

*THE*  
*NIGHT STRANGERS* *a novel*

*NEW YORK  
TIMES  
BESTSELLER*

"Boasts all the trappings of a classic gothic horror story . . . That thump thump you hear as you read is only your heart leaping from your chest."

—WASHINGTON POST

CHRIS  
BOHJALIAN

BESTSELLING AUTHOR of *MIDWIVES* and *SECRETS OF EDEN*

# Praise for THE NIGHT STRANGERS

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A BOOKPAGE BEST BOOK OF 2011

A GOODREADS CHOICE FINALIST, BEST HORROR BOOK OF 2011

“[Bohjalian] earns a place alongside Stephen King as the master of the Halloween beach book. This ghost story is expertly and, at times, beautifully written, deliciously creepy, and, like a bag of trick-or-treat loot, silently calls out to you when it’s languishing on the night table.”

—*Boston Globe*

“A good read for those who like a dash of creepiness.”

—*New York Times*

“Boasts all the trappings of a classic Gothic horror story, reminiscent in places of the spousal secrets in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Young Goodman Brown*, the thrills of *Rosemary’s Baby*, and the psychological frights of Daphne du Maurier. That *thump thump* you hear as you read is only your heart leaping from your chest.”

—*Washington Post*

“Shades of *The Shining* make for a haunting tale ... A modern-day ghost story worth losing sleep over.”

—*Family Circle*

“A delicious and haunting tale.”

—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“This unsettling latest from master storyteller Bohjalian will keep you up at night.”

—*People magazine*

“Good ‘n’ spooky.”

—*Good Housekeeping*

“*The Night Strangers* has all the hallmarks of a good ghost story, but ... Bohjalian has put his own 21st-century spin on the supernatural genre in his frightening new novel.”

—*CNN*

“You will close the book’s covers totally satisfied, aware that this masterful storyteller has done it again.”

—*Seattle Times*

“Put a haunted man in a haunted house ... and you have a Halloween hair-raiser. But it’s more than that. Bohjalian, with a dozen well-received novels to his credit, understands trauma: how long it takes to recover from unimaginable pain, and how people who have

never experienced it rarely understand.”

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—*Yankee magazine*

“A good, spooky narrative.”

—*Hartford Courant*

“A spellbinding, heart-pounding novel ... This is one perfect book for Halloween.”

—*BookPage*

“An atmosphere worthy of Edgar Allan Poe.”

—*Book Report*

“Bohjalian uses a clean-edged pen to dice, toss, and serve a gasp-inducing plot that is ghost story meets psychological thriller.... The book has a spellbinding clutch ... it will test your courage and resolve ... [It] will invade your world.”

—*Armenian Week*

“Masterfully crafted ... a suspense-filled ghost story set in rural New Hampshire ... This is a great read filled with real-life characters, an intricate story line, and just enough ‘spooky.’ ”

—*Grand Rapids Press*

“This moody, atmospheric story chills the bones and doesn’t let up until the last brutal page. It is a creepy, gothic mystery just right for Halloween.”

—*West Virginia News and Sentinel*

“Bohjalian has crafted a genre-defying novel, both a compelling story of a family in trauma and a psychological thriller that is truly frightening. Fans of Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones* and Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* and *The Robber Bride* will find similar appeal here.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“A gripping paranormal thriller ... Meticulous research and keen attention to detail give depth and character to [the] eerie world.... Bohjalian is a master, and the slow-mounting dread makes this a frightful ride.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“A page-turner of uncommon depth. Guilt, egotism, and fear all play parts in this genre-bending novel.”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

“Compelling ... a practical magick horror story.”

