all morning, that made him hustle, or the ear-splitting noise from the pile-driver directly across the street. He'd already over-stayed his lunch break, trying for a checkmate on his Lichess

app with LSR 36 ("Laser"? "Loser"? "Elizar"? Avatar: bear. Russian?) when he should have settled for a draw. By the time he lost, his sandwich was cold and his Coke was warm and he couldn't afford to leave them on the counter. He'd just put the phone away when the text came. Monica. The Old Man must be wondering where he was. Again. A missing person could mean a lucrative contract. Often an estate was involved. The case could drag on for months before all the leads were run down. Meanwhile, the meter kept running.

The case turned out to be all of the above, with an attractive spouse on top, like a maraschino cherry. She was sitting in the shiny steel and glass foyer when he walked in. Staff was still depleted by the pandemic and the Great Resignation. Even with the official emergency declared over, there was only Monica to handle internal communications, sort field reports, and greet clients. At the moment, she was nowhere to be seen.

The woman stood up to introduce herself, but he already recognized her from the Arts and Leisure section of the *Globe*. Brit Patterson. She wore what she was wearing in her photo: a Red Sox cap, untucked men's shirt, baggy, faded jeans. Her leather shoes in three colors topped by bright yellow socks didn't appear in the photo. Neither did her freckles. Her hair—in a pony tail with curly strands poking out above her ears—was redder in person. The high cheek-bones made her look professional, the jeans and shirt, Bohemian. Mid-career, late thirties? The *Globe* didn't give her age. It did say that she had two high-school age daughters. She had no purse, and the wet rain-jacket and cap gave her a bedraggled look.

Her bright blue eyes were open wide, staring at him. All six feet five inches and 300 pounds of him. He was used to that.

As soon as she stood up he saw how tall she was, almost to his chin. "Call me 'Brit,'" she said, finally extending a hand. There was a twang in her voice that was too faint to be Deep South—maybe a Border State? Great Plains? Again, the *Globe* hadn't said.

In his office (which wasn't his, the "offices" at Continental being anonymous and interchangeable, like Ikea display rooms), he took her jacket and cap and hung them up, and then, still breathless, sat down at the desk. The chair, an Aeron knock-off, groaned. He asked if she had an appointment.

"It makes no difference, of course," he added, quickly. "I'm just wondering if we slipped up somewhere. I don't have you in my calendar." He wanted an excuse for being late. We. He felt bad about throwing Monica under the bus. "If so, I apologize."

"Oh! No, no!" She made his tardiness sound like it was her fault. "This was on the spur of the moment. I was at the ICA, supervising an installation—I'm a sculptor—when I got the idea. I heard about your agency from a friend a few days ago. You helped with her divorce." Brit mentioned a name, but it wasn't familiar. Probably handled by another operative. "Anyway, I looked up the number and called and the woman asked when would be convenient. I said now, so she said how about one o'clock? That was perfect. We were breaking for lunch, and you're right nearby."

She spoke rapidly. At first he thought she was worried or excited. Later, he realized it was how she spoke, like someone with too much to do and not enough time.

The MP was her husband, Fletcher Kraft. He'd disappeared three weeks ago on his way to San Francisco for a business meeting. Kraft was chief accountant for an international trading firm with offices there and in Boston. The flight had to make an emergency landing in Iowa. He'd vanished while the passengers were waiting for another jet to arrive.

"The police did what they could, and I have nothing bad to say about them." She shook her head. "But really, how can you disappear nowadays with so many ways to find you? How can you—what is it?—'get off the grid' when you're making big muddy footprints as soon as you climb out of bed?"

She told him about Kraft's muddy footprints. For days after the emergency landing she was getting texts updating her on his arrival in San Francisco, how the meetings were going, how he'd have to stay longer to take care of unexpected problems. He said he couldn't call or receive calls because something was wrong with his phone. He'd have it looked at when he got home. Two days after he was originally supposed to get back she went to pick him up at Logan. He never showed. She texted him for another twenty-four hours and got nothing. That's when she called the police in Weston, where she lived. They said he had to be missing for two days before they could act. She said he hadn't communicated in three.

Since Kraft had been on a business trip for a Boston firm, the Weston cops contacted the Boston cops who contacted the cops in Iowa, a town called Fort Dodge, where the plane had landed. A local constable filled out a form and filed it with NCIC. That was the extent of Fort Dodge's official involvement until the next day, when Boston learned that by "communicated," Brit meant text-messaging, not voice. They called Fort Dodge immediately. A detective sergeant named Gale Cowper was assigned to the case. She showed Kraft's photo to airport personnel. One of them thought she'd seen him heading out of the waiting area and toward security. The restrooms were also located in that direction, though, and no one had seen him leave the terminal. Cowper also got in touch with United Airlines, who confirmed that Kraft hadn't re-boarded. As a courtesy, they provided the passenger list for the flight, with contact information.

Cowper emailed Kraft's photo to everyone on the list and got one hit: a woman named Amy Briscoe. Kraft had approached her in the waiting area near the gate to ask if he could borrow her phone. Said he'd left his on the plane, but the flight attendants couldn't find it. He needed to call his wife, he said. But he ended up not calling her and wandered off.

