

DIVISIBLE MAN™

A silhouette of a man in athletic wear running towards the viewer. He is holding a handgun in his right hand. The scene is lit from above, creating a spotlight effect on the wooden floor beneath him.

*"An intensely
satisfying
thriller."*

—Kirkus Reviews

THE SEVENTH STAR

THE FOURTH DIVISIBLE MAN NOVEL BY

HOWARD SEABORNE



DIVISIBLE MANTM
THE SEVENTH STAR

by

Howard Seaborne



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ALSO BY HOWARD SEABORNE

DIVISIBLE MAN

A Novel – September 2017

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SIXTH PAWN

A Novel – June 2018

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SECOND GHOST
ANGEL FLIGHT

A Novel & Story – September 2018

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SEVENTH STAR

A Novel – June 2019

DIVISIBLE MAN: TEN MAN CREW

A Novel – November 2019

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE THIRD LIE

A Novel – May 2020

DIVISIBLE MAN: THREE NINES FINE

A Novel – November 2020

DIVISIBLE MAN: EIGHT BALL

A Novel – September 2021

DIVISIBLE MAN: ENGINE OUT
AND OTHER SHORT FLIGHTS

A Story Collection – June 2022

DIVISIBLE MAN: NINE LIVES LOST

A Novel – June 2022

DIVISIBLE MAN: TEN KEYS WEST

A Novel – May 2023

PRAISE FOR HOWARD SEABORNE

DIVISIBLE MAN - TEN KEYS WEST [DM10]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

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

— *BookLife*

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - NINE LIVES LOST [DM9]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - ENGINE OUT & OTHER SHORT FLIGHTS

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - EIGHT BALL [DM8]

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

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THREE NINES FINE [DM7]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE THIRD LIE [DM6]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - TEN MAN CREW [DM5]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SEVENTH STAR [DM4]

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

—*Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SECOND GHOST [DM3]

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

—*Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SIXTH PAWN [DM2]

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

—*Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN [DM1]

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

—*BookLife*

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

—*Kirkus Reviews*

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

—*BookLife*

THE SERIES



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

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

SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL BOOKSELLER

The entire DIVISIBLE MAN™ series is available from the many local independent booksellers who offer online ordering for in-store pickup or home delivery.

Search: “DIVISIBLE MAN Howard Seaborne”

For advance notice of new releases and exclusive material available only to Email Members, join the DIVISIBLE MAN™ Email List at HowardSeaborne.com.

Sign up today and get a FREE DOWNLOAD.

*For Tom.
Everyone should be lucky enough
to have a brother like you.*

Author's Note

This story begins where the Divisible Man short story “Angel Flight” ends.
If you haven't read “Angel Flight,” now might be a good time.

The song playing in the Black Box Theater is “Adore” by Amy Shark.
A beautiful, heartfelt song.
You should download it when you read that chapter.

A few hours ago in Marshfield, Wisconsin

“ANGEL FLIGHT”

We crossed a parking lot. Evenly-spaced lamps all around us cast down cones of lighted mist—creating a magical forest of transparent Christmas trees. I felt the girl moving now. I felt her small arms around me and a weak but steady embrace. Her head lifted from my shoulder. I felt her looking around. I wondered if being in the vanished state gave her strength.

I aimed for the Emergency entrance.

I eased us onto the concrete outside broad glass doors. With a last pulse of the FLOP, we stabilized and stopped. Somewhere in the distance I heard the airplane high in the fog. Engine song faded into the silent night.

Fwoomp! I let gravity reacquire us. I settled onto my feet.

I looked down at the bundle in my arms. A set of wide, bright eyes stared up at me from an expression so serene, so at peace, it took my breath away.

“Are you an angel?” she asked.

“No, honey.” I smiled down at her. “That’s all you.”

PART I

1

Well, *this Christmas sucks.*

My hypothesis solidified when the so-called heater in my motel room issued a scream just before two a.m. The scream perfectly accented a nightmare knifing into my sleep cycle.

In the dark dream, my wife Andy fell backward. Not in cinematic slow motion. She was ripped away. Violently. Down a stairway that morphed into a shattered open window on the thirty-eighth floor of a Chicago high-rise office building. She reached for me. I lunged for her. Our fingertips touched.

Then we both fell.

And I woke up sweating.

After a moment, I remembered where I was and how I got there. I realized the scream wasn't my wife plunging to the pavement, but the mechanical workings of the in-room heater performing an operatic death scene.

The heater howled long enough to bounce me out of the bed looking for a baseball bat or an ax or something of equal menace with which to kill the demon. Management didn't stock the room with baseball bats or axes. Before I could locate an equivalent weapon, the device gave out a fatal *Chunk!* and fell silent.

I stood breathless in my underwear and sweat as the nightmare released its grip on my jangled nerves, only to reveal hip-hop bass beats throbbing through thin motel room walls.

Marshfield, Wisconsin has the usual array of fine hotels, inns and suites. The Pineview Motel is not one of them. I had called every establishment that

came up on my phone. Except the Pineview. The Pineview listing displayed one pathetic star and carried an encyclopedia of negative reviews.

One by one, the more reputable options reported being booked. It did not amuse me that I arrived in Marshfield on Christmas Eve bearing a child and there was no room at the inn.

Accepting the inevitable, I called the loser on the list. I should have read the warning sign when no one answered. Ever the optimist, I made myself vanish and set off on a short flight across town using the remaining battery power in my hand-held FLOP (Flight Launching Operational Propulsion) unit.

After I zigzagged above all-but-empty streets, avoiding wires and stop-lights, the Pineview Motel materialized out of dense fog. It crouched on cracked asphalt and dirty snow between a car wash and an auto parts store. Judging the book by its cover, I nearly turned around and went back to the Marshfield Clinic to sack out in one of the nicely appointed waiting rooms. The flaw in that plan was that I had no good answer should anyone ask why I was there. I didn't know the name of the little girl I dropped off at the emergency entrance. And I didn't want to answer any questions about the fact that I *had* dropped off a little girl.

I eased to a landing outside the front entrance of the Pineview, cleared the area to ensure that no one was watching, then reappeared and stepped inside.

The kid manning the motel's front desk had an understandable excuse for not answering the phone. He sailed higher than the cruising altitude Pidge and I had maintained on the flight to Marshfield. The visibility inside the motel approached instrument flight conditions and carried the rich aroma of burnt cannabis.

Not my problem. Or passion. I just wanted a room.

"I'm not sure, man, but I think somebody just left," the kid told me after I flagged down his loosely tethered attention.

"Maybe you could check and see?"

On the count of five the notion took hold. He looked down at the desk and found a plastic key card laying on an open *Sports Illustrated* photo spread that had nothing to do with sports. He picked it up and handed it to me with a big smile.

