

DIVISIBLE MAN™



*"Well-written
and engaging,
with memorable
characters and an
intriguing hero."*

—Kirkus Reviews

THE ORIGINAL DIVISIBLE MAN NOVEL BY

HOWARD SEABORNE



DIVISIBLE MAN™

by

Howard Seaborne



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ALSO BY HOWARD SEABORNE

DIVISIBLE MAN

A Novel – September 2017

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SIXTH PAWN

A Novel – June 2018

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SECOND GHOST
ANGEL FLIGHT

A Novel & Story – September 2018

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SEVENTH STAR

A Novel – June 2019

DIVISIBLE MAN: TEN MAN CREW

A Novel – November 2019

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE THIRD LIE

A Novel – May 2020

DIVISIBLE MAN: THREE NINES FINE

A Novel – November 2020

DIVISIBLE MAN: EIGHT BALL

A Novel – September 2021

DIVISIBLE MAN: ENGINE OUT
AND OTHER SHORT FLIGHTS

A Story Collection – June 2022

DIVISIBLE MAN: NINE LIVES LOST

A Novel – June 2022

DIVISIBLE MAN: TEN KEYS WEST

A Novel – May 2023

PRAISE FOR HOWARD SEABORNE

DIVISIBLE MAN - TEN KEYS WEST [DM10]

“The best possible combination of the Odd Thomas novels of Dean Koontz and the Jack Reacher novels of Lee Child.”

— *Kirkus Reviews*

“The soaring 10th entry in this thriller series is as exciting as the first... Seaborne keeps the chatter fun, the pacing fleet, and the tension urgent. His secret weapon is a tight focus on Will and Andy, a married couple whose love—and bantering dialogue—proves as buoyant as ever.”

— *BookLife*

“The author effectively fleshes out even minor walk-on characters, and his portrayal of the loving relationship between his two heroes continues to be the most satisfying aspect of the series, the kind of three-dimensional adult relationship remarkably rare in thrillers like this one. The author’s skill at pacing is razor-sharp—the book is a compulsive page-turner...”

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - NINE LIVES LOST [DM9]

“Seaborne’s latest series entry packs a good deal of mystery. Everything Will stumbles on, it seems, dredges up more questions...All this shady stuff in Montana and unrest in Wisconsin make for a tense narrative...Will’s periodic sarcasm is welcome, as it’s good-natured and never overwhelming...A smart, diverting tale of an audacious aviator with an extraordinary ability.”

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - ENGINE OUT & OTHER SHORT FLIGHTS

“This engaging compendium will surely pique new readers’ interest in earlier series installments. A captivating, altruistic hero and appealing cast propel this enjoyable collection...”

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - EIGHT BALL [DM8]

“Any reader of this series knows that they’re in good hands with Seaborne, who’s a natural storyteller. His descriptions and dialogue are crisp,

and his characters deftly sketched...The book keeps readers tied into its complex and exciting thriller plot with lucid and graceful exposition, laying out clues with cleverness and subtlety...and the protagonist is always a relatable character with plenty of humanity and humor...Another riveting, taut, and timely adventure with engaging characters and a great premise.”

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THREE NINES FINE [DM7]

“Seaborne is never less than a spellbinding storyteller, keeping his complicated but clearly explicated plot moving smoothly from one nail-biting scenario to another...The author’s grasp of global politics gives depth to the book’s thriller elements...Even minor characters come across in three dimensions, and Will himself is an endearing narrator. He’s lovestruck by his gorgeous, intelligent, and strong-willed wife; has his heart and social conscience in the right place; and is boyishly thrilled by the other thing. A solid series entry that is, as usual, exciting, intricately plotted, and thoroughly entertaining.”

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE THIRD LIE [DM6]

“Seaborne shows himself to be a reliably splendid storyteller in this latest outing. The plot is intricate and could have been confusing in lesser hands, but the author manages it well, keeping readers oriented amid unexpected developments...His crisp writing about complex scenes and concepts is another strong suit...The fantasy of self-powered flight remains absolutely compelling...Will is heroic and daring, as one would expect, but he’s also funny, compassionate, and affectionate... A gripping, timely, and twisty thriller.”

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - TEN MAN CREW [DM5]

“Seaborne...continues his winning streak in this series, offering another page-turner. By having Will’s knowledge of and control over his powers continue to expand while the questions over how he should best deploy his abilities grow, Seaborne keeps the concept fresh and readers guessing...The conspiracy is highly dramatic yet not implausible given today’s political events, and the action sequences are excitingly cinematic...Another compelling and hugely fun adventure that delivers a thrill ride.”

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SEVENTH STAR [DM4]

“Seaborne...proves he’s a natural born storyteller, serving up an exciting, well-written thriller. He makes even minor moments in the story memorable with his sharp, evocative prose...Will’s smart, humane and humorous narrative voice is appealing, as is his sincere appreciation for Andy—not just for her considerable beauty, but also for her dedication and intelligence. An intensely satisfying thriller—another winner from Seaborne.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SECOND GHOST [DM3]

“Seaborne...delivers a solid, well-written tale that taps into the near-universal dream of personal flight. Will’s narrative voice is engaging and crisp, clearly explaining technical matters while never losing sight of humane, emotional concerns. Another intelligent and exciting superpowered thriller.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SIXTH PAWN [DM2]

“Seaborne...once again gives readers a crisply written thriller. Self-powered flight is a potent fantasy, and Seaborne explores its joys and difficulties engagingly. Will’s narrative voice is amusing, intelligent and humane; he draws readers in with his wit, appreciation for his wife, and his flight-drunk joy...Even more entertaining than its predecessor—a great read.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN [DM1]

“Seaborne’s crisp prose, playful dialogue, and mastery of technical details of flight distinguish the story...this is a striking and original start to a series, buoyed by fresh and vivid depictions of extra-human powers and a clutch of memorably drawn characters...”

—*BookLife*

“This book is a strong start to a series...Well-written and engaging, with memorable characters and an intriguing hero.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Even more than flight, (Will’s relationship with Andy)—and that crack prose—powers this thriller to a satisfying climax that sets up more to come.”

—*BookLife*

THE SERIES



While each DIVISIBLE MAN™ novel tells its own tale, many elements carry forward and the novels are best enjoyed in sequence. The short story “Angel Flight” is a bridge between the third and fourth novels and is included with the third novel, DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SECOND GHOST. “Angel Flight” is also published in the ENGINE OUT short story collection along with eleven other stories offering additional insights into the cadre of characters residing in Essex County.

DIVISIBLE MAN™ is available in hardcover, paperback, digital and audio.

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*For Robin.
The many different people you are.
I love them all.*

PART I

The first time I vanished, I figured it for a morphine hallucination.
A hospital.

People in scrubs hovered over me. Solicitous faces used sharp eyes and tender fingers to probe and examine me. I heard the beeps of relentless monitors. I heard the whisper of curtains pushed aside, then pulled back in place to shield the worried from the wounded.

I had no idea why I was here, or how I had been delivered here, or how long I'd been here. I had no anchor point in time, and I wasn't all that sure about time's traveling companion, space, either.

The room behind the hovering faces contained cabinets and stainless-steel medical fixtures. An IV stand stood near my head, dangling its plastic jelly fish bag and strands of clear tubing.

One of the faces, speaking to me as if I were a distracted toddler, said loudly, "We're going to give you morphine for the pain, Mr. Stewart."

A hospital.

Morphine.

In my head I sang out, *Yes!* Because the third in a trilogy of things I knew for certain was that I felt like I'd been kicked in the family jewels by an NFL place kicker.

Pain screamed from my groin, up through my guts, and grabbed my lungs with tongs dipped in hot coals. Pain made me pass out, made me want to puke when consciousness returned, made me want to claw the nerves out of my skin. When the morphine drip started dripping and a cool sea breeze

blew through my screaming brain, I wanted to kiss someone. The cool sea breeze transformed into a series of sweet ocean swells, and the pain shriveled to become a nasty little man squalling at me from a tiny raft bobbing far, far away.

Logic suggested, then, that when I found myself floating six feet above a hospital bed lined with chromed steel rails, tethered by a thin plastic tube, it must be the morphine.

I rode the bliss, listening to Roy Orbison in my head singing *anything you want, you got it*. In the magical way of dreams, Roy Orbison became John Lennon urging me to turn off my mind, *relax and float downstream*.

I was indeed floating.

Somewhere in the distance the center of my body screamed profanities up the telegraph of my nervous system, yet thanks to Morphine with a Capital M, I didn't care.

Floating toward the acoustic tiles, I wondered how I was supposed to maneuver back for a landing in the bed. Fly a downwind, base and final? Or barrel straight in?

No worries. You're a pilot. You got this.

I wondered if anyone would judge the landing. Darkness shrouded the room. I saw windows covered by blinds, and beyond the blinds I saw parking lot lights against black.

Night.

A clock on the wall next to a flat screen pointed two hands up and into the dark small hours. Night in a hospital meant a busy, quiet nursing staff, which made catching anyone's eye unlikely, and made anyone catching me floating six feet over my bed equally unlikely.

I felt a little disappointed. Nobody to see me flying. Nobody to judge the landing. My mind wandered.

I'm in a hospital. Floating. On morphine, because—

You have a broken pelvis.

Someone said it. A boyish face, speaking emphatically. *You have a broken pelvis. We're going to give you something for the pain, Mr. Stewart.*

I had a broken pelvis. I had a broken pelvis because—

That's where my grasp ended, and my mind's fingers stretched out in vain, into black emptiness. I might have flailed and grabbed for an answer, were I not distracted by the situation at hand.

I floated six feet above a hospital bed, bumping into the ceiling like an escaped child's balloon, trailing an IV tube as my string.

Call it pilot's logic, or situational awareness, or call it being anal, but in

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the midst of all this, I thought, *It's good to do this sort of thing in the middle of the night.*

If you're going to go floating, do it on the dark side of midnight, while the nurses catch up on Twitter and the visitors sleep at home, tucked in under their own sheets, perhaps a tiny bit thankful those sheets are not hospital sheets.

The dark hours in a hospital have a white noise all their own. I learned that when I was twenty-two and spent six nights in a hospital giving birth to a kidney stone (and having my first taste of Morphine). Hospitals at night whisper secret incantations in a language you think you understand, but it's a language meant only for magicians in scrubs. I heard voices from the nurse's station, tantalizingly close, sometimes carelessly loud, yet ever unintelligible. Harmonizing with those voices, an important-sounding machine hummed in the treble clef. I pictured a guy with a floor polisher. A wheeled cart squeaked, adding mechanical mouse sounds. An electric door latch released with a sharp *clack*, officiously granting entry or exit to guarded spaces.

It was the ideal time to go flying on Morphine.

I turned my head to see the bed below. It was a mess. Like someone had been wrestling trolls in it.

Morphine logic wanted to know why the hospital staff hadn't tied me down. We can't have people floating all over the ceiling now, can we? They could have at least tucked me in beneath the bleached sheet and that pilled blanket. Morphine counter-logic immediately answered.

Because, you have a broken pelvis, dummy. Why would they assume you're going anywhere with a broken pelvis?

During my kidney stone episode, I learned that morphine doesn't extinguish pain. It allows you to make friends with pain. It lets you chat it up without having to listen to it scream. I also learned that Morphine bears a special gift. Hallucinations. One night, while the kidney stone ran power sweeps down my right side, I found myself kneeling on that other hospital bed, doubled over with my fingers dug into my guts while giant crows pecked at my head. At the time, I wondered not so much what giant crows were doing in a private room at Essex County Memorial, but what they were hoping to find in my hair?

Morphine logic.

This floating—it had to be a hallucination. A pleasant hallucination. Conditions normal, everything a Go for a leisurely float above my bed. Relax, folks, we've got smooth air all the way to Des Moines.

The explanation made perfect sense until I got stabbed in the cheek by

the sharp corner of the fluorescent light frame. One of those rectangular jobs, with a crosshatch insert like an upturned icetray, coated with cheap gold-colored film meant to add warmth to the colorless fluorescent bulbs. The damned thing jabbed me in the cheekbone below my left eye. It hurt, but I didn't care. Thank you, Mother Morphine. The coexistence of pain and the absolute indifference to it.

The other end of the light fixture jabbed my knee. I chose not to acknowledge it. I knew my knee hurt, the way it hurts when you kick a coffee table on the way to the kitchen in the middle of the night. But the pain was distant, someone else's pain.

Nudging up against the light fixture, I turned my head to avoid treating my nose to the same sharp corner. I looked across the white ceiling tiles, the Bonneville Salt Flats of ceiling. A filament of spider web drooped from one of the tiles, backlit by the wedge of light coming from the hallway.

Spider web. Dry tiles. Nurses outside my door talking about how "you can get that on Netflix." For a hallucination, it had the kind of rich detail you see in a Ridley Scott film.

I turned my head farther and looked down. The bed sheets lay crushed to one side, the blanket knotted where my feet had been. The room felt warm.

That's when I looked for my body and realized I wasn't there.

Gone.

Vanished.

Nice touch, I thought. I held my right hand, the one not attached to the IV, in front of my face. If I concentrated, I saw—or more likely, imagined—the shape of a hand, like something made of water within water. Just a shimmer of an outline to my eye. I looked for the rest of my body, still bumping languidly against the light fixture.