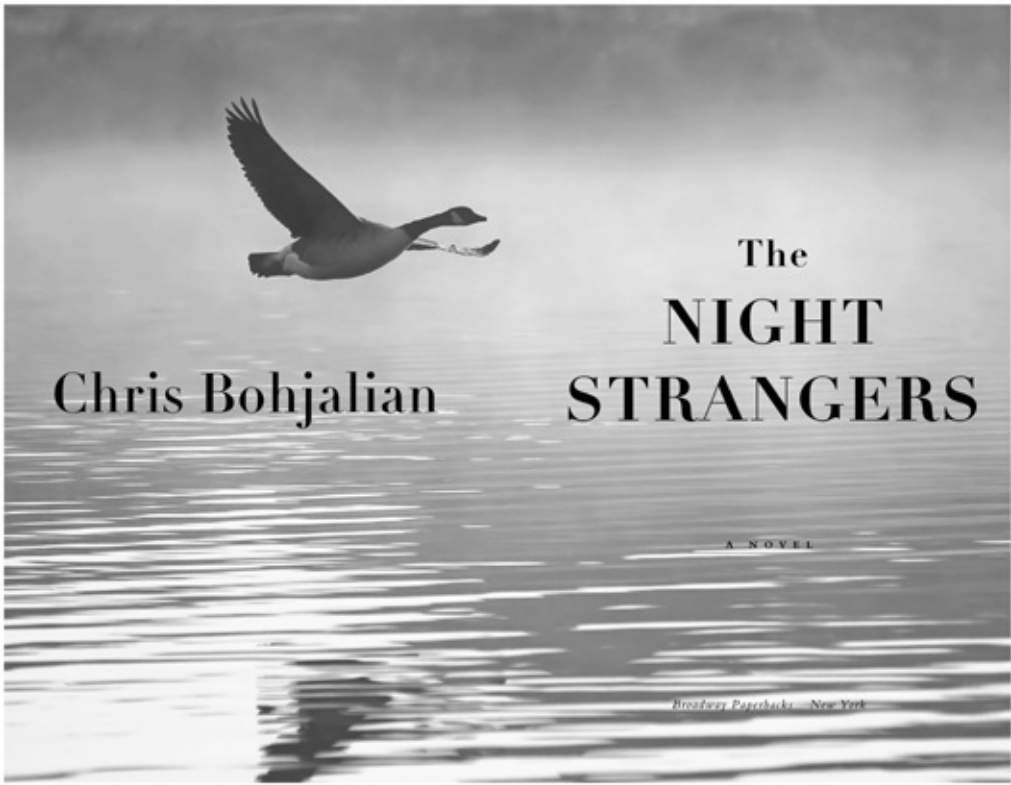
—*Kirkus Review*

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Chris Bohjalian

The  
**NIGHT  
STRANGERS**

A NOVEL

Broadway Books, New York



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# Contents

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*Cover*

*Other Books by This Author*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*Dedication*

*Epigraph*

Prologue

Part I

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Part II

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Part III

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Part IV

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty



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# Epilogue

*Acknowledgments*

*Excerpt from The Light in the Ruins*

*Reading Group Guide*

*About the Author*

~~Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners.~~

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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Othello*

*Dead ... might not be quiet at all.*

MARSHA NORMAN, *'night, Mother*

## Prologue

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The door was presumed to have been the entry to a coal chute, a perfectly reasonable assumption since a small hillock of damp coal sat moldering before it. It was a little under five feet in height and just about four feet wide, and it was composed of barnboard and thick pieces of rough-hewn timber. Its most distinguishing feature was not its peculiarly squat visage—and if a person were predisposed to see such things in the dim light of the basement, the knobs on the wood and the character of the planking did suggest the vague shadow of a face—but the fact that at some point someone had sealed the door shut with six-inch-long wrought-iron carriage bolts. Thirty-nine of them ringed the wood and the door was all but impenetrable, unless one were feeling energetic and had handy an ax. The door glowered in an especially dank corner of the basement, and the floor before it was dirt. The fact was, however, that most of the basement floor was dirt; only the concrete island on which sat the washing machine, the dryer, the furnace, and the hot-water tank was not dirt. When most prospective buyers inspected the house, this was their principal concern: a floor that seemed equal parts clay and loam. That was what caused them to nod, their minds immediately envisioning runnels of water during spring thaws and the mud that could be brought upstairs every time they did laundry or descended there to retrieve (perhaps) a new lightbulb or a hammer. It was a lot of largely wasted square footage, because the footprint of the house above it was substantial. As a result, the door was rarely noticed and never commented upon.

Still, the basement walls were stone and the foundation was sturdy. It capably shouldered three stories of Victorian heft: the elegant gingerbread trim along three different porches which in the greater scheme of things weighed next to nothing, as well as the stout beams that weighed a very great deal but stood invisible behind horsehair and plaster and lathe. Though the first-floor ceilings were uniformly twelve feet and the bedrooms' and sitting rooms' that marked the second and third floors no less than ten, the height of the basement ceiling wavered between six and eight feet, and—underneath an addition from 1927—a mere four feet. The floor rose and fell like beach sand. Further capable of inducing claustrophobia were the immense lengths of copper tubing for gas and hot water, the strings of knob-and-tube electrical wiring (some live, some dead), and the horizontal beams that helped buttress the kitchen, the living room, and the dining room. The den. The library. The bright wide entry hallway and the thinner, dark corridor that snaked behind the kitchen to the back stairs and the pantry. The copper tubing looped together in Gordian knots near the furnace and the hot-water tank. This piping alone scared away some buyers; it certainly scared away many more than did that door. There were strategically placed jack posts in the tallest sections of the basement and a railroad tie turned vertical in the shortest.

In the years the house was for sale—one real estate agent attributed her inability to sell to the unwillingness of the cantankerous, absentee owner to accept anything but the asking price, while another simply presumed it would take time for the right sort of family to express serious interest—all of the prospective buyers were from out of state. A great many were from Boston, enticed north into the White Mountains to see a house advertised in the

*Globe* real estate section as the perfect weekend or retirement home for families that would appreciate its sweeping views of Mount Lafayette or the phantasmagoric foliage offered each autumn by the sugar bush to the south and the east. It was only twenty minutes from a ski resort. Still, almost no one with any familiarity with the property—and that was the right term, with its connotations of acreage (nineteen acres split between forest and meadow crossed by a neighbor for hay) and outbuildings (two, including a garage that had once been a carriage barn and a small but workable greenhouse)—showed any desire to buy it. No one from the nearby village of Bethel even looked at it, viewing it as a house with (and this was the euphemism they were likely to use) a history.

At the same time, few of the agents who brought flatlanders from Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania to see the house ascribed its years on the market to the door in the basement or the thirty-nine carriage bolts that sealed it shut.

