



ALL RIGHT GOOD NIGHT

WHAT HAPPENED TO MALAYSIAN 370?

OLIVER HOWARD

Oliver Howard

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PREFACE

This novel is inspired and informed by the disappearance of Malaysian Air flight 370 in March 2014. Along with the rest of the world, the author watched in horror and disbelief as the tragedy unfolded and information was withheld, released, retracted and corrected in a confusing and frustrating torrent of events.

A picture eventually emerged which to someone with an inside knowledge of aviation pointed to a deliberate act. An aircraft cannot fly that far, and go through such a complex series of movements, without someone in control.

This led to the hypothesis that the world could now be facing a kind of terrorism it has never seen before. No-one claimed responsibility, but that was also the case in the New York, London and many other terrorist attacks. The question was, where is the terror in making an airliner disappear?

An idea therefore emerged that maybe this was the first action in a wider plan; that we had only seen the beginning, and from that sprang the inspiration for this novel. The author wishes to stress that this is a work of fiction and does not claim to be an accident analysis or—save for the first chapter—a representation of real events which, although they may be similar, are likely to have been completely different.

The author acknowledges and deeply respects the loss and the grief of the loved ones of everyone on board Malaysian 370 and extends his condolences to everyone so affected. It is his sincere hope that this novel does not add to the burden of this tragedy.

If anything, but this is just a dream, it might prevent a recurrence if someone in power had enough foresight and courage to take the premise of this book just a little bit seriously.

The author is a US Airline Transport Pilot with 18 years of international flying in General Aviation. He has flown in most parts of the world, including many remote regions and oceanic crossings, and has first hand experience of most of what he describes. Even so, artistic licence has been taken in the description of some situations.

The author also has a background in IT and was a co-founder of a software company at the dawn of personal computing. This experience provides inspiration and source material for the descriptions of a small group of people who in this novel are turned into terrorists by traumatic events. It is pure fabrication but serves as a conduit for the conflicts and frustrations that exist all over the world today.

The plot may seem far fetched, but so was the idea of flying airliners into skyscrapers until someone did it.

June 2014

Oliver Howard

1. THE FLIGHT

Malaysian Airlines flight 370 lifts off from Kuala Lumpur Airport eleven minutes late, at 41 minutes past midnight on March 8, 2014 on a routine night flight to Beijing. The 227 passengers and 12 crew members on board have six hours of flying ahead of them before their scheduled arrival in China's capital at 6.30 AM. Or possibly eleven minutes later, unless they can catch up on the way.

After twenty minutes' flight, at one minute past one, one of the two pilots on the aircraft reports by radio to Malaysian Air Traffic Control, call sign Lumpur Radar, that they have reached their cruising altitude of 35000 feet, or flight level 350 as it is called in aviation shorthand:

"Malaysian three seven zero, maintaining level three five zero."

Lumpur Radar acknowledges the report by reading back the aircraft's call sign:

"Malaysian three seven zero."

The pilots are following a highway in the sky called Airway R208 which is defined by a string of waypoints used for navigation and reporting. A few minutes later, they are passing over the lights of Kuala Terengganu on the east coast of Malaysia and head out over the dark waters of the South China Sea towards Vietnam in the north-east.

Nineteen minutes past one, Malaysian 370 is approaching a waypoint on their route, named IGARI, which is a few miles

before the end of Malaysian airspace and the beginning of Vietnamese. Lumpur Radar radios a handover message instructing the pilots to call Vietnamese Air Traffic Control for continued services and clearances:

“Malaysian three seven zero contact Ho Chi Minh one two zero decimal nine. Good night.”

One of the pilots replies:

“Good night, Malaysian three seven zero.”

The textbook response would have been: “Ho Chi Minh 120 decimal 9, Malaysian 370,” which includes the new radio frequency in the reply. This is usually followed by a “bye bye” or “good night,” depending on the hour, to soften the precise but frosty nature of aviation English. In fact, by convention, leaving it out would be equal to slamming the door in the face of the controller. Pilots sometimes do it on purpose if a controller has been difficult or uncooperative, but in normal circumstances these little courtesies help oil the wheels of aviation’s complex and delicate machinery.

But the pilot’s slightly non-standard response this night indicates nothing untoward. It is fairly typical of the relaxed nature of routine communications between pilots and air traffic controllers the world over. It is also the last communication from an entirely unremarkable flight which moments later is transformed into the deepest and darkest mystery so far in aviation history.

