

DIVISIBLE MAN™



*“Another
riveting, taut
and timely
adventure
...a great
premise.”*

—Kirkus Reviews

EIGHT BALL

THE EIGHTH DIVISIBLE MAN NOVEL BY

HOWARD SEABORNE



DIVISIBLE MANTM
EIGHT BALL

by

Howard Seaborne



DIVISIBLE MAN - EIGHT BALL

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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Sign up today and get a FREE DOWNLOAD.

*For all who see through the lies
and shine a light.*

*She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes;
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.*

—
George Gordon
(Lord Byron)

PART I

1

Oh crap.

The hospital corridor lights burst from dim to blazing. People in scrubs materialized from all directions.

“That’s my doctor,” the girl hugging my neck whispered a little too loudly. “My nighttime doctor.” I felt her move and point with an arm neither of us could see. We floated five feet above the carpet at the intersection of three wide hallways. The woman she pointed at hustled toward the room where I’d found this child.

Where did all these people come from?

I did not hear a PA announcement. No piercing digital alarm or squawking siren broke the semi-silence of the night shift. Yet a growing number of people in an assortment of medical attire converged on the recently empty hallway and this child’s hospital room.

This is not good.

The child in my arms was number seven. Lucky seven. I started just after eleven p.m. and the first six went smoothly. Easy in and out. All of them asleep—all of them except this one. I’ve grown adept at simply closing a grip on an arm or ankle and pushing *the other thing* over their small bodies. A gentle touch, then—

Fwoomp!

The sound in my head jars me but the silence in the room remains unbroken. The child vanishes, creating an empty child-shaped cavern beneath fuzzy blankets. I give it a minute or two. I have no idea if duration matters.

Sometimes the sensation of going weightless seeps into the child's dreams and they stir or wiggle. None have ever fought it.

When it feels right, I release my grip.

Fwoomp! They settle back on the mattress, often stirring, perhaps reacting to the sensation of falling.

In. Out. Unseen. Easy.

Until number seven.

"Hey!" This girl spoke the moment she flashed out of sight. My gentle grip on her wrist shifted, telling me she sat up in bed. "Who's there?"

"It's okay."

The light blanket covering empty space squirmed and shifted.

"Are you invi—?"

"Shhhhhh!" I cut off her full-voiced question. "Yes," I whispered back. "And I'm not going to hurt you."

I expected her to pull her arm free. Instead, her free hand found mine. She probed up my arm.

"Are you a ghost?"

"No."

"Are you an angel?"

"Nope."

"Superhero?"

"You ask a lot of questions."

"Well, duh." She reached higher, found my neck, then touched my face. I felt her hand jerk away. "I can't see myself! I can't see my hand! How did you do that?"

A stream of answers, ranging from sweet to smartass, flashed through my mind.

"The truth? I have no idea."

There had been no time to gauge the child's age. Propelled by a blend of overconfidence and what had become a bit of an assembly line routine, I had moved into the room quickly, assessed that no adults slept on a spare bed or sofa, found her arm above the covers, and went to work without looking too closely. In the dark, she was just another sadly bald head indenting a pillow. In my haste, I failed to see that she was awake.

She occupied an adult-sized bed. From her voice I estimated her age between seven and twelve, although like many her age, her attitude suggested twenty-something.

She moved. The blanket wiggled on the bed. I guessed that she waved her other hand in front of her own face.

"Am I invis—?"

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“Yes.”

“Cool! Is this a dream?”

I have used that gimmick, but only with groggy kids half in and out of sleep. This girl was fully awake.

“Nope. Keep your voice down, please.”

She still had not pulled free of my light grip on her wrist. She moved on the mattress. From the way the sheets flipped off, I surmised that she swung her legs off the bed. An IV line followed her movement, then popped loose and dangled, dripping on the floor.

“It feels cool—I don’t mean *cool* cool, but you know, like—”

“Water?”

“Yeah! Like going swimming!” She tried to stand. The act of pushing off the mattress sent us floating. “*What’s happening?*”

I shushed her again and grabbed the bedrail with my free hand. She wiggled against the sensation of weightlessness.

“*I’m floating!*”

“That’s part of the deal. We’re weightless. Like astronauts. You. Me, too.” I maintained a light grip. She seemed to be enjoying this, at least enough not to shriek.

“Why are you holding my wrist?”

“It only works if we stay in contact with each other. May I hold your hand?”

She thought it over.

“I guess.”

I slid my grip away from her wrist and found her hand.

“Am I dead?”

I squeezed her hand. “Does that feel dead?”

She squeezed back. I lifted my arm and abetted her launch from the mattress. She giggled. To my surprise, she probed my arm again, found my neck and threw her free arm around it.

“This is the coolest thing ever!” she whispered loudly in my ear.

“It kinda is,” I conceded. *In for a penny...* “You want to see something really cool?”

“Uh-huh!”

Off we went.

“WHAT, EXACTLY, DO YOU DO?”

Pidge asked the question less than twenty-four hours earlier. We flopped in a pair of ratty old lawn chairs and tipped end-of-the-duty-day beers at the

Education Foundation hangar at Essex County Airport. A September sunset painted shades of orange in the western sky, hinting of fall. Warm light fell on us through the open hangar door. The Foundation's twin-engine Piper Navajo crouched at my shoulder. Pidge ranks among a handful of people who know about my ability to vanish.

"Sneak in. Zap sleeping children in their beds."

Pidge whistled over the lip of her beer. "Yeah...I wouldn't let that get around. This is that crazy Marshfield shit, right? I mean—you told me that you fixed that kid. What? Now you're taking that show on the road?"

"I didn't fix that kid. *The other thing* fixed the kid."

"Right. Any idea how?"

"No clue."

"FM."

"FM?"

"Fucking magic. Have you told Arun yet?"

Pidge, a little under five feet of coiled cobra with short blonde hair and a disarming pixie smile, is a hotshot pilot who can fly circles around every throttle jockey I ever met. I rank her as the best pilot on the roster at Essex County Air Service and it has nothing to do with the fact that I taught her to fly. She's also a dervish with a dockworker's foul mouth, but she transforms into the image of cotillion charm around Arun Dewar who is, nominally, my boss at the Foundation. Arun joined the Christine and Paulette Paulesky Education Foundation as a gofer and office organizer after Sandy Stone, Director of the Foundation, all but drowned in grant applications. When Sandy, a kindergarten teacher both by trade and in the depths of her soul, returned to her flock for the new school year, Arun took over the day-to-day Foundation work. Pidge, who I had always assumed would die alone in a bar fight at the age of ninety, fell hard for Arun. I credited the young man's English accent.

"No, I haven't, and don't you go spilling it during pillow talk either." Pidge might carry every pilot rating except Airline Transport in her wallet, but she will always be my former flight student. I shot her a warning glance. She shot back a sly grin. "I mean it."

"Relax. I pinky swore about your disappearing act and when I fucking pinky swear, Fort Knox takes notice."

We drank our beer and watched the Essex County Air Service hangar and office across the ramp turn to black silhouettes. Only Earl Jackson's office remained illuminated. I rarely see it extinguished before I leave.

"So, like what—you do this routine in hospitals when you're on Foundation trips?"

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“Try to. On overnights. Plays havoc with my sleep time.”

“Sleep is overrated. You ever think about going public? I mean—if it really works, there are a lot of sick kids out there...”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t guilt me about this. Look,” I said, “I have no idea how it works, but worse, I don’t know why it works most of the time, but not all the time.” The ache of a recent failure involving a young woman named Angeline Landry lingered, always within reach. “What happens when it works for nine kids and not for number ten? How do you think the parents will feel? How do you think the kid would feel? People expect perfection, or else you’ll hear from their lawyer.”

“Fuckin’ assholes. Lawyers, I mean. So, like tomorrow you guys have an overnight in St. Louis. You sneak out so Arun doesn’t know?”

“Pretty much. I can hit ten, maybe fifteen rooms. Get in. Make the kid disappear for a minute or so. Then get out.”

“Doesn’t this scare the shit outta the kid?”

“They never know I’m there. Mostly. A few wake up, but these kids are accustomed to strangers coming and going at all hours, sticking them with needles, checking vitals, plugging in new medicine drips. Even the little ones are kinda worldly.”

“How do you know when the kid is...cooked?”

“I don’t. I don’t know. I don’t want to know.”

Because that would mean knowing when it doesn’t work.

“Not very scientific.”

She said nothing for a long minute, prompting me to fill the silence.

“Sometimes...sometimes, I kinda feel it. Maybe it’s just wishful thinking. But you’re right. It’s far from scientific.”

“How do you know it works at all?”

“I have someone who loosely tracks the results.”

Pidge lifted her eyebrows. “Someone else *knows*? Who?”

I held up a stop-sign hand. “Compartmental. He doesn’t know about you. You don’t know about him.”

“It’s that fucking head doctor! The one in Madison.”

“Jesus Christ, what does a guy have to do to keep a secret?”

“Yeah, you just keep tryin’ there, partner. Your wife told me all about him. The one who got your ticket back. It’s gotta be him. Steve-something.”

“Dr. Stephenson.”

“That’s the one!”

“He’s a neurologist.”

“What does that have to do with kids who have cancer?”

“His reputation opens doors. I let him know where I’ve been. He looks into case results, don’t ask me how. Remind me to tell you a story about him and Earl back in the day in Thailand.”

“No shit?”

“Crazy story. Anyway, like I said, he’s been quietly tracking the whole thing. Places I’ve been. Remission statistics. Doc says we’re running about eighty percent.”

She looked sideways at me.

“What?”

“Somebody’s going to notice. You get that, right? Somebody’s going to start asking how it is that kids are mysteriously getting cured at random hospitals. You watch.”

“I THINK they know you’re missing,” I said to the girl in my arms. We hovered near the ceiling of the broad hallway.

“Really? What was your first clue?”

I liked this kid. A fellow smartass.