When your airplane hits the flock of birds, the passengers in the cabin behind you feel the jolting bangs and the aircraft rolls fifteen degrees to its starboard side. The birds are geese, and it is not uncommon for you to see them from the flight deck as your plane begins its climb out of Burlington, Vermont. In this particular departure corridor, you see geese, crows, seagulls (lots of seagulls), and ducks all the time. The geese are flying perhaps forty miles an hour, traveling in formation from one feeding area to another, angling south from Malletts Bay, the animals always careful to keep near their cohorts. Today your aircraft is a Bombardier CRJ700, a regional jet that seats seventy passengers, two pilots, and a pair of flight attendants. This flight has forty-three passengers and three attendants, two on duty who have been with the airline for over a decade and a half, and another who is merely commuting home to Philadelphia and has almost as much experience. Both working flight attendants are, by any standard, immensely competent. You do not know them well, but you have gotten to know them both a bit over the last four days together. Likewise, the pilots (you may be so bold) are skilled, too, though your first officer has only been flying for three years. (The reality is that you and Amy have not been doing your jobs as long as the flight attendants have been doing theirs.) But Amy Lynch is smart and funny, and you have enjoyed working with her the last few days, as you have flown between Washington, Pittsburgh, Charlotte, Columbus, Philadelphia, and finally Burlington. She has nearly thirty-five hundred hours of flying time, twenty-one with you over the last four days. You are a veteran who has been flying for fourteen years, and you have finally lasted long enough for there to be talk that soon you may get to start training on an Airbus simulator and begin your climb to a considerably bigger plane and a considerably bigger salary. You have twin daughters, and in eight years they will start college: That bigger paycheck matters, as does the esteem that comes with a 154-seat jet.

This afternoon you see the birds, each with a wingspan almost the length of a man, just a second after your first officer does. She happens to be handling the takeoff. But the moment you fly through the drapes of geese—there it is, the sound you have always likened to a machine gun, the violent thud as each animal careens like a bullet into the metal and glass of your aircraft—the plane wobbles briefly to its side as first the left engine and then the right flame out. Most of those geese must weigh ten or eleven pounds each, and when they careen into the engines, the animals' bones and feathers and flesh are turned almost instantly to jam.

and then almost as quickly incinerated. The passengers don't know what they are smelling but they know there is a stench in the cabin that they have never inhaled during a takeoff before, and combined with the way the aircraft has pitched to starboard, they are experiencing what even the most frequent flyers would describe as an uh-oh sensation as they peer out the fuselage windows.

Meanwhile, you say "my airplane" and you take the controls. You flip on the APU, the backup generator in the tail of the plane, because a few years ago Chesley Sullenberger did this when his jet plowed through geese over the Bronx, and now turning on the APU is a part of the emergency checklist. You tell Amy, "Ignition on," although you are quite sure that the wrecked blades have completely ripped the engines apart and neither will ever reignite: You can see on the instrument panel that the engine speeds are at zero. Nothing inside the turbines is spinning because whatever metal is there is now scrap and shard. But it can't hurt to have your first officer try to restart the engines while you find the best spot to bring the plane down. "Airspeed, two hundred and forty knots," you say, the best glide speed for the jet—the speed that will give you the longest possible glide.

And while radio communication is your lowest priority this second, you do tell the tower that there has been a bird strike. You begin with words that sound at once foreign and cinematic in your mind because you never anticipated saying them: "Burlington, we just had a bird strike and are declaring an emergency."

"Roger. What do you need?" a cool female voice in the tower responds.

"Stand by," you tell her simply, trying to focus. After a moment, she offers you a heading in the event you want to return to Burlington.

And, indeed, your first instinct is to make a wide, sweeping circle and land back at the airport. You left to the northwest on runway 33; perhaps you could loop back around and land on runway 15. But making a turn that large will cause the plane to lose a lot of altitude and right now you're only about twenty-five hundred feet in the air. You weren't quite half a mile above the Champlain valley when that flock of geese darkened your windshield like a theater curtain. Your instincts tell you that you are never going to make it if you try for runway 15.

"Not happening," you tell the tower. "We have no thrust in either engine." An emergency landing at the airport is impossible.

And when you hear that voice from the tower next, you detect a twinge of panic in the usually professional façade: "Roger. State your intentions."

You project alternate flight paths, scanning the Champlain valley. Maybe instead of Burlington you could glide across the lake to Plattsburgh—to the airport there. The old Army Force base in upstate New York. You can see the area in the far distance to the right, and the angle of the runways looks promising. But it's not likely you have anywhere near the altitude or the speed to make it. And even if you do coax the crippled airliner across the lake, you will still have to adjust your approach: The angle of the runways is promising, not perfect, which means you might be crash-landing in a populated area. Moreover, the CRJ has very low wings. Not a lot of clearance as you scoot along ground that isn't a long, flat patch of pavement. It would be easy to catch a wingtip and lose control. You have seen your share of videos of planes cartwheeling along the ground into fireballs.

But you have to bring the plane down somewhere, and you have to bring it down soon.

Neither engine has restarted.

You know well how that other captain managed to crash-land a powerless jet—and that was an Airbus 320, an oil tanker compared to this relatively petite CRJ—in the Hudson River one cold but crystal clear January afternoon. It was considered a miracle, but mostly it was just excellent flying. Chesley Sullenberger had flown commercially for twenty-nine years and prior to that had been a fighter jock. Twenty-nine years versus your fourteen. Arguably, a considerable difference. But you still have a boatload of hours in the air.

Likewise, you know the story of the Lockheed Electra turboprop that sailed into thousands of starlings—some people estimated as many as ten thousand—on October 4, 1960. The plane and the birds collided seconds after takeoff from Logan Airport, only four hundred feet above the water in Boston Harbor. The engines stalled and the plane plummeted into the water, more than two hundred yards from shore. This was no gentle, seemingly slow-motion glide. There were seventy-two people onboard. Miraculously, ten survived, largely because of the flotilla of small boats that descended on the wreckage.