Two minutes on, twenty one minutes past one in the morning, the response from the aircraft’s radar transponder disappears from Air Traffic Control radar. Nine minutes later, at one thirty, the last radar echo from the plane fades from the screens.

Three hundred tons of Boeing 777 jet airliner with 229 people from fourteen different nations on board, between the ages of 2 and 79, appear to have vanished from the surface of the Earth.

What follows in the coming days, weeks and months is heart-wrenching agony for the hundreds of affected families and friends of all these people.

As time drags on, confusion, contention and controversy ensue as the flight and the reasons for its disappearance are picked over ever more desperately by experts, press and politicians, not to mention social media.

Then conflicts over costs and liabilities start appearing between airlines, authorities, manufacturers and insurers, leaving the bereaved largely sidelined and abandoned.

2. THE GAME

I woke up to a grey morning with an empty feeling as if time had stopped. Then, as I lay watching the hands of my alarm clock jump past noon, I realised it wasn't morning any more, but afternoon, and that time was not standing still after all.

I felt just as dull and grey on the inside as the scene outside my fifth floor bedroom window on our South London estate. A sea of grey concrete set against an empty, grey sky. Small drops on the window showed it was raining as well. Or drizzling, rather. Not even the rain could get going properly.

It was not as if I had been boozing the night before. I had been working. Till five in the morning. It's what I did when I was on a roll. In more ways than one—when things gelled and everything came together beautifully, but also when I had anything to do at all. It was September 2006 and the world was booming, but my work still came in fits and starts. Months of nothing, then months of mad rush to finish a job someone else should have finished six months ago. That's where I was now, and I was nearing the end.

I was a freelance programmer. Yeah, that's right, a geek, a nerd, and I had the looks to go with it—skinny, pasty and even a little spotty from time to time. But it was a living, and I actually liked it. No, I loved it. To me there were few things more fulfilling in life than turning a client's abstract and muddled real-world problem into beautiful data structures and clear, consistent computer code. I was deeply happy when I saw my creations

come alive, and I didn't care if people thought that was a sad, little life. It wasn't, not to me. But it was hard work sometimes.

The other side of the bed was cold and unmade. Omar, my partner, had probably been up early as usual even on a Saturday, and had left the bed like that so as not to wake me. Life started seeping back into me as I got on with my morning rituals—toothbrush, shower, coffee, a slice of toast. Oh, go on Nigel, spoon on the jam, it's not as if you're getting fat. In the end I even made the bed.

"Hello-o, anyone ho-ome?"

It always made me cringe when he did that. Put on his little girl voice. But I put on my glad face.

"Hi-i, look what I-I've got."

It was his dragging out of the vowels that did it. I didn't like it, but I knew he had a need to do it, so it was best done when we were alone.

Omar stopped dead in the doorway and looked at me.

"Hey, what's the matter with you." The voice had gone.

"Nothing. I'm fine." I tried to sound chipper, but only managed to sound like I tried.

"Oh, c'mon Nigel. You're not mad because I've been out, are you?" He didn't know, and I was glad.

"Of course not."

"Because I've been shopping, then?" He was working round to getting me into a position where his spending was my fault.

"No, no. What have you bought?"

"Just a few things. Think you'll li-ike them." The voice was back.

I'd heard him dump something in the corridor, so I knew he was only showing me the least of it. Then when the credit card statement arrived, he'd say "but I showed you that" and look hurt.

Served me right for choosing to live with a woman, I suppose. But when we met I thought he was a man. Well, dammit, you know what I mean. Gay, obviously, but still a man; that's what I had always found for myself. Two blokes together, simple and uncomplicated, in and out of bed. In and out of relationships.

But although Omar was a man from nature's hand, he was a woman on the inside. By the time I found out, it was too late; I was too deeply in love with him. Couldn't tell him about the bits of him I didn't like, would have hurt him too much. And I was afraid he'd leave me, I suppose. He was the kind of person who could just up and leave; he'd done that before; that's how he came to be here. And he satisfied something deep inside me nobody had ever done. In a way precisely because he was a man and a woman at the same time. Sometimes more one than the other, but always both.

That was both wonderful and difficult to live with, but live with it I did.

He held the bag up to my face and cracked it open just enough for me to catch a glimpse of something black, and very thin as far as I could see. I knew we'd have fun with it later and gave him a smile.

"That's better. Now tell me what's up."

"Oh, it's just my morning blues."

