

## TURBULENCE

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

The author's next novel, *Diving Into the Wreck* (Pyr), will introduce some people to the riveting world of her Readers' Award winning novellas, "Diving Into the Wreck" (December 2005) and "The Room of Lost Souls" (April/May 2008), and give those already familiar with this milieu a thrilling update on what Boss will do next. Her brief new tale provides all of us with a disconcerting way to look at...

Fifteenth flight of the month and it was only the fourteenth day. Got on the 747, wasn't sure if he was leaving or arriving in Chicago. Had a momentary panic before he remembered he was going to Denver. Three meetings, a pitch he had been working on in more airports than he cared to count, and he still wasn't done. He had to figure out what he truly *believed* about the product, what it was he could sell. Can't sell anything if you can't convince yourself first.

But he was so tired. Couldn't remember when he last called the wife. Had she complained this trip or the one before? *We never talk any more*. Hell, he never talked to anyone any more.

First class was full and he couldn't upgrade. What good was 100K in frequent flier miles when people actually paid for first class tickets? He begged for an exit row over the wing, got it, and decided screw the pitch. What he really needed was sleep.

He had closed his eyes long before the gate attendant started boarding by rows. He was already dozing when someone tapped his shoulder. He opened one eye, expecting a stewardess—dammit, he'd never get that right, no matter how many miles—a flight attendant. Instead, a large woman (a fat woman) smiled apologetically at him. She couldn't fit into the row with his knees in the way.

He unbuckled, got out, wondered how in the hell she'd fit in the seat—he barely fit in the seat. She waggled in, then pulled up the armrest, settled against the window, and fought with the seat belt.

He didn't watch. He got back in, slid down, extended his legs in the measly "extra" leg room the exit row offered, and prepared to drop off when she spoke.

So close to sleep that he wasn't thinking. He said, "Hmm?" like he would with the wife, a sound which told her, in that infinitely private language of marriage, that he was nodding off, and she shouldn't press. But he wasn't married to the fat woman, and she repeated what she had said a moment ago.

He opened his eyes, blinked at her, trying not to look annoyed. That was his second mistake. He should have looked annoyed. She smiled at him, the Safety Information Card in her left hand, and said, "I'm not sure I can operate the door. Do you think they'll make me move?"

"Dunno," he said. "Better ask."

So she did. The stewardess—dammit, the flight attendant—oozed sympathy. "You'll have more room in this seat, honey, and I'm sure this nice gentleman will help you should anything go wrong."

This nice gentleman squinched his eyes, and pressed his lips together, wishing that the stewardess, damn political correctness, had followed the rules. He wasn't sure he'd be able to reach over his seatmate to get to the emergency door should he need to, nor did he think he could shove her through it.

But he smiled politely, folded his hands across his chest, and prepared to close his eyes, when the woman said, "I've never had a safe flight."

"Hmm?" he asked, then damned himself.

She leaned toward him. "Every time, something's gone wrong. The last time, something under the plane was making an awful knocking sound, and we had to make an unscheduled landing in Des Moines. The time before that, the fog in Chicago was so bad that they overshot the landing and we bounced—have you ever been on a big plane when it bounces?—and I swear you could hear everyone sucking in their breath—"

"His breath," he murmured.

"What?"

"Nothing." He made himself look at her. She still clutched the Safety Information Card. She looked scared. His empathy, which had been noticeably missing a few moments ago, was back. Everyone was scared these days, and he understood it. Although he couldn't remember how long it had been since he'd been scared—not counting those five days he'd been stranded in Canada, mid-September 2001, wondering if his world was going to end. But scared, really scared of plane flight, he couldn't remember that. It had to be that first trip, 800K ago, sitting on the runway in San Francisco, praying that he wouldn't die.

"Sounds like you fly a lot," he said.

"No," she said. "It's bad luck to have me on a plane. I try not to."

He'd heard this before. He'd heard everything before. "Why're you flying this time?"

"My sister is having an operation. I'm the only family. Someone has to take care of her son."

"Family emergencies." He nodded, trying to sound more sympathetic, but he had a momentary panic that he would spend the next three hours hearing the family's tale of woe. "Always hard."

"Yes," she said. "When my grandmother died...."