And now it is August, and though the sky is that same cerulean blue as it had been the January day over New York, it is downright muggy outside. Before you looms Lake Champlain, wider than the Hudson but still long like a river. You notice two ferryboats, one venturing west to Plattsburgh and the other motoring east to Burlington. There must be a dozen sailboats. And there is the crystalline surface of all that warm August water. Warm August. Water. You will bring your plane down there—nose up so the aircraft doesn't flip—because it is your best option. It is, perhaps, your only option. You have two dead engines and the speed of the aircraft's descent is accelerating. You will do precisely what Sullenberger did on the Hudson. You've read all about it. All pilots have.

The tower is asking you again where you want to land. That voice once more brings up Burlington. She tells you that they have stopped all incoming and outgoing traffic there. The she suggests Plattsburgh.

"I'm going to use the lake the way he used the river," you tell her evenly, not specifying who *he* is because you don't have time and, really, you were just thinking aloud when you added that to your tower communication. And already you are turning your plane from the northwest to the south and watching the water start to rise up.

You wish it were possible to dump the fuel on this CRJ, and not simply because you fear an explosion and fire; you know that the plane would float longer if there were more air in the tanks. Still, the plane should float long enough if you do this correctly. And so you descend as if you were approaching an ordinary runway, nose up, flaps full. The ground proximity warning system kicks in, and a computerized voice starts repeating, "Terrain. Terrain. Terrain." Soon it will become more urgent, insisting, "Pull up. Pull up." As if you didn't know. Behind you, your passengers in the first rows hear it, too.

In a moment you will give the command every captain dreads: "Brace for impact." Then you will skim across Lake Champlain, landing from the north a few minutes past five on a summer afternoon, and your passengers will be rescued by those ferryboats and sailboats. They will not face the frigid waters of the Hudson River but will instead wait on the wings of the gentle summer bath of a New England lake or bob on the waves in those garish orange life rafts.

"Thrust levels all idle," Amy tells you, shaking her head, just a trace of anxiety in her

usually giddy, usually playful voice.

Without thrust, landing the plane will be all about pitch. Lowering the nose will give you more speed and a longer glide; raising it will slow the aircraft and shorten your time in the air. You want to belly into the lake as gently as possible, though *gentle* is a relative term. The water can feel like granite to the underbelly of a jet if you hit it at the wrong angle.

“No relight,” Amy tells you, essentially reiterating what she shared with you just a moment ago, speaking louder now because, in addition to having to be heard over the synthetic Cassandra telling you to *pull up, pull up, pull up*, your flight deck is alive with emergency chimes and bells and a controller who wants you in Burlington or Plattsburgh or (Did you hear this correctly?) the interstate highway in New York that runs parallel to the lake. But the asphalt linking Albany and Plattsburgh is no more an option than the asphalt on the runways at the airports on either side of the water. No, you will use the lake the way Chesley Sullenberger used the river, and soon your passengers will be wrapped in blankets on the decks of the ferries.

The plane is eighteen rows long along one side but only seventeen on the other so there is room for a second lavatory at the front of the aircraft. There are two doors at the front of the plane and two over the wings at row fourteen (though that is actually the unnamed thirteenth row). Everyone in the passenger cabin is agonizingly aware of their proximity to those four exits, but perhaps no one is more focused upon them right now than Ethan Stearns as he sits in an aisle seat in the very last row, barely a foot and a half from the rear lavatory. It is not his own safety that has him calculating in his mind the speed with which he will be able to fight his way through the chaotic, merciless swarm to those exit windows, assuming the plane actually remains intact after it hits the surface of the lake; it is the safety of his young daughter, Ashley, who is sitting in the window seat beside him. His wife, Ashley’s mother, is ten rows ahead of them. The plane is not full, but it seemed like a lot of work to have the gate agent reassign their seats so they could be closer together on the short trip to Philly. So, instead of his wife in the row ahead of him, there is a man he knows nothing about and a woman who, based on something she said into her cell before the doors were locked and armed, had just interviewed at the IBM facility in Essex Junction, Vermont.

His wife, he realizes, is five rows from the exits over the windows and just seven from the front doors of the plane. He and Ashley are five rows from their only real shot from the aircraft, the window exits. His mind has already done the triage and the odds: His wife is more likely to survive than either he or their eight-year-old daughter. His eyes meet his wife’s when she turns back to glance at Ashley and him. He smiles; somehow, he smiles. He reminds himself as he gazes around his lovely little girl’s head—which is pressed so close against the glass that he can barely see out of it—that the guy who landed an Airbus in the Hudson got everyone out alive. It’s not like they’re about to slam into a mountain or a skyscraper. He makes sure that her life jacket is tight around her waist and he understands how to inflate it once they are outside the plane. He had barely had time to find it under her seat and figure out how to pull it from its bag and unfold it. He never did find his. He guesses no more than three or four other passengers have donned life jackets.

“Brace for impact!” the flight attendant is telling them. “Brace for water landing! Heads down, heads down, heads down!”

“When we come to a stop in the water, we are going to race for that window exit,” he tells his girl gently, whispering into her ear, trying to sound as serene as the flight attendant’s sounds urgent. “Okay? I am going to lift you up and carry you like we’re racing through the crowds on Main Street in Disney World. You remember, when the park’s closing for the night after the fireworks and we’re racing for spots on the monorail?”

“But I can’t swim that far,” she stammers, her voice a little numb.

