

**“Autonomous weapons represent humanity’s next great threat. Their versatility could make them ‘the Kalashnikovs’ of tomorrow,”
Stephen Hawking, August 2015**

Prologue

The unmistakable tones of the computerized lock on the Boeing 757’s cockpit door pierced the ever present drone of the big jet’s engines as Captain Jack Sanders juggled two cups of coffee as he closed the door behind him.

“Skipper, welcome back. Coffee? Outstanding! I could use a pick-me-up before shooting the approach into John Wayne,” declared First Officer Ricard Bradshaw.

“I figured you would. What’s our status?” asked Captain Sanders.

“Skipper, we’ll pass the Hector VOR in about fifteen minutes. LA Approach confirmed the Kayoh Five arrival and advised us to expect thirteen thousand by Dawna intersection. John Wayne is currently reporting winds calm, ceiling three thousand broken, one thousand scattered and to expect the ILS 20 Right. Also, tops were reported at two thousand five hundred by a Citation departing toward the east with mild chop,” reported Richard.

“Great. That gives us a few minutes to enjoy the coffee and set up for arrival. Early morning cross country flights make for a long day. Richard, why don’t you enjoy the privilege of making the pre-landing public address to our passengers?”

“Will do skipper,” said Richard as he rotated the audio switch over to PA and retrieved the microphone from the clip located on the bulkhead to his right. Like hundreds of times before, Richard brought the stale smelling microphone to his lips and began the boring yet obligatory pre-landing commentary. “Ladies and gentlemen, this is the first

officer speaking. We are about to begin our descent into Orange County. Please return your trays and seats to their stowed and upright positions. We expect to land at John Wayne on time. From the cockpit and the entire crew of Central Airlines Flight 1423, it has been a pleasure to serve you. Thank you for flying Central Airlines. Flight attendants, prepare the cabin for landing,” followed by the subtle noise of the microphone sliding back onto its clip as Richard released the button.

“Central 1423, LA approach.”

“LA approach, Central 1423, go ahead,” replied Richard.

“1423, you are cleared for the Kayoh Five arrival. Upon passing Hector descend to and maintain sixteen thousand. After crossing Paradise, you’re cleared for six thousand. John Wayne altimeter is two niner niner five, over.”

Jane Crandon unlocked the cockpit door and quickly slipped inside. “Captain, may I take your coffee cups? I need to stow them.”

“Yes. Yes, of course. Jane, your coffee is just what I needed,” said Captain Sanders as he looked deep into her eyes for a long moment and smiled.

Blushing slightly, Jane smiled back and invisibly squeezed his hand as she took the half-filled cup of airline brew. Pausing for a short moment, she envisioned Jack and her lounging at the beach before heading back tomorrow.

The morning sun created a truly surreal character to the puffy tops of the thick local overcast, or marine layer as it’s affectionately called in Southern California.

“Skipper, crossing Paradise VOR,” called Richard.

“Thanks Richard.”

Richard depressed the microphone button on the Boeing’s massive control yoke and called the Los Angeles Approach Controller. “LA Approach, Central 1423 crossing Paradise. Descending to six thousand.”

“Central 1423, traffic two o’clock eight thousand. Bonanza east bound.”

“Roger approach. Traffic in sight,” replied Richard.

“Roger Central 1423. Turn right two five six degrees, descend to three thousand five hundred. When established, you’re cleared for the approach. Contact John Wayne tower on one twenty-six point eight.”

Captain Sanders turned the Boeing right two five six degrees as Richard pulled back the throttles beginning the descent to three thousand five hundred feet.

“Approach, Central 1423, heading two five six, leaving six thousand for three thousand five hundred. Cleared for the approach. Have a good day,” announced Richard as he changed the radio over to John Wayne’s tower.

“John Wayne, Central 1423, four thousand five hundred, inbound to Sager,” announced Richard.

“Roger Central 1423. Radar contact. Continue.”

“Roger, Central 1423,” replied Richard.

Captain Sanders maneuvered his craft, deftly following the flight director as he began a gradual left turn to intercept John Wayne’s instrument landing system that will guide him to the runway obscured by the morning overcast.

“John Wayne tower, Central 1423, inbound from Sager,” announced Richard.

“Roger. Central 1423. Winds calm, altimeter two niner niner two. Cleared to land two zero right.”

“What was that?” asked Sanders.

“What was what skipper?” asked Richard.

“I don’t know. It looked like a bunch of bees skirting across the top of the deck.”

“I didn’t see anything,” as Richard peered intently over the Boeing’s dashboard.

“John Wayne, Central 1423. It seems we have some sort of traffic at our twelve o’clock just above the deck. Any information?” asked Richard.

“Negative Central 1423. We’re not painting any traffic.”

“Thanks approach. I don’t know what it was, but it looked like a flock of very tiny birds just skirting the cloud deck in front of us.”

“Sorry Central. I don’t see it.”

“Oh my god! Skipper, pull up! Pu.....,” yelled Richard as the Boeing was engulfed in a wall of fire. The Boeing’s skin glistened in the early morning sun as it plummeted toward the ground.

The Evening News

“Good evening, I’m Jeff Stoddard here with my co-anchor Gretchen Chen. Welcome to United News Network’s Evening Edition. Tonight we sadly report on a tragedy in the skies over Southern California. For no apparent reason, a Central Airline’s 757 suddenly

crashed into the community of Tustin killing one hundred eighty-seven passengers and eight crew members. According to local reports, the airliner crashed into a quiet neighborhood around six fifty AM, killing at least ten people on the ground. According to reports, the crew observed what they thought might have been a flock of birds while on approach to landing into John Wayne airport. In an effort to understand what happened, we are fortunate to have with us this evening FAA Director Thomas Gomez. Director, welcome and thank you for taking the time to come on the air. What can you tell us about this horrific accident?”

“Jeff, it’s my pleasure. It is unfortunate, however, that I’m here tonight because of the Central Airlines’ tragedy. Candidly Jeff, we don’t have any information at the moment. All we know is Flight 1423 hadn’t reported any problems but, asked about what appeared to be a flock of birds in its path.”

“Director, it’s my understanding the pilot asked about what appeared to be birds above the cloud deck. According to reports, the cloud tops over Orange County this morning were reported to be two thousand five hundred feet. As a pilot, it’s my understanding that birds usually don’t fly that high. Is it possible what they saw weren’t birds?” asked Stoddard.

“Jeff, at the moment we don’t know what the pilots observed. And yes, with the exception of migrating birds, most birds fly at or about five hundred feet above the ground. According to our experts, there were no reported bird migrations in the area.”

“So, what happened Director Gomez?”

“What we know is the John Wayne tower controller observed, on his radar screen, Flight 1423 began a steep right climbing turn at about two thousand six hundred feet then

just as quickly began a high speed spiraling descent crashing about eight miles north of the airport. Unfortunately, as you know there were no survivors.”

“Thank you Director Gomez. We’re confident the FAA and the NTSB will figure out the cause of this terrible accident.”

“You’re welcome Jeff. I promise, we will get to the bottom of this.”