Gone.

I have vanished.

I'm floating.

I'm bumping into the ceiling.

This is not a hallucination.

What the—?

And that's when I reappeared, and gravity had her vicious way with me. I dropped from the ceiling to the empty hospital bed, broken pelvis and all.

The screaming that followed was not in my head.

. . .

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FOUR THINGS HAPPENED, if not simultaneously, then in such rapid succession that four eyewitnesses would have given four different accounts to the police.

A monitor sitting stoically at the head of my bed issued a loud tattletale beeping.

The landing approach, far from stabilized and far from my best, caused my left arm to pinwheel wildly, like a cheerleader cranking up the home crowd, which caught the plastic IV tube on the safety bar running down the left side of the bed, which in turn yanked the IV bottle free, which then tipped the entire stand over with an alarming crash.

To my left, from a sofa nestled beneath the room's windows, a black cloud of blanket, pillow and wild dark hair rose up like God's own juggernaut of holy justice, and from this fierce apparition my wife's voice cut through the darkness.

"Nurse! Need some help here!"

And I passed out.

“Hey.”

Andy’s voice, soft and close. I felt her lips against my ear, on my cheek. I felt her hands on both sides of my head, her fingers threaded into my hair. Morphine was nice, but this...

“Hey, Pilot,” she said. “You promised me you would never crash.”

Was she talking about my six-foot drop onto the bed?

I considered opening my eyes but felt no need. Andy hovered so close it felt like she spoke inside my head. Her hair lay across my face, falling around us like a shroud. She held me in two worlds. The world of pain shrieking up my torso, ringing in my ears. And the serene world of her voice, her touch, and her scent.

“No, I didn’t,” I whispered.

“It was implied.”

Something bad had happened. Bad enough to put me in the hospital. Whatever it was, it scared Andy. She held me tight.

“I suppose that makes it binding,” I said hoarsely. My throat felt terribly dry. “Can you—”

“What, love?”

“Can you get me a beer?”

She laughed. Then she sobbed. The two mixed like wind swirling above me, and rain came. She sobbed, and her tears fell on my face. I tried to reach for her, but my arms had been bound tightly against my body, held in place by the blanket I kicked off when I went flying.

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She'd been here. She'd been on the sofa, holding her vigil for me. I wondered if she'd seen me flying. Then I wondered how completely nuts I had gone to wonder that.

She cried over me for a minute. Then sniffled. She kissed me on the forehead, on the nose, on my lips.

"Don't ever do that again!" she commanded in a breaking voice that connected us like a vow. "Ever."

She kissed me on the cheek. It hurt.

She kissed me right where the light fixture had jabbed me.

My wife likes to tell people we met when she pulled me over for driving while full of myself. She insists such a law exists on the books in Essex County. That she pulled me over in full uniform while on patrol in a City of Essex squad car is not a lie, but she employs a bit of creative license in our origin story. With good reason.

The first time I saw her, the *actual* first time, she walked into the fixed base operation offices at Essex County Airport on the arm of a man named Carl Lofton. I was in my second year working as a pilot for Essex County Air Services, wearing the multiple hats of flight instructor, charter pilot, and sometimes as would-be mechanic wearing coveralls in the hangar, assisting with annual inspections and such repairs as Doc, our certified Airframe and Powerplant mechanic, would allow. Doc, thankfully, is about as good-natured a wrench-turner as the cold war Air Force ever minted, a fixture at Essex County Air Service since Bush Senior was president. I can follow directions and handle a set of tools, but I also ask a lot of questions, which Doc answers with endless patience. I think it has something to do with the fact that when I put on a set of coveralls, he hands off the dirtiest, most monotonous jobs to me.

The day Andrea Katherine Taylor walked through our tinted glass office doors, I was not, thankfully, wearing greasy coveralls. I stood looking my professional pilot best in a clean white shirt with a black tie and epaulets denoting my Captainly Authority, having just returned from an afternoon charter run to the upper peninsula of Michigan. I leaned on the counter,

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adding to my aura of great aviation prowess by holding a clipboard in one hand and a pen in the other.

Men are men, and when we see a woman like Andrea Taylor, we stop and look. Married men do it from behind sunglasses and with furtive glances. Single guys do it with tongues hanging out. We all do it. And we all run instant calculations, measuring ourselves against the dumb but lucky schmuck the woman is with. From those calculations, we project a flight path into a happily-ever-after future with such a woman. It's a fallacy that men don't want to commit. We do it all the time, all day long, with dozens of women we see on the street and in our minds.

Andrea Taylor could (and still can) stop a clock. Thick waves of auburn hair, taking and shooting back sheens of sunlight. A slender waist my hands instantly imagined gripping, blossoming into hips that signaled procreation to some lizard part of my brain. And legs. Oh, God bless the designer of that summer dress she wore, which shared most of her sculpted legs on one end and hung tastefully yet tantalizingly cut above the bosom at the other end, where she had just slightly more than most women her size and weight carry. Ever so slightly more.

Men stop and look, and some women collect those looks like Spanish gold, but a woman like Andrea will make you meet her at the eyes. They're too bright, too alert, too alive and they will hunt you down and demand direct contact. Once connected, she's the one doing the appraising, with little mercy. Her lips partnered with her eyes, pursed slightly, equally appraising. Their deep color seemed all her own and the smile they could conjure flashed like a magic spell. Her skin had just enough creamy caramel color to suggest what she took from the summer sun didn't burn and needed no enhancement.

She had the magazine looks, but it was immediately apparent she wasn't a two-dimensional beauty.

My first impression of Andrea Taylor was of a woman who knows when men are looking. When she chooses to look back, she will make you feel like the little boy you are.

My second impression was that she may have been on Carl Lofton's arm, but she flew in formation; she was nobody's cargo.

I didn't like Carl. Hadn't for as long as I'd known him.

Now I hated him.

Aviation is a family of like-minded people with a strong sense of dedication and purpose. The pilots I know, those I learned from, those I taught, and those I met along the way, are sharp, intelligent, precise, and humble before the forces of nature that we challenge. Then there are the Carl Loftons. They

don't fly because a childhood passion sent balsa wood airplanes zooming around the back yard. They fly because an airplane is another notch in the belt, like the boat, the SL Mercedes or Corvette, or the place on the lake. They fly because money is no object, and yet it is the sole object. So, Carl Lofton, an arrogant ass who made his money being an arrogant ass in real estate or an arrogant ass practicing law or perhaps as an arrogant ass stealing social security checks, added a pilot's license to his hundred-dollar haircuts and single-malt scotch collection.

Carl had passed his Private Pilot Checkride a few months before, and we all knew he would be buying his own airplane too soon. It's an old saw, but a pilot who earns his license—who has passed a difficult written exam and flown a practical test under the severe eye of an FAA examiner—has only earned a license to learn. Except for the Carl Loftons of the world. They already know it all. Instead of continuing to learn, the Carl Loftons go out and buy more airplane than they should, usually a little too fast and a little too complex. And trouble follows.

Standing there, watching Carl and his new girlfriend sweep into the office, I faced a choice. Stay, and enjoy the view of the woman, or duck into the inner office and avoid Carl's smug, over-loud baritone. I caught a glance from Rosemary, the white-haired goddess of our front desk (ever since the Wright Brothers, she liked to claim). Her sharp look warned me not to run like the coward she knew I was, and she rolled her eyes when I did just that. Besides, I could still enjoy a view of the woman walking out to the flight line from the inner office, all the less obtrusively. A nice afternoon breeze swept the flight line, and that summer dress—lemonade and roses—looked delightfully light.

Carl rented one of the Cessna 172s he had trained in, and a short while later I watched the airplane wiggle a little in the crosswind as they climbed out into the late afternoon, summer-hot sky.

"THAT GIRL IS GOING to be sick," Rosemary announced a little over an hour later, looking out the office windows.

I leaned on the customer side of the counter, updating my logbook as a means of killing the last duty hour of the day. I had watched Carl's landing with clinical interest. We had a decent crosswind, ten to fifteen knots about forty degrees off the nose of the airplane. A Cessna 172 is a high-wing airplane, light in a wind, and a little slab sided. I grudgingly gave Carl points for holding a crab angle into the flare on landing yet kicking the rudder enough to line up the wheels on touchdown. He came in hot, though. I

marked that against him. He rolled it off the runway and taxied to the gas pumps and shut down.

The woman let herself out of the passenger side without waiting for Carl to open the door. She stepped confidently onto the landing gear strut and down to the ramp. She moved with sharp intent. The way she left Carl behind and immediately headed for the office suggested trouble between the dating couple. But Rosemary read people well, and as this dark-haired beauty stepped purposefully up the sidewalk toward the office, I saw what Rosemary saw. The woman's hands extended at her side with her fingers stretched out, the way someone might reach for balance while walking on a beam. Her steps were measured and urgent. Her eyes hid behind a set of Ray Ban aviators—good pilot sunglasses though I later learned they were cop's sunglasses—but it was easy to see that her focus fixed on the next ten feet of pavement. She hurried.

"Here," Rosemary said. She handed me the plastic wastebasket from behind the counter. "She ain't gonna make it."

Already, the woman's right hand swept up to her lips. It was coming.

I pushed through the inner doors to the office, shoved open the outer doors and met her one pace beyond. She might have looked at me in horror, wishing no one was there to witness what was about to happen, but sharp appraisal kicked in; the wastebasket offered salvation.

I handed her the wastebasket. I took her by the elbow and pushed through the doors. Her pace doubled. With my hand on her elbow, I pulled her across the hall to the empty pilot's lounge. Her scent broke through the standard aviation cologne of grease, fuel, and what traces of tobacco lingered in the ceiling tiles from the days when everybody smoked. For a moment I caught a whiff of her perfume—something like fresh fruit at a summer breakfast. She rushed the last few paces to the leather couch and dropped in a flutter of summer dress, doubling over.

I had her hair in my hands as the first retching shook her shoulders. My own stomach announced its intentions to go aerobic, but I barked back at it in my head. *Stand down.*

It came fast, in body-shaking heaves, then spits and coughs. I continued to hold her hair but extended one leg behind me and kicked the door shut.

She gulped some air and vomited again. The first round had been productive. This, not so much. A sheen of sweat broke out on her slender neck and the fine slope where it met her shoulders. A few errant strands of her rich hair curled in glossy moisture forming mysterious glyphs. God help me, the woman was vomiting into a wastebasket, yet for an instant I imagined that sheen of sweat and that dark hair against a pillow.

She tried to rise, but I bunched her hair in one hand and put the other on her shoulder.

“Eyes shut, stay still, just breathe,” I said.

I got a nod. She pushed the basket away from her face to escape the smell before it induced another round. I took it from her and set it aside. She nodded again.

“M okay,” she whispered.

“No, you’re not. This will take a while.” I didn’t want to let go of her hair, but she turned her head slightly, signaling that the moment was over. “You’re going to want to lie down for a bit.”

“No, I really—” She started to rise.

“Lasagna,” I said.

She dropped sharply onto the leather cushions and her hands shot out, groping. I put the wastebasket in her fingers. She yanked it beneath her bowed head. Her body heaved. More coughing. More spitting. Then gulps of air.

“Bastard.”

I had my hands wrapped around her hair again, figuring that gave me temporary immunity.

Her lungs settled into a rhythm of short, strong breaths.

“I’m Will,” I said.

“I’m deeply embarrassed,” she said into the top of the wastebasket, this time enduring the swill at the bottom, knowing how close she was to launching again.

“Nice to meet you, Deeply,” I said. “Been there. Done that.”

She didn’t speak for a moment. She drew herself upright, and God help me again, but the view improved dramatically from where I stood above her. The light sheen of sweat condensed and traced glistening lines down the center of her chest. Her breathing continued in short, choppy in-outs, with a pause between each to see if the vomiting would be triggered again. After a cautious assessment, she pushed away the wastebasket once more. I took it.

“Lie down. Let the room stop spinning. I’ll get rid of this.”

Still not looking up, eyes still shut, breathing still quick, she slid across the leather sofa, feeling its dimensions, then she eased herself down.

I stole another long look before I left.

I dumped the wastebasket in the Men’s Room toilet and gave it a quick rinse. I left it there.

Carl Lofton walked up the sidewalk toward the office. I took up a casual stance beside the office counter. A light electric sensation eased down the back of my neck. I felt the nerves in my arms answer. I flexed my fingers the

way I do when I'm coming up on a final approach fix about to drop the landing gear and nail the glide slope needle. All focus. Everything clear and in its place. Something in the look on my face made Rosemary say, "Uh-oh." She departed her rolling office chair and found something to do in the inner office.

"Hey, Carl," I said flatly when he pushed through the doors.

"Will! My man!" The handshake was over-strong. Playing the alpha dog. I grinned at him, and he grinned back, too stupid to see that my grin didn't go any farther than my lips.

I said, "What a great day to fly! A little bumpy, but wow. Did you show her some stuff?" I flexed my eyebrows, like we were buddies, like I wanted to hear him boast. His shit-eating grin widened. Boasting is what he did best.

