

Death Flight

by Robert Wallace,

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Chapter I

Murder of a Hero.

The glaring white floodlights mounted on top of the great hangar building lit up the airport like day. They illuminated brilliantly the long main runways of the landing field, the low rope barriers that had been stretched on posts around the field, and the solid sea of humanity surging against those ropes. Scores of policemen struggled to keep the excited crowd from bursting through the ropes.

From a myriad throats came a deafening buzz and hum of voices, and in them one name was repeated over and over.

„Lucky James!“

A policeman turned toward a cool-eyed, craggy-faced man of wiry build who was passing along the line inside the ropes.

„Captain McCord, we'll never hold this crowd back when Lucky James' plane gets in!“ the policeman panted.

Detective-Captain Thomas McCord told the officer crisply:

„You'll have to hold them somehow. If this mob is on the field when James' plane lands, some of them will be hurt.“ McCord went rapidly down the field, his wiry form striding toward the floodlighted hangar building. A group of about twenty-five or thirty men were gathered in front of the hangar, including airport officials, pilots, and newspaper men who had been allowed inside the ropes.

One of the group saw McCord and gripped the detective-captain's arm. He was a blond, good-looking young man whom McCord recognized as Blair James, pilot of a passenger airliner and cousin of Lucky James, the flier they were all awaiting.

Blair James cried to McCord:

„Lucky's plane was sighted over Bayshore ten minutes ago! He'll be here any moment! I guess this proves Lucky is the best flier of them all. A non-stop solo flight from Cairo to New York—and a fifty-thousand-dollar cash prize!“

„I've done a little flying,“ McCord said dryly, „and I wouldn't try a flight like that for fifty million.“

He added, „I've got to see Stangland a moment.“

He pushed past the excited Blair James toward Robert Stangland, the superintendent of Gotham Airport.

„Don't you have any way of putting up more barriers?“ McCord asked the superintendent. „That crowd is going to—“

McCord stopped speaking. He and the superintendent and the others became suddenly rigid, staring up into the northeastern sky, from out of which, now, was coming a distant, deep-toned droning.

The crowd was staring too, and a hush had fallen over it. A dead silence in which the only sound was that humming drone that grew louder each moment, waxing into a roar.

Down into the glare of the airport lights came a big silver monoplane that roared low across the field, and then banked around and came back, dipping toward the runway.

McCord heard over the thundering motor, the frantic yelling of the crowd, and felt his own pulse hammer with emotion. Tow-headed, reckless young

Lucky James had spanned a hemisphere and was dropping out of the stars to fortune and fame and a crowd gone mad.

The great monoplane's wheels touched the runway in a perfect landing and it rolled down the field, coming to a stop a few hundred yards from the floodlighted hangar.

McCord found himself running with Stangland and Blair James and the others toward the silver ship. They reached the monoplane as its motor was cut off, and a reporter pounded on its side.

McCord saw the door of the little enclosed cockpit open. And there in the opening stooped a rangy youngster with a grinning, tired white face, his blue eyes blinking at the flare of the photographers' popping flashlights. He raised his oil-smearred leather-clothed arm in greeting.

„Well, fellows, it looks like I've made me fifty thousand bucks.“

Thuck! That brief, sinister sound cut through the din of popping flashlights and yelling voices around the monoplane.

Then McCord and the others, abruptly frozen in rigid, horrified silence, stared at the flier in the open cockpit door. Lucky James' grin had taken on a sudden surprised quality. His hand went uncertainly to a little hole that had appeared in the left breast of his leather jacket. Then he crumpled stiffly forward.

McCord and the men around him stared incredulously at Lucky James' body lying sprawled half out of the cockpit. Then Blair James, his face white and frantic, darted to the stricken flier.

McCord was close after him and helped him lift the limp body to the ground. Lucky James' wide blue eyes stared up at them unwinkingly, unseeingly.

„Lucky!“ cried Blair frenziedly. „For God's sake—“

„It's no use, Blair!“ rasped McCord. „He's dead—murdered.“

McCord's eyes gleamed like crumbs of ice in his craggy face, sweeping dangerously over the staring, horrified group.

„Someone in this group around the plane shot Lucky James with a silenced pistol!“ the detective-captain exclaimed.

A reporter turned to push his way out of the group, a wild yell coming from the other newspapermen as they, too, suddenly realized that they had witnessed the scene of a century. But McCord, his pistol flashing into his hand, sprang before them and halted them.