“How old are you?” She felt small, which was no reliable indicator. The disease killing her likes to shrink its victims first. I recalled that her scalp was hairless but could not picture her face.

“Eleven.”

“Got a name?”

“Sure. Do you?”

“Divisible Man.”

“That’s stupid.”

“I didn’t come up with it. I know it’s a little late for this, but would you promise not to tell anyone about...all this? If you promise, I’ll tell you my name.”

“I guess. Who would believe me anyway?”

“I know. It’s crazy. I’m Will.”

“I’m Amber.”

“Cut it out. Really? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“What?”

“Amber?”

“What’s wrong with Amber?”

“As in ‘Amber Alert?’” As I said it, a deputy sheriff in full uniform hurried down the hall beneath us. His leather holster and belt creaked and squeaked. Keys on his belt jangled.

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“Oh. I get it. Ha. Ha. Very funny.”

Staff clustered around Amber’s hospital room door now fanned out, checking adjoining rooms, opening closet doors, searching the unisex bathroom. Returning the girl to her own bed was not an option. A worried-looking woman in scrubs blocked the door. She held a phone to her ear and gestured at the empty room as she spoke. When she saw the deputy, she waved him to hurry to her. They traded words. The deputy lifted his radio mic to his lips.

“This is not good,” I said, as much to myself as the girl.

Totally my fault.

The weightless aspect of *the other thing* had been problematic for me at first, and occasionally downright frightening. Drifting untethered, or worse, the risk of floating unabated to the airless edge of Earth’s atmosphere, inspired me to engineer a means of propulsion. The solution came naturally to a pilot. I needed an engine and propeller. A few harrowing experiments with what looked like a small flashlight with an electric motor and a six-inch two-bladed hobby-shop propeller helped me hone the means to lift off and fly under control. Indoors or out. What had been frightening became exhilarating.

Along the way, I found what I can only describe as a core muscle that runs down my center when I vanish. It allows me to rotate and lever my body without the need for an anchor point. The discovery ended a disturbing tendency to knock over lamps and tumble out of control.

Between the power units, the ability to rotate in space, and a genetic love of flying, I had no one to blame except me for the fact that I invited Amber to go for a joy ride. We slipped out of her room and cruised down what had been the dim, nighttime hallway. We made a few turns, descended a staircase, and found the hospital’s main entrance and lobby where I bumped the Handicap Entrance button and opened the front door.

We zoomed into the cool night, soared across the street fronting the hospital and explored a broad park at treetop level.

Amber’s gasps and giggles paid her airfare. I flew her over forty-foot maple trees and initiated a series of dives and climbs over a placid pond. We skimmed the glass surface of the water. We followed the winding path of a running trail. We wove a low racecourse around empty picnic tables beneath a bloated moon. I made her shriek by colliding harmlessly with a row of tall arborvitae.

We had a blast.

We lost track of time.

Eventually I navigated back to the hospital, and back to her room.

Too late. All hell had slipped its leash.

The deputy taking up station at Amber's room door carried on an urgent radio conversation, no doubt calling in reinforcements or initiating a lock-down of the hospital.

"You ever wander off in the night before?" I asked.

"Me? No!" She sounded offended. "Am I going to be in trouble?"

Well, it sure as hell won't be me, I thought, instantly regretting that this child would take the heat for my impulsiveness.

"Just...give me a minute to think..."

I rotated and applied power to the hand-held propeller. Thrust pulled us away from the expanding search party. We cruised over a burnt-orange carpet embedded with a dizzying geometric pattern. Two more hospital staffers jogged toward us, bent on joining the search. Amber twisted against me as they passed. Her grip on my neck tightened, laden with tension and worry.

"What did you think of the flying?" I whispered, looking to lighten the moment.

"I love it!"

"You should become a pilot. When you grow up. You can take flying lessons and solo when you're sixteen. Get your private license when you're seventeen. Commercial license at eighteen."

She said nothing.

"Lots of women fly. The best pilot I know is a woman."

We retraced our path to the atrium where hospital signage sparked a plan.

"I'm not going to," she said faintly.

"What? Fly? Why not? You didn't like it?"

I felt her shake her head. "I'm not going to grow up."

Her matter-of-fact tone tied a knot in my throat.

"Don't be silly."

"This is my third time here. I had two remissions, but it keeps coming back. My mom and dad think I don't know what the doctors talk about, but I do. I know what's going to happen. I'm okay. But Mom cries a lot."

We soared over a staircase railing. This time there were no giggles and gasps. I aimed the power unit downward. We settled toward the first floor.

"Bullshit," I said.

"Daddy says that's a quarter for the swear jar."

"Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit. I owe you a buck. You ever been to Wisconsin?"

"My grandparents live in Wausau."

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“Do you know where Essex is?”

“No.”

“Well, your grandparents will know. Here’s the deal. On the day of your sixteenth birthday, get your parents or your grandparents to drive you to the city of Essex. Get them to take you to the airport, east of town. You walk right in the office door and tell a lady named Rosemary II that Will said you get a free flying lesson. Got it?”

“Okay, but—”

“No buts. Promise me.”

I halted our descent just above the lobby floor. I found the sign I was looking for.

“You mean flying like this?”

“No. Real flying. In an airplane.”

“I like this better.”

She had a point. “Okay. Well, then I’ll give you both. Airplane, and this. Sweet sixteen. You’ll be there. Trust me.” I’d never made a promise like that before. It barely squeezed past my lips and left a sting in its wake.

“If you say so.”

“I say so. Are you hungry?”

Except for a few operating coffee machines meant for third-shift workers, the stainless-steel shelves and tray slides of the slumbering cafeteria lay bare. The stoves were cold; the salad bars lay empty under sparkling glass.

Amber confessed that she wasn't hungry. She said it hurts to eat and makes her throw up.

I settled her in place on a plastic cafeteria chair and released her hand. She reappeared. Gravity embraced her. She gripped the seat of the chair as if it might launch her. Along with her naked scalp she wore the gaunt look and carried the thin appendages too often found in late-night TV ads meant to Save The Children. *Just a few pennies a day...*

All the pennies in the world weren't going to save Amber.

I maneuvered to the glass face of a snack vending machine, the kind that uses corkscrews to release treats. A small padlock secured the transparent front panel. I wrapped my hand around the padlock body and made it vanish. The border between the vanished body and visible shackle quivered. I tugged. The shackle snapped on the borderline. I dropped the pieces and heaved the door open.

"Here you go," I said. "My treat."

I feared she would reject the offer.

To my surprise, her eyes widened. She stood and took half a dozen steps to the unbound junk food riches. Her strides had a forced steadiness. Like a drunk trying hard to look sober. The idea of her wandering all the way from

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her room to the cafeteria in the middle of the night might test credibility. Her thin legs didn't look capable of the trip.

Something about the beckoning sugar and salty carbs awakened her. She held the open glass door and contemplated rows of gaudy choices.

"I have to go now," I said. She pulled her gaze free of the candy riches and searched for me in the empty air.

"Are you coming back?"

I pushed off and slowly floated toward the cafeteria exit.

"I might be back someday, but you won't be here."

A flash of resignation on her small face put a spotlight on my stupid choice of words.

"Hey! I don't mean it that way. You and I have a date for a flying lesson. Sweet sixteen. Promise?"

"Sure," she said. "Promise."

"Don't bullshit me."

"That's a buck and a quarter now. And I promise."

"For real?"

"For real."

She waved in the direction of my voice.

I didn't leave immediately. I watched her carefully pick out a Ritz cracker and cheese snack. Then a bag of Doritos. Then a Mars bar. By the time she retraced her steps to the chair and table, she clutched a load of goodies to her chest. She sat down and gingerly ate the Ritz crackers. She waited a moment, hesitant. Then she eagerly tore into the Doritos. I watched her munch and savor the chips, devouring the bag quickly and moving on to the next snack.

I never know for sure.

Except this time.

On the way out, feeling better about the night's work, I reappeared in a corridor long enough to flag down an orderly and report seeing a kid in the empty cafeteria who seemed to be eating the place clean.

I reached the TownePlace Suites hotel across from Spirit of St. Louis Airport just before four a.m. Zipping around behind a handheld power unit can be delightful, but it's dangerous at night when transmission and telephone lines become impossible to see and avoid. I traveled by Nissan rental car from the hotel to the hospital and back again. I parked in the hotel lot feeling tired but satisfied.

I fiddled the car's door locks and hiked the full length of the silent parking lot, the penalty for being the last guest arriving at a hotel. The lobby was empty. The check-in desk stood deserted. I counted both as a blessing and hurried to the elevators happy to avoid a judgmental hello from a curious night clerk.

A few hours of sleep—that's all I wanted.

Arun's schedule lined up a full day of meetings and school tours. He had asked me to go along, or at the very least, meet him for breakfast to bolster his courage—being new to handling Education Foundation business trips on his own. I told him I wanted to sleep in. It felt selfish at the time, but it wasn't a lie. I told him I would check out at eleven and wait for him at the airport.

I planned to sleep up to the moment of checkout.

I slotted the plastic key card in my room door. The pessimist in me anticipated the card not working, necessitating a hike back down to the front desk for a new card.

The tiny green light flashed. The lock clicked.

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I slipped into the room and had just long enough to wonder if I had left all the lights on before a woman's voice nearly stopped my heart.

"Where the shit have you been?"

Fwoomp! I threw forward the levers in my head and disappeared.

A tug on the core muscle jerked me off the carpet. An instant later I hung prone just below the ceiling, eyeballing a fire suppression sprinkler. The move startled me as much as the intruder's jarring inquiry.

She sat in the room's single occasional chair near the curtained window. Boyish dark hair, thin, dressed in a black blazer over a black t-shirt. Her dark eyes searched as the room door slammed shut behind me. Despite her angry tone and grim demeanor, her face gave the impression of suppressing a smile sprung from an inside joke. She carried a Glock semi-automatic handgun in a shoulder rig under her left arm.