"You know it!"

"Yeah? Crankin' and bankin'? Makin' big holes in the sky?"

"If you know what you're doing, even a 172 can sing, am I right?"

Except you don't know what you're doing, asshole.

"You know it, man! You know it!" I punched his shoulder.

Carl glanced around and adopted a theatrical expression of conspiracy between brother aviators. "I showed her. Rolled that baby." He puffed himself up like I was supposed to give him a high five. I wanted to punch his greasy nose through the back of his skull, but I kept up the grin, and he bought it like cheap land.

"No shit three-sixty rolled it? Up and over?"

His head bobbed. Idiot. "You know it. She loved it, man."

I stared at him. Grin fixed. Eyes cold. I saw a flicker of dawning realization.

"Say, where is she?"

"You rolled it?"

More dawning. "Well, yeah. A nice barrel roll, you know. Pretty much just one gee."

"Carl, what category aircraft is a 172?"

"Huh? A 172?" He gestured down the hall. "Say, did you see where she went? Is she in the can? It was kinda bumpy out there today. I think she was getting a little green toward the end. Maybe I should check on her—"

"Carl, what category aircraft is a 172?"

I got a hesitant look from him. Somewhere in his smug self-confidence, a that's-not-right moment intruded on his lordly command of Carl's World. It's the moment when a pilot hears an engine misfire. When a landing gear light doesn't turn green. When the oil pressure needle wavers. Men like Carl generally don't recognize such moments. They don't listen when tiny voices

whisper at them. But he looked at me now. My grin evaporated. Ice formed in my eyes.

“A 172 is not an aerobatic category aircraft, Carl.”

“I know, but I can keep the gees well within limits. A barrel roll, that’s just—that’s easy, one gee if you do it ri—”

“You fucking barrel rolled one of our aircraft?”

“Look, I, uh—”

“Scared the shit out of some poor passenger?”

“C’mon, man, I know what—”

“You know what you’re doing? Really?” My tone was smooth, even. Ice on a still pond. “You’ve had aerobatic training? You were in an aircraft rated for aerobatics?”

“Hey, I was careful.”

“You’re done here, Carl. You’re never renting another aircraft from us. Do you understand me?”

“You can’t—”

“Oh, yes I can. And I’m going to e-mail every other FBO in the state, so you can forget about taking your shit show on the road. You’re an arrogant prick who doesn’t belong in the cockpit.”

“Fuck you!” Red streaks rose in his cheeks. Carl probably had twenty pounds on me, most of it billowing over his belt, but I had an inch of height. This wasn’t going anywhere.

“Take your shit and go.”

He was close to jittering, like an old car with a bad clutch trying to take a hill it shouldn’t. Nobody talks to Carl Lofton like that.

“Fine,” he said, like it was suddenly his idea. “Where’s the broad?”

‘The broad?’ Are you fucking kidding me?

“She left,” I lied. “She said to tell you never to call her again.”

The red ran from his cheeks down into his neck. A vein throbbled above his right eye. I noticed for the first time that his hair was thinning badly. *Gonna need plugs soon, buddy.*

He still had the flight board in hand, with the aircraft key and the time-card showing how much rental time had been logged on the flight. He tossed it onto the counter. It slid across and dropped to the floor with a flat slap.

“I ain’t fucking paying for this!” He started to turn.

My left hand clamped on his bicep, just above the elbow. He tried to jerk free, but I had it at the bone. With my right hand, I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket. I held it up in front of his face with the screen toward me.

“You’re going to pull out your fucking Gold MasterCard and give it to Rosemary, and you’re going to pay for this rental and anything else you have

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on your account. Because if you don't, the recording I just made of this conversation where you admitted violating several Federal Aviation Regulations and admitted to careless and reckless operation of an aircraft is going directly to the Feds, where it, and my testimony, and the testimony of that woman will guarantee your license is suspended, do you copy?"

Rosemary emerged from the inner office, her face aimed at the floor, probably to suppress a cheer. She picked up the flight board and began to work the keyboard on the front desk computer. I released my grip on Carl's arm.

Rosemary took her sweet time. She tallied up Carl's account. Today's rental. Two from earlier in the month. She ran his card while he stood staring, silent. His signature scratched through the slip. He threw down the pen.

"Fuck you," he muttered as he walked out of the office.

Rosemary squeezed her lips together, holding her tongue, watching him go.

After a moment, I jogged out the front doors after him. The sun hung low in the west, but a steady early-evening breeze pushed out the windsock. It may have been a beautiful summer day, but such days produce sharp thermals over the farmland and forests of Wisconsin, and the ride in a light plane can be rough, hot, and uncomfortable. Between that and Carl's bad judgment, I understood how the flight had spun the woman's head.

"Carl!" I called after him. He was on a march to his car, the inevitable Corvette. "Hey, man! Wait up a second!" I let a little softness ease into my tone, a little brother-to-brother.

He hesitated. He looked over his shoulder at me.

"Wait up a second, man," I said with a mild shrug, the kind he read as the signal that an apology would follow. He was wrong. I let my eyes fall to his shoes for a second. Let him be the alpha dog. He waited for me.

"Listen, I want to ask you one thing, okay?"

"Okay."

"Don't take anyone with you."

He stood still, ready for the apology, but those weren't the words he expected.

"What?"

"Don't take anyone with you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I heaved a sigh. "You're an arrogant prick. You think you know it all. That makes you a dangerous pilot. So, don't take anyone with you. When you fuck up and kill yourself. Don't take anyone with you. A girl. A wife. Kids. Don't kill them, too. Please."

Carl took a thousand miles off the tires of his Corvette when he peeled out of the parking lot.

ROSEMARY WAVED her keys at me when I walked back into the office. The wall clock said closing time. The door to the pilot lounge stood open.

“She come out?”

Rosemary nodded. “She went down to the Ladies. Are you going to take her home?”

I shrugged with all the Casual I was able to muster up, but it didn’t fool her. Her cheeks balled up over a knowing smile that, unlike my grin for Carl, rode high into her pale eyes and lit them up like landing lights. She laughed and started to leave.

At the door, she stopped and looked at me.

“That girl is going to marry you.”

I DIDN’T THINK SO after I drove the woman home.

Except for curt directions, she hardly spoke. She didn’t tell me her name. It wasn’t a cold ride, but it was solitary. She directed me to an apartment building on the west side of Essex. I considered asking how she was feeling, but decided the question invited too much review of what had happened.

For some reason, I felt acutely aware that my car was an eleven-year-old Toyota Corolla that hadn’t seen a car wash, well, ever. I wanted to reach over and scoop up the litter on the passenger-side floor, but I didn’t want her thinking I was reaching for those beautiful bare legs. Except for shifting, I kept my hands at ten and two on the wheel.

Pulling into the parking space she indicated, I let the engine run.

To my surprise, she turned and looked frankly at me, eyes squeezed down slightly, like someone searching for a landmark on a distant horizon.

“I heard what you said. To Carl. Outside.”

I suddenly wondered if she’d also heard me lie to the bastard, telling him she’d gone and never to call her again. The pilot’s lounge door was closed, but it’s not soundproof. She probably thought I was an opportunistic ass.

“Did you mean it?”

“Mean what?”

“Will he kill someone?”

“I hope not.”

She got out of the car without another word.

Rosemary was full of shit.

. . .

TWO WEEKS LATER, as I turned onto the narrow blacktop about a quarter mile from the driveway to the farmhouse I'd been renting, a City of Essex squad car rolled up behind me with its light bar exploding blue and red against a high summer twilight. I felt a cold anchor drop in my stomach, the one everyone feels when the blazing cop car lights fill up the rearview mirror. I pulled over and fished my wallet out of my back pocket and held it in my hand. No sense reaching for something in the near-dark, something a cop can't see. Shit, was I speeding? I hadn't paid attention, but the default answer to that is approximately twelve over the limit. *Shit.*

The officer strolled up, filling my side-view mirror with utility belt and a black semi-automatic service weapon. I already had the window open. The air conditioning on the Corolla died long before I bought it used.

I looked up at the face beneath the peaked cap and the anchor in my stomach turned to a cloud of butterflies, like some sappy Disney animation.

She wore her hair in an official-looking bun. I had a split second to feel disappointed that she wouldn't need me to hold it.

"Hello, Will Stewart," she said. Dummy that I am, I wondered how she knew my last name.

"Hello, Deeply Embarrassed," I said, instantly wishing I hadn't, and just as instantly feeling better when it brought a smile. She let the smile linger.

"Yes, well, do you blame me?"

"I told you. Been there, done that. And I was the pilot."

"You were airsick?"

"Blew my breakfast out the side window."

"That's not exactly reassuring to the passengers." The smile stayed. It seemed to dance on her face, lit like a party by the blue and red lights from her squad car.

"Is there a problem, officer?" Stupid, stupid question.

"It's Sergeant. Andrea Taylor," she said. Her hand came out. I took it. We shook warmly, curtly, professionally. I wanted to hold that hand. "And yes, there is a problem if you ever tell my chief why I stopped you."

"Okay. I won't tell. Why did you stop me?"

"I want you to take me flying."

She could have been speaking a foreign language, it was so utterly beyond what I expected her to say. I looked at her for a long moment, to see if some joke lay beneath the surface. She gave no hint of anything but sincerity.

I thought about it, and said, "No."

Surprise flashed in her eyes, then doubt, and maybe embarrassment, the genuine kind that follows when a sure-fire plan flops.

“No? You’re the pilot.”

“Why?”

“Because you have the license.” Cute. The joke sparkled in her eyes. I liked those eyes.

“Why?” I repeated. “Why do you want me to take you flying?”

She hesitated.

“I don’t like being defeated. I never flew in a small plane before, and I felt defeated afterward. I don’t like that.”

“Okay. Still No.”

She rocked back on one foot. Her eyes darkened. “You won’t take me flying?”

I shook my head. “You take me.”

“Um, again...you’re the pilot.”

“Yes. But you do the flying. You take the controls. You’ll be hands on. You’ll be in control. You’ll feel the aircraft and know what it’s doing. I’ll get you onto the runway, but you’ll push the throttle up. You do the takeoff. You do the flying.”

“Me? Takeoff?”

“Little known secret. Airplanes fly nicely without us. The airplane will take off practically by itself.”

She drew a breath and considered the idea.

“I’ll be there, right there, the whole time. But no stunts. No bullshit. Not like—”

“That asshole?”

“I didn’t know if the two of you, um, were...”

“It was the second date. My mind was made up after the first date, but he offered to take me flying and it’s something I always wanted to do. And I got sick and that took it away from me. I want it back.”

This had nothing to do with saving face or showing me something. This was between her and her expectations, between her and the sky.

“Then take me flying,” I said.

And she did.

I knew before I showed her how to start the engine I was in love.

“They found you in the pilot’s seat, in a marsh about a half mile from the threshold,” Pidge told me. She had a note of envy in her voice, like I’d done something she wanted to try. No surprise. She’s crazy. “Fucking cockpit was gone. Just you and the fucking pilot seat.”

“Pidge,” Andy, my wife, the love of my life, fired a warning shot. “We’re not supposed to talk about the accident. Maybe later, okay?”

Cassidy Evelyn Page, who we at the airport had dubbed Pigeon after her first solo eight years ago, coughed out, “Fucking bullshit.” She talks dirty and she flies. Hence, Pigeon. Eventually, just Pidge.

I turned my head on the pillow. Andy sat close to me God love her. She held my hand. She had a good grip on it. She rubbed it, like she needed constant reaffirmation that it was neither cold nor dead. Her eyes glowed red and wet. Her long waving locks had been brushed through after last night’s vigil on the in-room sofa. She’d been there the whole time. Which begged a question about what she had seen or not seen when I went flying among the light fixtures.

She let her gilded green eyes fall on me, and they were full of love and gratitude to such a depth I felt the air sucked from my lungs. It felt good, which helped, because I didn’t. I hurt everywhere. The parts of my body that weren’t screaming at me were muttering rudely, fomenting rebellion. I was running a little light on painkillers. The team kicking field goals into my nuts said so.

Since my night flight, I’d been in and out, awake, asleep, and in between

on waves of pain and swells of bliss. Somebody cranked up the morphine and I must have slept. Now, the parking lot lights outside my window were out. The poles stood in silhouette against a blue sky.

“You’re gonna have visitors,” Pidge said dramatically. “The mother-fucking Feds.”

My eyes felt gunky, so I blinked to clear them and get a better look at who was in the room. Andy held down the chair by my bed. Pidge, looking the blonde pixie she was, sat with her legs folded under her on the sofa where Andy had spent the night. It was the kind of couch you find in a hospital room that’s trying hard to be both a chamber of pain, confusion and fear, and a three-and-a-half-star hotel room with wood paneling.

Pidge wore a grubby sweatshirt and cutoff jeans, so she was probably on her way to the airport where, like me, she worked for Essex County Air Service as a pilot. She kept her professional slacks and uniform shirt in a closet in the pilot’s lounge.

“NTSB got there a few hours after they found you. Been out at the site ever since. Jesus Jumped Up H. Christ, Will. You spread Six Nine Tango all over Essex coun—”

“Pidge!” Andy cut her off. My girl can swing a word like a Viking swings a war axe. I got a hand squeeze and gave one back.

