

# **THE RELUCTANT ACTIVIST**

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*A Solution to Stop the Carnage Plaguing  
the Helicopter Air Medical Industry in America*

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**car•nage** /'kärnij/

*Noun:* The killing of a large number of people.

*Synonyms:* Mass murder, massacre, slaughter.

# CHAPTER 1

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## Life Unraveling

I'm standing next to the helicopter's tail plane, looking up in disbelief at the massive damage I'd done. The accident was entirely my fault. I knew I shouldn't have been anywhere near a cockpit this morning. My mind wasn't focused on flight training, but I decided to fly anyway. It was a stupid mistake. The reality of knowing how badly I screwed up sickened me. As well as losing my wife to another man recently, it seemed likely I could now lose my job. This was not turning out to be one of my better mornings.

Omar, the junior Omani officer I'd been training, already saw the damage and was lying on the bench seat inside the cabin of the Bell 205 with his eyes closed – *resting* – waiting for the accident investigation team to arrive.

Omar loves to sleep. I once asked him, "Omar, why do you sleep so much?" and he replied, "Because it's so much better than real life."

What a character.

I wish I were outside "real life" right now.

I checked my watch: 0932. We were waiting for the accident investigation team to fly out from Seeb Airport to interview us. Ops said on the radio they'd arrive in about 45 minutes. That was 20 minutes ago.

I shielded my eyes against the morning desert sun looking up again at the tail rotor, still unable to believe the damage I'd caused. The 90-degree gearbox and the tail rotor were lying

in a tangled mess, drooped on the opposite side of the pylon from where they should have been. The blades didn't really look that badly damaged considering they'd slammed into the dirt. If this had happened on a harder surface, like over tarmac at the airport, I would have gotten away with it because the stinger – the piece of tubular metal that sticks out from the end of the tailboom like a bee stinger – would have prevented the tail rotor from striking the ground. But we were flying over parched desert earth when it happened so the stinger dug in, which allowed the tail-rotor blades to strike the ground and caused one hellacious vibration through the airframe and my flight controls.

While we were skidding to a halt, decelerating through 30 knots, the vibration suddenly ceased. That had to be the point when the 90-degree gearbox, with its now out-of-balance tail rotor, sheared the four bolts holding it onto the top of the tail rotor pylon.

I looked away from the damage I'd caused and shook my head because I knew our fate could have been a whole lot worse.

I shouldn't have been flying because my mind wasn't on the job. Instead, I'd been thinking about my disintegrating marriage. It was over; I knew that. But I didn't want to admit it. I was an emotional wreck – not mentally fit. I had no business being in the cockpit but I flew anyway and ended up paying the price.

Four months before getting on an airplane in Los Angeles to begin this job nearly four years ago, my future wife and I had had a whirlwind summer romance. I'd invited her to join me on my annual two-week vacation to sail with me on my beloved 35-foot sloop *Moali*, my home for the five years I worked in San Diego. We'd planned to go scuba diving off the islands of San Clemente and Catalina, both situated off the Southern California coast.

I'd only known her for a few months prior to asking her to marry me. She'd been a flight nurse on the Life Flight team, hired as one of six new flight nurses to staff the third helicopter the hospital had added to its fleet. Soon after meeting her, going

on two dinner dates and taking her out on only one day sail, I was quickly smitten and immediately drawn to her.

During our one-and-only sailing date she told me she was saving money to buy a sailboat of her own. She seemed to be everything I was looking for in a woman – smart, sporty, fun, pretty as well as being a top-notch nurse. We shared a common spirit of adventure too.

On the morning of our third day after sailing out of San Diego, while anchored off San Clemente Island, I was making preparations for our onward sail to Catalina. I'd just come out of the water from retrieving the anchor that had become snagged on a rock. While drying off in the dinghy next to the boat's cockpit, I asked her to marry me. She accepted and to seal the proposal she leaned over the aft lifeline to give me a kiss, accidentally bumped the stern-mounted barbecue and spilled several months of grey charcoal ash over my head and shoulders.

After a short civil ceremony in Catalina – wearing shorts and flip-flops and sporting great suntans – we made plans for our future. We'd live on *Moali* while working at Life Flight together until we could save enough money to quit our jobs, untie the dock lines and sail off to foreign ports. Then the job in Oman came along, which allowed us to quickly make some real money – “freedom chips” – the term cruising sailors use for cash. Our plan was to leave Oman one day to return to San Diego, put *Moali* back into the water, outfit her properly for blue-water sailing and takeoff on one huge adventure.

Thinking back on it now, I should have taken that incident with the barbecue as an omen of things to come.

Before the very recent and sudden collapse of my marriage I was very optimistic about the bright prospects for the two of us. At work I'd been asked by the chief pilot to be an instructor pilot and flight examiner for the helicopter side of the Police Air Wing. It was one of the highest compliments I had ever been paid in my professional career. I felt I was living a charmed life – a life that appeared promising on all fronts. Unfortunately, considering what I'd just done, it looked like my good fortune wouldn't last.