"Yeah, they did. Here." I took the key card. He didn't ask me to register. He didn't request a credit card imprint. He didn't inquire as to whether I might be staying the night or moving in permanently.

"Does this key card have a room number to go with it?"

"Oh, they all do," he assured me.

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SEVENTH STAR

I waited a moment and might still be waiting if I had been determined to make him figure it out for himself. Instead, I asked, "Could you look it up for me?" I handed the card back.

"Good idea!" He swiped the card through the desktop reader and handed it back to me. "Twenty-two."

"Right."

Everyone I ever tell this story to in the future will be able to guess what happened next. Room twenty-two throbbed with music that attempted to drown out the voices of the room's partying occupants. On top of that, the card didn't open the door.

I hiked back to the front desk.

"Sorry, man! I meant room Two. I saw the two, and then I saw it again, and I kinda put two and two together." This struck the kid as funny. After some helpless giggling he said, "But that key is totally for room Two."

"You're certain?"

"Oh, yeah. We only have one room Two," he solemnly held up his right hand.

The card opened room Two.

Where I stood in my boxers at one-fifty-four *ante meridiem*, peeling away the clinging threads of a nightmare and presiding over the dramatic death of an in-room heater.

Christmas morning.

ANDY and I spoke earlier in the evening. I called her immediately after delivering the tiny Angel Flight girl to the Marshfield Clinic Pediatric Hospital. I placed the child in the arms of the first nurse I found, gave the nurse just enough information to send her rushing away, then discretely made for the exit.

Standing outside the hospital entrance on a holy night made silent by thick fog, I fished my phone out of my pocket and touched the contact line for my wife.

"Hey," I said. "The delivery has been made. They were ready for her and took her straight in for treatment."

Andy relayed the news. I heard a shriek and clamor.

"I told the girl's mother to stay here at the airport," Andy explained. "I convinced her to wait for word." I heard a bit of a commotion and chatter. Andy relayed a question to me.

"Honestly, she was looking pretty good," I answered. "She was awake, talking. She seemed to enjoy the flight."

Andy relayed. More excited, relieved chatter.

“I don’t know,” I answered the next question. “Probably best if her mom calls the clinic. They’ll have information. After you tell her that, could you find someplace quiet? So we can talk?”

Andy repeated my suggestion and then excused herself from the escalating joy. A minute later she closed the door to Earl’s office. I closed my eyes and pictured her standing in her patrol sergeant’s uniform beside his old government-issue metal desk surrounded by a forest of piled maintenance manuals.

“The ambulance crew waiting at the airport called about fifteen minutes ago. They said the plane flew over but couldn’t land,” Andy said. “I told Rosemary II not to tell the mother. I knew you would try again. You obviously got in on the third try.”

“Yeah...no. We didn’t land. That ambulance crew might still be waiting at the airport.”

Andy gave me silence. I didn’t take it as judgment or confusion. Just the silence she needed as she computed the variables.

“Oh—my—God.”

“Andy, the kid was in bad shape. We had nowhere to go. Pidge busted minimums and we still couldn’t see anything. It was zero-zero.”

“You—didn’t.”

“Yeah, I did.” I gave her an abbreviated version of the Angel Flight.

“What about the nurse?” Andy immediately grasped the consequences of me disappearing and reappearing in front of a witness—not to mention jumping out of the airplane with the nurse’s patient. “What about the ambulance crew? And the people at the hospital?”

“I’m counting on a little chaos, I guess. She got there. The people treating her might wonder, but they’ve got bigger problems.”

“And the nurse? Will, you’re not thinking this through!”

“I explained to her that it was the only way. She knew we were out of options, and she swore she wouldn’t tell.” I realized how weak that sounded. “Don’t mention this part to the mother, but it looked bad for the girl. I think when the nurse finds out the kid made it, she’ll keep her word.”

“Oh—my—God.”

“I’ll send Pidge a text. Tell her to emphasize the need for secrecy. Call it the price of a Christmas miracle. She’ll probably be landing somewhere in the Dakotas tonight.”

“Where are you now? What are you going to do?”

I told her not to worry. That I would check into a hotel and I would call her in the morning to work out a way home.

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SEVENTH STAR

Does two o'clock qualify as morning?
Technically, yes.
But Andy might not agree.

I PUT on some pants and my boots, picked up my key card and slipped into the hall where the visibility continued to rival this night's flight in the fog. I wandered the length of the hall, making a note of which rooms were still registering music and voices on the Richter Scale.

On the way back, I stopped at each one.

"POLICE! OPEN UP!" I turned my back to each door and kicked three times with the flat bottom of my boot heel. "ESSEX COUNTY NARCOTICS SQUAD! OPEN THE DOOR!"

At each door the result was the same. Sudden silence replaced the thumping music. A patio door slammed open. Feet pounded.

Following my final stop, I heard vehicle engines start in the parking lot beside the building. I heard tires squeak followed by one very satisfying fender-bender.

"Dumbasses," I muttered. "This is *Wood County*."

By the time I got back to the one and only room Two, the fabulous Pineview Motel had fallen silent. It may have been my imagination, but the air in the hallway seemed clearer.

I stood in the empty room, fairly certain sleep wasn't in the cards.

“So?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Andy tried to sound light-hearted, but I wasn’t buying it. “We can talk about it when you get home. I wish you’d let me drive up and get you.”

I sipped the Kwik Trip coffee and surveyed the vacant gas pumps beneath the canopy. Christmas morning lay under the same blanket of fog that complicated my Christmas Eve arrival in Marshfield. The fog amplified the eerie absence of traffic. My already low mood deepened.

“The bus is safer. I have a ticket.” Only partly true. I needed to get to the CVS pharmacy on Ocean Street to buy the ticket and then figure out what to do for a couple hours.

Despite the wait, the bus remained the better option. Andy driving in low visibility worries me. On top of that, I didn’t need a full briefing to know that her sister’s attempted Christmas Eve family reunion had not gone well.

The Trailways bus from Marshfield to Milwaukee makes a stop at the Park ‘n Ride on Highway 34 at the western fringe of Essex County. Despite the fog, the company predicted the bus would run on time. I expected to be in my loving, emotionally-charged wife’s embrace by four o’clock.

Not a minute too soon.

Three weeks had passed since someone tried to kill Andy’s sister, thinking she was Andy. I spent those three weeks with a knot in my chest, one that tightened whenever Andy was out of my sight.

“That’s fine,” I said, “we can talk later. Maybe open a bottle of wine.”

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I felt relieved that Andy didn't want to discuss The Shitstorm, our pet name for her rocky relationship with her parents, specifically her father. She would want to vent, and that's a delicate procedure best performed in a controlled environment.