Pidge raised her palms in surrender, which is never that in a twenty-four-year-old pilot. I know. I’d been one a decade or so ago, and we of that ilk know two things: Everything. And nothing.

I deduced from what Pidge had let slip that I crashed one of the company’s twin-engine Piper Navajos, which I flew regularly on charters. I could not remember a crash, or a recent flight, or waking up in a marsh. A giant empty hole obscured my memory.

A doctor identifying himself as Morrissey had been in several times. Morrissey owned the friendly face that told me they would give me something for the pain. Morrissey looked younger than me. That had never happened to me before in a doctor.

“Mr. Stewart, imaging confirms that you have a stable pelvic fracture. Just one, in the pelvic ring, and no serious internal bleeding. That’s good news.”

It didn’t feel like good news. It felt like hearing that Hitler had invaded the Low Countries.

Dr. Morrissey seemed to want to bring home the point. He put his hand on my chest. “You’re lucky. The fracture doesn’t require surgery. It’s a closed fracture. There’s no skin break.”

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“Which means?” I managed to ask. A wave of pain ran up through my chest, under his hand and I nearly vomited.

“We’re going to continue the morphine for the pain. We’re going to keep you still. That’s how it will heal.” He pushed a nice, professional smile at me. “This could have been a lot worse.”

In my ignorance, and deep in pain, I wasn’t sure I agreed.

“There are no other overt injuries, but we’re watching you closely.” Something in his eyes said he was surprised not to have found more. “You had a period of being unconscious when you were brought in, so we’re mindful of a possible concussion.”

At some point, I think during daylight while waking from another cycle of pain-morphine-doze, I heard one of the nurses say to someone else in the room: This guy is a miracle. Plane crash. Broken pelvis. Classic seat belt injury. But not a scratch or contusion anywhere else. They found him sitting in his seat in a swamp.

I connected that comment to what Pidge said, grinning at me like I just flew under the Golden Gate Bridge and let her ride shotgun. She found way too much glee in this.

“Mwa—” my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. I reached for a cup with ice chips perched on a tray suspended over the bed.

“Let me!” Andy scooped it from my fingertips and pressed it to my lips. I probably could have managed, but I let her play Florence Nightingale. The ice did the trick.

“Nobody’s telling me anything,” I griped. “I wrecked Six Nine Tango? When?”

Andy shot Pidge a 40-millimeter anti-aircraft glance before she could open her mouth.

“Will, they only let us in to see you on condition that we not talk about the ... accident.”

“Such bullshit!” Pidge opined.

“Otherwise!” Sergeant Andrea Stewart said, “Otherwise, they were going to keep you sequestered until the investigators got here.” I didn’t like the sound of that, and it must have shown on my face. Andy quickly added, “I think they just want to hear from you, you know, before you start hearing versions from everybody else.”

“How long have you been here?” I asked my wife.

“Longer than you. Mike called me when they found you. I beat the ambulance here.” She smiled a smile that revealed both her precocious underbite and a streak of mischief that paid bonuses in bed. She also used it

to hide the terror I knew she must have felt driving through the night after getting the call. "I might have been speeding."

"Cops catch you?"

"The cop hasn't been born that can catch me."

Even if she wasn't a police officer, my wife was unlikely to ever receive a written citation. She had hinted to me that in the past she had slipped away more than a few times with a polite warning.

She looked at me sweetly and Mother Morphine met her match; Andy's gaze warmed me deeply.

"They're here," Pidge muttered out of the side of her mouth, unfurling her legs on the couch, squaring her shoulders as if the FAA and the NTSB intended to ramp check her on the spot.

Doctor Morrissey entered the room leading two newcomers.

A woman in a blue nylon windbreaker with NTSB on the breast, and a man in a blue hoodie, but without the yellow lettering, stepped into the room. The woman was short and carried the kind of weight that probably branded her with hurtful words in the schoolyard as a child. She used dark eyes like tools of her investigative trade to scan the room, its occupants, and most thoroughly me. Assessing. Recording. The man was younger than her, with an athlete's build. Rock climber. Or kayaker. His blondish hair and tanned face confessed to a love of sunshine.

Morrissey laid down the rules like a referee. "Mr. Stewart is receiving strong narcotic medication for pain, so you need to keep this short, and you need to keep this unofficial." I wondered if he knew something I didn't. I liked that he ran interference for me.

The newcomers introduced themselves. Connie Walsh of the National Transportation Safety Board and Joe Cyler from the Federal Aviation Administration Flight Standards District Office in Milwaukee, which pilots call Fismo.

"Hi," Walsh said. "How are you feeling?" She didn't offer a hand, but I took that less as a snub than her thinking she might break something if she reached out and grabbed me.

"Like the scene of an accident."

"That bad, huh."

Cyler stood silent. He wore an expression that said this exchange struck him as only mildly interesting.

"You are, according to Dr. Morrissey, nowhere near as broken as you probably should be, Mr. Stewart," Walsh said. "In fact, I'm rather amazed to be standing here talking to you." The eyes, her tools, continued their investi-

gation, paying no heed to the smile she applied to her lips. “When we got the call, we assumed it was fatal. When I saw the wreckage, I was sure.”

Andy’s grip on my hand tightened. I shrugged lightly. Then gritted my teeth. It hurt to shrug.

“Just so you know, this is not an official proceeding,” she said. “We just want to get an initial idea from you about what happened.”

My mouth remained dry. The words came slowly. “I might not be much help. In fact, I was hoping someone might fill me in.”

“You don’t remember the accident?”

“Nothing.”

I expected her to think I was lying. Her eyes didn’t leave me. She gave it a second to sink in, but she seemed to do so without judging.

“Do you remember flying a charter to Lansing? Dead-heading the return trip?”

I’ve been across Lake Michigan to Lansing with regularity for years. I remembered the approach clearances, the runway, the coffee in the FBO. None of those memories raised a hand to volunteer that they were connected to whatever put me in this hospital bed. I remembered a breakfast. Parking my car in the airport lot. Weather briefings. But were those memories for this trip or for any other day of my working pilot’s life?

“Wha-happened?” I asked, a little put out with myself for slurring it.

“Well, initial indications are that your aircraft broke up. Possibly...” She glanced at Cyler. “Possibly because you hit something.”

Cyler’s expression said he didn’t like her sharing.

“You mean the ground?” I had a sick feeling. I screwed up. Lost situational awareness. Vertigo? Flying an approach below minimums, slamming a perfectly flyable aircraft into the earth? Unforgivable aviation crimes that I, like every other pilot who has ever done it, felt sure I would never commit.

The NTSB report would classify it as CTIF; Controlled Flight Into Terrain.

I felt heartsick.

Walsh shook her head.

“No. Hit something. In the sky, not the ground.” She looked at me for a reaction. I looked at her for meaning.

Neither of us found what we were looking for.

“How much trouble am I in?” I pointed the question at Cyler. I watched him make the catch, juggle the question, weigh it, fit it into the holes and slots of what he knew so far, and process an answer for himself that he wasn’t ready to share. Surfer dude or not, his wheels turned fast.

“So far, we haven’t found anything to indicate deviation from procedure.” He replied. It was clear they weren’t done looking. “You were cleared IFR out of Lansing. All comm was normal. Handed off to Chicago Center. Normal. Cleared for the RNAV 31 into Essex County. I haven’t seen the radar track yet, but I talked with Center and they said it looks normal. You disappeared from radar at...” His eyes shot up to the ceiling to retrieve the information. “...twenty-one forty-seven. About a mile from the approach end of 31 at Essex.”

“Altitude?”

“Say again?”

“What altitude? Last radar hit. What altitude?”

Cyler cracked a smile at one corner of his mouth.

“You were on the approach, on glideslope.” Walsh answered when Cyler didn’t.

The butterflies in my chest stopped beating their wings.

Walsh said, “After you cancelled, Center said you radioed, but were cut off. When they couldn’t raise you, they called local PD to ask them to confirm your landing. Local PD reported no activity on the field. About the same time, they also got a report of a loud bang from a farmer.”

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I wondered if Walsh knew Andy was “local PD.”

“John was on dispatch,” Andy said. “Mike was in twenty-one and first on the scene.” I got a hand squeeze as she said it, like a part of her had been out there looking for me.

“Mr. Stewart, you were found sitting in your seat in an area of soft ground,” Walsh said, and something girlish glittered in her eyes, like she’d been winding up to say those words all day. Behind Walsh, Pidge grinned and nodded her head. Walsh let the statement hang, like I might fill in the blanks. It was a trick Andy used when questioning a witness or suspect—and sometimes me. I knew the trick and kept my mouth shut.

Walsh, defeated, eventually spoke. “The airplane is spread out over a quarter mile behind where you were, on the line of the approach.”

“Collision? Somebody else on the approach?”

“So far, we haven’t found any debris other than the Piper Navajo.”

“What then?”

“We don’t know.”

“Was it a missile?” Pidge blurted.

“We’re still investigating,” Walsh said, but from her tone, I think missile was off the list.

“Wait,” I said. “You don’t know what I hit? How do you know I hit something?”

“Preliminary examination of the components we’ve been able to identify,” Walsh said. “Very preliminary. Which brings me to questions. Do you mind if I record this part?”

“I’m not sure I’m comfortable with that,” Sergeant Andrea Katherine Taylor Stewart leaned forward in her chair. My protector, putting herself between the threat and her loved one.

“I’ve already explained that Mr. Stewart is receiving strong doses of narcotics for pain,” Dr. Morrisey added.

Walsh waved a friendly hand. “Duly noted, Doctor. And Mrs. Stewart, this will be noted as preliminary only. We’re really not here to do anything except investigate the cause of the accident.”

I wasn’t sure Cyler had signed on to that.

“It’s okay,” I told Andy. “I don’t think there’s much I can tell anyone. I’m drawing a big blank. The day, the charter, the weather.” I shook my head. “I got bits and pieces, but I think they’re from other trips. Pidge, who was the charter?”

“Romain.”

Romain Construction. Headquartered in Michigan, working a big highway project in Essex County. When they figured out our charter rates

were lower than they had been paying out of Lansing, they became a regular customer, practically a scheduled run. Had been for several years now.

“Jackson? Bridley? Some of the crew?”

“Bridley and three crew. One way. I bet they’re going to be fucking glad it wasn’t the other way when they hear about this shit storm.”

I had nothing. I could see Joe Bridley, with his red beard and sunburned nose. But not in connection with this trip. I could picture some of his crew guys but failed to come up with which ones were on the outbound leg to Lansing.

Hell, I could picture the climb out of Essex, the shore of Lake Michigan passing below and the span of blue wide enough to let you imagine it’s the ocean for a few minutes before the other side appears on the horizon. I could picture low clouds, no clouds, cloud layers, moonlit night flights. Flights full of turbulence and ice and sweat. Flights on beautiful blue days hung like living dreams. I could fill in all kinds of blanks and the ATC voices to go with them, but none that anchored precisely to this flight.

What the hell did I hit?

“May I?” Walsh held out her phone, finger poised over a Record button.

I felt Andy coiled beside me, ready to object. She might hate lawyers, but she better than anyone would know when you should have one fronting the band. I squeezed her hand.

“Go ahead. But like I said...”

Walsh nodded and tapped her screen. She spoke a few preliminaries into the device, date, time, names of those present.

“Mr. Stewart, do you remember flying into Essex County Airport on the night of June fifteenth?”

“No.”

“Do you have any memory of a collision while piloting a Piper Navajo?”

“No.”

“Do you remember any details of a flight that originated in Essex County, with a stop in Lansing, Michigan and a return to Essex County?”

“No.”

She tried a few more. And soon I got the impression she was doing it not to incriminate, but to keep me in the clear. I never met anyone from the NTSB, but I had heard stories. All of them painted the NTSB investigators as sharp professionals dedicated to the investigation, not to assigning blame. I sensed I was being helped.

My answers were as blank as my memory. It wasn’t long before she nodded and pointedly stopped the recording.

“My turn,” I said.

“Fair enough.”

My voice was tight. My sentences were punctuated with short breaths. “What was the wreckage pattern? You said there was no contact with terrain.”

“A nearly perfect straight line, starting with what we think was the left wing, engine and horizontal stabilizer. Then the rest of the tail. Then the right wing and center section along with most of the fuselage. Then parts of the nose and cockpit. Then you.”

“How long? From the first piece to me.”

“Almost five hundred yards. About a quarter of a mile.”

That didn’t make sense. Walsh could see it on my face.

“I know,” she nodded. “CTIF would be more concentrated. A high-altitude breakup would have been much more spread out, and both linear and lateral. This was linear only. Like you kept flying and shedding pieces.”

“The left wing.” I said, wincing. The bones in my torso were pissed at all this chatter. I took a deep breath. “That was the initial impact point?”

Walsh tipped her head to one side, marking her answer as a guess. “We think so...”

“But?”

“But it’s hard to tell.

“What about impact markings? Paint? What the hell did I hit?”