"Christ," I said, "you scared the shit outta me."

Her eyes lifted toward the sound of my voice. FBI Special Agent Leslie Carson-Pelham rose from the chair.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Do you always do that when you're startled?"

"Do you always break into people's hotel rooms?" I pushed off the ceiling and rotated to an upright position. The instant my feet touched the carpet—

Fwoomp!

—I reappeared. She blinked at me.

"Where the hell were you? I've been here for hours."

I glanced up at the ceiling. In an instant, I had not only vanished but, propelled by an instinct to move out of harm's way, had shot to the top of the room and swung to a prone position.

Without pushing off.

Without deploying the power unit in my pocket.

Without thinking.

Not for the first time, a strange emergency autopilot launched me at a moment of threat. Andy and I experienced a nearly identical move in a motel room in Montana seconds before gunfire tore apart the bed we occupied. The same thing happened over a frozen lake, where I hung helpless holding the drowned body of Andy's pregnant sister in my arms.

The first time it happened, it launched me and Lane Franklin out the window of a burning room. For months since, I've tried to replicate it, without success.

During the flashcard review of these events in my head, Leslie continued speaking to me.

“...to make this work.” She fixed an angry expression on me. “Is your phone dead? I tried calling.”

“I...uh...”

“Never mind. Let’s go.”

“Go where?”

She spotted my flight bag on the desktop. She hooked it and thrust it at me as she marched past me on her way to the door.

“I’ll tell you on the way.”

“On the way where?”

“A picnic.”

Andy drives like a demon. Her driving is the reason I always grab the car keys when we leave the house. FBI Special Agent Carson-Pelham could have been Andy's driving instructor. We covered the short distance between the hotel and the airport at just below the speed of sound. She treated a pair of red traffic lights like quaint mood lighting.

I cinched my seatbelt tighter and didn't speak. Ten minutes ago, I could have flopped on a memory foam mattress and winked out within a few breaths. By the time Leslie stood on the chattering anti-lock brakes in front of the Tac-Air portico I had enough adrenalin pumping through my veins to file a flight plan and fly home to Essex County.

"Special Agent—"

"Leslie." She stabbed the start/stop button on the dash and killed the car engine. "Let's go."

I grabbed my bag and hopped out. She breezed through sliding glass doors. I hustled after her. She walked through the FBO lobby at a pace that made me trot to catch up.

"If you want me to fly us somewhere, I need to—"

"No. You don't." She tossed the car keys to a desk clerk who buzzed open the door to the ramp. I hurried out behind her. She made a bee line for a parked Cessna Citation jet. The pilot sat in his command seat under red cockpit lights. The copilot waited for us at the open hatch.

"Hey!" I stopped cold. "What the hell?"

She turned. She glanced at her watch, then glanced at the plane, which

had begun to spool up one engine. She weighed whatever she planned to say next, then retreated until she faced me, drilling me with a judgmental stare.

“I don’t know how things are with you and your wife, who I like a lot, by the way. But if you feel a need to dip your wick outside your marriage, that’s going to be a big problem. Not because I’m a prude, but because shit like that really, *really* messes things up—evidenced by the fact that I couldn’t reach you or find you for the last five hours, which means we’re about to miss a rare window of opportunity.”

“You’ve got it wrong.”

She grabbed the sleeve of my flight jacket and jerked me forward. “Fine. Get on the goddamned plane and explain it to me. We don’t have time for this here!”

Five minutes later we rolled for takeoff.

“I WASN’T CHEATING on my wife,” I said.

Leslie faced me in a matching, plush leather seat. Dim cabin lights shaded a stony expression riddled with doubt. I heard it, too. My denial sounded less than credible. On top of that, I felt my face redden. Autoblush. Not helping.

Leslie and I occupied the cabin alone. The crew closed the cockpit door as soon as we began taxiing. The flight carried no cabin steward. Contrary to the Hollywood image, the interior of most business jets isn’t much bigger than a family minivan—with about as much headroom. Nevertheless, I struggled not to be impressed. I have nearly zero flight time in executive jets as pilot or passenger.

“Come on. You’ve met Andy. It would take me fifty lifetimes to be so lucky again. I’d have to be nuts to want anyone else.”

“Men don’t want anyone else. They want more.”

“Getting a little personal here, aren’t you?”

Her eyebrows shot up. “There’s no such thing as too personal, Will. I need to know everything about you if we’re going to make *this* happen.” She leaned forward. “Director Lindsay was high enough up in the Bureau to work without a net. I’m not. I’m hiding shit from my bosses and they’re hiding shit from their bosses.”

“Speaking of hiding things—this hasn’t exactly been a two-way street.” The question of Leslie’s chain of command after Deputy Director Mitchell Lindsay lost his life remained unanswered. My relationship with the FBI had barely taken its first breath when Lindsay had been killed. When Leslie stepped in, Andy and I nearly pulled out. We relented only after Leslie swore

that she would sustain Lindsay's decision to restrict knowledge of me and *the other thing*.

"I told you. It's—"

"Don't you dare say 'complicated.' I hate that."

"It's unsettled."

"Bullshit."

"You're not that politically naïve, Will. You know where the FBI stands with this administration. For Heaven's sake, there's a Special Counsel from Homeland—that little fascist asshole from the White House—sniffing around everything Lindsay did, said or had. Trying to make him look bad because that makes the FBI look bad. I told you up front, I'm being careful. Everyone's paranoid, and with good reason. Director Lindsay had the right idea about protecting you, but there are people crawling through his files right now. People I do not trust. People you do not want laying their hands on...this *thing*."

"*The other thing*."

"You seriously need a better name for it."

I didn't argue. I also wasn't convinced that Leslie had been entirely honest in implying that she had full autonomy to take up where Lindsay left off. She lived in a professional food chain, which meant someone ranked above her.

Whoever it is, I thought, *they have the power to pull a jet out of their hat in the middle of the night*.

"Look, Will, I'm out on a limb with you—more than you can possibly imagine. So, you can see how it would not go down well to have some psycho side piece blasting social media with descriptions of hot sex while floating under the St. Louis arch." She leaned back, then shot forward again. "And trust me, the side piece is always psycho."

"Wow. Is that the voice of experience?"

"This isn't about me, Stewart." She folded her arms, a gesture that reminded me of my wife. "Fine. Explain."

I folded my arms, too.

"No. You first." She said nothing. "Look, you're the one that jacked me out of a hotel in the middle of the night. All this...the jet...the rush...something's up. What is it?"

"Nothing's up, or ever will be with you, unless I can be confident that you won't compromise everything we do."

"I won't."

She frowned.

I dug for my phone. I keep a candid photo of Andy in its own gallery

folder. When I snapped the photo, Andy had been sitting beside me on our porch steps. Evening sun lent a glow to her light caramel skin. She wore an old Metallica t-shirt, her hair still kinked after release from the workday's French braid. Her head angled toward me, not the camera. I shot the picture as a selfie with the lens on zoom. Only Andy filled the frame.

I had been talking—about God knows what. Andy's face said she wasn't hearing a word I said, yet her gaze said she had never heard anything so wondrous. In that photo—in that instant—her relaxed expression of unconditional love guaranteed—at least to me—that we would share our last breaths together.

I held up the phone.

"You really think I'd cheat on her?"

Leslie studied the image. She shrugged.

"We just met. I don't know how crazy or stupid you are."

I closed the screen and tucked away my phone. Point made.

"A little of both," I said. I glanced out the window. "We're headed west northwest. Where?"

She said nothing.

"Talk to me," I said, "or I'm out that door. Which I can do, by the way." She didn't need to know that jumping out of a light jet would be damned near impossible at this speed.

Leslie used a moment of silence and a penetrating stare to make a final point: *This conversation isn't over.*

After a reset breath, she asked, "What's the greatest domestic threat in America?"

"Kale?"

Leslie reached into a backpack that had been in the seat across the aisle when we boarded. She pulled out a folder. She extracted the tray table from the fuselage wall and laid the folder between us.

"Domestic terrorism. Not ISIS. Not Islamic fundamentalists. Not commies or aliens or cable news. Domestic terrorists." She pulled a sheaf of papers from the folder and held it up. "This is a classified report from the office of the DNI. And no, you can't read it."

"Is that the report that was all over the news?"

"The media got the redacted public version of this report. You and Andy had a hand in stirring things up by exposing General Winslow Pemmick when he tried to build his hate group coalition. The Pemmick case prompted the Director of National Intelligence to release portions of the classified report spotlighting what we've known for some time. Domestic terror groups have been oozing out of the muck for years. They got a shot in the arm from

the current political climate. And thanks to politicians giving cover to these groups, every time we bring it up, we get pushback. The Bureau has to swim upstream.”

“Waco? Ruby Ridge?”

She frowned. “Please. That’s like saying the Titanic represents the cruise industry, Will. I don’t have time to educate you, but the origins of today’s crop of domestic terror groups—more precisely, white power groups—go back to Vietnam. There’s a good book on it by Professor Kathleen Belew of the University of Chicago. I’ll get you a copy. Point is, DHS has identified lone wolf extremists and Domestic Violence Extremist groups as the top terrorist threat. DVE groups are merging under a militia-style umbrella. A proliferation of over-the-counter weapons is arming people who used to steal military hardware. Now they buy it retail. Training camps have popped up again—they were a thing in the 90’s until creative court actions shut them down. But it’s like Whack-A-Mole. And these groups are restless. We’re hearing chatter about soft targets. Public events. Mass casualty events.”

She pulled a sheaf of photos from the folder and handed them to me. I leafed through them.

“Those were taken at rallies in Michigan, Missouri and Texas. If you look closely, you’ll see participants common across multiple states and multiple events.”

Venom-infused faces filled the photos. They reminded me of a line of chanting neo-Nazis I’d seen at the state capitol in Nebraska not long ago—moments before I lit all their flags on fire.