„Not one of you leaves here!“ he grated. „Someone in this group is the killer and he's not going to escape.“

„But you've got to let us break this story!“ cried a reporter.

„Get back there, everyone of you,“ McCord menaced them. „You're going to be searched right here and now for the gun.“

Frenziedly protesting, the newspapermen fell back toward the monoplane. As they did so, Stangland, the airport superintendent, cried out and pointed to the ground near the ship.

„There's a pistol, McCord!“ he exclaimed.

McCord leaped and picked it up by its muzzle tip. It was a stubby automatic whose butt, trigger and trigger-guard had been wrapped with soft cloth. It had a silencer on it.

„The killer wrapped this so it would show no fingerprints, and dropped it right after he shot Lucky,“ McCord said. „He must have shot from under his coat, standing right here among us.“

There came to McCord's ears a vastly increased roar of voices from the great crowd around the field. A police lieutenant, coat torn and ruddy face pale, burst through the group toward the detective.

„McCord, the crowd's gone crazy!“ he cried. „They know Lucky James was just murdered and they're wild with rage—they'll tear to pieces anyone they suspect of being the killer!“

McCord whirled, saw that the crowds were now struggling to get through the rope barriers to the monoplane. The policemen along the lines were trying desperately to restrain them.

The idol of this crowd, the tow-headed youngster it worshiped, had been murdered, and the crowd wanted blood.

McCord's voice crackled to the pale group around him. „We can't stay out here—we'll have to continue this investigation inside the hangar until that crazy mob gets calmed down considerably.

„Stangland, you and Blair James carry Lucky's body,“ he ordered, and then spoke to the disheveled police lieutenant: „Davidson, you post your men outside the hangar's doors once we're inside.“

The stunned Blair James and the airport superintendent picked up the dead flier's body and started with it toward the hangar. The others followed without need of urging, glancing nervously toward the raging mob outside the ropes. McCord followed last, gun in hand, watching to see that none of them slipped away.

When they reached the hangar, McCord waited outside a moment. Lieutenant Davidson and his torn, bruised officers were running toward the building, the vast crowd surging after them.

Davidson panted as he ran up.

„McCord, if you find the killer don't let this mob know it. They'll tear the place down to get him.“

„You've got to hold them back!“ rasped McCord. „Use your guns to scare them, and meanwhile I'll phone for reserves. Someone of that group is the killer, all right,“ he continued swiftly, „and they're going to stay here until I find out who.“

Davidson yelled to his officers, and they spread out around the hangar, posting themselves at the doors with drawn pistols.

The mob rolled up to the building and halted with a menacing growl at sight of the glinting weapons. McCord saw that the guns would hold them back, and he strode swiftly into the hangar.

The interior of the hangar was a vast, dark space more than two hundred feet square, its floor of smooth concrete and with a spidery network of steel beams and girders under its low roof. A few suspended lights fought the darkness and showed the dim shapes of several large airplanes parked along the side.

The group of men gathered beside the body of Lucky James were listening with pale faces to the menacing voices outside. McCord singled out Stangland and said to the airport superintendent:

„There's a telephone in your office, isn't there? Then phone Headquarters to rush reserves here at once.“

Stangland hastened across the shadowy hangar to the door leading to his offices. In a few moments he was back.

„The reserves will be out here as soon as they can make it,“ he reported.

„They’ll take care of the crowd when they come,“ McCord said. „Meanwhile, we’re going to learn who killed Lucky.“

He turned toward the silent body on the floor. Someone had thrown a tarpaulin motor cover over it, and now Blair James stood gazing dazedly down at the unmoving, shrouded form of his cousin.

Blair’s face was working, and he choked through trembling lips:

„To think that Lucky flew all those hours, across half the world, and all the time he wasn’t flying to fame and fortune as he thought, but to death—flying to death!“

McCord nodded somberly. He asked:

„You and your cousin were pretty close, weren’t you?“

Blair James nodded, his face still quivering. „He was more like an older brother than a cousin, I guess, because I was his closest relative. He taught me flying, got me my job, and was always lecturing me about wasting my money and gambling. We lived together, you know.“

„Then maybe,“ McCord asked him keenly, „you can tell me if you ever heard anyone threaten his life, or heard him mention any such threats?“

Blair shook his head.

„Lucky was everybody’s friend and nobody would—“

He stopped suddenly, his face changing as though expressive of an abrupt inward revelation.

