

Love and Sand (Excerpt)

WAS THAT IT, THEN? HAD PIKE CHOSEN TO DIE AT SEA RATHER THAN DIE AT THE HANDS OF THE COASTAL NOMADS? OR WAS HE PUTTING HIS FAITH IN SOME PLAN THAT MANTON WAS NOT PRIVY TO? COULD HE NOT SEE THAT THEY WOULD HAVE A FAR BETTER HOPE OF SURVIVAL IF THEY OPTED FOR THE BEACH BEHIND THEM AND TOOK THEIR CHANCES WITH THE NATIVES, RATHER THAN CONTINUE ON THEIR PRESENT COURSE TOWARD CERTAIN DEATH BY DROWNING—OR BY BEING EATEN BY SHARKS?

MANTON SAT THERE STRUGGLING BETWEEN HIS NATURAL RELUCTANCE TO QUESTION HIS CHIEF'S DECISION AND HIS GROWING CONVICTION THAT IF HE DIDN'T SAY SOMETHING PRETTY SOON, HE WOULD BURST.

HE LEANED ACROSS AND TAPPED THE CAPTAIN ON THE SHOULDER. AS PIKE TURNED HIS HEAD, HE MUST HAVE SEEN THE QUESTION IN MANTON'S EYES. BEFORE HE COULD SPEAK, PIKE POINTED TO THE EMERGENCY BOOST CONTROL ON THE UPPER RIGHT CORNER OF THE INSTRUMENT PANEL. HE TAPPED IT SEVERAL TIMES AND MOVED HIS HAND UP AND DOWN IN FRONT OF THE CONTROL KNOB IN A MOTION INDICATIVE OF TURNING IT ON AND OFF. MANTON NODDED THAT HE UNDERSTOOD AND WAS IMMEDIATELY RELIEVED TO KNOW THAT PIKE HAD SOME PLAN IN MIND THAT MIGHT GIVE THEM SOME CHANCE OF SURVIVAL. THE FACT THAT HIS PLAN WAS, TO MANTON'S MIND, AKIN TO ASKING FOR A MIRACLE, DID NOT MATTER. HOWEVER SLIM THE CHANCES OF IT WORKING, IT SEEMED TO MANTON TO HAVE THE EDGE ON THE ALTERNATIVES.

THE BLENHEIM IV AIRPLANE EMERGENCY POWER CONTROL, KNOWN AS 'PLUS 9 BOOST,' PERMITS THE PILOT TO RACE AN ENGINE BEYOND ITS NORMAL OPERATING LIMITS FOR A VERY BRIEF PERIOD. THIS WAS THE AIRCRAFT'S LAST-RESORT ACE-IN-THE-HOLE RESOURCE. IN DIRE CIRCUMSTANCES, THE PILOT COULD REACH UP AND GRAB THE PLUS-9 HANDLE, PULL IT HARD, BREAKING THE RETAINING WIRE THAT PREVENTED ACCIDENTAL USAGE. PULLED OUT TO ITS HORIZONTAL POSITION, IT BOOSTED ENGINE POWER FROM ITS NORMAL MAXIMUM OF PLUS 6 TO PLUS 9 BOOST. IT COULD BE APPLIED FOR UP TO ONE MINUTE. BEYOND THAT TIME LIMIT, RAPID OVERHEATING WOULD, ACCORDING TO THE AIRCRAFT'S HANDBOOK, DESTROY THE ENGINE.

IT HAD CERTAINLY NOT OCCURRED TO MANTON THAT THIS EXTREME POWER LEVEL COULD BE USED FOR MORE THAN A ONE-SHOT EFFORT AT SURVIVAL, BUT PIKE, ALREADY CONVINCED THAT THE EMERGENCY BOOST WOULD BE SUFFICIENT TO STOP THEIR DESCENT, HAD OTHER IDEAS. BUT WHAT CHANCE WAS THERE THAT AT THIS EXTREME PERFORMANCE LEVEL THE ENGINE WOULD LAST FOR MORE THAN A COUPLE OF MINUTES?

MANTON WAS NOT ABOUT TO COMMENT ON THAT. AS A SERGEANT CREW MEMBER ON HIS FIRST REALLY DANGEROUS MISSION, THERE WAS NO WAY HE COULD SAY ANYTHING USEFUL. THE CAPTAIN, AN EXPERIENCED AND HIGHLY SKILLED AIRMAN, KNEW WHAT HE WAS DOING.