“A lot of these groups just play guns and warriors on the weekends. But there’s a serious core with a dangerous agenda.”

“Government takeover?”

She laughed. “They don’t want to be the government. They just want to burn it down. There’s never a plan or enough initiative to actually take over and run the government, no matter how much they talk up The Revolution. No matter how many rallies they organize, or pickup truck parades they launch. I mean—think about it. You join one of these groups and then one day you finally get the call to arms. You load up your guns and hop in your pickup truck and race off to the rally point. Then what? Occupy the state capitol? The local post office? Where are your reinforcements? Supplies? Logistics? These goofballs talk all this shit, but they never ask the most important question.”

“Which is?”

“*And then what?*”

“They’re idiots.”

“No argument. But they’re idiots who can do a lot of harm to innocent people. It was one thing when their enemies were all fantasy-based. Cabals of deep state politicians. World banking conspiracies. But things change when they target a bunch of college kids marching for racial justice. Or a voting rights rally. Suddenly these goons have enemies they can sink their teeth into. The old skinhead gangs used to go looking for fights with two-by-fours and baseball bats. These guys want to start a firefight with their AR-15s.”

I flipped through the photos. Men marching. Men fighting. Nazi and Confederate flags waving. Jacked-up pickups with men hanging onto roll bars and waving long rifles. Beards and bellies. A lot of pale faces full of white power poison.

Leslie pointed at one individual. Even without her fingertip tapping the photo, he stood out. Tall. Wavy long hair that belonged on the cover of a romance novel. A chiseled face with stark, alert eyes. He carried wide shoulders and intimidatingly muscled arms branded with tattoos.

“This guy gets around.”

“Who is he?”

“Darryl Spellman. Ex-marine. Iraq war veteran. Demoted while he was in the service for racist aggression against fellow marines. He finished with an OTH discharge.”

My expression asked the question.

“Other Than Honorable,” she replied. “Not that it matters. If you read bios posted on white supremacist websites, he’s Audie Murphy and Dwight Eisenhower rolled into John Wayne’s resurrected body. One site claims he’s a Medal of Honor winner. He’s not.”

“I take it he’s a leader?”

“He’s been bouncing around from group to group since he got out of the service in ’07. We have intel that a couple of groups kicked him out for being too aggressive, even for their tastes. Worse, he has one quality that most of these moron’s lack.”

“Which is?”

“He’s articulate and photogenic. He’s capable of transiting the thin line between nut job conspiracy websites and right-wing conservative media. He was a favored guest of your old pal Josiah James. He’s a stone’s throw away from showing up on Carlson or Hannity on Fox News.”

I handed the photos back to Leslie. She tucked them in the folder.

“On the upside, most of our intel comes from inside these groups. You’d be surprised how many of these guys sell out their buddies. They assuage their turncoat guilt by feeding us misinformation so they can fantasize about

being double agents, but the truth is for a few hundred bucks in beer money, they'll sell out their own mothers. Sometimes we insert undercover agents. That's harder, and it takes longer. It's a high-risk proposition that pressures our own agents to violate the law. The hard-core groups force newbies to commit acts that cross a line they think an undercover agent would not cross. We've had some close calls and a couple of tragic outcomes."

"Is this where I come in?"

Leslie pushed the photos and documents to one side of the tray table. A little of the ice in her earlier demeanor melted. "Do you want some coffee?"

"God, please! Yes!" She slipped out of her seat and went to a cabinet in the back of the cabin. The crew had stocked it with coffee mugs and a thermos. She returned to her seat and poured for us both. My expectations were low, but the brew was not bad.

She sipped and fingered through the photos again, pulling out two.

"Spellman...and this guy..." She pointed at a heavy-set older man with a prospector's beard, hippy hair, and a fat-handed grip on a semi-automatic rifle. "They currently head up two of the more vocal, more active cells we're tracking in the western white power movement. Spellman runs an outfit they call Company W and Louis Blaze here runs the American Bloodline Coalition, an off-shoot of Aryan Nation."

"Cute names."

"Company W is quasi-military with a white supremacy agenda. You can guess what the W stands for. They recruit by dredging up the post-Vietnam line about betrayal of the American soldier, updated for Iraq and Afghanistan vets. Strongly anti-government. American Bloodline is, as you would expect, all about purity. It's their religion. They peddle a radically edited version of the Bible, which they claim is the true text before the International Jewish Banking Conspiracy rewrote it in the 1930s. They claim that Hitler's European war was a righteous war against the corruption of the Christian faith by godless communists. They publish fantasy novels about how the western allies join Germany to crush the Soviets."

"Nazis. I hate those guys." I paused, but Leslie didn't acknowledge the reference. "You want me to spy on them?"

"Yes."

"Time out. This kind of surveillance could take weeks. You pulled me out of the middle of a Foundation trip. Arun's going to show up at the airport this afternoon expecting me to fly him home. I can't just drop everything and—"

"This isn't a long-term op. This is a one-off opportunity. Granted, you may have to call your friend Arun and tell him to make other arrangements

to get home today, but I should be able to get you back to St. Louis tomorrow.”

I was not pleased and showed it.

“Will,” she lifted her mug for a sip, “the white power movement dreams of a race war, a chance to cleanse America once and for all, and implement their fantasy social order—a military, survivalist culture where men rule, and women are property. Contextual to that vision, women play the role of reproductive slaves. Chattel. It’s one of the ways these groups form alliances. They exchange daughters in political marriages. I told you we’re going to a picnic. We are. It’s also a wedding. Blaze is giving his daughter to Spellman as a symbol of their two groups forming a union. We don’t care about the wedding, but we have grave concerns about the merging of these two groups. We have solid intel that Blaze and Spellman will do a sit-down before or after the ceremony to seal the real deal. I want you there.”

“Why? For a copy of their new bylaws?”

Leslie reached into her folder and pulled a fresh photo. I recognized the torn concrete façade of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. It might have been a hive of bureaucratic offices, the target of some insane anti-government manifesto, but all I ever saw in that monument to mass murder was a daycare center full of innocent children.

“No,” Leslie said. “This union, we think, is the lynchpin in a plan to hit the U.S. Government in a way that, they say, will make Murrah look like a pinprick. A way to light the fuse on their civil slash race war. We want to know what that plan is.”

I had never been to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, but first impressions verified everything I'd ever heard about it. Stunning blue waters kissed evergreen-covered mountains. Distant snowcapped peaks intruded on a sky that drew a monstrous breath and expanded. Even the high, sailing wisps of mare's tail cirrus seemed sharper, more sculpted. I spent the final fifteen minutes of the flight leaning against the fuselage looking out the window like a kid on a Disney ride.

Leslie's initial description of the mission prompted me to envision a militia mountain stronghold, a remote barbed wire-protected encampment full of camo-clad men toting and shooting automatic weapons.

I did not expect suburbia.

After disembarking the private jet at Coeur d'Alene International Airport, we checked into a rented mini Jeep full of plastic cupholders. Despite the manufacturer's badge, I pictured the vehicle less on a muddy mountain road and more in the parking lot of a Starbucks.

"Where's the tactical team? The task force?" I asked.

"Are you kidding?" She chuckled. "What? You were expecting a secret nerve center lair full of computer screens? An HRT squad?"

"Kinda..."

She navigated the little red Jeep out of the airport parking lot.

"And just how would I explain you?"

"Ride along?"

. . .

TWENTY MINUTES later we cruised the winding streets of a middle-class suburban subdivision. Leslie steadfastly obeyed the speed limit signs. Lawns and landscaping—probably governed by strict homeowner association standards—gave the parade of gray-, pale blue-, and cream-stained cedar-siding homes a striking uniformity. A yellow school bus lumbered past us, either dropping off or picking up half-day kindergarten children.

“On your right.” Leslie pointed. “Look between the houses. Look at the backyards on the next street over. See it?”

“Are you serious? A bounce house? The neo-Nazis and the white supremacists have a bounce house?”

“Told you it was a picnic. We’re not going to drive on that street, but I assume you can mark the location.”

“A bounce house makes a pretty good landmark.”

The street hosting the domestic terrorist picnic defined the outer border of the housing development. Beyond it, raw land expanded into rising terrain. The undeveloped land showed the scars of new roads cutting a new subdivision out of the landscape. Scattered half-finished homes rose over new basements.

The entire setting lent an absurdly pedestrian tint to domestic terrorism. I imagined armed militiamen gathered over a breakfast omelet bar sharing veggie smoothies before hiking up into the hills to practice killing people with extra pigment in their skin. I pictured their wives and mothers packing power bars to snack on between lessons on garroting racial justice protesters.

“Let’s find a spot and get you wired up,” Leslie said.

She backtracked to a small park at the center of the subdivision. The communal park featured playground equipment and tennis courts, an effort to add value and cohesion to the development. Leslie killed the engine in the corner of an empty asphalt lot. A few minutes later she tucked a recording device in my shirt pocket and clipped the microphone to my collar. “It’s nice not having to hide this.”

“Is this the same toy you used in D.C.?” I asked.

“It’s an upgrade.”

“Can’t fault the recording quality.” The dust had not yet settled on the attack on the U.S. Supreme Court justices. News channels still aired bits and pieces of a recording I made of a U.S. Senator and a cartel leader discussing what they believed at the time to be the successful murder of all nine justices. Said U.S. Senator—my very own from Wisconsin—has since resigned and disappeared into the protective arms of the FBI, anxious to spill his corrupt guts and save his own skin from execution for treason.

“You have the advantage of getting close.”

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“Unless they lock themselves in the basement rec room. I make no guarantees.”

“From what I just saw, the wedding will be in the back yard. More than likely, Spellman and Blaze will parley at a picnic table.”

“Doesn’t mean they’ll openly discuss bombing a statehouse or launching a gas attack on a protest march.”

“Just try to get in tight.”

“Roger that.”

“Leave your cell phone. I know you and Andy like that as a means of communication, but these guys routinely use cell disrupters, so it won’t work.”