McCord, watching him intently, saw the change and instantly fastened on it.

„You did hear of threats of some kind against him, then?“

„I just remembered something,“ Blair James said slowly. „You know, Lucky’s flight was backed financially by Gotham Airlines, the company both he and I were pilots for. They thought it would be good advertising for them if one of their pilots won the prize, and to the pilot it would mean fifty thousand dollars.“

„Several other of the pilots tried to get the company to choose them to back for the flight. Tuss McLiney and Wallace Jandron and Leigh Bushell were the others who applied, and they were pretty sore when the company turned them down and chose Lucky. It was rumored around the airports that some of the three had declared that Lucky James would never live to spend that fifty thousand dollars, even if he succeeded in making the flight.“

„I heard talk like that around the field too!“ exclaimed a mechanic beside Blair James. McCord asked tautly of Blair, „Were any of those three pilots in this group that was around the plane when Lucky landed?“

„Yes! They’re all three of them here!“ Blair exclaimed.

Out of the group there stepped quickly a stout, strong young fellow with chubby face and slightly protruding blue eyes.

„I’m Wally Jandron, one of the three you’re talking about,“ he told McCord. „But I want to deny right here that I ever made any threats against Lucky James’ life.“

A sharp-faced, nervous young man behind him spoke up rather hastily.

„Neither did I ever threaten him—I’m Leigh Bushell,“ he said. „I was rather angry, but I wouldn’t threaten a man’s life.“ He added: „But I want to suggest that we slip out of here by a back window or something and continue this investigation elsewhere. That mob might do anything if it breaks in here!“

„That’s right!“ seconded a reporter. „If the crowd fastened on one of us as the murderer, it’d kill him right here.“

„No one is going to leave here!“ rasped McCord. „The murderer of Lucky James is going to be found before any of you get out. What about the third pilot, McLiney?“ he demanded.

A tall, browned, hard-bitten man with a short mustache, thin hair, and a hard mouth and eyes, stepped forward.

„I’m Tuss McLiney,“ he said truculently, „and I hate lying and liars. I did make threats against Lucky James and so did Jandron and Bushell, though they deny it now. We were all three burned up because the company turned us all down to back Lucky, and I admit I talked wild and made angry threats. But it was just talk. No matter how resentful I was, I wouldn’t kill Lucky or any other man.“

„Why did you come here tonight to be on hand when he landed?“ McCord demanded.

„Simply because I wanted to see if he made it,“ McLiney answered defiantly. „Naturally I was interested in the flight. I admit, mean as it sounds, that I hoped he’d never make it.“

„And you admit you had threatened his life?“ rapped McCord.

„I’ve told you that those threats were just angry talk,“ retorted McLiney.

McCord spoke to Blair James.

„Blair, you were nearer the plane than I was when the shot was fired. Were any of these three pilots near Lucky?“

„Yes,“ Blair said slowly. „Bushell and McLiney were at my right and Wally Jandron was just in front of me.“

McLiney, his hard face unmoved, said to the detective-captain.

„But that doesn’t prove that one of us killed Lucky. Anybody in the whole group around the plane could have done it.“

„Yes, but who else in the group had a motive to do it?“ McCord demanded. „Who else had made threats against Lucky’s life? You three hated Lucky bitterly for edging you out and getting the chance to make the flight. And in this group, only you and Jandron and Bushell—“

McCord suddenly stopped, his craggy face tightening.

„Where is Bushell?“ he demanded suddenly.

They stared around their own group, then around the dim, dark hangar; but the nervous young pilot with the sharp face was nowhere in sight.

„Bushell wanted me to let him and the others slip out a back window!“ the detective-captain cried. „If he’s done that—“

McCord sprang toward the door of the hangar, and tore it open and leaped out into the glare of the floodlights.

He collided squarely with Davidson, the police lieutenant, who had been about to enter the hangar.

The lieutenant’s face was pale and his words poured forth in an excited flood.

„McCord, the crowd’s got hold of somebody who tried to slip out the back of the hangar! They’re yelling that it’s the killer of Lucky James trying to escape, and they’re going to lynch him!“

Chapter II

Mad Vengeance.

The scene that met McCord's eyes on the floodlighted field outside the hangar was an appalling one. The immense crowd was pouring away from the building, giving voice like a great, baying beast.

In the lights flashed a sea of contorted, vengeance-lusting faces. Some one was being carried along on the shoulders of the crazed mob, struggling vainly to free himself, his face terror-stricken.