“We’re looking at all that, but frankly...” she peeled off a glance at Cyler, who remained mute “...Mr. Stewart, I saw the left wing myself. It’s barely recognizable. Same with the left engine, the nacelle. Parts of what we think was the left side of the fuselage. I’ve seen airplanes that made a crater that were more recognizable. Only this damage didn’t appear to come from ground contact. The ground isn’t scarred. Then there are parts of the rest of the fuselage that are split open. Farther on, the whole right wing, which looks nothing like the left. Practically intact. On that side, indications are that the blades were still turning when the prop hit the ground. And then, well, there’s you.”

“Me?”

“Doctor Morrissey here says you have a broken pelvis. Type—what did you call it?”

“Type A. Stable fracture. Not uncommon with a seat belt injury. The contusions across his midsection strongly support seat belt as the cause. No indication of the kind of rotational forces that produce a partial disruption of the posterior sacroiliac complex, or the kind of force that you might see in a motor accident or fall from a significant height. Those injuries would require surgery and a long, long recovery period. We talked about this, Will.”

We did? Guessing at what I was thinking, Morrissey said, “Treatable with bed rest.”

Bed rest. I wanted to ask when I would fly again.

Sitting in the pilot’s seat in a marsh. Nearly intact, not counting the pelvic injury. What the hell? I usually fly the RNAV 31 Approach into Essex at 120 knots. The left side of the airplane gets torn off, my seat gets pulled out, and I wind up in a swamp—with a broken pelvis probably caused by the seat belt? Treatable by bed rest? With no other injuries? At 120 knots?

Those dots did not connect.

“I think you’re seeing the mystery here, Mr. Stewart. For us at least.” Walsh looked at me like I was a puzzle. “You are one lucky pilot. You were lucky to be deadheading. Had you been carrying any passengers we assume they would have all been fatalities. You probably should have been.”

“Ejector seat!” Pidge offered, grinning.

Walsh said, “If the airplane had one, it would make a lot more sense.”

By the end of the conversation, I decided I liked Walsh. I wasn't sure where Cyler was coming from, but most of the Feds I ever met like to cultivate that aura. They're not bad guys. They just like to stand behind their credentials. Walsh finished the conversation with a hearty handshake, having seen with her own eyes that I was an actual medical miracle and wasn't going to break if she took my right hand. She gave me a sincere thank you for being alive to talk to her. I told her the pleasure was all mine. Given what I figured she'd seen in her career, I think she would have argued the point.

After they left, Andy dispatched Pidge to the cafeteria for coffee.

"You're not going to heal properly if you pull another stunt like last night," Morrissey said, hands in his pockets, trying to be stern. He wasn't all that good at it. Morrissey looked the part of a fresh-hire prep school professor, with no-nonsense glasses and a slightly receding hairline. A young Michael Caine had the acting gig not worked out. Maybe not as tall. "The nurses said you were trying to get out of bed. Or standing up on it."

Not so much. I had a feeling, however, that explaining what I experienced would not hasten my release date.

"It's pretty fuzzy," I offered. "I think I was getting a little trippy on the morphine."

"We need to cut that back," he said, more to himself than to me.

Dammit.

"You have to remain stable. You're young but you're not a kid, Mr. Stewart. The bones will heal, but you need to give them the best possible

chance of doing so. Jar them again like that, and we're looking at surgery, and extensive recovery time with extensive rehabilitation."

"You copy that, Pilot?" Andy said sharply.

"Roger."

THEY WEREN'T KIDDING about the bed rest. Either as punishment for my antics in the night, or to enforce their intent to immobilize me, they wrapped my midsection in an inflatable cast and secured it to the rails on the bed. A series of thin, air-filled ribs ran parallel to my body, starting just below my own ribs and ending about even with the family jewels. From this rig, an air hose ran to a compressor beneath the bed. Every half hour or so, the compressor started up, keeping the air pressure in the ribs set precisely at Fix This Guy's Pelvis, I assume. The compressor sang a low, muttering song, barely above a vibration. The first time I heard it, I thought of my cell phone. Which then made me wonder, where was my cell phone? And my pants? And for that matter, my wristwatch?

Andy told me my clothes had been cut off. She had my watch. She didn't know anything about my phone. My socks and shoes survived. She pointed at a closet.

She then helped me sort out a bigger question. Time and space.

We were alone in the room. Pidge had delivered coffee to Andy and gone back to her duties on the Essex County Air Service flight line, magnified now that we were one pilot short. The feds had gone back to supervise relocation of the wreckage to an empty corporate hangar at Essex County Airport.

"You were supposed to be back by ten," she told me. "Chicago Center called dispatch at ten-twenty. We got the noise call around the same time. Mike started at the airport, and when he didn't see anything or anyone, he headed out Highway C where the noise call came from. He started a grid search there. He should have called me. I could have checked the wind and told him which approach was in use, and to start on a line from the runway outward."

"That's my Co-Pilot," I said, "except why would he call you? He had no reason at that point to think it was me out there."

"Well, anyway he's the one that found the wreckage. He almost ran over part of it. There was a piece of it on the Old Bridge Road. That's when he called for help. They got the fire department out there and started walking through the fields. He said it was like stuff had fallen off a truck. Just a line of aluminum and airplane parts. As it turned out, entirely by chance, they

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started at the beginning, and you were at the other end. That's why it took so long to find you. They didn't find you until almost two a.m. That's when Mike called me. They ... um, they..."

Her hand squeeze turned to concrete. Andy's voice went tight and high.

"They knew it was you. They thought, just looking at you...sitting there...that you were—"

"I've said it before. I'll say it again. Rumors of my demise have been greatly exaggerated."

She burst into a laugh and vented sobs that had been building.

"Do this again, Pilot, and I'll kill you myself," she said, wiping water from the corners of her eyes. "Anyway, that was around two. They couldn't believe it when one of the firemen got a pulse. They had to carry you to the road, about a quarter mile. I got here at around two-twenty. They rolled you in around ten minutes later."

Here. Essex County Memorial. That took care of space. Two-thirty a.m. arrival. That took care of time. Part of it.

"You were in the ER for a few hours. All they would tell me was that you were alive, and you were unconscious. I, um..."

Hand squeeze.

"I had to wait outside. They took you to Imaging. They wouldn't tell me what they were looking for, but I assumed it was head trauma, broken bones, or God forbid spinal. That's when they found the broken pelvis. I don't think it was what they were expecting. You woke up down there, they said."

"Did I tell them anything? About what happened?"

"You told them someone had shoved molten steel up your ass. Nice."

"It hurt."

"I guess. They said you were in and out of consciousness and in a lot of pain, and once they confirmed there was no head or spinal injury, they started worrying about internal injuries and bleeding. What?"

I stared at her. Questioning.

"Morrissey told me all this," she explained. "After the fact. I didn't know any of it at the time. I was out in the waiting room tearing the wallpaper off with my fingernails. So that's when they moved you up here and put you on morphine. They couldn't treat the pain until they were sure it was okay. That was yesterday morning. You went to sleep like a baby when I finally got in to see you. I thought—God, I thought so *many things!* And then I saw you there, sleeping like nothing happened. You were snoring a little."

"I don't snore."

"Right. Nobody does. You were sleeping and there were no bandages, and you had all your parts."

“You checked *all* my parts?” She ignored me.

“I was tearing my hair out the whole time.”

“Please. Not the hair. That’s the fourth reason I married you.”

She ignored me some more.

“I guess I was a little worn out. I sat down on the couch there, and they brought me a blanket and pillow. Funny, but I remember telling them I didn’t want to sleep. I don’t remember lying down. But I do remember waking up. Will, you scared the living daylights out of me!”

She said nothing about me disappearing from the bed. Or re-appearing six feet above it. Thinking about this, I reached up with my free hand and rubbed my cheek.

Still sore to the touch.

“I guess you had some sort of nightmare. Were you thinking about—or dreaming about the crash?”

“I got nuthin’ on the crash. Zip. I guess I woke up and the pain from this must have been a rude surprise. Sorry for all the noise.”

Time and space. Now I had them both. Essex County Memorial, early Sunday morning. It might be a pilot thing, but few things agitate me more than uncertainty about time and space. I read the clock. Nearly eleven a.m. Sunday. Something about that gave me comfort. Like groping through a dark room and finally finding the light switch. The comfort lacked certainty, however. A big gap hung in my memory.

“You need to go home,” I told Andy.

“No.”

Her answer came with a head shake and a strand of hair fell across one eye. I’d seen this before. She left it there, a flag signaling the start of a stubborn, mortal stand.

“Dee.” I used her pet name. Dee, as in D. E., as in Deeply Embarrassed. Also, a shortening of Andy, the shortening of Andrea Katherine, which I would invoke to press the point if I had to.

“I’m staying.”

“I’m being pumped full of drugs. Can barely feel them welding down there in my pelvis. I’m going to fall asleep in mid-sentence here and start drooling all over the pillows. I don’t want you to see me like that. You’ll never want to get near me and a pillow again.”

“You’re lucky I don’t jump you right now, Pilot.”

Yeah, that wasn’t a help, because things started stirring down under the magic inflatable cast that definitely should not be stirring at that moment.

“Go home. Get some rest. Let me rest. Come back tonight and I’ll share my Jell-O with you.”

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The strand of hair hung defiant.

“Come back rested and I’ll let you jump me.” More stirring. I moved, or tried to, and a jolt of pain pushed through the morphine. That helped with the stirring thing, but it also painted the pain on my face. She abruptly pushed the strand aside and kissed my cheek. (Still sore.) “Andrea Katherine, go home! Seriously, let me zonk out.”

Oh, if I could bottle the gaze that fell on me at that moment. Love. Pity. Warmth. Gratitude. I felt like such an ass, scaring her so badly. We share a life together with certain walls that go up when we’re apart. When she’s armed and in a patrol car at night, stopping who-knows-what kind of shit-bird. When I’m on a charter and the American Midwest is producing thunderstorms like popcorn in a pan. The wall goes up and we lock down the part of our minds where the worst happens in Technicolor. This accident knocked down one of those walls and put her through hell. I was such an ass.

“A few hours,” she surrendered.

“Take a nap. I’ll ask for green Jell-O.”

“You do know how to show a girl a good time.”

I got another kiss, this one on the lips, long and firm and trading love between us the way power lines deliver lightning. More damned stirring. For the first time, I wondered how long it really took to heal a pelvis. I had plans for mine. Something I would ask Morrissey next time he appeared.

She worked her way reluctantly out of the room, giving me one more damp-eyed look at the door.

I scared that poor girl.

I wondered how in holy hell an airplane had been ripped apart under me and I wound up sitting in a marsh in the pilot’s seat as if I had dropped in for some birdwatching. How does *that* happen?

“I saw your wife on the way out. She said she’d shoot me in the head if I stay more than five minutes. I believe that woman would.”

Earl Jackson appeared in the doorway where I had been clinging to an afterimage of Andy. Earl is somewhere at the other end of the scale when it comes to human design. He looks like a live model for a gargoyle, a combination of squat, bald, and scarred with questionable proportioning. His face has bulges that suggest anger, his arms and shoulders have muscles that suggest murder, and his clothes suggest a rummage sale from 1960. Earl is also the model for one of aviation’s oldest clichés. How do you make a small fortune in aviation? Start with a large fortune.

Earl Jackson made a large fortune either inventing or perfecting some sort of machine that bores holes in the ground for cables and pipes. And while I’m sure he did that with the single-mindedness of Genghis Khan conquering Asia, he also suffers from the same lifelong affliction that I do: he loves airplanes. While he was boring holes in the ground all over the world, he was boring holes in the sky with an amazing variety of aircraft. He also crop-dusted, flew checks through the night, flew package express, did a short stint for an airline called North Central (the one with the blue goose on the tail), and even did some flying in Central America for a diamond prospecting enterprise. I imagined him dropping out of a beat up round-engine twin-tail Beech Model 18 on some dirt strip, two bandoliers across his chest and a pair of .45s on his hips. Eventually Earl sold his hole-boring-machine company for a few dozen million and he bought Essex County Air

Service. And even though he could be sipping iced tea on a veranda in Monaco, he prefers to spend his days sitting in a tiny office crammed with maintenance manuals and pondering fuel purchases, or out in the shop arguing torque tolerances with Doc. Slowly turning his large fortune into a small fortune. I have no complaints about that. He pays me better than any airline offers fresh hires these days. He keeps better equipment than most charter operations. And he loves the miracle of flight more than the bottom line. He is an amazing, sometimes terrifying man. Now he stood in the space where the image of my wife had been. It was jarring.

Earl loves Andy, and she loves him. He often says she is my best quality. He also likes to look at her when he thinks no one is paying attention. I don't hold it against him.

"Hi boss."

"Don't 'Hi boss' me. What the hell did you do to my airplane?"

Someone pushed Earl into the room and said, "Earl! Language!"

A woman with skin the color of melted milk chocolate, striking facial bone structure and a gleaming smile appeared. She did what no other human on the planet would dare. She pushed Earl Jackson aside. She cast that smile onto me above a cloud of bright flowers I had no hope of identifying because they weren't red roses. The smile surpassed the flowers.

"There you are—now I feel better," I said, looking at Rosemary II. She marched into the room, and planted the flowers, conveyed in their own vase, on a shelf near the closet. A moment later she stood over me and put a kiss on my head.

