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Wet fog was blowing hard from the Farallons into the Bay, forming upward-moving rivulets of water on the BMW's windshield as I drove south over the Golden Gate Bridge. The sky was grey. The morning sun must be up there somewhere, but I would be hard-pressed to prove it. After all, it was San Francisco.

I unlocked my office at seven forty-five, while balancing a Starbucks Vente on my battle-scarred Hartmann briefcase. After setting my stuff down, I opened one of the three double-hung sliding windows in suite 404 of the old brick and mortar building three blocks from St. Anthony's Church in North Beach. The window behind my desk looks west over Columbus Street and frames the orange towers of the Golden Gate, seven miles away. The other two windows face north and look down on a florist, a small Italian grocery, and Buono Serra Restaurant, below on Green Street.

All eight offices on the fourth floor have dark wood-framed opaque glass doors and transoms along a hall reminiscent of a Dashiell Hammett novel. The leasing agent told me that, if I were on the fourth floor at midnight on Halloween, I might see the wisps of Sam Spade and the Black Dahlia climbing the stairs, and maybe smell Spade's cigarette smoke. Still looking and still smelling. Nothing yet.

The Law Offices of John X. McManus has a small reception area where legal assistant Angela DiCecco works at a weathered wooden desk, five lateral file cabinets behind her chair, and four client chairs in front. Not plush, but prospective felons are usually concerned about things other than whether their chair is soft while they wait for their appointment.

My office contains a mahogany partner's desk, a gift from Mary's father when I inauspiciously left the Department of Justice and opened my own office here five years ago. The creased and worn umber leather couch, a veteran of many years in my father's law office, fills most of the south wall. The north and east walls are covered with floor-to-ceiling bookcases holding massive brown and red

volumes of Federal case law, covered by a telling layer of dust. The wall behind my desk is hung with various degrees and bar certificates which, I guess, helps justify my high fees and satiates my ego.

I loved this building when I first saw it. The exuberance and bustle of the Italian neighborhood outside reminded me of South Boston. It also reminds me of Mary.

Angela wouldn't arrive until eight-thirty and my first client was at ten, so I thought I could get some work cranked out before the phones started ringing. But the zen-like quiet was soothing, so I decided to put my feet up on the desk, sip some Starbucks, and catch the early news on TV for a couple minutes.

I switched to CNN. Anderson Cooper was reporting from Phoenix and interviewing people at the airport. They looked grim.

"Lydia Thompson has been waiting since last night for word on her father," Cooper said. "What have you been told?"

"They just don't know," she said, "they haven't been able to get inside the wreckage, too hot, but they said they're hopeful."

"Thank you for talking with us. Two hundred fifty-nine persons, passengers and crew, still officially unaccounted for on yesterday's late-in-the-day American Airlines New York to Phoenix flight number eighteen twenty-one, after the 767 struck ground at full speed just short of the Phoenix airport runway. The fire burned all night. Our prayers are with the families as they wait for any word."

I carefully put down the coffee, put my feet on the floor, sat up straight and stared at the faces on TV. I didn't know what happened but I knew how they felt. Like electricity, I flashed back to Mary and the shooting in Berkeley and my disbelief and grief and rage. My head started to spin.

Then I heard Cooper again. "We have just received word that NTSB accident investigators have confirmed that the captain, Angus Flaherty, and the first officer, Earl Weaver, have been located and confirmed dead."

Dear Jesus. I recalled a distant second cousin, or some relation, named

Flaherty, who was a pilot, but that was years ago. *Couldn't be the same person, could it?* That was unlikely, too much of a coincidence, and I turned off the TV. Life has to go on and I have to get to work.

But, Flaherty?

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At five-fifty the following morning, Frank Kobe and the NTSB investigators touched down at Benito Juarez International Airport in the Gulfstream. The Mexican Dirección General de Aeronáutica had requested the NTSB to assist in the investigation. A cold front had moved through Mexico City overnight and the grey skies still spitted hard, cold rain as Kobe rushed down the stairs to the airport tarmac.

Kobe had investigated so many aircraft crashes during his career that he had lost track of the number and the details. But he had never been able to escape the emotional shock of each. All different. All the same.

The airport was shut down after the crash and later flights diverted to other airports. The wreckage cooled somewhat overnight after the inferno was extinguished. But the broken bones of the 767 were still warm and scattered over the runways and taxiways and parking lots where they fell back to earth after the explosion. The kerosene-chemical smell of jet fuel hung heavy over the wreckage. But it was the other smells that stopped Kobe in his tracks. He always tried to hold his breath to avoid the nasty combination of scorched rubber fuel cells and tires, burnt fabric and aluminum, hydraulic fluid and jet fuel and, of course, human flesh and bone. Not unusual smells for a large airplane crash. But it made his gut wrench. It did that every time he arrived at an aircraft disaster.