“That’s why you have a life jacket,” he tells her. “The key is to scoot out of the plane with me, that’s all. Your mom will already be waiting for us because she’s a little closer to the exit.” Then his eyes go back to his wife’s, and her terror is like an electric shock. The cabin eerily quiet because the engines aren’t working, and the passengers are mouthing the prayers or texting or staring in mute wonder as the plane seems to be descending beneath the Burlington skyline to the east and the Adirondack foothills to the west.

“Do not wait for us!” he finally says to his wife, uncaring that it is like shouting in a cathedral during silent prayer. “I’ll have Ashley! Just get out of the plane!”

Once he has spoken, broken the spell, others start offering advice. Someone, a man, yells for the women and men in the exit rows to be prepared. Someone else starts yelling out how many feet above the lake water he believes they are.

Ethan finally pulls his daughter’s head from the window, kisses her on the cheek, and then pushes her down into the brace position. Then he joins her, but he wraps his left arm around her shoulders, as if he actually believes he is strong enough to protect her from the impact of a passenger jet augering into a lake at 150 miles an hour.

The captain never thought the door in the basement in any way resembled the over-wing exit doors on an airplane. Or even a main cabin door. Which, of course, it did not. But much later his new therapist, when the captain and his family had moved from Pennsylvania to New Hampshire, would probe this connection. A squat door? A pilot with PTSD? How could a psychiatrist not mine this possible connection? But of all the things the captain saw in the door in that dusky corner of the basement in the house they had bought, a locked and armed passenger jet door was never among them.

And, indeed, a Hudson River–like landing is precisely what might have occurred, and you might have wound up a media darling just like that Sully Sullenberger. But soon after you have told the cabin to brace for impact and your plane has skimmed onto the lake—tail first underbelly then nose, a hard landing but picture perfect—there is a high wave. It curls up from the wake of one of those ferryboats—the one that had been churning its way west—as it starts to turn around to aid the plane that is bearing down fast upon the water. The crest is just tall enough and just sudden enough that it smacks the left wingtip of the aircraft. For a tiny fraction of a second you are eye to eye with the foam. And then, before you know it, the one thing you had wanted to avoid is occurring. Suddenly the CRJ is not coasting along the glass of the lake as you had planned—had envisioned—but is vertical to the water. And then it is somersaulting, slamming down hard, that great metal underbelly facing the sun, and the passengers, who had been merely terrified into a prayerful silence, are now disoriented and screaming. You hear them through the metal door of the flight deck. Others already are dead.



though you will only learn this later, because when the plane bangs back into the water the second time, it breaks into halves and the passengers in rows ten through fourteen are slammed headfirst into the fuselage as it collapses or are decapitated by the jagged metal edges. Others are starting to drown that very instant as the lake water—yes, warmer than the Hudson that day in January but still a shock to the system if you are upside down in an airplane and strapped tight by a strong nylon belt into a seat—begins filling the two halves of the blackened cabin.

But the fuel does not explode and the surface of the lake will not become a firestorm. And so not everyone will die. Of your forty-three passengers, four crew members (including yourself), and one deadheading flight attendant, nine will survive. Nine somehow will manage to unhook their seat belts, though in some cases their heads already are underwater and claw or swim their way the six or eight yards to those gaping holes in the fuselage. (As that talk in the plane about exit doors, all that calculation about proximity and survival. None of it mattered for most of the passengers, because the plane split in half like a baguette torn in two.) They will push past those who are already dead, past dangling wires, laptops, computers, briefcases, backpacks, magazines, seat cushions, slim plastic bags with uninflated life vests, and the daggerlike shards of metal, everything—the harmless and the murderous—bobbing together amidst the bubbles like jellyfish. Despite broken bones and deep cuts and sprained legs and arms, they will kick their way away from the plane before the large pieces start to disappear completely underwater.

As, somehow, will you. Reflexively you will release your five-point shoulder harness (you will only be later that you will see and feel the eggplant-colored bruise the buckle left just below your sternum), and you will unbuckle your first officer, squinting in the tiny flight deck that already is filling fast with lake water, not completely disoriented because there are streaks of light to your left that must be afternoon sky. You hope Amy is merely unconscious and not dead (only that evening will you look back on the moment and realize by the way her skull was dangling that her neck was broken and your efforts were meaningless). Then you pull open the door to the cabin, initially twisting the chrome knob the wrong way because you are upside down, and the water rushes in and knocks you and your first officer against the back of your seat, but you wrap one arm around her and take a deep breath and swim into it, your eyes above the surface of the water and then, suddenly, not. So you swim with physical references, a combination of muscle memory and what you saw before the water was over your head, feeling along the flight attendant's jump seat (he's not there, a good sign, perhaps) and then to the exit door. You pop your head above the roiling water inside the aircraft, desperate for air, discovering that what had been perhaps three feet of air is now down to inches because of the speed with which the plane is sinking. You take another deep breath and paw your way down the metal until you have found the door's emergency lever. Again, momentarily you forget that the aircraft is floating upside down, and you can't understand why you can't open it. But then you recall where you are and manage to flip the lever and shoulder the door free, and with Amy still a great, dead rag doll in your arms, you shimmy through the opening against the water, briefly catching the cuff of your uniform pants on an edge, and out onto the surface of the lake. Miraculously, you are free. You are alive. Perhaps everyone is alive. (Later, you will wonder how you could possibly have thought that for even a moment.) You hold Amy under her arms, treading water madly.

strangely aware of your shoes, gulping in great gasps of air, your throat and your sinuses on fire from the water that has gone up your nose, until there is someone beside you—no, above you and beside you—in a sailboat. Someone is in the sailboat, the sail a beautiful, billowing red canvas that is blocking out the sun, and he is reaching down for you. And someone else from that sailboat is jumping into the lake, a fellow perhaps half your age, and together they are lifting your first officer from your arms and into the small craft. There are sirens you hear clearly, and so automatically you turn your eyes to the east, surprised by how well you can see the Burlington waterfront and the crowds that are forming along the ferry dock and along the bike path and along the walkway beside the aquarium. Boys in T-shirts and shorts, and girls in wispy summer dresses. It's as if they are lining the streets and expect a parade.