"Oh, thank Heaven." She uttered the words as a prayer, her eyes squeezed shut. Earl rolled his.

"Hi Mr. Stewart!" Another bright voice joined the room. Lane, Rosemary II's daughter, all of fourteen going on twenty-five and already every bit the heartbreaker, stepped hesitantly to my bedside. She stood beside—and as a reflection of—her mother, whose real name is Amanda Franklin. Lane tipped a chipper salute in my direction.

Two years ago, the original Rosemary, the icon and authority at Essex County Air Service, the beloved insulation between Earl Jackson The Terror and our cash-paying students, renters, and charter customers—the woman who claimed to have had an affair with Jimmy Doolittle—marched into Earl's office and announced her intention to retire.

"Again?" (That's what Earl is rumored to have said. The story is shrouded in doubt, which we who work for Earl happily fill in with speculation.) "How many times does that make this week?"

"I'm moving to Mexico," Rosemary announced. I knew from experience

that Rosemary, the woman who told me Andy would be my wife at a time when I was pretty sure Andrea Taylor associated my face with vomit, had moments when her pronouncements were marble-carved. If she said Mexico, she meant Mexico.

“You don’t speak Spanish,” Earl supposedly told her. Like that mattered. More to the point, he said, “You can’t retire. Who’s going to make the coffee?”

“I have just hired my replacement,” Rosemary said. And she had.

That’s how Rosemary II came to work for Essex County Air Service. It took two days before Earl realized Rosemary had been serious. It was another day before he came out of his office to meet his newest employee, whom he dubbed Rosemary II. Two weeks later, Rosemary, who would had to have been in her hundreds to have flown with Wilbur and Orville and was probably an infant when Jimmy Doolittle was rampaging through the air race circuit, died peacefully in her sleep at the blessed age of eighty-nine. She was in the home where she’d been born, in Essex, far from the Mexican sun. It happened one day before the first anniversary of my wedding to Andy, the wedding Rosemary predicted. In honor of that wild prediction, Andy and I had planned to remind Rosemary of her prescience with a toast. The unopened bottle of champagne we intended to share with her that summer sits on a shelf at home, mourning still.

“Hey, Lane,” I said to the girl. “Who’re you gonna fly for?”

“British Airways,” she said affecting an accent and hitting the t in “British” like a native.

I gave her a thumbs-up and she gave back her mother’s smile.

“What the hell—” Earl caught a sharp glance from Rosemary II, the same anti-aircraft weapon my own wife had used on Pidge, “—*heck* did you do to my airplane?”

“Broke it, so they tell me,” I said.

“S coming out of your paycheck,” he declared. It was all for show. His threat was the equal of Rosemary II’s kiss on my head, an Earl Jackson expression of gratitude for my survival. His retired prize-fighter’s face rippled weirdly as that gratitude ran beneath the scarred landscape like one of his hole-boring machines. He coughed suddenly and shook it off.

It was a stark moment for me. I realized there were people who, upon hearing I’d gone down, had been frightened nearly as much as Andy. People who were now trying to draw a breath after discovering there would not be a funeral. The hard, sour knot it caused in my throat caught me a little by surprise, and I suddenly felt tired, tired beyond all expressions of fatigue.

The little man on the raft was screaming again, too. I think the pain showed on my face.

“I’ll give you a couple days off, but then you get your ass back to work. We gotta find a new airplane,” Earl said, reassuming his standard linebacker personality. “Hopefully one you won’t spread all over the county.”

“Oh, baloney,” Rosemary II waved him off. “Now you rest, and get better, and thank the Lord for every heartbeat. And we are going to stop bothering you, aren’t we, Earl.”

“Bye, Lane!” I gave another thumbs-up to the girl by way of apology. I was sure she had better things to do on a Sunday than visit hospitals. She returned the gesture happily, apparently not the least put out that she’d been dragged in for a thirty-second visit. I liked Lane, and I think she liked me, and I think she, too, was glad I wasn’t dead. Her mother turned her by the shoulders and aimed her at the door, shooting Earl a gesture that said Get Out as she passed him.

“In a minute,” he said. He turned to me. “There’s goddamned TV crew out front.”

From the hall: “Earl! Language!”

“They think you’re a fucking miracle. Shit, I think you’re a fucking miracle.” Earl came a little closer to the bed. His eyes were sharp, penetrating, like he was looking at me for the secret. One I didn’t have. “I saw the pieces. Talked to Walsh.”

“I don’t—”

He cut me off with a wave. Then he just stood there. Earl only does two emotions. Pissed and angry. But this was something different, and I was not entirely sure I wanted to witness it.

Earl surprised me with something I never knew.

“I flew Phantoms,” he said. “Out of Thailand. Got my ass shot down.”

I had never heard of this, and I have heard a lot of Earl Jackson stories, half of them from Earl Jackson himself.

Earl held his eyes on me, but I think he was seeing something else. Or looking for something else.

“Pretty close to home, I was. In fact, I landed among friendlies. Never wound up a prisoner, thank the gods and all the cheap beer at Udorn Air Base. Some kinda round, I don’t know what, came up through the belly. Hit my fuckin’ ejector seat and the damned thing blew me out before the whole airplane blew up.”

“Jesus, Earl, I had no idea.”

He waved me off again.

“Neither do I.” He shrugged. “I talked to Walsh. Cyler, too. He’s an ass

hat. Walsh, I like. She told me what you told her. That you don't remember. So, this is what I want to tell you: I don't remember it. All I know is what was in the report put together by the I-team they sent out to find the scrap metal. I don't remember any of it. The mission, the hit, the ejection. Lost my back-seater. Tommy Day. They never found him. Nothing. Put his name on the wall, but that's all. To this day, I don't remember it. I don't remember losing Tommy D."

I saw pain in the way he clenched his jaw.

Now he looked at me. If he had grabbed me with the claws he calls hands and pulled me up into his face, it would have been the same thing as the look he aimed at me. He *looked* at me.

"I'm gonna go to my grave not remembering. Just how it is. An itch I can't scratch. I had to learn to live with it. Had to."

I tried to say something, but had neither the words, nor the saliva to make words work.

"I thought you should know. It happens that way sometimes. You learn to live with it. If it doesn't come to you on its own, don't try too hard to dig for it. Copy?"

"Copy."

Earl issued a sharp nod and the book closed. I had a feeling I would never hear another word about it. I sure as hell wouldn't ask.

"I want you back soon. Pidge will fucking drive me batshit if you're not around. Don't let those goddamned TV people in here." He turned and marched out, knowing Rosemary II would return to drag him away any second now.

An itch you can't scratch. Forever. I didn't like the sound of that at all. I wondered if the sore spot on my cheek would end up being an itch I couldn't scratch. My eyes hung heavy, but I took a last look at the ceiling before closing them.

At the tiny spider web hanging from the acoustic tiles.

I rode sleep into Monday. Andy sat on post again when I woke, with the sun shining through the blinds behind her. The wall clock said ninety-two. It messed with me, because when Earl left it had been around eleven. I thought in addition to disappearing, I might be going backward in time. That seemed funny to me.

“What?” Andy stood over the bed, looking fresh and combed and wearing different clothes.

“Huh?” My mouth was dry.

“You’re smiling,” she said. She stroked my hair.

“Mwma...” I pointed at the water cup with the bendy straw. She provided. It was cold and fresh. More confusion on the timeline, as the last sip had been closer to room temperature.

I limbered up my tongue and said, “Happy to see you. Did you take a nap?”

Now she smiled, laughed a little. “I got some rest. You did, too.”

“I’m getting that impression. Why is it earlier than when I saw you last?”

“It’s Monday, love. You slept nearly twenty-four hours.”

“Oh. Well, they’re working me pretty hard in here. What about you?” My eyes cleared. I spotted the folded blanket and pillow on the sofa.

“I’m fine. How are you feeling?”

I took a quick inventory. I never lie to Andy. Ever. I might get away with omission, but she has a built-in lie-detector that the CIA would love to get their hands on. It serves her well on the job.

“Hurts again. And what am I feeling ... down there?”

“You’re still wearing the air girdle.”

“Um, no, that’s not it.”

She smirked. “Well, you’re a bit immobile...”

“Kinda know that.”

“Um, it’s not like you can get up and go to the bathroom.”

Horror dawned on me. First, because I realized I needed to go. Second, because I began to realize what caused her smirk.

“They didn’t.”

“Had to.”

“I’m wearing a—”

“An adult undergarment. It was that or a bed pan, and a bed pan means having to raise up your pelvis. Oh, my God, I’ve never seen you so red. Oh, love!” She kissed me on the cheek like a child. I felt my whole face burning. “Seriously, it’s okay!”

“I’m wearing a diaper in front of my girlfriend. The romance is over!”

She fought back a giggle.

“Go ahead. Laugh at me. Please tell me you didn’t, you know...”

She shook her head vigorously and said, “Oh, no! It wasn’t me. A couple big male nurses came in and did all that.” And then she broke into a giggle that grew until it shook her shoulders and made her gasp for air. “Oh, love! You should see your face!”

“Guys?”

“Stop! I’m teasing you. The nurses set you up. And they were very complimentary.”

“*What?!*”

“Oh, my God, you are so easy.”

“And you are in so much trouble. Stop giggling.”

It was nice to see her laugh. It helped me, too. Because that NFL place kicker was loosening up his leg again. Low waves of pain rolled in, pushing up into my chest.

Andy told me the TV crews had returned. They positioned outside the front entrance to the hospital so that their setups would catch the sign in the background. The Fox affiliate called me a “Survival Miracle.” The local NBC affiliate said I fell from the sky after my plane “exploded.” I wondered what Walsh thought of all this. The Fox guys got the scoop with a mobile unit in front of the hospital yesterday. Andy said she saw Earl, Rosemary II and Lane on TV, trying to slip out the front door in the background of a report aired on the 10 o’clock news. Not to be outdone, the NBC guys joined

them this morning and both did live reports, saying I was still in “serious” condition. I concurred with their assessment. It hurt.

“Earl said they’re getting calls at the airport, asking about the accident, asking about you. I coached Amanda on how to handle the press.” Andy refused to call her Rosemary II, even though I got the distinct impression Rosemary II felt honored by the nickname. “And a few nut balls, too. One guy claimed it was the hand of Jesus and asked for a lock of your hair.”

“Has Morrissey been in?” I asked.

She read the grimace correctly. “What’s wrong? Is it the pain?”

I blew out a breath, not wanting to complain, but ... “I just wondered if he cut back on the meds. He said he was going to. Things ... are getting just a little sore.” I had to squeeze out the last few words.

Andy hit the call button before I could stop her.

“Hi, we were wondering if Dr. Morrissey is coming around.”

The tin voice in the tiny speaker said, “He is on rounds this morning, so he should be seeing you. I can’t say for certain when. Is there something you need?”

My head was shaking to which Andy paid zero attention.

“My husband is having a lot of pain. Do you know if there’s been a change in his medication?”

“I’ll send someone in to check.”

Her lips pursed, accenting the slight underbite I found so sexy when she got steam up in a conversation. It extended slightly. I knew it as her I-don’t-buy-this-bullshit look, but she held her tongue.

“We have another problem,” I said.

“What?”

I rolled my eyes and made a face at her.

“Oh!” The giggle tugged at the corners of her mouth, trying to escape. “Oh, well, go ahead.”

“Take a walk.”

“Don’t be silly. Just go. That’s what it’s for.” She tipped her head at my waist and tried for all she was worth to hold a straight face. Utter failure. “I can’t—I’m sorry! You’re too funny!”

“Out!”

“Alright alright alright!”

I heard her laughter sparkle in the hall.

Try it sometime. Try just peeing in your pants. Or your bed. It took me almost ten minutes to go, as bad as I needed to.

This was going to be a bad week.

“Yes, we stopped the morphine last night, while you were sleeping,” Morrissey said. “You’ll be in less pain if you can keep yourself stabilized. So, you’ll need less. No more trying to escape, of course.”

“Not that I’m looking to become a junkie, Doctor, but I’m pretty uncomfortable right now. Are we going cold turkey?”

“Oh, no, no, no. I prescribed Oxycodone. It’s a narcotic, an opioid.”

“Pretty sure I’ve heard of it,” I said. “It’s all over the news. Epidemic.”

“Yes, well,” Morrissey shoved his hands in his pockets, “abuse may condemn it, but it does not mitigate its medical benefit when called for or under the right supervision. Sorry. I get a little soap boxy on this subject. People have an infinite capacity to turn any beneficial advance into something destructive. If you prefer, we can skip it.”

“Morphine to heroin. In a way, I prefer to do without,” I said. I was thinking about hallucinations. “But I don’t think the brush fire in my gut agrees, and I trust your judgment. And—right now—this is killing me.”

“We’re going to use the extended-release form, ten milligrams every 12 hours. I brought your first pill now and I’d like to stick to a nine a.m. and nine p.m. regimen. That stands the best chance of making you comfortable during the day, and helping you sleep at night. I think after a few days we may be able to back off this, too.”