"Lydia of course played the big sister card," Andy launched into it. "She always thinks she knows best. I was afraid she would do that. I mean, fine, she already apologized for how she was toward me, but—I don't know—the minute Mom and Dad walked through the door it's like this programmed response kicks in. I get it. She's had it pounded into her. To be fair, she has overcome *a lot* of that. And I know she's dealing with serious issues of her own. But it was still there, you know? Just these little—*oooh!*"

I decided if Andy wasn't going to talk about it, I better sound interested.

"How did it go with your dad?"

"Oh, boy. No. We'll talk about that later. Not on the phone."

So, not well.

"Right off the bat, he gets into it about you. 'So sorry your husband decided to miss this family time.' Like you had a choice. Like you went looking for something else to do. I told him about the Angel Flight and how important it was, but then Ellis made some comment about you still flying puddle jumpers, and why couldn't they transport the patient in something bigger? Like there's 747 service to Marshfield! I mean—my brother can be such an elitist. And just like that, it became a doubles match with Dad and Ellis pairing off against me and Lydia. Liddy called Dad on his tone and reminded him that he agreed to a truce. But this is his idea of a truce? I'm supposed to give him kudos for not jumping all over me for my career choices while he puts on his robes and sits in judgment of you? For God's sake—you were out there trying to save a little girl's life!"

I switched the phone to my other hand and opened the pack of C cell batteries I bought to replenish my dead FLOP unit.

"And Mom, oh—my—GOD! She actually asked why someone else couldn't have taken the flight. Why it had to be you. Do you believe that?"

Andy went on for a while about her mother, bringing Lydia back up for a few choice observations on how it would have been nice if her sister had been stronger in pointing out their mother's insensitivity. I added an occasional "uh-huh" and "oh" and threw in a few keen questions to prove I was listening. Mostly, I sipped my coffee, replaced the batteries, watched the unattended gas pumps and counted my lucky stars that Andy didn't want to talk about all this over the phone.

"And then here it comes, right in the middle of dinner," she said. "Lydia doing the big sister thing again—thinking she's helping. She brought up

Lane's case and then she brought up Cinnamon Hills, and my promotion, and that gaudy business with the governor at the capital. Yeah, okay, fine, she meant well. But I mean, I don't need her validation. I don't need her going to bat for me with Dad! And the whole time I'm waiting for the inevitable hammer to drop about me being a cop, like it always does. And you know it's right up there, hanging from the chandelier along with the mistletoe. And sure enough! Dad, of course, says, "This kind of life experience is powerful resume material."

Silence.

Crap. She wanted me to respond.

"I...um ..."

"Do you believe that?! Resume material! Will, he didn't say it, but I *know* he's just waiting to lay all that same old shit on me about getting me into law school! He didn't come right out with it, thank God! Because I swear, I would have walked out. I would have lost it! And not just me. I think Liddy would have butter knifed him right there, right in front of her kids, all over the tuxedo cake. He still hasn't given up! You just wait. He's going to slip it in somehow. He'll say, 'I've got contacts at Harvard.' All that old-boy BS. I should ask him if he thinks admissions will offer extra credits when I put down on my application that I blew off the top of a raging pedophile's head!"

"You had tuxedo cake?"

"And God forbid he should find out about Rahn!" I didn't need to be reminded of the threat to her life. The knot tightened. "God!" she cried out. "So *fucking* not cool!"

Andy rarely curses. This was getting serious.

"And on top of that, it's Christmas! And I—I *miss you!*"

The sentiment and its sudden tenderness signaled an end to the rant.

"Miss you, too," I said, wanting with all my heart to believe we were done *not* talking about her Christmas Eve at Lydia's lake house.

I listened to her breathing for a moment.

"I'll be home soon. Meet me at the bus."

"Fine."

"I think I have to go. My phone battery is about dead. I asked at the motel about a charger. They offered to sell me one for thirty bucks."

"That's crazy."

"Well, I think they lost some money at the Pineview Motel last night. Some of their regulars checked out suddenly without paying. Plus, they never charged me for the room. Hey," I said, seeking a more intimate tone.

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SEVENTH STAR

“Maybe we could do a nice quiet dinner tonight, just you and me. Have Christmas together.”

Andy’s Christmas present lay unopened under our small artificial tree.

“Everyone is still at Lydia’s until Friday. They want us to come for left-overs tonight, so they can meet the man I’ve been married to for three and a half years.”

Shit.

Andy met me as I stepped off the bus, her arms out, looking like the dream girl in a movie where the hometown sweetheart meets her serviceman beau at the station. She missed me, I missed her, and we missed spending Christmas together. We were all over each other for a moment in that Park 'n Ride lot. The people remaining on the bus gawked at us.

We broke it up after the bus driver wished us a Merry Christmas and told us to get a room.

“I talked to Pidge about twenty minutes ago,” Andy reported as I slipped into the police cruiser she drove. She’d been using one of the Essex PD squad cars ever since her car sank in Leander Lake. This one, unit twenty-three, perpetually smelled like french fries.

Andy threw the car in gear.

“Where did she end up?” I asked.

“Bimmidy?”

“Bemidji?”

“Yes! Bemidji, Minnesota. She said she found a hole in the fog. Otherwise she would have been visiting South Dakota just like you said.”

“I’m surprised she got in at Bemidji. Is she back now?” I don’t know why I asked. The fog still hadn’t lifted.

“No, and she may not be back tomorrow either—and not just because of the weather,” Andy said, cracking a smile. “She and that nurse went out and got wasted. Epic Christmas-Eve-in-Bemidji wasted, according to Pidge. When I talked to her, she said the nurse was still passed out and it sounded

like Pidge was still drinking. The City of Bemidji has asked them not to come back.”

“Might be a good strategy. Convince the nurse that she doesn’t clearly remember what happened.”

“Oh, no. Pidge said you were the subject of many a toast last night. I think you’re right, however. I talked to someone at the hospital. The girl seems to be doing better than anyone expected. It’s a Christmas miracle and that might do the trick.”

“How’s the mom? Is she on her way up there?”

“She took off last night, right after you called. I didn’t want her to drive but couldn’t really stop her. Tom came out and drove her over to Al Raymond’s car lot and they set her up with a rental. Well, a loaner. Tom persuaded Al to cough up a little Christmas spirit.” Al Raymond is a stingy old bastard, but Tom Ceeves, the Chief of the City of Essex Police Department, goes six-six and two-seventy. Persuasion follows him into a room. “The poor woman couldn’t wait another minute. I made her promise to text me when she got there, but I haven’t heard anything. I’m sure she had other things on her mind.”

“I have no doubt she made it.”

Andy nodded.

“So, what’s the plan?”

“Well,” Andy said. “You and I are going home to get cleaned up and presentable, and then I’m going to take my new boyfriend to meet the parents. And if they like him, I might let him ask me to marry him.”