„String him up! He murdered Lucky James and then tried to get away!“ roared the crowd.

„Hang him on this pole over here!“ voices were yelling.

The mob was bearing the struggling victim toward the tall steel tower of a beacon light, yanking down ropes from the barriers around the field to use for the hanging.

„That's Leigh Bushell they've got!“ McCord yelled to Davidson. „They must have got him as he tried to escape from the hangar. We've got to take him away from them—it may be a wholly innocent man they're lynching!“

He raised his voice and the police outside the hangar came running to him. McCord swiftly ordered two of them to remain and see that no one inside the hangar left.

Then with the other officers massed compactly behind him, McCord plunged into and through the mob that was bearing the terrified Leigh Bushell to his doom.

The officers' clubs bounced off heads right and left as they smashed through. The little phalanx of police drove through the formless mob like a spearhead, and in a few moments reached the beacon pole where a rope was being tied around the neck of the struggling Bushell.

McCord and Davidson knocked back the would-be lynchers with quick blows, and jerked the stunned pilot in among the officers.

„Back out with him now, Davidson!“ yelled the detective-captain „Quick!“

„They—they think I killed Lucky!“ the livid pilot was gasping.

McCord did not heed him, he and his fellow-officers fighting now to get Bushell out through the mob.

The crowd was yelling in redoubled fury as it comprehended that its victim was being snatched from its grasp. It surged around the little group of officers, struggling to recapture Bushell.

The advance of the police phalanx was slowed, then halted. McCord jerked his pistol from his pocket and fired a stream of shots over the heads of the crowd. The members of the mob nearest him retreated in sudden alarm, and the police group crashed ahead toward the hangar.

As they neared the building there was a screaming of sirens, and police cars and motorcycles came speeding onto the field. The crowd, that had started in pursuit of McCord and his group, fell back before this unexpected onset.

„Thank God the reserves got here!“ panted Davidson. „They're not any too soon.“

The captain in charge of the newly-arrived forces approached. „What's been going on here, McCord?“ he wanted to know. „We heard that Lucky James was murdered when he landed.“

McCord nodded grimly.

„He was, and the crowd thought this man was the murderer. Can you clear them off the field?“

„We'll disperse them,“ the other promised briefly. „And the Homicide Squad will be out before long.“

The fleet of police cars and motorcycles soon was scattering the thousands of people still on the field, dashing among them in repeated charges.

The crowd, its mob anger cooling rapidly now, dispersed in all directions.

McCord turned and found that Leigh Bushell had slumped to the ground, half conscious, his white face bruised by blows. He and Davidson picked up the limp pilot and carried him back across the floodlighted field to the door of the hangar.

They set the pilot down inside and Davidson went back out to post his scattered guard around the building. Blair James and Stangland and the others came running across the dim interior of the hangar toward McCord.

„God, I thought you were all done for out there!“ cried Blair James. „Did they kill Bushell?“

„He'll come around all right, I think,“ McCord said.

Stangland was clawing at the detective-captain's sleeve.

„McCord, while you were out there I remembered something that I think is a straight clue. It's a letter that—“

„Wait just a minute,“ McCord told the airport superintendent. „Bushell is coming around now.“

Leigh Bushell had opened his eyes. As the detective-captain helped him to his feet, an expression of terror crossed his face.

„They nearly hanged me!“ he cried. „Because they caught me escaping from here, they thought I was the murderer of Lucky.“

„Well, aren't you the murderer?“ McCord demanded grimly. „If you aren't, why did you try to get away?“

Bushell's face quivered with fear,

„I'm not the one who killed Lucky!“ he cried. „I only tried to escape because I was afraid that the mob would break in here and maybe lynch us all. I told you I was afraid of that.“

„It looks bad for you, Bushell,“ McCord said. „It may be that that mob had the right man.“ He swung toward Stangland. „Maybe you can clinch it, Stangland. You said you had a clue.“

The airport superintendent nodded, his keen face alive with excitement. „Yes, and it makes me sure Bushell isn't the killer,“ he said. „It's a letter Lucky wrote me several weeks ago, in which he told me confidentially that he'd had trouble—“

Click!

The dim lights of the interior of the hangar suddenly went out, interrupting his words. They were plunged instantly into a Stygian obscurity relieved only by the faint glimmer from the small, high windows at the back of the hangar.

McCord's voice rasped through the thick darkness.