He fished in his coat for a small packet, extracted a pill and handed it to me. The cop sitting next to me gave it a stony look. She’d seen too many of

these in backpacks and plastic sandwich bags. I popped it in and chased it down with bendy-straw water. It left a metallic aftertaste.

“Don’t operate heavy machinery. And no alcohol.” Morrissey’s delivery was so laconic I almost missed the crease at the corner of his mouth. “We’re going to keep you on liquids for a while, partly to reduce the need to move your bowels.”

“Praise Jesus,” I said.

“But you might get an upset stomach. Also, shout out if you feel shortness of breath, confusion. Other side effects include a reduced sex drive. Possibly impotence.”

“This just keeps getting better. I don’t think my chances of getting laid here are all that good.”

“An interruption in menstrual periods,” he went on.

Andy’s hand shot up to stifle a laugh.

“Other than that, it should make you comfortable. A nursing assistant will bring your next pill at nine this evening. Think you can hold out until then?”

“Depends how well this works. Is this some really good shit? Primo?”

“Oh, we only peddle the best here, Will. Andy, any questions?”

“Can I bust him for possession?”

“Yes, bring out the handcuffs, officer,” I challenged her.

“It’s sergeant, and he already told you, no sex drive. Possible impotence.”

“Care to test that theory?”

Morrissey logged out of the in-room workstation that contained all my secrets along with a catalog of his notes. “I’ll leave you two to work that out on your own. But I sincerely doubt what I gave you is enough to knock down the pain you would feel if you do indeed test that theory. Call me if you need me. Otherwise, the happy fairy comes back at nine tonight.”

The happy fairy’s name was Nick.

Andy had a court appearance in the afternoon. I persuaded her not to cancel it by claiming I needed downtime for a nap. She insisted she would return for dinner, arguing she never got her Jell-O. I countered with a demand that she sleep in our own bed tonight, at home. She keeps a little-girl-pout in her repertoire for special occasions, and she pulled it out, but I bull-rushed her with the argument that it was hard enough sleeping in this place as it is, and how it would keep me up all night worrying about her. Besides, I knew she'd been told by the Chief of Police that she could take whatever time she needed, and that she'd be back in the morning. I begged her to get the rest.

She returned to see me picking over a dinner consisting of, well, not much of anything, at least not solid. She carried in a roast beef sandwich for herself from the hospital cafeteria but then apologized for eating real food in my presence. I called it nonsense and told her I lacked an appetite. The pill fought its fight against the pain for the better part of the day, treating me to a touch of nausea along the way. I wouldn't have called myself comfortable, but I had also made up my mind to do a little fighting of my own. Nevertheless, the returning high tide of pain contributed to my lack of appetite and made me poor company that evening. Andy turned on the TV and we caught the evening news. I think she was relieved to see that the only mention of the crash appeared in a crawl, in which they misspelled explosion. *Pilot survives aircraft explosion, miraculously found alive in swamp after aircraft destroyed near Essex County Airport.* No live coverage, at least that we saw.

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She channel-surfed until we settled on an Indiana Jones movie. I lowered my eyelids around the time Indy was lowering himself into the snake pit. Before the big finish, I reached over and hit the remote.

“Go home.”

I got the pout. “Please let me stay.”

We did another dance. In the end, I got kisses, deep ones, and made her go.

The drowsiness had been an act. The little man on the raft had come in on the tide and he was in my head screaming out the national anthem accompanied by Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock. I checked the clock. It was eight-ten.

Then eight-eleven.

Then eight-twelve.

I was afraid I would start grinding the enamel off my teeth when the night nursing assistant showed up at nine-fifteen. Nine hundred seconds late, if you must know.

“Hiya, Mr. Stewart! I’m Nick!” he said bouncing into the room behind a cart covered in tiny paper cups. He was tall, thin, and had a narrow Ichabod Crane face under a shock of white-blond hair. His nose looked like it had been broken more than once. “How are we feeling tonight?”

“Five by five,” I said, aware that my voice was just a little we-just-lost-an-engine tight.

“That’s awesome, man!” He bobbed his head vigorously to show me how truly awesome that was. “You were all over the news, man! You’re a miracle! Awesome! Coming out of something like that, wow. I saw some pictures. Holy cow. Don’t know how you did it, man.”

He parked his cart and checked in on the in-room terminal. He tapped out a busy little cadence on the keys, regarded his work, added a few more riffs, then pronounced his composition good with an extravagant poke of his right index finger.

“On a scale of one to ten, can you describe any pain you may be having right now?” He stood over me with a big grin.

Sure I can. Count the holes in the ceiling. Multiply by infinity.

“Maybe a seven. A little sore.”

“Seven. That’s awesome.” A raging hippo crashing through the window probably would have struck him as *awesome*. “Okay, we’re going to give you a pill to make you comfortable for the night. Did Dr. Morrissey go over all this with you?”

“In detail. Gave me a quiz and everything.”

“A quiz! That’s awesome! Okay, let me get that for you.”

He went to his cart and, with his back to me, made a note on a clipboard.

He studied his collection of medications, and I presume picked the one that had my name on it. I got the impression of a magician in scrubs, hiding the deck from the crowd while he pushed aces up his sleeve. I wasn't far off. He turned around and extended a little paper cup to me, pill on board. I took it, popped it in, and did the water chaser again. Metallic with a hint of—what was that? Clove? He held out his hand for the little cup.

For a second, I had a feeling he was looking at me for a reaction. Like the effect of the pill would be instantaneous. Or that Mr. Hyde would suddenly appear. Then he abruptly crushed the cup and launched it into the wastebasket.

“Score! That should do you, Mr. Stewart. Is there anything else I can get for you? Ice chips? A hot blanket? I can heat one up for you.”

I shook my head.

“If you could kill the lights and call it a night, I'm good.”

“It's a night then. I'm gonna close this door so when we start playing field hockey in the hallway around midnight, it won't disturb you. You have yourself a *gooooood* night, sir!”

With one hand in his pocket and the other on his rolling pharmacy, he slid out the door.

The itch began immediately.

There's no such thing as darkness in a hospital room. There are LED lights everywhere, bars of light above and below the door, and of course the parking lot mercury vapor lamps bleeding through the window blinds. It might be night, but no one would mistake it for darkness.

In that phony moonlight, I lay thinking, possibly for the first time. Since regaining my place in the third and fourth dimensions, between sleep and the ministrations of modern health care, I had no chance to deal with the itch. I had no time to find out if it could be scratched, or if, as Earl warned, it could not.

I started with *The Crash*. In my world, the word 'crash' carries the weight of a boulder and the depth of a Russian novel. I read accident reports regularly. It may seem morbid, but in every one of them I can find the 'there-but-for-the-grace-of-God' message. Many of the NTSB briefs I read contain stories of pilots doing things I would reject out of hand. That's why I read them. To confirm that I would have rejected the action out of hand. But there are also reports that give me pause and make me think of times and places where I came close. Where I might have pushed aside a warning or adopted an 'it's not that bad' assumption—about the weather, about the drop in RPM on the left engine, about whatever. Those are the reports I read carefully. The public sees the one-sentence crawl on the television news. Family of four dies in airplane crash. There is no such thing as just a 'crash.' Speed, altitude, weather, pilot proficiency, maintenance and a dozen other factors make

up the equation. I see a multitude of missed cues, failed judgments and ultimately a broken promise between a pilot and his or her passengers. It's not a single explosive event, over in an instant. It's a chain that begins in training, or with attitudes developed over a lifetime, and continues through a convergence of people's schedules and decisions, machinery and its failings, and giant weather systems that span a continent. That's how I see it. That's how Walsh sees it.

So how was Walsh seeing my accident? I needed to talk to her. That was one itch I could scratch. The one I couldn't scratch went back to last week and hung like a black hole between then and now. I remembered trips I flew on Wednesday and Thursday. I remembered the dome of severe clear high pressure that made those trips comfortable and stress-free, weather-wise. I remembered a briefing for a trip to Minneapolis, but not for a trip to Lansing. Was there a weather briefing? Of course, there was. There had to be. It would be in the trip manifest, and it would be on record with Flight Service, and it would be something Walsh would have confirmed. Which meant everybody had it except me.

I pictured the approach leading up to The Crash. Flying westbound over the lake in clear skies meant that the horizon would hold a shimmering line of red light long into the summer evening, long after the earthbound thought night had fallen. I would have flown headlong into that soft glow, and maybe given myself a minute or two to enjoy the gradient of red to blue to black rising above the dark earth. It never gets old. It would have been a beautiful flight.

If the approach had ended in a landing.

If I hadn't ended up unconscious in a marsh.

After landing, I would have popped the side window for a little fresh air and taxied to the hangar. I'd be alone at that time of night. It's a rural airport. There's no twenty-four-hour service. Shut down the engines in front of the big hangar and start the rituals that comprise the end of a charter flight conducted under part 135 of the Federal Aviation Administration regulations. Generate the paperwork demanded by the feds, and which Rosemary II compiles for accounting and billing. An hour later I would be on the road and on my way home.

That's how it should have gone. That's how I should have remembered it. I imagined it easily, down to the smell of the propane gas-powered tractor used to push the Navajo, Six Nine Tango, into the main hangar, engines still ticking as they cooled. But that's not how it ended. And I couldn't remember. Instead, I had a maddening itch that could not and might never be scratched.

DIVISIBLE MAN

Tomorrow I would ask to see Walsh. I needed to know more. I felt a raging urge to unplug the air girdle, slide out of the you-know-what, find my clothes and escape to the hangar where the pieces of Six Nine Tango had been collected and catalogued. Maybe sight of the wreck would trigger the small cerebral explosion I needed to blow this black hole into fragments and let the memories flood back in. I needed to get out of this room.

So, float out.

It was time to touch the cheek again.

My hand ran across the bone beneath my left eye. Ever so secretively, a bruise whispered to me, *I'm still here*. I pressed. It hurt. Just in that one spot, just where the light fixture in my dream or hallucination (this bruise isn't a dream or hallucination) had jabbed me.

But that's not possible.

What about your knee?

Not possible.

I reached down. I stretched to get to the knee. Just as a lava flow of pain shot up from my pelvis, I felt it—a sensitive spot on the cartilage of the kneecap, a bruise like the kind you get when—

Catching a coffee table on the way to the kitchen in the night.

That, I remembered. Clearly. Vividly. It happened right up there, over my head, bumping against the light fixture. No, there was no itch to be scratched in this. I remembered a kind of whoosh or whump sound in my head when my body reappeared, and gravity took me back again and slammed me down into this bed.

I had been defying gravity.

But wasn't this just a hallucination? A product of the morphine and—

Oh, to hell with that. You jabbed your cheek. You stung your knee. That spider web is still there. You've been looking at it all day, dumbass.

It happened.

It happened? Really?

Yes, it happened.

Okay, so what if it really did happen?

Forget the morphine rationalization and consider the possibility that what happened, really happened. Accept it. What's the next question? There's always a next question. What is it?

In that semi-dark hospital room, the next question was clear as day.

Can you do it again?

I lay on the bed and took stock of my body. The head of the bed was raised. I had a commanding view of myself. A thin hospital blanket, tucked in at the foot and sides of the mattress, ran up to mid chest. The outline of

the air girdle made me look six months pregnant, but only if the baby was going to be born a rectangular cube. My legs extended my full six-foot-one-inch length. I wiggled my toes to confirm. Yup. Mine.

Running up the center of all this, I had pain. I was getting tired of noticing it, tired of wishing it would just go away already. The nine-o'clock pill was taking its sweet time to do its job. I might have to go back to Morrissey and challenge his claim that I was getting primo goods. A steady throb radiated up from my groin, into my guts, into my diaphragm.

The clock said eleven-o-eight, and goddamn, it still hurt.

It will kick in soon, I thought. Has to. Focus on something else.

Back to the question at hand.

I concentrated.

I closed my eyes and studied the blank canvas of darkness inside my eyelids. Painting with my imagination, I formed the cockpit of Six Nine Tango, a once-loved Piper Navajo that would never again see sky. The broad, high instrument panel took shape. Directly in front of me, the six-pack of primary instruments. In the center, the stack of radios. Below that, the throttles, prop controls, mixture controls. To the side of that, the round gear handle, shaped like a wheel so we throttle jockeys know it's the landing gear handle in our fingers. Opposite that, the flap handle, flat like a flap, again to lend tactile confirmation. Engine gauges to the right. Everything in place where it belongs.

Better. This was my world.

I put my right hand on the throttles and felt the reassurance of power. I put my left hand on the control yoke and felt command over the airplane.

The throttles aren't throttles, they're pain. Pull them back.

I pulled. I felt the smooth, measured friction as they retracted. In my mind, I heard the twin engines change their note, seeking a lower octave. I felt the pain in my chest move down, away from my diaphragm. I pulled the throttles farther aft, and a frosty sensation replaced pain. The absence of pain isn't nothingness, it's condensation dripping from a margarita in summer, it's a Corona shedding ice chunks as you pull it from a cooler.

This is working.

I wiggled my feet on the rudders in this imaginary cockpit. I used my toes to grip the blanket and push by push, removed it from the full length of my body. I kept my eyes closed but could see that blanket as I'd seen it two nights ago, bunched up at the bottom of the bed. I felt air on my legs.