“Morning! It’s past one.”

“To me it’s morning. Dunno why, but I got thinking about 9/11. Remember?”

“Remember? Of course I remember. Why, I haven’t got the dust out of all my clothes yet.”

*

Omar grew up in New York but moved north to get a computer degree from MIT. He had just moved back to New York for his first job when 9/11 happened. He lived three blocks from Ground Zero and told me his cereal tasted of it for months. Couldn’t get it out of all the nooks and crannies of his life, so in the end he moved to California. He loved life with the laid back hippie bunch out there but also began to make a name for himself as a programmer and met some important people in the business. When the offers started to roll in, he took a job in London to see some of the world and as an intellectual challenge. He knew that some of the best people in the business were British, and Omar Farid was now one of the most sought-after computer programmers in the UK.

That’s how we met. One day I walked into a meeting with a client and there he was, my golden boy. His Moroccan emigrant father and half Navajo mother had given him a stunningly beautiful, light golden skin and a finely chiselled face. I thought he was a new poster boy for their latest ad campaign and wondered what he was doing with a bunch of nerds discussing updates to the customer database software.

Even when he was introduced as the company’s new head of database resources, I couldn’t believe it. Nobody can look like that and be a geek. But when he opened his mouth, it took me

only a few seconds to realise that this guy was no poster boy. He summed up the job in hand with a few, clear statements in his soft and measured American English, more Boston than New York, that gave away a considerable, but quiet intellect.

His voice also told me he was gay, not by anything that was there, but by the way he was trying hard to conceal it. I just had to look at the way he moved, especially his hands, to be sure. I was completely in awe, and I was also falling head over heels in love. But I didn't think I'd have a chance with someone like Omar. Take a look in the mirror, Nigel.

*

"What about 9/11? Now, I mean. That was five years ago." He raised an eyebrow as he glanced at me quizzically.

"That's just it. Five years and nothing's happened."

"What d'you mean, nothing's happened?"

"Well except for everybody forming neat lines at the airport and nobody daring to joke about Muslims, tell me what's changed. Western capitalism is still running the whole world, the same people are poor. No, the same *nations* are poor. It was just a hiccup."

"Thousands died."

"I know that. But nothing compared to the number of people who die in traffic accidents every year. Or are killed by mundane things like the measles or falling off ladders or something. In fact, I looked it up. Almost the exact same number of people die each year from *ear infections*, for chrissakes. The point is that knocking down a couple of iconic buildings and killing a few thousand people had a short term shock effect, but no real long term

consequences. D'you know, the bastards just adapted to it, fucking evolved, that's what they did. Like Darwin's turtles, they adapted to survive." I had a habit of going slightly off track when I got excited, and I sometimes lost it. But Omar was with me all the way.

"I know. What you gonna do about it?"

"Dunno. Talk about it for starters. At least with you."

"Talk away."

Then I remembered another reason I put up with his girlie stuff. The woman in him made him a tremendous listener, and maybe that's what I couldn't find in a man who was just a man, even if he was gay; a need to be listened to. Really listened to, and understood. Omar wasn't just listening idly, he understood.

The way I understood him. He said he'd never known anyone who figured him out the way I did; that's why we were together. It didn't hurt to know that he hadn't chosen me for my body; nobody ever had, well maybe except for one part of it. I wouldn't have chosen my body if I'd had the chance. But it made me feel good to know he'd chosen me for my mind. I liked my mind.

"What do they call 9/11? I mean, apart from nine-eleven."

"Bush called it Terrorism on day one."

"Precisely. And what's that?"

"Making people fear something"

"Exactly. Making many more people than you could ever kill live in fear of being killed. But that's only the half of it. What's the point of making people fear something if it doesn't lead to anything? And it didn't. Well, not apart from a lot of hullabaloo about security and standing in lines and taking your shoes off and

people can't take their toothpaste on an aeroplane any more. Big deal!"

"Why was that, d'you think?"

"I think it was because there was no follow-through. Maybe not even a plan to do a follow-through. It was like it was just a stab in the dark. And I think the West knew that. All that nonsense about a war on terror Bush talked about was just an excuse to subsidise his friends and a way to get re-elected."

"Which was one and the same."

"Yes. Bin Laden and his merry men did the bastard a favour. Like Khrushchev did for Kennedy."

"He didn't get re-elected."

"No, he got shot. But before that he got popular. And a place in history. Well, alright, he'd have got that anyway by getting himself shot, but Khrushchev made him look like a statesman. He handed him that on a silver plate."