Staff from Mexico City's Medical Examiners office were combing the site for incinerated human fragments. Kobe always stayed away from that work. He

did not deal with body bags or body parts. His job was to look at the wreckage for some clue of what went wrong. Like a detective. What happened here two days after the Phoenix disaster? What one thing or combination of things killed all these people?

Airport administration provided Kobe with a large empty hangar to store the wreckage. The NTSB crew had started tagging and transporting pieces of the airplane to the hangar. The small parts were carried by hand. The large parts were carried by truck or fork-lift. All parts were arranged on the hangar floor to correspond with their position on the airplane. Many were so damaged by fire that their location or function was impossible to determine. By the end of the day the hangar floor was covered in aircraft parts.

To Frank Kobe, airliners crash due to system failure, structural failure, sabotage, or pilot error. But in the time he had spent so far walking around this crash site, he had not located any evidence suggesting any of these possibilities.

At two in the afternoon he interviewed Rafael Cervantes, the air traffic controller on duty in the tower directing the Lufthansa 767 at the time of the crash.

“So, Ralph, the Lufthansa was on final approach, right?”

“Yes Sir, that’s correct.”

“And the weather was a few scattered thunderstorms around the airport but no wind shear?” Kobe said.

“Exactly. There were some heavy winds, but no shear and a few scattered showers. That’s why I confirmed the German *aviador*’s approach speed, which he told me was two hundred seventy-eight knots. I confirmed that speed with radar.”

“Tell me what you saw.”

“Just as the *portaaviones* was approaching the end of the runway, about one hundred fifty to two hundred feet above ground, or so, it was almost dark, but what I saw then looked like the red light on the left wingtip start to go down and the green light on the right tip start to rotate up, as if the airplane was going to *vuelta*, uh, you know, roll upside down. After it passed the end of the runway, I

could clearly see that the aircraft was upside down and I saw the top of the cabin fly onto the runway. Aluminum stripped off the top in large strips and all sorts of debris from inside started to spill out and fly around. Then the wings fractured and fell to the runway, and fuel spilled out. *Jesus Cristo*. The fuel caught fire. *Una pelota de fuego*. A fireball, like the fires of Hell.”

Kobe pondered. *Upside down?*“

Anything out of the ordinary before it reached the runway?”

“Well, yes. I got a call from the *aviador* when radar showed him just under six kilometers out starting down the landing path. He asked if we were having any problems with the landing system’s transmitter. I checked and then and told him no, everything looked good, and asked what the problem was. He said the autopilot was trying to adjust the airplane away from the programmed direction and he may have to fly the approach manually. I cleared him to land. That’s all.”

“Thank you, Ralph.”

It was late in the day, still grey, still raining, and Kobe was exhausted. But he couldn’t get the image of the 767s last moments out of his head. *Upside down? How can that be?* He walked around the assembled wreckage in the hangar. He stopped and studied the remnants of the cockpit windscreens. He then looked at the aluminum panels stripped from the top of the fuselage behind the cockpit. He looked at the vertical stabilizer, the rudder and wingtips. All damage was to the top of the airplane, not the bottom. He squatted down by the left wingtip, pulled a package of Pall Mall’s from his leather jacket’s pocket, pulled one out, tamped it on the package, placed it between his lips, and lit it with his Zippo lighter. He knew the dangers and tried to limit his cigarettes to three a day or less. But he needed one right now. He took a deep drag. He slowly surveyed all the aircraft parts and debris spread out on the floor.

The evidence was inescapable. No doubt about it. The top of the cabin had been ripped back, stripped up and back, like the top of a sardine can. When the top of the cabin hit the runway, when the airplane was upside down, when the wings

flexed toward the runway, they struck the runway and cracked open and disgorged thousands of gallons of jet fuel that was immediately ignited by the engines. *The perfect cataclysm.*

The rain peppering the corrugated metal hangar's roof sounded like buckshot hitting a pie tin. The rainfall got heavier, the noise got louder. Kobe was thinking about the day and listening to the rain sounds echo off the metal walls inside the building. He tried to connect the dots but no explanation came to mind. He dropped his cigarette butt to the hangar floor and crushed it with his shoe.

His watch showed six in the evening. But he didn't recall what time zone it was set to. The other NTSB people had gone to the hotel for their first meal since arriving. But Kobe wasn't hungry. Nothing he saw helped him figure this out. *This makes no sense. Rolling a 767 upside down just before landing is not pilot error. It's insanity.*

But the NTSB preliminary report didn't have a box to check for insanity as a cause.