“What if they don’t?”

She tipped me a light shrug.

“Guess I start shopping around again.”

4

Andy dressed in a knee-length plaid skirt of Christmas green and red and topped it with a cream-colored angora sweater that made me want to touch more than usual. I asked her if I should suit up, but she told me a nice shirt with dress pants would be fine. I knew better. I brushed off my one-and-only suit, a crisp white shirt and a cranberry-red tie I keep around for holidays.

My wife gave me a pleasing once-over when I descended the stairs. “Giving it the full-court press, I see.”

“I better, if I’m going to ask the old man for his daughter’s hand. Do you come with a dowry?”

“How do you feel about goats?”

Breaking with routine, I drove us to Lydia’s house in my car. With the arrival of evening, the relentless fog intensified. I didn’t want to show up at this event with my heart in my throat thanks to Andy’s driving. I also allowed a machismo instinct take hold and decided I would not appear at this first parental meeting with their daughter at the wheel. Plus, I thought showing up in a squad car might needlessly press the point about Andy’s career choice.

The route to Lydia’s lake house took us through the curve where Lydia went off the road into Leander Lake. By the time we rolled past the spot, a combination of pitch black and fog obscured the lake, less than fifty feet from the road. Still, Andy reached for my hand.

Electric tension settled into my neck and shoulders.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

I felt grateful for the darkness and the fog. I’ve seen the spot numerous times since pulling Lydia from the black water. It gives me a chill.

Still, I checked the rearview mirror to make certain nothing rushed up behind us.

LYDIA’S LAKE house belies the term. Done in multi-layered slabs that descend a slope to a vast patio overlooking the water, the wood and glass architectural award-winner bears little resemblance to ‘casual’ or ‘cottage.’ I marvel that it’s available for rent. Lydia has hinted at buying the place. Given its location and price, I decided Lydia wasn’t kidding when she told me she planned to financially castrate her philandering soon-to-be-ex-husband.

She met us at the door beaming. Andy wrapped a hug around her sister, mindful of the baby bump between them. I stepped into the warmly lit modern interior and immediately dropped to one knee. I knew what was coming.

“Uncle Will!”

“Unca-woo!”

Harriet, the five-year-old, and Elise, the two-and-a-half-year-old, collided with me. Arms entangled around my neck, I scooped them off their feet and stood, squeezing and gently jiggling them, giving their helpless giggles a nice *vibrato*.

“Ladies! Oh, it is *soooooo* good to see you! It’s been forever! Days and days! Plus, even some hours! How have you been? Have you been desperately lonely without me?”

“We have!” Harriet cried. “Come and see what we got for Christmas!”

“Come and see!” Elise bobbed her head and pigtails like a pair of antennae wiggled.

Since Lydia moved to Essex County, and especially during her short hospital stay, I have become acquainted with my nieces. As I looked at their faces, at their alert, beautiful eyes, healthy skin and strong little bodies, I thought of the bundle I carried into the pediatric hospital at the Marshfield Clinic. I thought of the way her eyes had been bright, and her face serene and glowing in defiance of the disease killing her.

Dammit. Lydia must have been cutting onions in the kitchen.

I pressed a kiss into Harriet’s hair, and another into Elise’s forehead. And blinked the sting out of my eyes.

“In a minute, ladies. I have important people I must meet first, but then there better be some pretty fantastic toys for me to play with!”

“Harriet got a Frozen Castle!” Elise announced as I lowered her to the floor.

“Ellie! Stop!” Harriet cried out. “Mom, she’s telling everything!”

I pulled Harriet close and whispered in her ear, “I didn’t hear a thing. And you can show me first.”

The reassurance earned me a smile.

“Girls, go and play by the tree until dinner,” their mother commanded.

A young woman appeared. Taller than Pidge, but sporting the same short blonde hair and pixie looks, she reached out to corral the children. There was no way to miss the baby bump she, too, carried. Not for the first time, I directed a thought at Lydia’s dirtbag husband. *Jesus, Davis, did you climb off your wife and onto the nanny?*

“Hello Mrs. Stewart—Mr. Stewart,” the girl said with a hint of an east European accent.

“Hi, Melanie.”

“Please excuse me while I see to the girls,” she said. Her eyes dropped, and she turned away. I caught her pulling at her open sweater. Extending it. Hiding the bump.

Lydia gave us raised eyebrows as the nineteen-year-old nanny shepherded my nieces away. She waited until the trio disappeared down a set of steps into another room.

“I can’t get her to stop feeling ashamed. I’m seriously considering counseling. Seriously.”

“Or maybe swearing out a warrant,” I muttered to Andy. She jabbed me with her elbow.

Lydia took our overcoats but not before I patted mine to ensure that two ready propulsion units remained tucked in a pocket. I noted the location of the closet where Lydia found hangers and hung the coats. Andy pushed her purse onto the top shelf of the closet. The move told me she carried her Glock 26. We both came prepared.

“Where are Mom and Dad?” Andy asked.

“Getting ready.”

Andy rolled her eyes. “Really? They couldn’t meet us at the door?”

“It’s all about the grand entrance, Katie,” Lydia said, letting Andy’s childhood name slip. “Will, regardless of the raging temperance in this house, we are well-stocked. Can I get you something?”

“The stronger the better,” I said.

“He’ll have a Corona Light with lime. I will, too,” Andy said, firing a

warning shot at me about getting shitfaced, which I will admit I had considered.

Lydia ushered us into a vast room with night-black windows that, in daylight, offered an expensive view of the south end of Leander Lake. I knew from previous daytime visits that a stand of trees to the left obscured the place where Andy's car had been pulled out of the deep end of the lake.

The room was tastefully furnished. Contemporary but comfortable-looking sofas and chairs attended the broad span of windows. Recessed lighting warmed wood-paneled walls. I wondered about anyone who could own such a beautiful property and not seek every opportunity to enjoy it, instead renting it to a stranger.

A bar occupied one corner of the room, just inside the entrance, opposite the windows. Lydia stepped into the role of bartender and produced two bottles of Corona. She deftly wedged lime slices into the necks, handed them off and picked up a tumbler filled with ice and what looked like cranberry juice.

"Okay, maybe not perfect, but one of the best Christmases I've had in a while," Lydia raised a glass with a special glance at Andy. We touched our drinks to hers.

Pregnant. Marriage falling apart. Nearly killed. I had to give it to Andy's sister. She mined the silver lining.

We drank.

"Lydia, you're toasting without us?"