„Don't any one of you move! I'll shoot anybody I hear trying to escape! Stangland, you know where the switch of these lights is?“

„Yes, right by the door,“ came the voice of the airport superintendent through the dark, followed by his steps. „I'll—“

His words were abruptly punctuated by a dull, thudding sound. Then came the muffled impact of a body striking the concrete floor.

„Stangland!“ yelled McCord in the dark. „What's happened?“

There was no answer from the superintendent.

„Everybody stay put! I'll fire if I hear other footsteps!“ McCord cried, and darted forward in the darkness in the direction of the door.

In a few strides he stumbled over something lying on the floor. He knelt and struck a match.

And there Robert Stangland lay, on his side upon the floor, his face lax and unmoving. His skull had been fractured by a terrific blow from the side. Beside him, lay a short wrench whose end was smeared with blood.

The match went out, and in the dark someone screamed.

Chapter III

The Trap of Flame.

It was the voice of one of the reporters and he shrilled: „The murderer has killed Stangland, too, to silence him!“

„Stay where you are, everybody!“ thundered McCord.

He struck another match. In its glow he found the light switch beside the door, but discovered that instead of being turned off, one of the exposed wires of the switch had been torn out by a quick pull. The lights could not be turned on again.

McCord stooped with the lighted match and examined the blood-smeared wrench. There were no fingerprints on its handle. The killer had evidently wrapped it with a handkerchief before using it.

McCord looked up. Before him stood the chubby Wally Jandron, and beyond him Tuss McLiney and Blair James and the others.

„You two were both near the switch!“ he said to Jandron and McLiney. „And since Stangland, just before he was killed, said he was sure Bushell wasn't the killer, he must have been about to name one of you two as the murderer. Which one of you took that wrench out of your pocket and killed him to keep him from telling what he knew?“

„It wasn't me!“ bleated Wally Jandron hastily. „But I thought I heard someone moving in the dark beside me.“

„Well, you didn't hear me, because I didn't move from my tracks,“ declared McLiney.

The match went out at that moment, leaving them all again in darkness.

McCord jerked the door open and yelled out through it.

„Davidson!“

Davidson's voice came from close at hand.

„What's the matter? I saw the lights in there go out.“

„Some one turned them off,“ McCord told him swiftly, „and then killed Stangland. You get some kind of lantern quick, and I'll prevent any of 'em escaping.“

As Davidson raced off on the errand, McCord turned back into the dark interior of the hangar.

Holding his gun leveled in the rayless obscurity, the detective-captain was fumbling in his pocket for another match when a sound, hitherto unheard, arrested his attention.

It was a liquid, gurgling sound that appeared to come from the side of the dark hangar where the line of airplanes was parked.

„What’s that sound?“ McCord cried.

Blair James exclaimed in the dark:

„It sounds like one of the planes leaking gasoline—“

His words were abruptly interrupted. Someone in the dark struck a match and then quickly tossed it, as soon as it flamed, through the darkness toward the parked airplanes.

The flaming match described a little arc of fire in the darkness and then flipped down into a gleaming pool of liquid that lay on the concrete floor beneath one of the airplanes.

Instantly that pool burst upward a great puff of flame that enveloped the ship above it in a fraction of a second.

Blair James yelled:

„Some one slipped over in the dark and opened the dump valve of that plane’s tank, then flipped a match into the pool!“

„Let us out of here!“ cried a photographer in alarm. „This whole hangar will go now!“

With a soft, loud roar, the flames spread to the next airplane, a small biplane.

Burning gasoline splattered the walls—patches of living fire that were swiftly spreading over the sides of the roof of the hangar.

„I’m not going to stay here and burn to death!“ cried a reporter, bolting for the door.

„Wait a minute!“ yelled McCord.

But with wild shouts of terror, the whole group was stampeding for the door. They charged past McCord before he could prevent them, and rushed outside in mad haste to escape the blazing inferno which the hangar was rapidly becoming.

Blair James had stopped to clutch McCord’s arm. He yelled over the soft roar of the flames.

„You’ll have to get out of here too, McCord! Nothing can save the hangar now!“

„We’ve got to get the bodies of Lucky and Stangland out!“ McCord told him.

He reached down for the still form of Stangland, while Blair James seized the body of his cousin.

As they dragged the two bodies toward the door, the fires were roaring terrifyingly, all along one side of the hangar, enveloping the airplanes there in sheets of bursting flame.