“That must drive the neighbors crazy.”

“It’s not like anyone will complain.”

I dropped my phone into her outstretched hand.

“How do you want to do this?” She gestured at the windshield. Fifty yards away, a woman walked her dog on a winding cinder path.

“Why don’t you hop out and take a walk. Just another book club mom, taking a breather from the kids and the housework. Hold your door open long enough for me to slide out. I don’t want to disappear with somebody watching.”

“Obviously.”

I twisted in the seat and pulled a pair of power units and companion propellers from my flight bag. One set fit neatly into a zippered pocket on my thigh. The other, I snapped together and tested. The prop issued a satisfying whine.

“Take as much time as you need,” she said. “If you can get anything, *anything* indicating their plans or a target, obviously that would be golden. I can’t stay here all day. I’ll make a pass on this lot every hour on the...” she checked her watch “...quarter hour.”

“I can’t see my watch. Don’t worry,” I said. “I’ll find you. I’ll bang on the roof.”

I tucked the power unit into my armpit and—

Fwoomp!

—I vanished. A cool sensation washed over me.

“Okay. That’s freaky.” She reached out and gingerly found my arm. “I don’t know why...I keep thinking you’re not solid when you do that.”

“Sorry. Can’t go through walls.”

She opened her door and stepped out. The woman with the dog casually watched Leslie stretch and lift her face to the afternoon sun. I reached across

the seat and grasped the top of the door frame. A smooth pull lifted me free of the vehicle.

“Clear,” I said, rising.

She could not help herself. She glanced toward the sound of my voice.

I could not help myself, either. The high blue sky felt welcoming. Perspective shifted. The grass and parking lot fell away. The electric sensation of pure flight hastened my pulse.

I slid the controller on the power unit forward. The prop buzzed. I pulled away.

THE SUBDIVISION HAD BEEN DESIGNED as a series of concentric oval roads. The little park formed a center hub. To the west, the residential suburb eventually merged with urban sprawl. To the east, undeveloped land surrendered to new roads and vacant lots. Spellman’s little piece of heaven occupied the border between new and old. The front of his house looked across the street at fresh new streets and staked, empty lots.

The bounce house excelled as a beacon. A bright yellow roof covered fat red walls on the back corner of a one-acre lot.

I leveled off at two hundred feet and cruised a quarter-mile arc using the bounce house beacon as an anchor point. A light westerly breeze pushed my path and I adjusted for it. Young trees among the existing homes suggested that the development was less than twenty years old. Adjacent wilderness sloped toward distant mountains. I wondered how Spellman and his neighbors felt about the trucks and builder’s vans lifting dust from the new construction. Workmen labored on several of the properties. A loaded gravel truck idled on the next concentric road near a lot where a backhoe dug the foundation of a home that would soon intrude on Spellman’s view.

I tightened my reconnaissance arc and studied the target.

Rows of picnic tables covered in checkered plastic lined one side of a watered and fertilized lawn. Colorful figures circulated among the tables. Children darted. Women in bright summer dresses laid out picnic paraphernalia.

A cluster of men occupied a patio bordering one side of the house. At the edge, a plank bar had been laid out beneath a pop-up canopy. Stacked aluminum kegs promised abundant free-flowing beer.

The men on the patio modeled a loose uniformity. Most had already drunk their share of beer in life, if the bellies pouting over belts served as any indication. Beards were common, a few of them salt and pepper and descending to the diaphragm. Younger men sported the modern badge of

ruggedness—the three- to five-day shadow. Almost all wore cargo pants and boots. A few wore camo t-shirts. Some wore black. Others wore flannel. None of the attire hinted that a wedding anchored this event. None of the guests appeared to carry weapons.

I inspected the vehicles. Not one sedan. A mix of SUVs, pickup trucks and a stand-out black Hummer filled the driveway and spread along the road in both directions. From my height I could not read the license plates, but multiple color schemes indicated multi-state vehicles.

I mapped an approach across the new construction. The path offered a straight shot at the makeshift bar. A grunting backhoe covered the sound of my power unit. I swept in low over a new basement being carved out of heavy brown clay. I crossed ground that had been scraped free of topsoil, passed the loaded gravel truck idling on the new street, and sailed over the vehicles parked in front of Spellman's house.

Decelerating over Spellman's lawn, I approached the patio bar. Voices rose to meet me. Men laughed. Someone called someone else an asshole and laughed. A boom box played Creedence below the hubbub of conversation.

I pulsed the power unit. My forward movement diminished to a crawl. A shallow descent took me lower until I trotted lightly across the grass. I gripped a pole securing one corner of the canopy and came to a halt at the edge of the party.

Close enough now to be served a cold beer, I watched two women shuttling red Solo cups from keg to customer. Men in their late teens or early twenties leaned on the two-by-ten plank bar, competing for attention. The two barmaids wore matching shirts tied just below the bosom over tight, short cutoffs. The women toyed with a leering crowd. Men joked and stared at their chests. The drinkers almost uniformly displayed tattoos of swastikas, numbers, and incoherent lettering. Skin exhibited glyphs and symbols, some of which had faded with time. One or two of the marked displayed huge swaths of black on their skin, ink applied to blot out previous affiliations.

Separated from this cloud of testosterone, women at the back of the house attended to tables crowded with covered dishes. Younger women wore tight jeans and midriff-exposing tops. Others wore modest summer dresses. Children tagged in and out of the cluster of women but avoided the male-dominated bar area. More children tested the resilience of the bounce house at the back of the yard, adding shrieks and laughter to the Creedence soundtrack.

Seated at a card table in the bar area, a hefty Louis Blaze challenged the durability of a folding aluminum lawn chair. A shock of steel-colored hair hung from the sweatband of a weathered ball cap. His beard, jutting from the

perimeter of a fleshy, pale face, carried only random dark strands among the silver and gray. He had fat lips beneath small, wide-set eyes that looked down on everyone around him, despite being seated while everyone else stood.

A young woman bearing an unflattering family resemblance sat beside him. She wore a simple white dress with lace at the ends of short sleeves and at a hem that fell below her bare knees. A knot of tiny flowers accented her drab brown hair.

The bride. This was her day. Her earnest investment in the dress and flowers revealed harbored dreams, yet her demeanor confessed that she knew she was neither pretty nor the center of attention—a point underscored by the two flirting beer servers just yards away. She folded her hands in her lap and fixed her eyes on her knees. Her father beside her gave no sign that he detected her discomfort. He sipped from his red plastic cup and patted dewdrops of beer from his thick moustache.

I tuned out the chatter except for the broad strokes. Sports. Movies. Goddamned liberals. That bitch in Congress. Cars. Nothing floating in the boisterous conversations suggested sinister plans. Leslie worried that we were late to the party and may have missed the main event. I read this as a social hour preceding the ceremony. If the men intended to adjourn for deeper discussions, I expected it to be after the bridal transaction.

“Spellman! Darryl! Get your ass over here!” someone shouted.

Heads turned to where a man emerged from the back of the house.

Darryl Spellman moved with casual grace among the women, drawing smiles and coy glances, more than a few of which landed on the back of his jeans. His broad shoulders, thick hair and cultivated tan tugged a glance from nearly every one of the women. Some let their eyes linger. One boldly drew close, lifted herself on tiptoe and whispered in his ear. He laughed and let his eyes stroke the exposed cleavage she offered him. He said something in her ear. She giggled and touched his arm. His hand wandered to her backside, but she pushed him away with a laugh.

I glanced at the would-be bride in time to see her drop her eyes. Louis Blaze cast a limpid glance at his future son-in-law. The father of the bride expressed no offense at the overt flirting.

Spellman broke away from the women and sauntered toward the group of men.

“Somebody get me a beer!” he called out.

One of the bar girls about to hand a customer a cup filled to spilling diverted her delivery. She leaned over the plank bar and extended the beer and her own deep cleavage toward Spellman, who took in both.

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“To the groom!” someone shouted. The crowd repeated the outcry in rough unison. Cups lifted. Men drank. Spellman turned a smirk on his admirers. His satisfied grin signaled not just comfort with the charisma others saw in him, but a taste for it.

A buzzing sound thrummed past my head as two things happened in the same instant.

Something disturbed the air beside my ear.

And Darryl Spellman’s head exploded.

Shocked silence followed a wet cracking sound and the splash of gore. Most of Darryl Spellman's brains landed on the bride and her father. The bride froze, eyes ringed by white, her mouth open for a scream that could not escape her throat.

Spellman's body collapsed in an awkward heap where he stood. Nothing remained above his lower jaw and earlobes.

A few who had been drinking lowered their cups, unaware. Someone laughed and loudly said, "And may he find th—" The toast died on parted lips and a slack jaw.

Louis Blaze flicked blood and gore off himself as if someone had spilled a beer. The golden liquid in his cup had turned red. He dropped the plastic cup to the patio bricks.

"Fuck!" someone uttered.

No one moved.

A scream tugged my attention from Spellman to the women among the food tables. A woman in a flower-patterned dress sat on the grass with her legs splayed. She had dropped where she stood. A blue bowl rested inverted between her thighs. She clutched both hands across her abdomen. The flowers on her dress were yellow and orange with green leaf accents. Beneath her fingers, red roses bloomed on the fabric. Her face flashed starkly white as if the blood running from her belly drained directly from her cheeks. In seconds, her startled expression went slack. She toppled over backward.

DIVISIBLE MAN - EIGHT BALL

Several women rushed to help. The one who had whispered in Spellman's ear stood with her hands to her lips, screaming. The sound broke the spell among the men.

"Sniper! Sniper!"

Men broke in every direction. Some ducked and scrambled for cover. One young man tried to dive over the bar, but flopped onto it instead, knocking the planks loose and crashing the entire works to the ground. The barmaids screamed.

"Get down! Get down!"

Men collided, tangled and fell.

"Fuck! Get offa me!"