I knew Andy's mother was attractive. She was her daughter's mother, and I'd seen photos. But it was instantly apparent that the woman entering the room lacked her daughter's accessibility and warmth. A couple extra decades gave Eleanor Taylor a sharp edge I hoped Andy would never acquire. She wore her hair shorter than either of her daughters, yet more expensively styled. She wore makeup carefully applied to suggest she wore none. She entered the room like someone who knew where the best light fell.

She traded a brisk hug with Andy, then turned to be presented to me.

"Mom, this is Will." I caught my wife's eyes flaring at me and the beer in my hand.

I dropped the cold beer bottle on the bar and quickly wiped my hand on my pants before extending it.

"A handshake? For your mother-in-law? Nonsense!" she pulled me into a hug, the temperature of which I could not determine.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Mrs. Taylor."

"Finally!" She left the word hanging, perhaps so that blame could be randomly assigned.

“Dad, this is Will,” Andy said, pulling me away from her mother.

I turned around and met my wife’s father. He posed at the entrance to the expansive room. He looked younger than the photos I’d seen, fit and dressed to perfection in an expensive suit and tie. He had a businessman’s look and a businessman’s silver-touched haircut. I flashed on the notion that if you slit him open, he would bleed spreadsheets.

I had just enough time to feel glad I dressed up, sorry I didn’t own a better suit, and foolishly confident that this might go well.

Then he spoke.

“You want to explain to me how you almost got my daughter and her unborn child killed?”

The doorbell chimed.

The left engine gave out a loud bang and a piston blew through the side of the cowling. The oil pressure dropped to nothing. Ice broke from the props and slammed into the fuselage. The fuel tank feeding the right engine read empty and the valve for switching tanks stuck. The flight controls heaved as the electric trim ran away.

In my head, it was that kind of moment.

“Hello!” A voice called from the front door.

“I’m leaving,” Andy announced. She planted her barely-sipped beer on the bar.

“Dad!” Lydia scolded her father. “Andy please! Don’t!”

Andy marched past her father on a line for the front hall, which was now crowded with two new people who appeared cheerfully unaware of what was happening.

“Girls! Come back here!” the nanny cried as the two little girls thundered toward the sound of the doorbell.

“Mom! Do something!” Lydia snapped at her mother.

I stared at Andy’s father, who tried to fry me with an expression likely used to good effect in board rooms, or for welding. Andy charged back into the room from the front hall, trailing her brother and his wife who were quick to conclude that something pungent had hit the fan.

Andy whirled and confronted her father.

“Overlooking how monumentally wrong you are, I have to ask, Dad, how could you be so insufferably rude?!”

“And I have to ask both of you girls why you thought I didn’t deserve to know?”

Lydia and Andy traded glances and gasps—then both spoke at once—a rapid-fire response mixing disclaimers and dismissals with angry assertions that the car-in-the-lake incident was none of their father’s business.

“None of my business? One of my children almost loses her life thanks to *his* irresponsible action and it’s none of my business? I expect that from you, Andrea Katherine, because you’ve decided nothing in your life is my business, but from you Lydia? I expected better—although your judgment at present is seriously open to question.” Louis Taylor marched to the bar and poured a drink from a decanter of something glittering and golden.

“Oh—my—God!” Andy exclaimed. “You waited for this moment, just so you could blow everything up! You are UNBELIEVABLE!”

“My judgment? My judgment?” Lydia demanded.

“Look at you,” her father said, swinging his tumbler in the direction of his daughter’s belly. “Do you really feel this is the time to break up your marriage?”

“Are you kidding me?!”

“I think Dad just means—”

“SHUT UP ELLIS!” the sisters snapped at their brother who edged into the war room with a dark-haired woman wearing a friendly face.

“He—fucked—the teenaged—nanny!” Lydia enunciated every word to perfection. “Probably because none of his regular sidepieces were available that night!”

I shot a glance toward the front hall. Thankfully, Melanie had already shepherded the girls to another room. I hoped it had a door. A solid one.

“Lydia! There’s no need to talk that way!” Eleanor Taylor scolded.

Lydia slapped her forehead, gaping at her mother for apparently thinking foul language was the greater sin.

I picked up my Corona and took a long slug.

Kill the engine and feather the prop before it freezes up. Pull the circuit breaker for the electric trim or else kill the master switch until you can. Grab a pliers from the flight bag and crank the fuel selector over. Hit the de-icing boots.

I got this.

I flexed my fingers. I thought about vanishing. A hearty pull from the beer substituted.

“Wait a minute! How did you find out what happened to Lydia?” Andy demanded.

“So, you admit to hiding it from me.”

“Dad, you may think you’re the center of the universe, but people do have the capacity to deal with things without your sage counsel!”

“Oh, that’s more than evident and you’ve certainly paid the price.”

I wondered if *paying the price* meant marrying me.

Another slug of Corona went down. The floating lime tap-danced on the bottom of the bottle. I began mapping a path to the back side of the bar for reinforcements.

Andy’s light caramel complexion, a genetic gift from her mother, took on a deeper shade.

“Answer—my—question. How did you find out what happened to Lydia?”

“Your chief of police told me.”

He dropped the statement like a stone.

“You went to my work?”

“I did. I wanted to find out if anyone there had the sense to help you see that there are better paths for your future. Imagine my surprise when a stranger told me what a blessing it was that my *other* daughter was not killed. And then having to hear the whole terrifying story. Not something you expect. No thanks to *him*.”

Andy’s father gave me a sneer. An actual sneer.

“Of course, your father and I felt the complete fools for not knowing a word of it,” Eleanor Taylor contributed smartly.

“Clearly, Mother, your embarrassment is the real headline here,” Lydia said.

Lydia’s phone woke up, broadcasting a pop tune ringtone. I recognized the song (something snappy about a lying cheating bastard) and assumed the call came from her husband, Davis. She extracted the phone from a pocket and jabbed a finger at the screen, killing the music and the incoming call.

“If that’s Davis, shouldn’t you let the man speak to his children?” Lydia’s mother suggested. “It is Christmas, after all.”

“He was probably calling to chitchat with Melanie!” Lydia fired back. “See if she wanted to—I don’t know—go roller skating or go to the prom!”

“Don’t be absurd. You shouldn’t keep him from his children.”

“Which *children*, Mother?”

Andy moved to face her father as he stood at the bar.

“The whole story?”

“Yes, the whole story,” her father said. “How your pregnant sister found herself stranded in a storm and *he* didn’t have the sense or courtesy to drive her home. How *he* sent her out in a strange car—an *old unreliable* car with no four-wheel-drive—on unfamiliar and dangerous roads that are obviously

not well maintained in this part of the state. How she slid into this God-forsaken lake and nearly died!”

Somehow, I couldn't picture Chief Tom Ceeves telling the story like that.

A shade of red, not far from the color tinting my wife's cheeks, climbed the sides of her father's neck.

“Whoa, Liddy? You drove into the lake? This lake?” Ellis asked.