"Krus-who?"

"My point exactly. In fifty years no-one will remember bin Laden's name but people will still remember Bush, even if they mix him up with his dad. Anyway, that's beside the point. The point is that it didn't change anything. As I said, the same people run the world and the same people are dirt poor."

"What should they have done?"

"Attacked again. Before the bastards had time to catch their breath."

"I was there, remember."

"I know. I would have found someone else."

He threw a cushion at me.

"No, but seriously. They should have thrown a second punch. What's a left hook without an uppercut?"

"Shut up. You don't know anything about boxing."

"No, but you get the picture, don't you? Why do all that when all it does is make the enemy stronger and put yourself on the run? Currencies didn't collapse, banks didn't fold, they didn't start fighting each other. That must have been what those guys were after."

"Who?"

"Bin Laden and whoever was behind him. Maybe that's what went wrong, really. Their aim was too narrow. It was religion, or religion and politics; don't think it makes much difference to those guys. But don't forget, in America money is God before God is. They didn't go for the money. Not the serious money."

"Even though they attacked the biggest fucking symbols of capitalism? The two biggest dildos in the world." Omar made eyes like teacups.

"I know. It was all symbolism. Twin Towers, Pentagon, White House. Icons of money and power. Not just in America, for the whole effing West. It wasn't just Jihadists against the West. It was all sorts of people in the West against the West around that time too. Timothy McVeigh wasn't a Jihadist. The IRA aren't exactly Muslim. Waco wasn't a Jihadist siege. The Basques aren't Islamists. I could go on."

"The IRA aren't fighting the US, they get most of their money from them."

"Don't quibble. My point is that to win a war against something as well established as Western capitalism they've got to be a lot smarter. And find ways to work together."

"Good luck getting a bunch of atheists, Protestants, Catholics and Muslims to work together."

"They'll have to think about it, though." Which reminded me of something I'd been wanting to ask him, and I wanted to change the subject anyway. I was working myself up, I could hear it. I was swearing too much; that's always a sign I should give it a rest.

"Did you think about the idea I have for a game?"

"Yes, but how's it going to work? For a start, how's it going to make any money?"

"Doesn't matter. Not to begin with. We need to get a lot of people to play it, then we'll think of something. Advertising, selling add-ons, whatever. There's still a shedload of money to be made on the internet. Not by going public now after dotcom, but by operating out there. Trick is to get a lot of users, then get a small sum off each of them."

"Well, it matters to me. I usually get paid to code," Omar said.

"I know, so do I."

"You call that code?"

I tried to look hurt. I was not in his league, but I didn't mind. He usually didn't browbeat me with it. If he was software's Shakespeare, I was a hack. His code was elegant, inspired, sometimes even divine while the best I could say about my own was that it was solid and reliable. But at least we had a common language, and most of the time we understood what the other said.

And I had the best ideas. I think he knew that even if he never said so.

"You will. Just not now. You'll get share options."

"I'll get fucking founder shares, that's what I'll get." He pretended to be fuming.

It was good natured banter, but it could be about a lot of money if we pulled it off. Omar's swearing was a sign he was getting interested.

"Of course you will," I said. After all, it was 2006 and there was only one way: up, up, up, and everybody thought it would never end. "But let's get it made first."

"No, let's agree on how to share it first. Then we can have fun making it. How do you see it?"

I had thought about some broad outlines, but no details. Not before he'd told me he was interested, so now I had to think on my feet. I knew he would need motivation, so instead of quibbling over percentages I decided to make him an offer he couldn't refuse. Half, can't say fairer than that.

"Thirty per cent each with forty percent set aside for options later."

"Why not just fifty-fifty?"

"Thought I'd make it thirty in honour of your birthday." He had a round one coming up and didn't want to talk about it, so I was teasing him with it. "No, because then we have to issue more shares if we need them for key people later on. Then we'd be diluting the existing shares, and that's a risk. Sometimes people get into fights and start diluting some shares more than others. It's

a source of conflict I don't want to build in from the start." That wasn't just quick thinking; I had seen it happen.

He looked doubtful. Brilliant as he was, he found business boring, and that made him suspicious of anyone who didn't, even me.

"But you could just issue those share options to yourself."

"No I couldn't. As long as they are not issued, thirty-thirty is the same as fifty-fifty. We each have half. In fact that's not a fantastic idea either because that could put us into a deadlock. It would be better if someone had a swing vote, but I don't know who that should be."