"He seemed confused," said Brit. "Briscoe thought he must have been pretty shaken up by what happened."

"What did happen, exactly?"

"The plane nearly crashed. Something went wrong and put it into a nosedive. The pilot managed to pull out of it just in time." Thus, the unplanned stopover in Fort Dodge.

He remembered. Not top of the screen—no fatalities. But worth some pixels.

Amy Briscoe also remembered Kraft sitting next to her on the plane. He was the one who put her oxygen mask over her face after she passed out.

"That sounds like him," Brit added. "Always calm. Always aware of what's going on around him, of other people." She paused, shook her head. In sadness? It was a gesture hard to read.

"Didn't his business associates call to ask where he was?"

"Fletch keeps his business contacts to himself and I don't want to be on their list anyway. Our professional lives are separate. But the police told me they talked to Transcoastal—that's his company—and found out he sent them a text saying he'd missed his flight that morning after testing positive for Covid and going back to bed. Not true, of course. Also, his phone wasn't working right and he could only exchange texts, like with me."

He hesitated before sharing his first thought. "It sounds like he's trying to throw people off his track. Either that or . . ."

"Or someone found his phone and is trying to impersonate him, right? And not give it away by using their voice. Well, how did they get into it? And if they did, where is he? Why hasn't he tried to reach me?" She didn't sound worried so much as impatient. Not with her husband. With the explanations.

"Could be any number of reasons."

"Like?"

He didn't want to go there, but was pretty sure she'd been there. He put it off.

"Any demands for ransom?"

"The police asked the same thing." Now she was annoyed. "Wouldn't I have told them? And no."

"Most likely, judging from what Ms. Briscoe said, he was disoriented, or has amnesia. That means he should be found sooner or later."

"It's been three weeks."

They were both silent, each waiting for the other to say it: if Kraft wasn't skipping out on her and there was no demand for money, then someone *was* stealing his identity. And if that was the case, and she hadn't heard from him by now, he could very well be dead.

After a few more seconds, he decided to move on. "Any ATM withdrawals or cash advances? Any suspicious credit card purchases?"

"Nothing."

"Any cards of his own?"

She thought about it long enough for him to add, "It isn't legal in Massachusetts to open a line of credit your spouse doesn't know about, but it does happen. Does he have a computer at home?"

"A desktop, in his home office. The police asked to see it, poke around in there. At first, I said no. We respect each other's privacy." She paused, then sighed. "I gave in, eventually, but they couldn't find anything."

"Let me try. I assume he travels with a portable, maybe an iPad, and backs it up when he gets home?" She nodded. "With your permission, I'd also like to search the home office."

"I did that." She looked embarrassed. "That's' how I found his passport. But sure, why not?"

"I'd like to have a scan of that. All the pages. Could you send me one?" She nodded.

"Any relatives? Parents, siblings, extended family?"

"Not that I know of. He was an only child. His mom and dad passed a while ago. He never spoke about any aunts or uncles. Or cousins."

She was sitting back in her chair with her hands folded on her lap and her ankles crossed. Now she leaned forward.

"My older daughter is starting college this fall. She's got a soccer scholarship to cover tuition, but not room and board. I can cover it, but not for long. Not on my own, I mean. And my younger daughter will be graduating from high school in three years. Fletch and I kept our finances separate, but we named each other beneficiaries. I can't touch his estate, or his life insurance, unless he's declared dead, and that can't happen unless we find his body or he's been missing for five years. At least, in this state it can't, right?"

He confirmed her information.

"I'm a single mother now, with an unfixd income. I do pretty well, the work is selling, but I'm paying all the bills for a home in Weston, including taxes.

I'm trying to move, but I haven't found an affordable place with a studio, and I want the girls to finish school with their friends."

He guessed what was coming next. To head it off he began to tell her how much they charged, retainer plus hourly, but not to worry, Continental could spread out the payments and would try to minimize any added expenses Before he got to the hourly, she cut him off.

"Oh—I'm not worried about paying you, and I don't want you to worry." She leaned back, smiling now. "Fletch's company called this morning to ask if I wanted to hire a private investigator. They offered to help. Later I was talking about it to my friend—she's my agent—and your company came up. She made it sound like you could do miracles!"

A big, heartless international corporation paying to help an employee's wife find her husband? *That* would be a miracle, he thought. But Fletcher Kraft might be a valuable asset, depending on how long he'd been with them, directing traffic for maybe hundreds of millions of dollars a year. And there might be corporate secrets involved. "Bodies buried," as they say. Well-positioned employees had access to all kinds of information that rival companies might kill—or worse—for. Or, it might just be a practical matter. Maybe there was no one lower down who was qualified to step in. Maybe there was trouble finding a suitable replacement and getting them up to speed. What did he know? And what did he care, as long as he got paid? And Continental, of course.

"They want to be kept up to date, though."

"So, I'd report to them and to you?"

"Well, it is their money I'm paying you—or rather, they're paying you."

She turned off her headlong flow of words at the faucet, as if she wasn't sure, just then, that she was making sense.

"We'll arrange the payments with Transcoastal," he said, "if you've got their contact information?"

As he rose from the Aeron, he remembered to put his hands on the arms so he wouldn't get stuck.