“Oh, my God!” his wife exclaimed. “Are you okay? Is the baby okay?”

She seemed nice. I put out my hand.

“I'm Will.”

“Mary,” she smiled warmly and with her eyes. “Oh, and this is Ellis.”

We shook, but he guarded his half of the transaction. The Buffalo Springfield lyric about battle lines played in my head.

Lydia's phone beeped. She ignored it.

“I'm fine,” Lydia said tersely.

“Are you sure?” Her mother put her hand on Lydia's belly. “Have you seen a doctor? Is there even a doctor *around here* you can see? You should come home with us.”

“God, Mom! This isn't The Oregon Trail!”

My wife stood silently facing her father. He glowered at her. At any second, I expected her to switch back to ‘We're leaving’ and take me by the hand. Instead, she tipped her head to one side. A dimple appeared at one corner of her mouth. Given the moment, I didn't initially recognize the sign, but then the dimple's twin joined.

She giggled.

This brought stunned silence to the room.

She giggled and she turned to face me. Her gold-flecked green eyes, alight, met mine. A smile blossomed.

“I'm not sure what you think is so funny,” her father said.

I had no idea what was so funny either, but it was infectious. I felt a confused smile break out on my face.

Andy blew out a deep breath. She put one hand over her mouth, but the giggle slipped between her fingers.

“Whatever she's drinking, pour one for me,” Ellis said.

Lydia, still fuming, gaped at her sister.

Andy reached out and touched my arm, just for a moment, just to connect. Our eyes locked as she gathered herself. Then she turned and pulled her father into a hug. He stiffened. His drink spilled a few expensive swallows onto the hardwood floor.

“Oh, Daddy!” she said. “I love you.”

She pushed back from him and looked at his stunned expression.

“That’s right. I love you. And I just realized I don’t care if you remember it or not. I remember it. I love you and that’s all that matters to me. You can get onboard or get off. You can chase my lost future for the rest of your life. I don’t care. It only matters to me that I love you.”

She planted a kiss on his cheek.

“And whether or not you ever say it—you love me. Because all this—all this awful behavior—it’s because you found out today that you almost lost a child, isn’t it! A child you love.”

“You’re being simplistic.”

“God, please help me to see simple truths! You love your children. And like it or not, that means you love me. I never saw it before, but I see it now. You always act your worst because you love me.”

“Well, dammit, of course I do! What’s that got to do with anything?”

She smiled sweetly at her father. “I’m sure you will figure it out.”

She left him frowning and took me by the arm.

“Everyone,” she announced. “This is William Stanley Stewart. He is the love of my life. I know this to be true, because my father just treated him like crap. I know this to be true because the first time I saw him, I vomited. He is a pilot and he loves airplanes and flying more than he loves me—” I started to protest, but Andy suppressed it with her hand on my arm “—but I am blessed to hold second place, because I love him more than you could ever imagine. Daddy, he came here tonight to ask for your blessing and my hand, and I hope you give it—but as you may one day realize, *my* blessing is all he ever needed and all that ever mattered.”

Louis Taylor wasn’t buying any of that.

“Oh, and Daddy, this isn’t the man who caused Lydia’s accident—this is the man who saved your daughter’s life, and the life of your unborn granddaughter. You might want to thank him.”

The magenta color under his skin turned blotchy. He had no words.

“You vomited?” Ellis asked.

“Several times,” I said, slipping my arm around Andy’s waist.

“*That* is a story I need to hear.”

“You have my blessing, Will Stewart.” Lydia came close and gave me a kiss on the cheek. “Anyone who can make snow angels when no one else is watching has the right heart for my sister.”

Her phone beeped again. Mildly exasperated by the interruption, she plucked it from her pocket. I thought she might turn it off once and for all.

“Davis again,” she muttered. “Dammit.”

She poked the screen then froze. I was close enough to catch the phone

when it slipped from her fingers. Andy caught Lydia by the arm when her whole body quivered.

I looked at the screen. A text message displayed one word.

Bitch.

The image above it displayed a selfie taken from arm's length. The man in the photo wore a terrified expression, thanks to the heavy orange outdoor extension cord wrapped tightly around his neck, knotted and extending upward to a point beyond the frame of the picture.

“I am the fabulous Prince Moose and I have come to rescue the princess!”
“That’s not a moose, Uncle Will, that’s a reindeer!” Harriet set me straight.

“Come!” I hopped the stuffed animal to the castle wall. “Jump down on my back and I will ride us into the sunset!”

Ellie plucked her favorite princess, a doll with hair the color of a firetruck, from the balcony and dropped it on my moose-reindeer. I held the two dolls together and hopped them toward the Christmas tree, which we had designated the Green Forest of Dancing Fairy Lights.

Andy hurried down a half-set of stairs into the informal sitting room that also overlooked the lake. This room nestled half a level below the space containing the bar and the adults. I missed the bar. I didn’t miss the adults.

She crouched where I lay on the floor and whispered in my ear.

“D.C. Metro police are there.”

I looked up. She shook her head, then looked at two small girls who just lost their father and didn’t know it.

I stroked Ellie’s hair, thinking, *She eventually won’t remember him.* Looking at Harriet, who was busily arranging tiny furniture in the castle, I knew this would scar. In her world, the cowardly lying sack of shit was ‘Daddy’ and only the ideal lived in her heart. Only the ideal ever tucked her in at night.

“I’ll stay here,” I said. “We will be having a princess tea party soon.”

“Lydia is sending Melanie down to get the girls and give them dinner.”

The news had shaken Melanie. I volunteered for princess-rescue duty while the nanny collected herself.

“We’re fine here. I got this.”

Truth be told, I preferred it.

Andy gave me a kiss and a squeeze on the arm.

“I love you.”

She hurried back up the half-stairway.

“Auntie Andrea looks like a princess,” Harriet observed.

“Which is most wonderful,” I pointed out, “because that makes me a prince!”

And God knows, you’re going to need one.

The remainder of the night passed like an old truck, shuddering and rattling down a dirt lane, cylinders missing and ignition stammering. A relic on the verge of quitting at any moment. Something that should never be taken out of the barn again.

Andy divided her attention between her sister and her phone, stepping away to speak in low tones to the police in Washington, D.C. Mary took over in the kitchen and produced the delayed meal, leftovers from the Christmas Eve dinner I missed. Instead of attempting an organized sit-down dinner, Mary put the food out in a haphazard kitchen-countertop buffet. We grazed our way through an unenthusiastic meal. Melanie saw to the children. They made one last appearance in colorful nightdresses, doling out hugs and kisses to aunts and uncles, and Mama and Papa, as they called Lydia's parents.

Everyone put on brave and cheerful faces for the children.