"So half the shares each, and half the votes each?"

"Effectively, to begin with. We'll have to agree if and how to start issuing share options. They don't necessarily have to get voting rights. Depends, we'll see how it pans out. We just need to agree on something simple so we don't start fighting when it takes off."

"I agree. Let me think about it."

"Can we talk about the rest in the meantime?"

"Sure. You were talking about some kind of role-play, weren't you? Isn't that where dimwits run round the woods dressed up as Robin Hood?"

"That's just one kind, live action. Role-play started as a board game, but it's huge on-line now."

"OK, so how can we make something that's different?"

"We need to make it more attractive to more people. As it is, players select a role and play it according to a set of rules. I want

people to be able to design their own roles and to some degree set their own rules. And more or less everybody should be able to interact with everybody else as long as everybody wants to."

"What, Vikings against tanks and Romans against machine guns?"

"Maybe not exactly, but in principle, yes why not? If a Roman legion thinks it can take on a machine gun position, let them do it. They may use superior tactics or maybe the Romans had a weapon we haven't heard of yet that could beat machine guns. Players should be able to invent their own weapons. But that's details. The idea is to make the whole thing more flexible, fewer rules, more fun. And the real key is that you can be whatever you want to be."

"Sounds like anarchy. Everybody will want to be generals."

"Yes it's more anarchic than all the other games. That's the whole idea, that's why people will love it. But I don't think everybody will want to be generals. Probably most people want to be heroes. Pilots and tank commanders and spies and things like that. Knights on white horses, double-oh sevens and Red Barons. Anyway, we can regulate that. Make it bloody unattractive to be anything everybody wants to be if that becomes a problem."

"So how do we get anyone to play the boring bits?"

"That's just it. We don't. Instead we provide them."

"You mean the game does?"

"Yes. We'll fill in all the spaces others don't. Who's to say if it's a real live player or one we've generated? That way we also control the whole thing as much as we want."

Omar gave me one of his looks. The one that said “Wish I’d thought of that.” But he didn’t bear grudges, he just quickly adopted an idea if he liked it. That was OK with me, I had plenty more.

“A heck of a lot of programming,” he said.

“Yes but not as much as you think. Most games look like they are hard coded. Each character has its own code. That’s why they are so one-dimensional. We should make our characters generic. Then we basically only have to program one character who can then be made to do whatever we want it to do simply by changing its parameters. You know, all a character does is move up, down, left, right, back and forth. And then they throw things at other characters—punches, stones, sticks, spears, bombs, torpedoes, rockets, nukes, whatever. They’re all the same, it’s just a bunch of different parameters that determine what they look like and how they behave.”

“Sure. Way to go,” he said in a distant voice. He was starting to take it seriously. “Could do the same with the game itself. Or games, there could be lots of different ones. There’s really only one, but we can apply as many sets of rules as we want. And different worlds. That’ll also make it easier for them to interact with each other.”

“And the rules don’t just say what a player can do. They decide what weapons and equipment they have, how it can be used, who can see and hear and do what, and who they can do it to. In fact the whole world, the whole universe of the game is just different rules for different places. The same few processes over and over again, just with different parameters.”

"Brilliant." I could see he regretted it the second he said it. Omar was a sweet man, but he didn't give many compliments. At least not out of bed, but leave that to one side for now.

"That way we can spend a lot more time putting flesh on the characters and on the different games. Instead of cardboard cut-outs they'll come alive. It's a whole new ball game."

"I can see that. Not that I ever played any of them, but maybe that's because they aren't good enough. We're talking multi-player, I guess?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Of course. Multi-player, multi-role, multi-platform. We'll be the most popular game in the Universe in two years."

"Multi-platform?"

"Yes, it's got to work on anything and everything. We can start with PCs, but there's a lot of smartphones out there and many people think tablet computers are the next big thing. We have to run on anything people want to play games on."

"Tablets? Mmm. Not as simple as it sounds."

"I'm not saying we have to do it all right away, and there aren't really any tablets out there yet anyway. We'll go with the biggest platform to start with, just keep in mind it needs to be ported later on. To something we don't even know what is yet."

"Makes sense. Have you thought of a name?"

"That's the easiest part. There are thousands of war games and role-play games and stuff out there. But the one name I had thought of all the time hasn't been used by anybody."

"What's that?"

"TheWar. One word, capital W."