Again, however, this is an image that only registers in your mind later, when you are on a boat. One of those ferryboats. Perhaps the one that had inadvertently finished up what the geese had started, destroying your aircraft once and for all. Mostly what you are seeing as you kick through the agitated ripples and waves, the water in your mouth at once earthy and bitter with jet fuel, are the two halves of your plane starting to disappear, and how the starboard wing is gone. Just gone. Is it already wafting its way in slow motion to the bottom of the lake, alongside all of those seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cannons and warships and Abenaki canoes? Apparently. You are aware of your few surviving passengers, one in an uninflated life jacket, swimming or dog-paddling toward the boats, which now seem to be everywhere. But not all of the survivors are trying to work their way through the water made choppy by all those boats and a plane that doesn't belong. There is a woman, perhaps thirty-five, looking around madly and crying out someone's name as she treads water. It is a girl's name. Ashley. And you have a sick sense that she is crying out the name of the child you happened to notice board the aircraft with a Dora the Explorer backpack. She had blond spring curls and was seven or eight years old. Perhaps two years younger than your own little girl. Your and your wife's twins. She had peered into the flight deck and smiled at you, and so you had smiled back. There is a man whom you pegged as your age, somewhere around forty, who keeps coming up for air and then diving back under the water, and finally starts swimming back toward the slowly disappearing rear half of the jet. And so you swim that way, too, once your first officer has been lifted from your arms, to see if there are other survivors you can pull from the fuselage, swimming past and between the floating bodies of people in short-sleeved sport shirts and summer-weight business jackets. But you don't get far because out of nowhere two strong-armed college boys appear in the water beside you and are—as if they are lifeguards—pulling you away from the wreckage of the plane. Your plane.

You try to resist them, to explain to them who you are, but you haven't the strength and your words are lost in the sobs and wails and the idling engines of the ferries and a Coast Guard motorboat that now has arrived on the scene. Besides, they know. They know precisely who you are. You're wearing your uniform, all but the jacket and the cap. So, you allow yourself to be brought to that ferryboat and hoisted aboard. And there you stand in silence, suddenly aware of the great gash along your forehead (all that blood you had presumed was simply water) and how there is something wrong with one of your ankles and how your ribs hurt like hell. You stand there, most of your weight on your good ankle wrapped in a blanket you're not sure you need, and watch the rear half of the plane, still belly up, recede once and for all beneath the surface of the lake.

~~I~~ t would be the captain's wife, a lawyer two years younger than the captain who specialized in estate planning and did the heavy lifting when it came to raising their twin girls, who would see the advantages of finding a house that offered both relative seclusion and vistas that might feed her husband's battered soul. Emily Linton was two years shy of forty when Flight 1611 flipped onto its back like a killer whale at a SeaWorld performance. Her husband was not deemed responsible for the tragedy (that onus would be hung round the remains of the cooked birds), but neither was he Sully Sullenberger. The media's interest in him would wane once it was clear that he hadn't made an egregious mistake but neither had he successfully ditched a commercial jet on the water. And their lack of attention was precisely what he desired as he mourned the dead in the lake and pondered the long, painful litany of might-have-beens. Chip Linton would second-guess this critical three minutes of his life for as long as he lived, aware always that he was not Sully Sullenberger. He would, Emily knew, compare himself to that older pilot he had never met and always come up lacking. The psychiatrist from the pilots' union and a preternaturally serene young woman from the Critical Incident Response Team warned them both of this; they seemed to want to counsel both her husband and her, and she was grateful.

Their children were fifth-graders named Hallie and Garnet: Garnet because her newborn hair had been the deep red it was even now and Hallie because it was the name of the infant's grandmother—Emily's mother. Hallie and Garnet were not identical twins, though they certainly were close and took pride in their sisterly camaraderie. They were each other's best friend. The family had lived outside of Philadelphia, in the mannered suburb of West Chester, but at different points in their lives both Emily and Chip had spent sizable chunks of time in New England. Emily's grandparents had had a summerhouse in Meredith, New Hampshire, and she had fond childhood memories of Julys and Augusts in the brisk waters of Lake Winnepesaukee. Chip had spent four years in Amherst at the University of Massachusetts, though by his senior year he was spending far more time at the Northampton Airport than he was in classes: He would devote whatever money he made working overnight at the university switchboard to flying lessons there in Pipers and Cessnas and, eventually, in a twin-engine Beechcraft Duchess. The first mountains he flew over—foothills in all but name—were the thousand-foot peak of Hitchcock and the eleven-hundred-foot summit of Norwottuck, which were no more than five miles from the edge of the runway.

Consequently, the idea of retreating to New England after the disastrous water landing grew slowly but inexorably—rather like a seed germinating in water in a bathroom glass—in the minds of both the captain and his wife. Any state but Vermont, the site of the crash, would do. Neither of them particularly liked the idea of uprooting their children, but they also didn't believe that remaining in Pennsylvania was an option after the captain's sudden retirement from flying. They needed to start fresh someplace new. Emily thought she could take the bar wherever they resettled, and Chip presumed it didn't matter at forty whether he started a new career in New England or the Mid-Atlantic. The girls would make friends wherever they found themselves. Children were resilient. Didn't families move all the time?