Midway through the goodnight process, Lydia hurried away to the kitchen to prevent her children from seeing tears. Andy and Mary followed, leaving me at the table with Ellis and Louis while Melanie hustled the little girls off to bed.

"I'll be there in a minute!" Lydia called after them.

Anchoring the head of the table, Louis nursed his third Scotch, turning the tumbler slowly clockwise on the white tablecloth. Andy cut me off after my third Corona. She left her first unfinished. I sipped an ice water in the uncomfortable silence.

“How are the pelvic bones these days?” Ellis asked.

“Hurts when I play rugby,” I tossed off. Then, thinking better of dismissing his attempt at small talk, I added, “They’re doing well, thank you.”

“Must have been terribly painful. I hear that’s not something you can set or have in a cast.”

“It is not. But on the upside, I don’t have to go running with your sister every morning.”

“This is a bad business. With Davis.”

“I never knew the man.”

Louis said distantly, “He ruined a good thing with Lydia.”

Then you might try hating that sonofabitch instead of me, I thought.

We slipped back into silence. After a few minutes, Louis broke it.

“Will.”

I looked at Andy’s father. He sat back in his chair. He let his eyes rest on the tumbler of scotch as he turned it around and around.

“Sir?”

“Thank you.”

His eyes came up briefly, narrowed to slits in a granite expression. I nodded acknowledgement.

“Anybody else need a drink?” he stood up suddenly, finished off the last gems of amber in his glass and stalked toward the bar for his fourth.

“Wow.” Ellis watched him go. “That must have hurt.”

Shortly after ten, Andy concluded a final call with the on-scene detective in Washington, D.C.

“They’re done for the night. He gave me a number to call in the morning,” she said. She turned to me. “I offered to stay, but Lydia said no. We should go home.”

I went for the coats while Andy engaged in a lengthy goodnight discussion with her sister.

At the door, Louis and Eleanor doled out a cordial but stiff “it’s good to finally meet you.” In the car, Andy called that a win. I considered her assessment generous. I was more pleased that Andy seemed to have found some release from the expectations her father had held over her. I thought of her outburst of giggles; it made me smile.

On the ride home, Andy sidestepped details about Davis’s suicide. Instead, she talked about the logistics of helping her sister. Of dealing with the D.C. police and medical examiner. Of dealing with Davis’s family and the looming issue of a funeral. Would it be in Washington? Or would it be in Michigan, where his family originated? What role would Lydia play? What about the children?

“I’m worried that Lydia will blame herself,” Andy said.

“That’s ridiculous.”

“She did love him once, you know.”

“And his unworthiness of that love grows bigger every day,” I argued, with apologies to the nanny’s belly.

“You’re right. And that’s completely not the point.”

I wasn’t sure how that worked but having identified a new minefield I marked it on the map and moved gingerly around it.

The house was cold and dark. Andy slipped out of her coat and made a quick examination of the first floor doors and windows. She double-checked the front- and back-door deadbolt locks and turned on yard lights, then secured the weapon she had been carrying in her purse.

Security checks and lighting up the yard at night had become the new routine. Like the squad car in the driveway.

I hovered a bit, waiting for a sign, which came at last when Andy closed her arms around me in a loving and distinctly unsuggestive embrace.

“Can we do presents tomorrow evening? I’m beat. I hardly slept last night. And you’ve got to be dead on your feet. Did you get any sleep?”

“Plenty,” I tried to lie. The look on her face told me I failed.

“There’s so much to do tomorrow. I need to call the Chief and see if I can switch shifts with somebody. Lydia will need me.”

She stood against me for a moment, resting her head on my shoulder, absorbing something she needed. I slipped my hand under her sweater and lightly ran my fingernails over the skin between her bra strap and the waistband of her skirt. I didn’t touch the bra.

Just as a part of me woke up to argue that nobility wasn’t all it was advertised to be, she said, “If Lydia goes to D.C., I’m going with her. Let’s get some sleep.”

This Christmas sucked.

“Dammit.” Andy muttered, standing over the dining room table in the gray dawn light.

She snapped the laptop shut and shoved her fingers deep into her thick auburn hair. A lock of it fell angrily over one eye.

“It’s been three weeks!” she complained.

This was about Bob Thanning. He had been spread out on our dining room table since the day of his murder, the day Lydia nearly drowned. Andy scooped up the photos, printouts, documents and maps that erupted like a paper volcano each time she sat down to study the case. She tamped everything into a tight sheaf and shoved it all back into the case file. The file traveled with her to the station every morning and returned to our dining room table every evening.

I resumed scrambling eggs. Andy doesn’t appreciate the clichés. *It takes time. Look at it from a different angle. Don’t worry, something will pop up.* The last time I said *Maybe if you step away from it*— she threw a pen at me.

I knew what she was up to when she crawled out of our warm bed at four-thirty in the morning and padded downstairs on bare feet. Even with Lydia and Davis on her mind, she remained driven by Bob’s murder and the attempt to murder her/Lydia. More than a few early mornings, after showering and dressing, I found her at the table, chasing information on her laptop, reviewing emails from the investigators in Montana, sending new emails to law enforcement agencies around the country or rearranging the photos and documents.

Someone who doesn't know Andy might have suggested she was driven because Lydia had nearly died. Or because she, not Lydia, had been the intended victim. That wasn't the full story. Sister or not, a crime had been committed in her jurisdiction. A murder.

Though that's not what the official record said.

THE ESSEX COUNTY CORONER ruled Bob Thanning's death an accident.

Ten years ago, at a machinery auction held at the Edwin Orth farm, Bob purchased a snowblower. Not your typical pull-start, walk-behind snowblower. Constructed by the Heath Machinery Company of Hibbing, Minnesota in 1947, this monster made of heavy steel, blades and chains, ran the width of a car and had been built to be mounted on a tractor. The machine used an auger to pull snow into a channel at the center, then used a fan-type blower to launch the snow into the next county.

Bob nurtured the bright idea that the beast could be mounted on the front of a pickup truck and would make his winter snowplowing avocation the star of Essex. Unfortunately, the Heath Machinery Company built the snowblower like a battleship. With the added weight of an engine he mounted to power the rig, Bob had yet to come up with a method of attaching the machine to the front of his Dodge Ram diesel pickup without tipping the rear wheels in the air or crushing the front suspension. The engineering question regularly sparked debate on fall Saturday mornings at the Silver Spoon Diner. Marching into another snowplowing season, Bob found himself forced to serve his clients the old-fashioned way.

According to the coroner, Bob had been tinkering with the beast when he reached into the running unit to retrieve a screwdriver that was later found mangled in the auger. The machine snatched his arm and pulled it into the auger and fan, which painted the roof and wall of his garage workshop with skin, bone and blood. Bob managed to avoid being pulled bodily into the machine only because the auger chewed his right arm off at the shoulder.