They got outside with the bodies. The floodlights on the roof had gone out, and the darkness was relieved only by the flickering glow from within the burning hangar.

Davidson ran up to McCord. He said: „I was getting a flashlight from the car when I saw the fire. Where’s the group you were holding inside?“

„They stampeded out and now they’ve all escaped,“ McCord told him. „You and Blair get the officers together and try to round them up. Find McLiney and Jandron!“

Davidson nodded in understanding and raced along the side of the burning hangars, shouting for the policemen who had been posted around it.

Automatic alarm bells were now ringing wildly inside the squat, great building, and the roaring flames seemed spreading swiftly to that side of the building, that held the administrative offices and machine shops.

Blair James remained behind Davidson a moment to cry a question to the detective-captain, who had whipped a handkerchief from his pocket and was rapidly tying it around his mouth and nose.

„McCord, what are you going to do?“

„I'm going back into that building, to Stangland's office,“ McCord told him.

„Stangland said that a letter Lucky wrote him gave a direct clue to the killer. That letter must be in his office file. The killer fired the hangar to destroy that letter, and I'm going to get it before—“

Blair held him back.

„McCord, for God's sake don't try it! That building is a death trap now!“

„You go and help Davidson find McLiney and Jandron,“ McCord told him, pushing him after the police lieutenant. „I'll find that letter and be out in a couple of minutes.“

With the words, McCord ran along the front of the burning hangar and around the corner to a side of the building not yet burning so fiercely.

He tore open a door and plunged into a dark hall, from whose ceiling smoke was curling ominously. He ran down it, bumping around a turn and into another corridor at whose end bursting flames were rapidly advancing with a steady, crackling roar.

McCord looked tensely ahead. There were a few doors down at the burning end of the hallway and he darted toward them. The heat of the flames just ahead scorched his hands and masked face, and the heavy smoke made him cough and choke.

Through tear-dimmed eyes he saw that one of the doors had on its glass panel the legend:

AIRPORT SUPERINTENDENT

He darted into a little office whose one wall was burning, filling the room with quivering light. The shifting glow showed beside a desk a letter file of green steel. McCord tore open the file, rapidly rummaged the mass of papers in its drawers, examining them with smarting, blinking eyes by the light of the flames.

His desperate search failed to discover the letter he sought. Heedless of the creeping fires, he continued to ransack the contents of the file. Choking from the stifling smoke, he suddenly uttered a hoarse, exultant exclamation as he found a carelessly scrawled letter with the signature, „Lucky,“ and a date of a few weeks back.

A swift glance through it told McCord that it was the letter he sought.

Stuffing the letter into his pocket, he darted through the now burning door frame and raced down the corridor away from the advancing fires.

McCord rounded the turn in the hall and was running down the dark section of the corridors when out of the blackness at the side of the hall a foot suddenly projected to trip him.

McCord sprawled headlong, and pinwheels of light spun in his brain as he struck the floor. Out of the darkness leaped the shadowy form of a man who hammered McCord with swift, deadly blows as he sought to rise.

McCord, already half-dazed by his fall, felt his attacker's savage blows swiftly beating him into unconsciousness.

His numbed brain apprehended what had happened. The murderer of Lucky James and Stangland, seeing the detective-captain enter the burning building in search of the damning letter, had also entered the flaming hangar to see that McCord and the letter both perished in the flames.

McCord made a supreme effort of will and body to save himself from the horrible fate that awaited him if he allowed himself to be beaten into unconsciousness. He reached out desperately, plucked at his attacker's ankles, jerked them hard. The assailant fell to the floor.

In the moment of respite this allowed him, McCord dug frantically in his pockets for his gun. He got it out, thrust it forward and squeezed the trigger.

The gun only clicked. Too late McCord remembered that he had fired all its shots in his effort to save Bushell from the mob.

He dropped it, clawed in another pocket for the stubby, cloth-wrapped automatic with which Lucky James had been shot, and which the detective-captain had been carrying ever since.

He got it out, but before he could use it, the killer had grasped his wrist and was trying to wrench the gun out of his hand. They struggled there in the dark corridor, the noises of their combat drowned by the roar of flames now advancing around the turn of the hall.

McCord swung his left fist hard. He felt a crunching shock as it struck the other's face. The man uttered a cry of pain, recoiling a little, and McCord seized the opportunity to wrench his gun-hand free.