Better. I felt better. Maybe the Oxy was finally kicking in.

What if you made it happen?

Eyes locked shut, I scanned my vision of my cockpit. I saw it in warm

red, with night falling, illuminated by the glow of cockpit and instrument lights. My hands slid to the right on the throttle quadrant, past the mixture controls, to a new set of levers. These had no color, only shape. I felt them, but I couldn't see them. They existed in no known aircraft. They were fully retracted, like the throttles I'd just used to reduce the pain.

Try it. Push them forward. Full forward.

I pushed. I felt smooth resistance again, the resistance set by the friction lock on the throttle quadrant, the lock that ensures that these controls stay where the pilot sets them.

The full length of my body came alive. Like acquiring a sheen of sweat, but not wet. Like a fresh breeze that hits you when you walk up out of a lake in summer, but not cold. Like a hundred million goose bumps forming, but not shivering. I pushed these new, unnamed control levers all the way forward.

Fwoomp!

It startled me. This new sound came from inside my head, but not from my imagination.

My hair tingled. My toes felt cool water passing between them.

I felt negative gees. Weightless. With that, the pain stopped entirely. The pressure on my fractured pelvic bones, brought on by the simple fact that my body had weight, was gone.

I opened my eyes.

I was gone.

The bed lay empty. Between my eyes and the blanket bunched up at the foot of the bed there was nothing. The air girdle, holding its shape and tethered to the side rails by Velcro straps, hung just a fraction of an inch above the sheet that still bore an impression of my backside. My broken pelvis remained snug in the device, yet I saw through it.

Holy Shit!

I forced myself to breathe evenly. I remembered the way the realization that I had vanished had abruptly killed the effect last time, and I wasn't remotely interested in crashing down onto the bed again, even from a quarter of an inch in the air. Breathe in. Breathe out. Float.

My hands hung in mid-air, but I couldn't see them. They held their position, the left gripping an imaginary control yoke, the right resting on power levers controlling something never engineered by the Piper Aircraft Corporation. I closed my eyes to reaffirm the vision of my constructed cockpit, then opened them again to reaffirm the effect.

Vanished.

It felt like flying for the first time. You know it's happening. You can see

the earth falling away. But part of your petulant mind wants to fold its arms across its chest and refuse to go along. This can't be happening.

This is happening! Gone. I was gone. My body, the flimsy gown they had me in, and the stupid you-know-what were all gone.

I eased my left hand down to where my chest should have been. I touched myself. My hand didn't pass through my body. The gown was there. My skin was there beneath it. I pressed and felt chest muscle, and beneath that, ribs. I reached over and felt the chromed steel side rail of the bed. Just as solid as I was. I looked around the room. Monitor lights blinked. A bar of light glowed beneath the hospital door. Parking lot light seeped through the blinds. There was no way this was a dream—or hallucination!

I held my hand up to the window.

Nothing.

Feeling adrift, tethered by the air girdle, I grabbed the side rail. My whole body gained purchase, relative to the railing now. I pulled myself toward it. I pushed myself away. Like an astronaut showing children in a classroom on Earth what it's like to be weightless in the International Space Station.

Except we can't see you, Major Tom.

I pressed my knees together and they touched. I rubbed one foot with the other and felt the callouses on my heel.

Easy. Easy. Take it easy and hold it. Don't let it get away from you. My instructor voice spoke in my head, as if teaching a student how to land. *Feel it, hold it, stay in command of it.*

A harsh realization exploded in my mind. What if I can't turn it off? What if I can't get back!

Fwoomp! The sound broke again inside my head, like something played on headphones, heard between the ears.

I dropped the quarter inch onto the bed. Pain bloomed, but nothing like the last time when I crashed from the ceiling.

Feet. Knees. Legs. Arms. Everything reappeared at once. The gown. The you-know-what. I felt myself pressing into the mattress, more aware of gravity than usual. I threw my hands onto my chest and saw them pressing where I had touched before. I pulled the gown up before my eyes. All here.

Son of a bitch!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



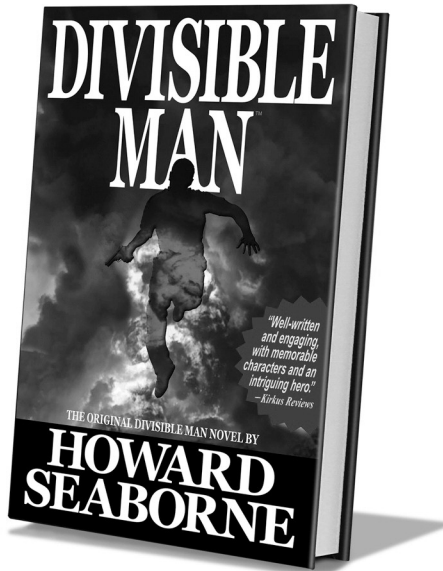
HOWARD SEABORNE is the author of the DIVISIBLE MAN™ series of novels and a collection of short stories featuring the same cast of characters.

He began writing novels in spiral notebooks at age ten. He began flying airplanes at age sixteen. He is a former flight instructor and commercial charter pilot licensed in single- and multi-engine airplanes as well as helicopters. Today he flies a twin-engine Beechcraft Baron, a single-engine Beechcraft Bonanza, and a Rotorway A-600 Talon experimental helicopter he built from a kit in his garage. He lives with his wife and writes and flies during all four seasons in Wisconsin, never far from Essex County Airport.

Visit www.HowardSeaborne.com to join the Email List and get a FREE DOWNLOAD.



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The media calls it a “miracle” when air charter pilot Will Stewart survives an aircraft in-flight breakup, but Will’s miracle pales beside the stunning aftereffect of the crash. Barely on his feet again, Will and his police sergeant wife Andy race to rescue an innocent child from a heinous abduction

—if Will’s new ability doesn’t kill him first.

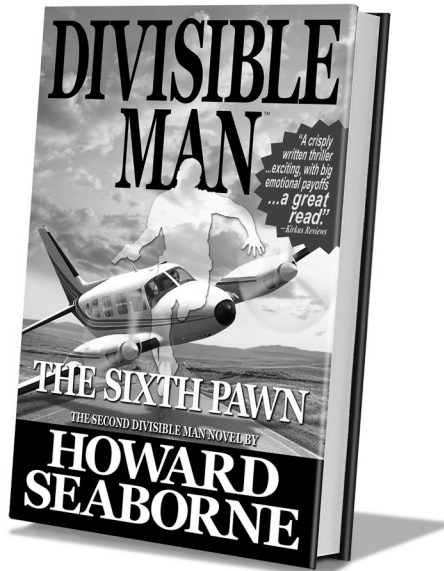
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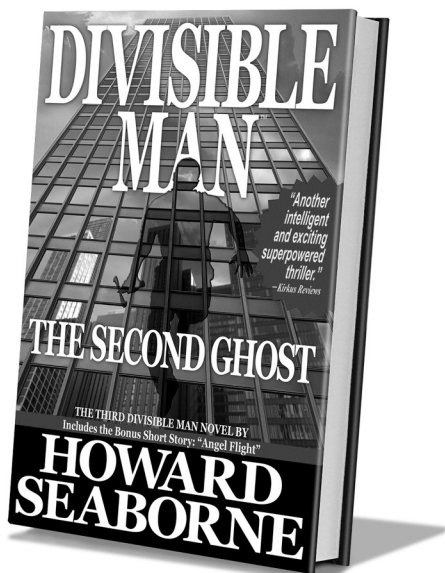
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Includes the short story, "Angel Flight," a bridge to the fourth DIVISIBLE MAN novel that follows.

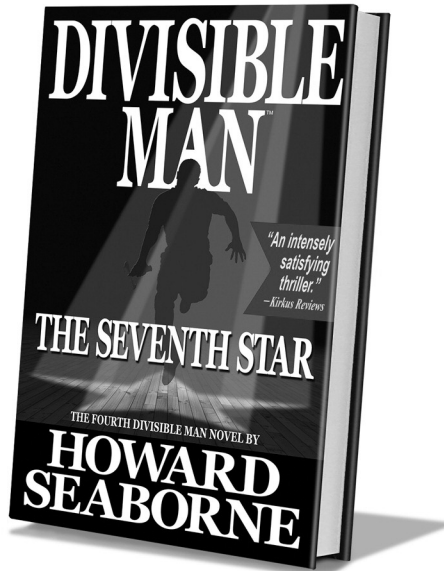
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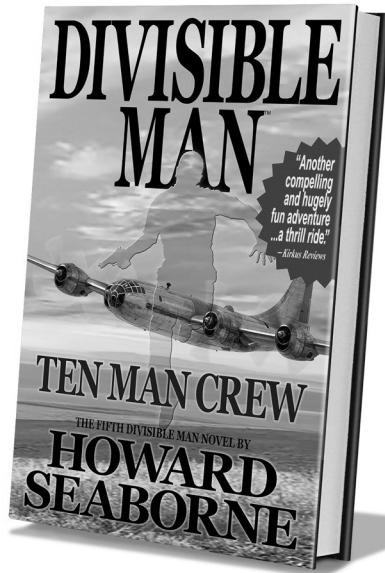
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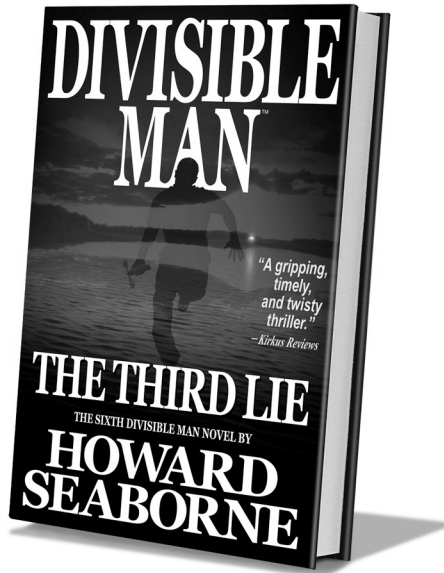
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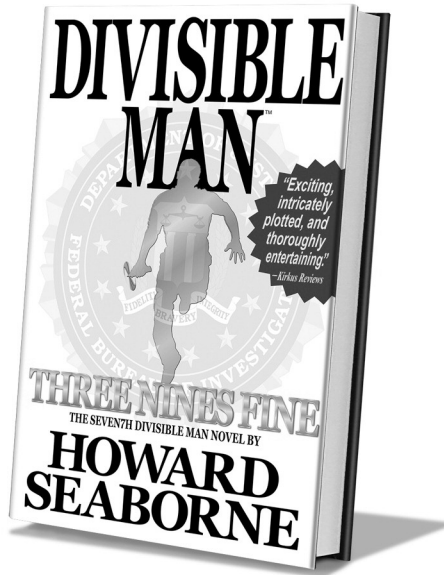
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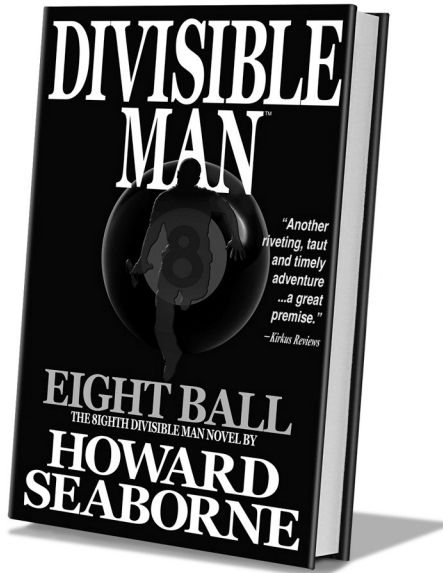
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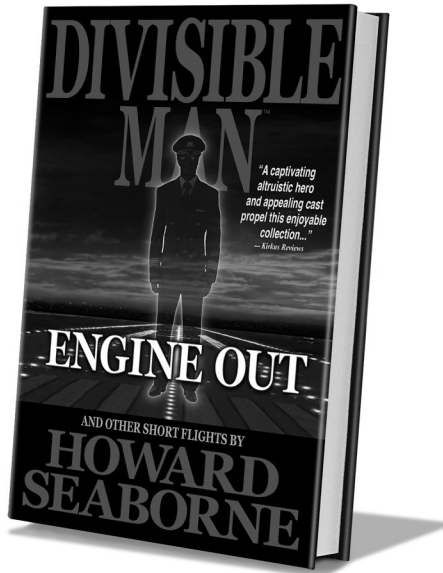
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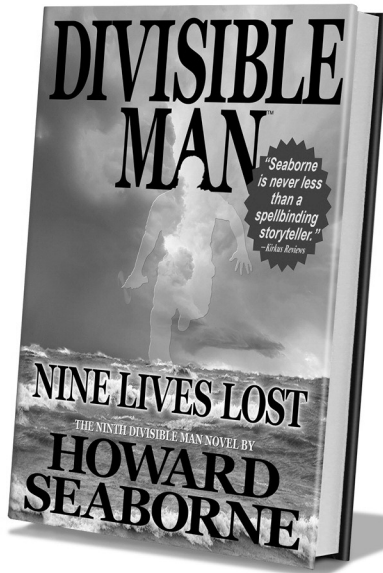
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