"Goddammit!"

"Sniper!"

Louis Blaze struggled to his feet, tangled in the lightweight lawn chair. He staggered, fell forward, and crawled toward the corner of the house with the tenacious chair clamped on his substantial ass.

The bride sat frozen.

I kicked the earth and shot skyward. As I rose, I rotated and searched for a rifle barrel sticking out of a window or a sniper prone in the meadow grass. A search up and down the line of vehicles and of the half-constructed homes across the street yielded nothing. I looked for a vehicle racing to escape the scene, but the streets lay quiet.

I thought the buzzing was a wasp!

The insect sound was no wasp. The tickle at my ear had been air disturbed by a bullet. A big bullet. Big enough to remove a man's head at the upper lip and above. Powerful enough to do the job and move on to the belly of a woman holding a dish of potato salad fifty feet away.

There had been no gunshot. No supersonic crack from the bullet.

I searched the line of the bullet's path for a speeding car or racing motorcycle. Nothing moved on the streets. The hydraulic arm of the distant backhoe clawed the earth. Carpenters applied nail gun shots to the rising wooden frames on two new homes. No one I could see carried a rifle. None of the workmen broke their casual stride or steady application of nails.

On Spellman's lawn, a few men staggered to their feet and ran. Two of them crossed the mowed grass and ducked beside their trucks and SUVs. After stealing glances across the street, they clawed open vehicle doors. One by one, they extracted rifles, jerked rounds into chambers, and lifted the weapons to their shoulders. A man in green camo threw himself prone under the front corner of his truck and aimed across the street. I followed his aim, thinking he might have seen the shooter.

Empty, barren lots offered no hint of an enemy. Nothing moved. In Spellman's yard, screaming and shouting marked mounting chaos. Voices swore. Men yelled for everyone to get down. Women shouted at the children. Near the bounce house, kids stood bewildered by the shift in atmosphere.

"Over there! Over there!"

The man beneath his pickup crawled forward and swung his rifle back and forth. "Where? Where goddammit?"

A hundred feet above the scene, I lifted the power unit to arrest my ascent. I searched. Except for the mayhem in the picnic yard, quiet ruled the surrounding neighborhood. Darryl Spellman's headless body lay in a heap at the feet of his bride-to-be. She might have been a vandalized statue. She sat covered in red, staring down at her headless groom.

I rotated and examined the two homes under construction. I calculated the path of the bullet based on the wasp-wing tickle at my ear, the explosive hit on Spellman and the subsequent strike on the woman with the potato salad. The shot clearly came from the construction zone across the street, yet I could see no sign of an assassin.

Gunfire erupted, sharp and rapid. I looked down and saw the prone gunman and his companion firing. They aimed at a dirt mound sixty yards from the road. Clods of dirt snapped into the air.

The fusillade was pointless. No one crouched behind the dirt mound.

The firing continued relentlessly until both men had emptied their clips.

"Didja geddim?"

"I don't know!"

Neither ventured into the open to assess the battle damage. I searched the landscape and found nothing.

Dammit.

I gripped the power unit tighter. Sweat broke from my palm. Every muscle in my body felt jittery.

Right past my head! Inches from my head!

I flew a tight circle above the construction but saw nothing.

TEN MINUTES LATER, I located Leslie's compact red Jeep cruising several streets over. A sharp dive took me to the roof rack. I grabbed it and banged on the sheet metal. The Jeep stopped. I dropped beside the passenger door and reappeared without so much as a glance at the homes on either side of the street. I didn't care. I jerked open the door and slid onto the passenger seat.

“What the hell is happening?” she demanded. “I heard shots.”

“Drive. Quickly. Get as far from the Spellman house as possible.”

“What the—”

“Somebody killed him. Go!”

She stared.

“Go!”

“I’m not sure you understand that I’m a law enforcement officer, Will.”

“And I’m not sure that you want to wander into a live fire zone waving your FBI badge in front of a bunch of rabid anti-government militia types who just saw their beloved leader assassinated.”

LESLIE WHEELED into a parking space near the air pump at the back of a gas station quick mart. I finished explaining what I’d seen as she killed the engine.

She reached across the console and pulled the recording device from my shirt pocket. She unclipped the microphone and wound the lead around two fingers, then dropped the coil into a cupholder. Taking the device in hand, she pulled out her phone. She produced a loop of thin black wire from her pocket and pushed a connector into the bottom of the recording device. The other end she connected to her phone. Using her thumbs, she worked the screen, opening an app and touching command buttons. A bar appeared. A green line crept across the bar.

Sirens sounded nearby. The volume rose and fell.

I wiped my palms on my pants, then closed a grip on my thighs to keep my hands from shaking. The wasp sound played in my head like a pop tune earworm.

Inches.

On Leslie’s screen, the green bar reached its destination and disappeared. Leslie thumbed commands into the phone. A video screen appeared. On it, the interior of the Jeep wiggled incoherently, then the driver-side door, the parking lot, then the landscape seen from a bird’s eye.

“That thing has a camera?”

“Uh-huh.” She watched the aerial view captured by my circuit around the Spellman house. She watched me approach the patio bar. The fisheye lens reduced and separated the figures in the wide-angle view.

She watched Spellman’s head explode without flinching.

She watched the aftermath to the point where I rose and rotated. When the camera view faced the construction area, she froze the frame. She exam-

ined it for a moment, then closed the frame and the app and pocketed her phone.

“Huh.” She sat and stared at nothing. “I guess you weren’t the shooter.”

“What?”

She said nothing.

“You thought I did that?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way.”

“How would you put it?”

“You have an independent streak. Lee Donaldson warned Director Lindsay. The Director, putting it bluntly, wasn’t sure you could be trusted. Lee thought you were impulsive.”

“Jesus Christ! That bullet missed my head by—I don’t know—this much!” I raised a thumb and finger measurement. “I felt the damned thing go past my ear!”

“Good.”

“Good? What do you mean *good*? You saw what it did! That could have been me!” My voice climbed an octave.

“Good that you weren’t five inches to your right. Good that you can pinpoint your location at the time of the shooting and help us determine the precise path of the bullet. Good that we should be able to figure out where the shooter set up. See? All good.”

I swallowed, momentarily speechless.

She started the engine, checked her mirrors and the backup camera display, then put the Jeep in reverse and backed up, spinning the steering wheel.

“Where are we going?”

“Back to the airport.”

“You’re not going to—I don’t know—check in with the local office? Turn over what we know? Help with the investigation?”

“And how would I do that? This is the point you and your wife have made from the beginning.” She checked both ways and pulled onto the street. “You can’t exactly tell anyone your story.”

“What if the shooter is still up there?”

She shook her head. “The shooter is long gone. From what happened to Spellman’s head, I’d say that was a heavy round. Maybe fifty-caliber. Most weapons firing that kind of round are accurate a thousand yards out. The shooter was never anywhere near Spellman.”

“You’re just going to drop this?”

“Not by a long shot.” She cracked a smile at the pun. “But your part in this is done.”

DIVISIBLE MAN - EIGHT BALL

“Just put your toy back in the box,” I said sourly.

“One way of stating it.” She glanced over to catch me pouting, which is not my strong suit. “Look, Will, you—and more specifically, Andy—spelled out the limitations when you met with Director Lindsay. There’s the world in which you can do what you do and don’t get me wrong, it’s invaluable. And then there’s the world of warrants and Miranda and probable cause. I have to walk the line between the two.”

“You’re doing nothing?”

“I didn’t say that. When we get back, you and I will pull up a satellite image of that subdivision and get into the finer points of trajectory. Your report and the video will provide data. I’ll find a way to mainstream that data into the investigation. But we were never going to drive back up there, join the local LEOs and point to where the shot came from.”

The miracle that is general aviation returned us to Spirit of St. Louis Airport before my absence created a problem for Arun. A few minutes after four p.m. the FBI chartered jet deposited Leslie and me on the ramp where our day began. A text from Arun said he was running late as usual, and that he anticipated arriving for our departure by six.

I double checked with Leslie to make sure she didn't plan to whisk me off to Key West or Alaska, then text-replied Arun that I'd be waiting.

"Food," I said when we entered the fixed base operation office and lounge.

"We don't have time."

I veered left and caught the eye of the desk manager. "Can you order a pizza for us?"

"Certainly," he replied cheerfully producing a pen and memo pad.

"Pepperoni, sausage, onions and mushrooms."

"On half!" Leslie called out as she marched toward the restroom. "Veggie on the other half."

I watched her disappear, then said, "That figures. Make it a large. And see if you can get some garlic bread with that. We'll be in the pilot's lounge. Thanks!"

"No problem!"

. . .

“HERE,” I pointed at the Google Earth image. I sat beside Leslie on a leather sofa. We huddled over her laptop. “This is the patio. This is where they put the bar tent at the edge. I landed and anchored to a tent pole...here.”

Leslie squeezed her fingers on the touchscreen and zoomed closer.

“The round parted my hair right about...here.”

She said nothing. Her dark eyes narrowed.

I pointed.

“This is Spellman. And this would be the second victim, the woman.”

Leslie pulled her phone and the recording device, still connected, from the pocket of her black blazer. She tapped the phone screen to life, found the video app, and replayed what I had recorded. I turned away. With pizza coming I didn’t need to see Spellman’s brains splatter his never-to-be-bride again. After a moment Leslie put away the phone and returned to the laptop. She expanded the view and moved the Spellman property to the upper left corner of the screen. Then she lifted a copy of *AOPA Pilot* from the coffee table and ripped out a page.

“That’s rude,” I said.

She ignored me. She folded the page lengthwise twice, then laid the makeshift ruler on her laptop screen, aligning it with the points we had identified.

The line extended across Spellman’s yard, across his street, and into empty land which, in the Google image, had new roads but did not show the new construction or freshly dug basements.

“The shooter was on this line,” she said. She picked up the phone and video recorder again. She cued it to a wide shot captured when I rotated to search for the source of the shot.