He fired instantly, the crimson streak of the shot blazing across the corridor, but the murderer had thrown himself aside, and now his feet were pounding down the corridor as he ran down it toward the outside.

McCord, still on his knees, fired down the hall again as he heard the outside door slam. Then he was on his feet, plunging down the corridor after the fleeing criminal.

But before he had made two strides, there was a cracking crash ahead and a mass of burning wood broke down through the corridor ceiling ahead of him, blocking his way with a barrier of flame!

McCord spun around. The way behind him, too, was still blocked by the fires that were swiftly creeping around the corner of the hall toward him.

He was caught in a horrible trap whose jaws of flame were rapidly closing upon him. He glanced swiftly about, his craggy face and cool eyes showing no sign of fear, but tensely weighing every possible chance of escape.

Chapter IV

Struggle in the Sky.

A quivering glow of the advancing fires, now illuminating the corridor brightly, showed McCord a door a few feet from him. He ran to it and ripped it open.

A mass of flames filled the office or room inside, almost as terrifying as the fires at the ends of the hall.

But McCord's smoke-dimmed eyes glimpsed a window on the other side of the flame-filled room.

McCord knew that to dash across that burning room was to take tremendous risks. Yet to stay in the corridor meant meeting a horrible death without even an attempt at escape.

Rapidly he stripped off his coat and wound it around his head and face. With one swift glance he gauged accurately the position of the window, then pulled the coat across his eyes and threw himself blindly like a human projectile across the flaming room.

He felt tongues of fire scorch his arms and legs, and then with an impact and crash of shattering glass he burst through the window and fell to the ground outside.

McCord unwrapped the coat and got to his feet, heedless of his singed limbs and the slight lacerations which the glass had inflicted on his body. He ran around the corner of the flaming hangar.

In front of the burning structure, fire trucks were dashing up with bells clanging, and a crowd of firemen and policemen were already toiling frantically to connect hoses with fire mains.

Davidson ran out of the group toward the scorched, disheveled detective-captain.

He cried:

„McCord, what in God's name happened to you in there?“

McCord, disregarding the other's excited question, asked swiftly:

„Did you see anyone else come out of the building?“

The police lieutenant shook his head:

„I just got back here from rounding up your group of suspects. We found the reporters at the nearest telephones, but haven't found McLiney and Jandron yet.“

„McLiney and Jandron still at large?“

Then McCord suddenly cried, „By heaven, I know where the killer has made for, now that he knows I have the letter. Lucky James' plane!“

Before the astounded Davidson could comprehend him, McCord had turned and was racing down the runway into the darkness, away from the flaming hangar.

From the dark ahead there came to McCord's ears the sudden clatter of an airplane motor starting.

He sprinted forward frantically, Davidson and others coming yelling after him a few hundred feet behind.

Now the detective-captain descried in the dark ahead of him the big silver shape of Lucky James' great monoplane being taxied around to point down the runway. The silver ship started to roll forward, its motor roaring. McCord was abreast of it and dove for its side.

He got the handle of the cockpit door in his grasp and clung to it, trying desperately to open the door as he was dragged along with quickly increasing speed.

The door suddenly opened under McCord's frantic efforts. He reached in and got a hold inside, and with a convulsive effort drew his body partly in through the little door.

His legs still hung out of the door, and cinders flying up from the runway stung them. Then the cinders ceased to sting, and McCord knew that the roaring monoplane was rising into the air.

The wind tore viciously at the detective-captain's legs as he sought to climb completely inside the cockpit. Then, with a surge of desperate strength, McCord pulled himself up into the cramped little space.

A black figure, sitting at the controls in the front of the dark, crowded little cockpit, whirled in his seat. McCord jammed his pistol into the other's back and yelled over the roar of the motor:

„Take this plane back down and land or I'll kill you right here!“

The man, his face invisible in the dark, laughed wildly.

„You don't dare kill me, because if you do the plane will crash and you'll die, too!“ he cried.

„Don't fool yourself!“ snarled McCord. „I worked with the police plane division two years and I've done a little flying. If you don't turn—“

Before he could finish the sentence the man, whose hands had been busy a moment swiftly adjusting something at the controls, turned and struck suddenly at McCord with a gleaming tool.

McCord was knocked back against one of the big tanks at the rear of the little cockpit, and the shock sent his gun flying from his hand. The killer scrambled over his seat to strike at him again.

