**Tonight**

NIGHT PAINTED THE snowscape an unearthly grey; sawtooth treetops standing out against the blizzard like hungry jaws waiting to swallow whatever came their way. What was coming their way, through the roar of the storm and the stinging snowflakes, was a twin-engined silver bird flying too low for comfort and too fast for safety. It skimmed the Lapland pines in a last-ditch effort to gain height, and as it cleared the ridge, the pilot was given hope that he may have succeeded, but it was a forlorn hope.

“Mayday. Mayday. We’re going down.”

A shallow valley opened up below but it wasn’t deep enough or long enough to allow the Boeing 737 time to recover. Cabin lights shone out through the windows along either side, frightened faces contorted into silent screams visible if there had been anyone to see. There was no one, just the silent night and the raging storm battling the roar of the airliner’s engines. Up front the captain threw a sad little glance and nodded to the co-pilot.

“Airspeed’s as slow as we’re going to get it.”
“I know.”

They both glanced through the reinforced windscreen but could only see the swirling snowflakes attacking the glass. A pair of brilliant headlamp beams scythed through the night but there was nothing to see except the blizzard, then suddenly there was a break in the dancing white demons and for a brief moment they could see the valley open up before them. It was the flattest piece of land they could hope for after the ridge, and it was disappearing fast. Act now, or the plane would be halfway up the opposite valley wall and... curtains. The captain acted on instinct.

“Full flaps. Landing doors open.”

He pulled back on the throttle and flicked four switches. The plane shuddered and he was thrust forward at the sudden deceleration. The co-pilot hit the row of green buttons in sequence, and a deep throbbing hum vibrated beneath the roar of the engines.

“Doors open.”

The valley was rushing towards them beyond the windows.

“We’re not going to have time.”

The captain ignored the plea, flipped up the protective covers, and hit the landing gear buttons. A heavier vibration thrummed beneath them, and the co-pilot kept his eyes glued to the control panel.

“Almost down.”

Gigantic wheels lowered out of the nose, and the belly of each engine, slowing the plane even further. There was no landing strip but they needed all the space they could muster to help soften the blow. The valley floor was rippled with snowdrifts but it was impossible to tell if they were solid or simply vagaries of the wind. The lower they got the faster the snowdrifts whizzed past.

“Almost.”

They were so close to the ground now that the captain was surprised they hadn’t touched down. He said a silent prayer under his breath, then opened the cabin mike.

“Brace positions everybody.”

His voice sounded calm over the main cabin speakers, imbuing the scene with an unreal sense of the everyday. The co-pilot ignored the approaching ground, his knuckles white as he watched the panel. The captain glared at the snowscape as if demanding that it wait a few more minutes. An almost imperceptible bleep from the console and the co-pilot shouted above the engines.

“Locked.”

The landing gear was down. Pulling back on the yoke, the captain gritted his teeth. They both stared out of the window. The valley wall rushed towards them, the rippling snowdrifts almost finished, then the wheels tore into the uneven ground and the world was turned upside down.