“Great name.” High praise, for the second time in a day. No, in an hour. I was beginning to feel a need to pinch myself. Maybe I was still asleep and it was all a sweet dream.

3. THE FLIGHT DECK

Captain Agung Gupta turns slightly in his seat and looks across at his first officer. Her trim body in the crisp short-sleeved shirt merges into the gloom of the dark flight deck. But her face glows softly in the light from the instruments in front of her, and it makes her even prettier than she is, with her high cheekbones, sensuous lips and dark eyes. Like most Malaysian women she is not very tall, so she has her seat well forward in order to reach the flight controls comfortably, and she has adjusted the rudder pedals as close as she can. Not that they are used much on a jet airliner, but they are important in crosswind takeoffs and landings, and if an engine fails.

First Officer Nurul Sinna is pilot-flying, PF, so she is in charge of handling the flight controls. Which these days mostly means controlling the many settings and modes on the autopilot because most airlines only allow pilots to hand fly the aircraft for very short periods around takeoff and landing. That may sound like she hasn't got much to do, but the exact opposite is true. Often flying the aircraft through the autopilot is more complicated to get right than hand flying, and requires a lot of planning and concentration. But the autopilot is smoother, smarter and more patient than any human pilot. It gives passengers the ride they want—one they can't feel—and it saves the company fuel.

Sinna only joined Air Batam five years ago, and she is intensely proud to have made first officer on the overseas routes at the young age of 28. Most of her contemporaries are still stuck in regional turboprops on the short hops. Her parents are even

prouder, in fact her entire family holds her up so high it's hard to bear sometimes. She is the first to make a success of life away from the village. They all know it has cost her a lot of hard work, and she carefully hides any signs of what else it has cost.

It is just after midnight, and they are flying over a black South China Sea towards Vietnam in the north. Ahead the ocean and sky merge into a big, black hole. Only if Gupta leans forward and looks up can he see the stars; ahead they disappear in the mist like on most night flights this time of year.

Captain Gupta is pilot-not-flying, PNF, which makes him responsible for navigation, communication and the setting and monitoring of aircraft systems. Plus dealing with any anomalies or emergencies that might arise. Those jobs used to keep three pilots busy, but electronics and automation have taken the hard work out of it, and it's now mostly a question of selecting the right screens for display and carefully monitoring the information they present. A bit like a computer game, but at a much slower pace. And with deadlier consequences if he gets it wrong.

The two pilot roles normally alternate between flights except in special circumstances where company Standard Operating Procedures call for the captain to take control. But right now Gupta is relaxed and pleased to see his protégé control the big, complex aircraft with such competence. He even finds it disturbingly erotic.

They have not spoken much in the half hour or so since departure apart from what is needed to do their jobs, but that is not unusual. Departure from a big international airport is a busy time as Standard Instrument Departure procedures are followed to the letter and relief from those restrictions are sought and

negotiated in order to save time and therefore money. At four to five hundred US dollars per minute, flying a big airliner brings a whole new meaning to the saying that time is money. Each pilot has a precise role to play in the delicate dance act they are performing in the sky in order to do the best for their passengers, their bosses and ultimately themselves.

But now they have reached their cruising altitude of 35000 feet, or flight level 350, and things are settling down. They are following a highway in the sky called airway M753 with its succession of waypoints.

“Ninety miles to IPRIX,” says Gupta, calling out the waypoint where Malaysian airspace ends and Vietnamese takes over.

“Twelve minutes.”

“OK, anything you want me to do?”

“No, steady as she goes. I’ll prompt him if he doesn’t call us in the next five minutes.” The captain doesn’t want to draw attention to their flight, but on the other hand doesn’t want to get too close to Vietnamese airspace without clearance. Or, in fact, get into Vietnamese airspace at all. It could be a close call, but he is on top of it.

“Batam 8125, call Ho Chi Minh on one two zero decimal niner, good night.” The call from Lumpur Radar comes as expected just as they are coming up to ten miles from IPRIX.

Gupta bites his tongue as he returns his rehearsed response: “All right, good night.”

It goes against his instinct and training not to use the standard phrases he learnt in basic training and has used ever since. But this night is not textbook, very far from it. The words he speaks

are carefully chosen and rehearsed in order to cause confusion, debate and controversy when this flight is analysed by everybody and their grandma in the coming weeks and months.

THIS IS A PREVIEW OF THE FIRST THREE CHAPTERS

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