“There’s nothing there,” I said. “This is where they’re putting in a new house, which might have been a place to hide, but it’s off the line. Your trajectory path is empty.”

“It just looks empty.”

Twenty minutes later the pizza arrived. The front desk manager hustled it into the lounge along with a tray containing plates and utensils. He spread the meal on a table. A cloud of pizza scent filled the room and stirred my stomach. The desk manager asked, “Can I get you anything to drink?”

“Coffee, please?” I asked.

“Just water,” Leslie added. The desk manager spared a glance at the device in her hands, then hurried out.

Leslie stowed the pocket camera and closed the laptop. We moved to a table where I began eating my first meal of a long day. I needed the food.

And more coffee. A flight from St. Louis to Essex County remained on my agenda, and fatigue born of a sleepless night lurked in ambush.

“So?” I asked.

Leslie fixed her attention a thousand yards beyond the wall of the lounge. I wasn’t sure she heard me until she finally spoke.

“Sniper rifle. High caliber. Military grade. A long-range shot. Someone with skill and experience. Military training.”

“Lots of that in these groups.”

She shook her head. “Not as much as you think. Most of these cosplay militia guys have never been in the military. Of the few who have, not many are serious combatants.”

“What do you mean?”

She made a face. “They’re wannabes. Wannabe soldiers. Wannabe special forces. We call them ‘special farces.’ Guys who did unremarkable tours as wheeled vehicle mechanics or warehouse clerks, but who beef up their service records on the militia websites with a lot of bullshit. Very few of them are genuine special forces vets, or vets who saw combat. These fools want a race war or a war to overthrow the government. People who have seen actual combat want nothing to do with either.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“Mostly. But this shot—I gotta say. This was something different.” She picked up a piece of disturbingly topped pizza and plucked off an errant slice of pepperoni. She bit the end and chewed, deep in thought.

“How do you plan to ‘mainstream’ what I’ve given you?”

“I don’t know yet. There’s a task force on this. They knew about the wedding. The intel was channeled to me. My job is to channel it back. You complicate things, Will. You really do.”

I didn’t answer. Not for the first time, I wondered about the decision Andy and I made in New York, driven largely by Lee Donaldson—the decision to introduce me and *the other thing* to the FBI. Like most candidates for regret, it seemed like a good idea at the time.

“Speaking of complicated,” she said, chewing enthusiastically, “do you see the service weapon I carry?”

I wasn’t sure I understood the question. I glanced at her shoulder holster.

“Yes...?”

“Good. Now you’re going to tell me what you were doing in the middle of the night last night or I’m going to take that weapon out of the holster, remove the safety, and put a round through one of your blue eyes.”

She smiled. I think.

. . .

DIVISIBLE MAN - EIGHT BALL

I MARVEL at the tectonic shift my life took the day a beautiful woman in a light summer dress strolled into the offices of Essex County Air Service. She arrived on the arm of a man I disliked intensely, more so after he gave her an airplane ride and made her airsick. My world flipped while I held Andy's hair as she vomited into a wastebasket. That moment, unannounced, marked the point at which much of what I do began to flow through the filter of *what would Andrea Katherine Taylor Stewart do?*

The question popped into my mind as Leslie looked at me with a glitter in her eye and a smile on her lips and a loaded Glock under her left armpit. I didn't contemplate how my next words might affect my interaction with the FBI. I imagined instead the conversation that would take place when I explained to my wife of four plus years how I revealed to Leslie the last sacred layer of secrecy about *the other thing*. I vividly pictured the look on her face. The words out of her mouth. The way she would stab her fingers into the waves of her hair as if to massage the next thought from her mind.

Irony flooded the moment—that Leslie thought I could be unfaithful to Andy when the secret I kept reflected my devotion to my wife.

“Well?”

Given that I'd not seen Andy in person for eighteen days (and a precise number of hours easily calculated) since she left for FBI training in Virginia, I decided that any objections she might voice could be rationalized by the fact that we both served the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

“Do you know what an Angel Flight is?”

“Hi, gorgeous.”

The number on my phone screen wasn't the same as the last time Andy called, but I recognized the Virginia area code. Trainees were not allowed personal mobile devices during the 20-week course at Quantico. Limited access to landline phones during personal time on weekends provided our only connection. Demand for a few landline phones ran high and call time was limited, so on Friday night, when the window for personal phone time opened for Andy and her fellow trainees, I waited for the call on the screened porch of our rented farmhouse with my phone charged and a cold Corona in hand.

“Hello, handsome.” Andy's voice warmed me as much as the slanted fall sunshine penetrating the screens.

Questions and demands raced through my head.

I miss you.

When can I visit?

When will they release you for time off base?

I suppressed them one by one, knowing my needs and impulses only put needless pressure on Andy.

“Are you kicking academic ass?”

“It's exhausting. We're in class nine hours a day and it feels like the homework is another sixteen.”

“That's twenty-five hours.”

“Feels like it.”

“Leaving the competition in the dust, I’m sure.”

“Will, you have no idea. The people in my class are—I don’t know how to put it—*daunting*. Lawyers. Engineers. I haven’t met a cadet who doesn’t have a master’s degree. One woman has a doctorate in counterintelligence. Where do you even get something like that?”

I smiled. This was an old song with Andy, who hides her county technical college associate degree in police sciences the way a middle school girl hides new orthodontics. Nothing about law enforcement scared her more than the idea of competing against peers she could not imagine as her equal. I knew better. My handshake bet with her Essex PD boss, Tom Ceeves, placed a hundred dollars on Andy finishing in the top three, and double that if she finished number one in her graduating class. I think Tom took the bet in her presence just to give her permission to finish fourth or lower.

“Been out to Hogan’s Alley yet?” I asked.

“Heaven’s no. We all walk around with inert weapons. We don’t go to the range until—I think—week six or seven. They call us ‘children’ and don’t trust us with anything sharper than a pencil. It’s all classroom right now. You would not believe the lecturers, Will! Incredible people. Counterterrorism experts. Agents who have worked foreign posts and international investigations. Law professors who have clerked for the Supreme Court. Top investigators who worked 9/11, Lebanon, Bin Ladin, and cases I can’t mention. Legal experts. Firearms experts. Explosives experts. We had a ballistics and weapons expert who worked the Las Vegas shooting. The things they’ve seen and done!”

I sat back and listened to schoolgirl enthusiasm bubble up in Andy. She talked about her classes, her schedule, the reading list, and the long hours of study. She spoke in awe of her classmates, the best of the best out of tens of thousands of applicants. I recognized her insecurity and embarrassment for having been given a slot without having traversed the unforgiving application process. Director Lindsay had arranged the opening.

After Lindsay’s death, the door would have closed if not for Leslie. What she did or who she did it to, Leslie refused to say. One week after Andy and I met Agent Carson-Pelham, Andy received a call to report to a class assembling in a matter of days. The call set off a whirlwind. It seemed like only minutes later when I dropped her off at Shannon Field in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Andy asked that we part on the airport ramp rather than at the gates of the FBI training center. I hid my disappointment and agreed. This was her journey, not mine. She viewed her backdoor entrance to the academy as less than legitimate, a deficit she needed to overcome on her own terms, starting with an arrival sans ceremony.

Andy talked. I savored the sound of her voice.

“...thought I was in shape, but I have aches in muscles I didn’t know I had. We do morning and afternoon PT. And next week we start combat and self-defense training. And...”

The line went quiet for a moment.

“And?”

“And...it’s magical, Will! I—I don’t know how to put it, but this is the most incredible experience. I never imagined!”

“I’m glad,” I said sincerely.

“I miss you.” Her shift to intimacy caught me by surprise. “I do. I miss you every day. I know I go on and on about all this, but I *do* miss you.”

“I miss you, too. But it’s okay. I couldn’t be happier for you.”

“We still need to talk about ‘*the other other thing.*’”

I laughed. She had previously dismissed my suggestion of a name for our as-yet unconceived child.

After several years of postponing the topic of a family, Andy, propelled by impulses I could not fathom, rather suddenly announced her desire to have a baby. Just as suddenly, the call to join the FBI Academy derailed our plans. I quickly shifted from assuring Andy that I wanted a family to assuring her that we could wait.

“I still want it.”

“Dee, I do, too. There’s time. Let’s climb one hill at a time, okay?”

“I just...I feel selfish...after what happened. After we decided.”

“No. Crazy, maybe. But there’s nothing selfish about jumping all over this opening to train for the FBI. Dee, this is something you never even dared to dream was possible. To have it happen and pass it up...?”

“I guess.”

“You know I’m right.”

“Okay.” She closed the topic, having prompted me to say the words she needed to hear. “Any news from Leslie?”

“Funny,” I chuckled. “More than news. Usual disclaimer?”

“What, now you’re asking me?” She laughed.

“Hey, I’m now an asset of the Eff-Bee-Eye!”

“Right. So, what’s the news?”

“You’re not going to belie—”

“Wait! Maybe this isn’t such a good topic for the phone.”

“Really? You’re at a secure facility on a Marine base, sweetheart. Surrounded by the federal officers.” The instant I said it, I realized that was the point.

She didn’t speak for a moment—a message in itself. Then she said, “I

DIVISIBLE MAN - EIGHT BALL

just mean there are other people waiting to use this phone. We can talk about it when you come out.”

“Come out?” My heart accelerated.

“We get a 24-hour leave next weekend. Noon Saturday to noon Sunday. Wanna go on a date?”

The feline purr in her voice stirred the answer before I could say it aloud. I leaned back on my ratty old lounge chair.

“I don’t know. I usually wash my hair on Saturday night.”

Police Chief Tom Ceeves looks at me differently since I vanished before his startled eyes at the kitchen table where Andy and I eat breakfast. He tries to be cool about it, the way I imagine myself attempting to not notice if I ever wind up sitting on a commercial airliner next to Tom Hanks or Charlize Theron. He fails exactly the way I imagine myself failing in that first-class seat I doubt I will ever occupy.