The monoplane was roaring along at an unvarying altitude on a straight course. McCord, squirming desperately to avoid those deadly blows, knew that the killer had made use of the automatic pilot device which Lucky James had had installed for his lengthy flight.

He knew, too, that the murderer meant to knock him out and then heave his body out of the open cockpit door.

McCord grasped the other's hand and they squirmed and struggled, on top of the parachute pack and thermos bottles and other objects on the cockpit floor. The killer fought to use his gleaming weapon.

Suddenly the roar of the thundering motor faltered. Almost instantly it faltered again, then abruptly died.

The monoplane's interior was filled with the screaming of the wind outside, shrill and keen. The cockpit in which the two men struggled tilted crazily this way and that.

McCord knew instantly what had happened. The gasoline in Lucky James' ship had been almost completely exhausted by his long flight, and now had given out altogether. The ship was drifting downward with its motor dead!

The murderer abruptly tore loose from McCord and clawed beneath him for the parachute pack, trying to struggle hastily into the harness.

He scrambled with it toward the open door of the cockpit. But McCord had scooped up the metal tool the other had dropped, and struck quickly with it.

The thump of the blow on the killer's head was followed by his limp collapse on the cockpit floor.

McCord scrambled into the seat to the controls of the ship. He tore off the automatic pilot device and got the monoplane under control, then banked around in the darkness.

Down there below in the dark, some distance away, the big hangar of Gotham Airport was like a vast, red torch, flaming high.

He headed the monoplane straight down toward the field in front of the burning building.

A few minutes later the silver ship swooped silently down and made a ragged and bumpy deadstick landing near the flaming hangar.

When it rolled to a stop, McCord salvaged his stubby pistol and then was climbing out of the cockpit when, from the burning hanger, a group of shouting men ran toward him.

Davidson was the first to reach him, with Bushell and McLiney and the others behind him.

„McCord, you're all right?“ cried the lieutenant.

McCord nodded. „I'm okay, and so is the murderer, though he's not conscious right now.“

„You got him, then?“ cried Davidson.

For answer McCord reached into the cockpit and pulled out the unconscious form of the murderer.

Lying there in the red glow of the burning hangar, sprawled half out of the little cockpit door just as his first victim had sprawled a few hours before, lay—

„Blair James!“ yelled Davidson in utter amazement.

They stared unbelievably.

„But it can't be that Blair killed Lucky James, his own cousin!“ cried the police lieutenant.

„He did, though,“ said McCord somberly, „and he did it for the same reason that many a closer relative has been killed: for money. Lucky James, by completing his flight from Cairo to New York, automatically became worth fifty thousand dollars as soon as his plane landed tonight. Blair, as he told us, was Lucky's only near relative. As such, he was Lucky's heir, and would inherit the fifty thousand.“ McCord took from his pocket a scorched and crumpled letter. He looked up from it a moment.

„You'll remember that Blair himself told us Lucky had lectured him about his gambling and spendthrift ways? Well, this letter which Lucky wrote to Stangland from Cairo explains why Blair needed money so badly and was willing to kill his cousin for it.“

McCord read:

Stangland, I wish you'd keep an eye on Blair until I get back. I had quite a quarrel with him before I left. It seems he's lost several thousand dollars in I.O.U.s, gambling, and is being pressed hard for payment. You know he'll lose his job as pilot if the company officials find out about it.

He wanted me to give him part of the money the company advanced to back my flight, and when I told him I'd never give him another cent to pay gambling debts, he became very resentful and bitter. Try to keep him from doing anything rash, for he seemed in a desperate mood. Lucky.

„That explains it,“ McCord said. „Blair, bitter at Lucky and desperate for money, decided to kill his cousin when he landed and thus inherit that fifty thousand. He killed Stangland when he guessed that Lucky had written Stangland about his gambling debts and the quarrel, and he fired the hangars to destroy the letter. When I went in after it, he went in after me.“

„And because McLiney and Jandron were still at large, I was sure one of them was the killer!“ Davidson exclaimed. „But we found it was they who went to turn in the alarm that brought the firemen here.“

McCord nodded toward the unconscious man. „We‘d better take him and lock him up—we had a hard enough time getting him.“

„We will,“ Davidson said, „and then you‘re going to come with me and have a drink. You look as though you need one.“

McCord, his craggy face relaxing into tired lines for the first time that night, nodded assent.

„We‘ll all have one,“ he said, „and make it in honor of a kid who must still be flying, somewhere. We‘ll drink to Lucky James.“