Still, they had barely begun to search the Web for possible homes in New England when they heard from a real estate agent. A fellow named Sheldon Carter called, describing some town they had never heard of in northern New Hampshire. Bethel. Sheldon, of course, along with every other sentient adult in the country, was aware of Flight 1611 and the captain who

wasn't Sully Sullenberger. He knew precisely who Emily was. He said that he had seen her name among the possible buyers who requested more information on the agency's Web site. Littleton, New Hampshire, and that he had the perfect house for them. His voice was serene and warm, and it sounded as if he really did have an intuitive sense of what the Linton family needed: a world where they would be far from both the stares—some judgmental, some pitying—and the averted eyes. A world where people were not defined by their successes and failures. A world that was, in some ways, oblivious to the inexorable media—the twenty-four-hour news cycles, the relentless blogs, the wonder walls of gossip and innuendo and supposition on the Web—that constantly had stories likely to trigger self-hatred and despair in the captain, even though it wasn't his fault.

The house he had in mind, the Realtor said, had character, space, and absolutely spectacular views. It sat alone on a hill up the road from the village. And the town had a first-rate public school system. Sheldon actually described the property as regal before sending Emily a link to it on the agency's Web site.

Consequently, the Lintons agreed to visit Bethel, New Hampshire. They drove, though the captain insisted he had no fear of flying. They drove because this way they could look at four other possible houses along the Connecticut River, two in western Massachusetts and two in New Hampshire.

All of those houses were intriguing in some fashion, and all of them felt more authentically Yankee than the development Colonial in which they lived in Pennsylvania—a house that wasn't that much older than the stadium where the Phillies played baseball. But none of them cast a spell over Emily or Chip or their girls. They were too small or too damp or simply not as interesting as they had seemed on the Web sites. Two of them were in a condition that was almost too good. It felt to Emily as if they were strolling inside the pages of *Martha Stewart Living* and there was no need to fix the place up and make it their own. It seemed like someone was about to walk in the door and ask them to take their shoes off. Consequently, the Lintons' expectations were not especially high when they finally reached a sparsely populated corner of northwestern New Hampshire and met the real estate agent in the driveway of the house just outside of Bethel. The Canadian border, Chip realized, could not have been more than forty-five or fifty miles distant.

Sheldon was delightful and he was obese. His stomach pillowed over his belt like a beanbag chair and he walked with a cane. He said he was sixty-eight, but he was diabetic and Emily doubted he'd reach seventy. But he was charming, and immediately he commented upon young Hallie's remarkable cheekbones and Garnet's thick mane of red hair. Emily presumed this was his way of trying to build commonality with prospective buyers. And if she was being manipulated, Emily decided that she didn't mind; anyone who complimented her daughters made her happy. But the girls were far more interested in the greenhouse and the barn on the property than they were in the kind words of a grandfatherly real estate agent. They were intrigued by the idea that the house came with a carriage barn. Then the whole family wandered through the Victorian's three floors, the rooms and the corridors handsomely lit, though even Sheldon admitted that they were a little dark once they went beyond the entrance foyer. The air was particularly musty in the bedrooms, but it was thick everywhere with emptiness and disuse. They listened attentively as the real estate agent explained how it would be deceptively easy to lay down a concrete pad across the entire basement floor, and

how the three stories above were not nearly the fiscal nightmare to heat in the winter that person might fear they would be. There was, for instance, that beautiful soapstone woodstove in the den. Supposedly, it alone heated the den, the kitchen, and the dining room.

But neither the captain nor his wife was troubled by the basement with its dirt floor and low ceiling or how costly it might be to heat the massive structure above it. They saw only the magnificent three-story Victorian with that gingerbread trim and its fish-scale clapboard along the three porches. They saw only its carriage barn and that greenhouse. They saw only its views of Mount Lafayette and the cannonball-shaped foothills that rippled beneath the mountain's tectonic heft, and the house's proximity to a village green with a gazebo and a Civil War cannon, an immaculate white clapboard firehouse for the volunteer firefighters, and an iconic, squat brick library built with Carnegie money in 1911.

If they noticed a door with thirty-nine carriage bolts partially hidden by a moldering pile of coal, the image never registered in either of their minds. It certainly didn't register in the minds of their daughters. And so the Lintons offered more or less what the absentee owner was asking for the property—they chalked up his unwillingness to budge much on the price to the fact that he had grown up in the house, and with both parents and his lone sibling dead, he attributed profound sentimental value to the brown and red clapboard walls and elegant slate roof—and he accepted. The very next day, Sheldon Carter died of a heart attack. But the closing was still seamless, and the Lintons moved in on Groundhog Day.

It was only on their third afternoon there, when Chip Linton descended the basement steps with their first ever load of laundry in their new home, that he would sense something from the corner of his eye and turn toward it, realizing as the hairs on the back of his neck began to prickle that behind all that coal in the corner was a door.



**Y**ou see the long, wide, perfectly straight strip of asphalt before you, the hangar to your right with the words GREEN MOUNTAIN BOYS painted in billboard-size letters along the side. You recognize it as Burlington's runway 33, facing to the northwest. When your first officer lifts your plane off the ground, you know there will be a slight bump in about eight or nine seconds as you rise up and cross over the ravine churned out by the Winooski River. There is always a slight updraft there, even on a muggy afternoon such as today's. The sun has begun its descent in the west but is still high above the Adirondacks.