He can't peel away his initial glance. His gaze hangs longer than it should. He leaves me with the sense that he has something to say. Tom is a man of few words, but lately his already slender word count has dropped.

I worry that the chief's knowledge of *the other thing* will have consequences for Andy. I fear that he will second-guess her sterling police work, that he will wonder if she cheats by using me. Discrediting her would be absurd and unfair. I can cite ample examples of cases Andy resolved with no influence or input from me. Andy recently spent scores of hours—many of them on her own time—crawling through social media posts to ferret out a suspect who thought it would be funny to give hallucinogenic mushrooms to half a dozen grade school kids on the Indian Line Running Trail that courses through Essex County. The investigation and subsequent arrest belonged entirely to Detective Andrea Stewart. I spent many of her investigative hours reading a Craig Johnson novel on the front porch.

The question hangs in the air when I see the Chief. I suppose it also hangs in the air with Pidge, Lillian, Spiro Lewko, and Earl Jackson—with everyone who knows what I can do.

DIVISIBLE MAN - EIGHT BALL

And what do you plan to do with it today?

Ordinarily, it's a question unasked.

The morning after Andy's call, on the last Saturday of September, Chief Tom Ceeves asked the question outright.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



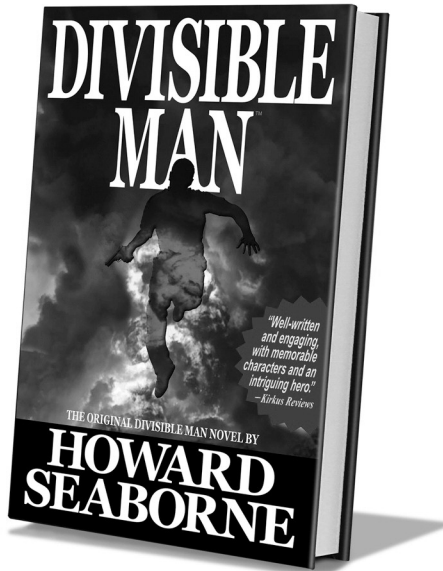
HOWARD SEABORNE is the author of the DIVISIBLE MAN™ series of novels and a collection of short stories featuring the same cast of characters.

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.

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DIVISIBLE MAN



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.

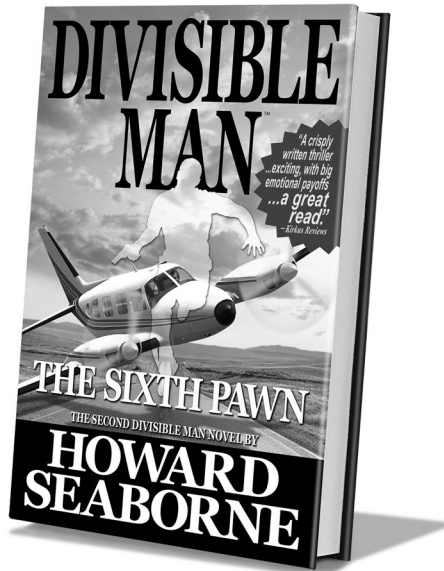
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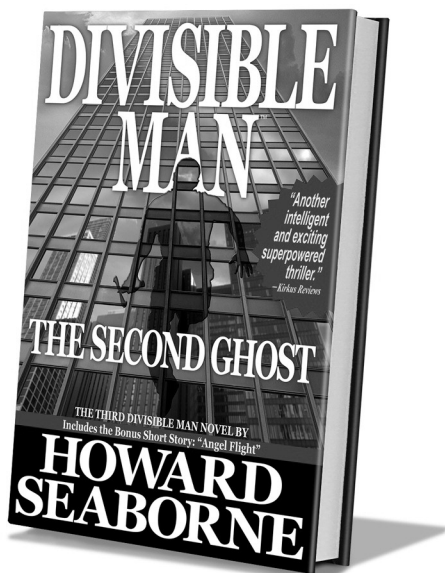
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Includes the short story, "Angel Flight," a bridge to the fourth DIVISIBLE MAN novel that follows.

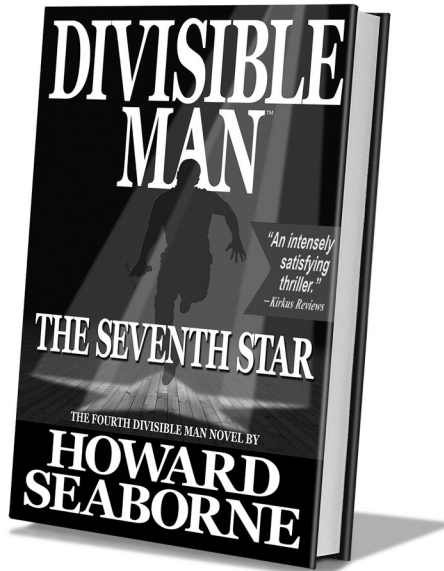
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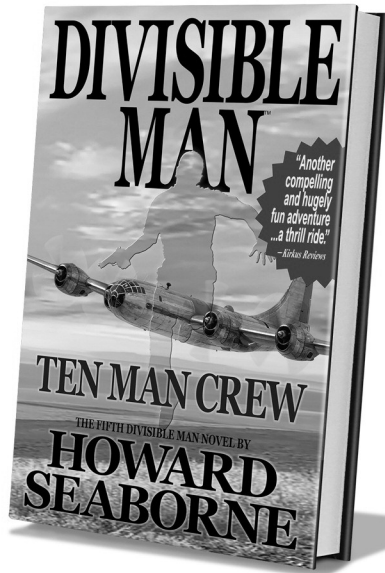
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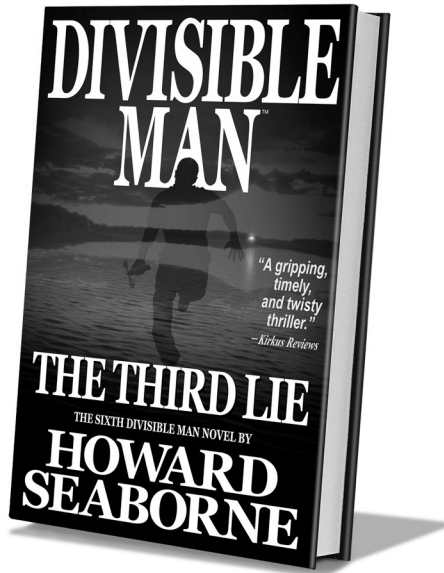
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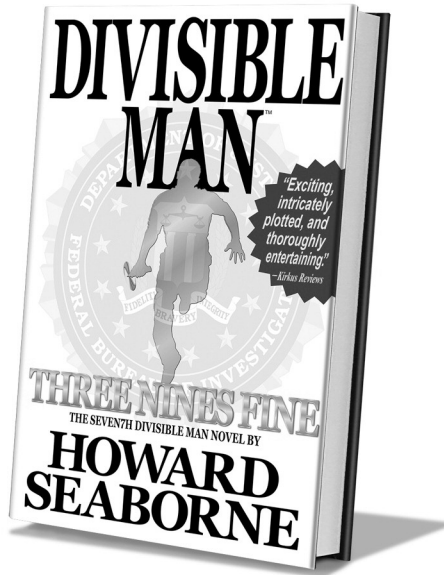
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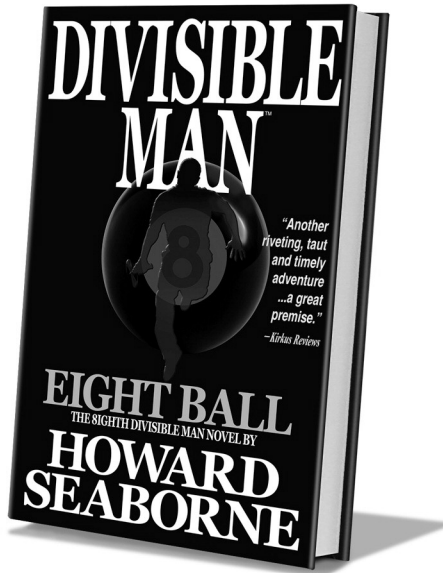
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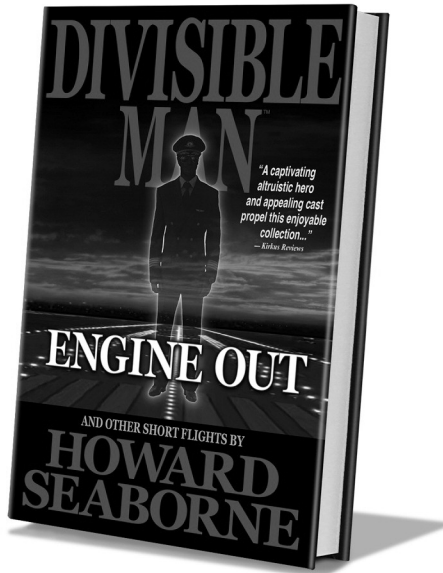
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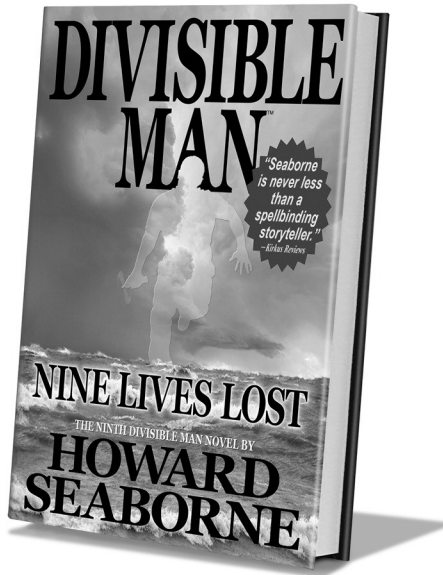
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