AT 500 FEET ABOVE THE WATER, PIKE GRASPED THE BOOST HANDLE AND WRENCHED IT FORWARD AND DOWN, FRACTURING THE RETAINING WIRE. THE ENGINE NOISE AND VIBRATION INCREASED IMMEDIATELY, AND THE PITCH OF THE WHINING ROSE SEVERAL NOTCHES, BUT THERE WAS NO IMMEDIATE CHANGE IN THE RATE OF THEIR DESCENT. THE WAITING SEEMED INTERMINABLE.

THE ALTIMETER READING CONTINUED TO FALL, BUT AT ABOUT 350 FEET ABOVE SEA LEVEL, THE INCREASED ENGINE POWER BEGAN TO HAVE AN EFFECT. THE NEEDLE HOVERED THERE AS THEIR LOSS OF ALTITUDE WAS ARRESTED. THEN, SLOWLY, OH SO SLOWLY, THEY BEGAN TO GAIN ALTITUDE AGAIN. BUT ENGINE TEMPERATURE WAS RISING, TOO. IN LESS THAN A MINUTE, THE NEEDLE HAD REACHED THE RED LINE. THEY HAD BARELY REACHED 500 FEET.

PIKE TURNED OFF THE BOOST. THEY BEGAN A SLOW DESCENT AGAIN, AND WITHIN SECONDS, ENGINE TEMPERATURE BEGAN TO EASE BACK DOWN. BUT NOT FAST ENOUGH. THE NEEDLE WAS STILL SHOWING SOME ELEVATION OF TEMPERATURE WHEN THE ALTIMETER REGISTERED 200 FEET. THEY HAD TO CLIMB AGAIN. PIKE RE-APPLIED THE BOOST. THE DESCENT STOPPED AND THEY BEGAN TO CLIMB, BUT NOW THE ENGINE TEMPERATURE ROSE MORE QUICKLY AND STAYED ABOVE THE RED LINE, REMAINING IN THAT CONDITION EVEN AFTER PIKE AGAIN TURNED OFF THE BOOST, AND THEY WERE ON THEIR WAY DOWN ONCE MORE.

MANTON FELT THE DRYNESS IN HIS MOUTH. THEY WEREN'T GOING TO MAKE IT; THAT MUCH WAS EVIDENT. THERE WAS NO WAY THIS DAMAGED AND OVERHEATED MASS OF MACHINERY COULD LAST MORE THAN ONE OR TWO MORE MINUTES; AND AT THEIR PRESENT SINGLE-ENGINE AIRSPEED, THEY WERE STILL A GOOD FORTY MINUTES AWAY FROM THE EASTERN SHORE.

STRANGELY, AS THIS REALIZATION CAME TO HIM—THAT THEY WERE GOING TO DIE—THE COLD FEAR THAT HAD BEEN BUILDING INSIDE HIM GRADUALLY SUBSIDED. HE BECAME CONSCIOUS ONLY OF A DEEP SADNESS FOR ALL THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN; FOR THE LOSS OF ANY OPPORTUNITY TO EVENTUALLY SEE HIS HOME AGAIN, TO PICK UP WHERE HE'D LEFT OFF; TO BE WITH HIS FAMILY ONCE MORE. HE WOULD NOT BE TAKING THAT BOAT WHEN IT WAS ALL OVER. THERE WOULD BE NO REUNION WITH HIS MOTHER AND HIS BROTHER, AND THERE WOULD BE NO OPPORTUNITY FOR HIM TO ATONE FOR THE HURT HE'D INFLICTED ON VERNA, HIS WONDERFUL GIRL BACK HOME—FOR THE EMOTIONAL DAMAGE HE'D CAUSED HER, AND FOR THE UNFORGIVABLE LIE HE'D TOLD HER. THERE WOULD BE NO CHANCE NOW TO PLAN FOR THAT LONGED-FOR DAY WHEN HE COULD BE BY HER SIDE AGAIN, CONFESSING THE LIE THAT HAD HAUNTED HIM FOR SO LONG, AND BEGGING FOR HER FORGIVENESS.