Already, however, you feel yourself sweating, and so you know on some level this must be a dream. But, unfortunately, you don't know how to wake yourself up. No idea. Emily, your wife, can do that, but not you. Still, you wouldn't be sweating unless this were a dream because in reality you never broke a sweat when you were flying. Why would you? And if it is a dream—*that dream*—you know what's next. Your heart starts pummeling your ribs even before they appear. And then there they are. The geese. You are upon them or they are upon you. Doesn't matter. You're somewhere between two and two and a half thousand feet above the ground, and there are the Bonnie and Clyde-like machine-gun blasts as you plow through them. (Why Bonnie and Clyde? You're unclear on this, too, but your therapist has told you with a smile what an odd place the unconscious world is. And so it is Bonnie and Clyde Browning automatic rifles that you think of when you think of that sound.) Your engines wiggle—one in flames, one with grinding, steel-cutting-steel immolation, in both cases the nine-, ten-, even eleven-pound birds displacing the compressor blades and sending them spinning like shrapnel through the engines—although your forward thrust will bring you to about twenty-five hundred feet before you will begin your glide and start to lose altitude.

By then, of course, it is your plane. At least it was in reality. You had taken the controls.

So why is it now that it isn't—why is it that you aren't flying the jet? In this strange dreamy version, no one is flying the aircraft, not even Amy Lynch, your first officer. Instead the jet is immobile in the air, as if teetering on a high wire or balanced on its belly on the top of a great triangular obelisk. And then it becomes—and here is that expression a friend of yours who is in the Air National Guard and flies F-16s uses to convey his own fighter's absolute lack of glide prowess—a lawn dart. The nose turns down, straight down, still well east of the lake, and you are looking down at trees and grass and death in the sort of cataclysmic fireball after which only small fragments of body are ever recovered and identified. A finger with a wedding band. A foot as far as an ankle, still strangely wearing a black Converse sneaker. A quarter of a jaw with a few bottom teeth.

Only then do you wake up. Apparently, you really can't die in a plane crash in your dreams. A myth proves accurate. You find yourself cradled in Emily's arms in the small hours of the night, your whole body wet with sweat and your heart that relentless jackhammer.

When your Philadelphia therapist refers to this as a flashback, you wonder if you should correct her. It's a nightmare, not a flashback. In reality, you didn't actually auger into the ground.

~~They decided they would take a break from the boxes they had been unpacking and the wallpaper they had been scraping to go skiing and snowboarding.~~ It was the Lintons' first Sunday in New Hampshire, and they woke, took their equipment from the massive pile of athletic gear they had deposited unceremoniously in the mudroom off the front entryway, and Chip hooked everything into the rack on the top of the station wagon or wedged it in the back. They would drive to Cannon Mountain, where they would buy day passes for the family. Emily would snowboard with the girls while Chip skied alone. After five days of steady work, the stacks of boxes had begun to shrink and the corridors composed of cardboard had begun to diminish in both height and length. The cartons marked HALLIE and GARNET and KITCHEN were largely (but not entirely) gone, flattened and taken yesterday to the transfer station. On the other hand, they hadn't even started on the boxes in the living room because they had made the decision that the wallpaper there—a repeating image of horses and hounds and a fox that looked disturbingly like an eel with fur—had to go and they might as well deal with it sooner rather than later. Nor had they started on the boxes in the dining room or the guest bedrooms. In the other rooms (and this house, they realized, really did have a lot of rooms) they had made varying degrees of progress, though all still had at least two or three unopened moving cartons.

Emily found herself fascinated by the traces that remained of the family who had lived in the house before them: Sometimes she was bemused, other times slightly disturbed. Parnell Dunmore had been buried nearly seven years now in the cemetery a mile away with the elegant wrought-iron fencing and the gates with the ornate trelliswork, and his wife, Tansy, had been in that graveyard almost four. Tansy had lived in the house not quite fifty years and, with Parnell, raised two sons there. Twins, which Emily viewed as either an irony or a coincidence. One of the sons had taken his own life as a twelve-year-old decades earlier, but his brother, now an ornery fifty-four-year-old named Hewitt, lived about forty minutes away in St. Johnsbury. Though almost all of the Dunmores' furniture had long been cleared by the time the Lintons moved in, a certain amount of detritus remained that either the son had forgotten or hadn't bothered to pack—or, in some way, was inextricably linked to the house. Sometimes Emily would find the sort of thing you might discover in the back of an antique store, such as the broken but handsome sewing machine from the late nineteenth century. It was made of cast iron and mahogany and had a treadle in the bottom of the cabinet that demanded both feet to operate. It looked like a desk and might have weighed as much as a small car. Emily found it in the attic and couldn't imagine how anyone could possibly have carted it up the rickety steps that descended from a trapdoor in the second-floor ceiling and was the only link between the attic and the rest of the house. Not far from the sewing machine were rows of old wine bottles—over two dozen—with either plastic flowers or melted candles emerging from the tops. Some were forty years old. Among the items she found in the basement (all far from the corner with that peculiar door) were old wooden saw buckets, great coils of deteriorating rubber garden hose, a plastic model of an Apollo rocket, a brass door knocker, and three separate birdhouses. The girls found a couple of old teacups hanging from hooks in the very back of a cabinet in a dining room wall and porcelain figurines of elves and trolls and skiers in a box in a corner of the walk-in closet on the third floor.

Meanwhile, the carriage barn had everything from long lengths of rusted barbed wire to



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