He had a gift for tuning out even though he looked as if he were paying close attention. He would nod now and then, make eye contact, mmm-hmm softly. No one ever knew, *she* didn't know, he was thinking about the pitch, then remembering all the hundreds of bad flights he'd had: the time the oxygen masks had descended in Portland; panicked stewardess running from the cockpit to their seats as a warning buzzer sounded just before that landing in Cleveland; the ice-slide at LaGuardia the day before that jetliner went into the ocean. *There but for the grace of God*, he had thought then. *There but for the grace of God*.

Yet he still retained the skill to put those moments out of his mind, knew that they were simply that. Moments.

She paid religious attention to the safety protocol at the beginning of the flight, interrupting her monologue for it. After they were airborne, she managed to talk non-stop. All near-disasters, frightening misses. The woman ahead of them turned once and shushed her, saying she was worrying the little old lady in the next seat, and that worked for five minutes.

But the monologue seemed to soothe the fat woman and he found himself wondering, as he stared into eyes that could have been green or gold or a weird shade of gray, whether anyone else had ever pretended to listen to her that long.

“You sure are nice,” she said more than once, and he would smile reassuringly, wishing he knew of a graceful way to get himself out of the conversation. But he didn’t, so he mm-hmmed and nodded, and almost didn’t notice when she paused for breath, somewhere over Nebraska.

She frowned, held out a hand, and watched the flesh jiggle. He did too, mesmerized. “There,” she said with authority. “It’s coming. Better buckle up.”

The seatbelt light came on then, and he was about to tell her he was always strapped in when the plane dropped, just dropped, like a kid would drop a marble, then it leveled as if it had hit the floor. People screamed, drinks flew, and the woman in the row in front of them slammed her head against the compartment above her. The smack was so loud that he felt a sympathy ache in his own head, and his breath caught in his throat.

The plane tilted dangerously left, and then righted itself, leaving passengers moaning and shaken, a spatter of blood on the compartment before him, the smell of urine, vomit, and gin in the air. Someone was sobbing. He was clutching the armrest on the aisle side, staring at the emergency exit, wondering if he could turn and pull and shove with the woman in the way.

She laughed shakily, gave him an apologetic smile, and said, “It’s okay now.”

He believed her. He didn’t know why, but he did. A few minutes later, the seat-belt sign went off, and the stewardess came down the rows, checking, soothing, offering bandages and blankets. The woman who had shushed them had a cut on her skull, but insisted they didn’t need to make an emergency landing for her. A doctor a few rows back was allowed to come up and concur. Some other passengers helped with the clean-up, and the plane was filled with nervous voices, voices he had heard in the sky only once before, voices most people saved for elevators that had momentarily stuck or just after a particularly close car wreck.

He was awake now, all of him, and it wasn’t the sudden drop which had done it. The fat woman had awakened him with her monologue, her certainty, her uncanny and accurate knowledge that something had been about to go wrong.

She had reawakened the insidious voice he had put to sleep in San Francisco 800K ago, only its tune had changed ever so slightly.

*How many times, it asked, does this happen? How many times do planes malfunction, people get hurt, near misses become real catastrophes like it has for the woman one seat ahead of you? If you hadn’t been wearing your belt, that could have been you. There but for the Grace of God—*

“Go I,” he whispered.

“Hmm?” the woman next to him asked.

He shook his head. She closed her eyes, rested her hands on her ample stomach and dozed off. He watched her for the next hour, sleeping the sleep of the innocent, as if she and she alone knew that nothing more would happen to them. He knew that he should sleep too, now that the vomit and the urine and the gin smells had mingled with some kind of deodorizer, and the frightened voices had ceased.

But sleep eluded him, and when the plane bumped its way through the expected turbulence at Denver International, his fingers were digging holes in the armrests again. The plane eased to a stop—a perfect landing, he would have said if he had been calm—and he stood the moment the seat-belt light went off.

The woman woke then, and looked up at him.

“Sorry,” she said.

She knew. She knew she had done what terrorists and bad landings and strange engine noise had not. She knew she had reawakened that insidious internal voice which even now was telling him that flight was not natural, that his life was not natural, that someday, somewhere, he would die.

He felt a surge of anger, knew it was useless, and forced himself to smile his most polite smile—his business smile, the one he’d worn for 800K, the one, perhaps, he might never wear again.

“It’s all right,” he said to her, and for the first time, the lie didn’t sound convincing.

For the first time, he could no longer convince himself.