Linda Thanning found Bob lying prone in front of the bloodied machine, which stopped running after the engine ran out of gas. Later, the coroner would say that if the shock of the violent amputation hadn't killed him, carbon monoxide from running the engine in the closed garage would have.

An accident.

A lie.

Andy proposed letting the lie stand. Chief Tom Ceeves approved. They cemented their conspiracy two days after Bob died—on the day Andy and I drove Lydia home from the hospital.

Tom met us at the lake house.

“Are you finally going to tell me what’s going on?” Lydia asked Andy when she saw the Chief. Andy said yes.

Lydia moved slowly. She had bruises on her legs and one knee was swollen, causing a limp. At the hospital they pronounced the injury a mild sprain, probably caused by twisting the leg when she was pulled from her submerged car. Her throat hurt, she said. Her voice had a rasp to it.

We took seats in her large sitting room overlooking the frozen, snow-covered lake. A severe-clear blue sky hung over the fresh blanket of white on the early-season ice.

“The Chief and I have already been over most of this, but we need to brief the two of you,” Andy said. I tried to look curious. Andy had already shared her plans with me under the terms of our Usual Disclaimer.

Andy opened her laptop and turned the screen to face Lydia. “His name is Mannis Rahn.”

“Is that him? Is he the bastard that pushed me?” Lydia pointed.

“We think so,” Andy said. “Rosemary II thinks he’s the one who pretended to be an insurance adjuster. The one who was interested in my car. He also struck up a conversation with Bob Thanning when Bob stopped at the airport to set up driveway markers on Thursday morning.”

“Bob is a—was a talker,” Tom explained. “Ask him the time of day and half an hour later you still wouldn’t know what time it was.”

“Rahn probably pumped him for information,” Andy said. “I think that’s how Rahn found out that Bob plowed for us and where we live. Rosemary II said she heard them talking about the big storm coming.”

“It’s not hard to imagine Bob telling someone all that,” I said.

“So, who is he? Why did he come after me?”

“This has to do with the Cinnamon Hills Robbery case, Liddy. I don’t know how much you followed the story—”

“Every word of it,” Lydia said, “that I could find. Not just because it was my kid sister leading the charge, but because it had Davis and some of his colleagues awfully upset. A lot of lobbyists worked for those private prison companies.”

“Montana is prosecuting the case against Parks, but they’re keeping me in the loop on their investigation. I asked for a copy of the Evergreen population database and a list of inmates classified as Discharged by Death in Custody. It’s a long list. It happens more than you would think. On that list, I found four who fit the profile. Two of them we knew about. One actually was a death in custody. Another was Garrett Foyle—”

“The Nazi?”

“Everything but the little Hitler moustache,” I interjected.

“Two more are ranked as highly probable. Evergreen says they died and were cremated. We think one may have been seen going into Mexico. We thought the other had equal chances of being dead and alive. Now we know.” Andy gestured at the screen. “Rahn.”

“Time out!” Lydia held up her hands. “If these men were part of a scheme by this Pearce Parks character—what on earth would that have to do with me?”

“Liddy, he wasn’t trying to kill you.”

“Oh, beg to differ! That sonofabitch came up behind me and rammed me. And the moment he hit me I heard him rev his engine. He—he—!” Lydia choked on the words. She put her hands to her lips. “I’m sorry! I will never—*never*—be able to forget that moment!”

I wondered if that was a blessing or curse.

My accident—the one that cracked my pelvis and put me in the hospital six months ago—existed only in the form of what I could imagine and its aftermath. I normally nurtured a little self-pity over my memory loss. Looking at Lydia, I wasn’t so sure that I didn’t have the better deal.

“I will never forget going into the water,” Lydia whispered. “Thinking for a crazy moment that the ice would hold me—and then it didn’t. Breaking through, and the front of the car going straight down. I opened the door, but the car just filled up. Not like in the movies. Not this slow rise of water. It was a flood! A tidal wave! And it was black, and I didn’t know up from down! And—oh, Katie!—all I could think of was the girls! What would they do without me?”

Tom and I exchanged a glance across an uncomfortable silence while Andy reached for and held her sister. Lydia shuddered.

I stood and walked to the nearest bathroom. I returned with a box of tissues. Andy took them and plucked one for her sister.

“Dammit!” Lydia swore, taking the tissue. “Ever since I met your husband, all I do is cry in front of him!”

“I’ve noticed that,” I said. “It’s giving me a complex.”

Lydia let a laugh break through.

“I’m so sorry, Liddy,” Andy said. “It never should have happened. I wasn’t saying he wasn’t trying to kill you. I mean, he wasn’t trying to kill *you*. He was after me. He thought you were me.”

“Well, that doesn’t make it better! Why is this *asshole* after you? Why would he do Parks’ bidding? I presume this Rahn had a life sentence like the Nazi, right?”

“Multiple life sentences,” Andy confirmed.

“But he’s free. He’s out. And the devil he made a deal with is in jail now. So, if he answers to no one, why would he come after you? Why isn’t he on a beach somewhere?”

Tom spoke up. “Andy thinks that Parks still has some sort of hold over Rahn. The world thinks Rahn is dead. Maybe Parks threatened to expose him. Maybe he’s using that threat to get one more job out of him.”

“Why?” Lydia asked.

“To eliminate me as a witness for the prosecution,” Andy said. “Parks’ legal team has been rolling out claims he never knew about any of it. Cal Richardson, the Montana Attorney General, thinks they’re going to try and deflect everything onto a lackey named Leeson. He was a captain in the ranks at the prison in Sioux Valley—and in Tulsa before that. I met him. He disappeared when everything went bad for Parks.”

“That’s a body that will never be found,” Tom muttered.

“I’m not their entire case,” Andy said. “But Parks has a lot of money and a lot of legal firepower at his disposal. He’ll chip away at the prosecution’s case, move the venue, file motions to create delays—*eliminate witnesses*—and eventually muddy the waters so much it’s hard to bring a conviction.”

“But he tried to kill your friend Sandy! He killed her father!”

“Foyle killed her father. As for Sandy, Parks is laying all that on Jameson. He claims he had no knowledge of Todd’s intentions,” Andy said. “He’s claiming that when Will and I rescued Sandy, we invaded his home and injured one of his employees, who plans to sue. He probably will sue, at Parks’ bidding, just to throw the kitchen sink at me.”

“That’s insane!”

“No, that’s civil law,” Andy said. “Although the two are often one and the same.”

“Don’t get us started,” I added, thinking of a recent encounter with another stellar member of the legal profession.

Lydia gestured at the laptop and looked at the Chief. “This Rahn. You think he killed your friend? Mr. Thanning?”

“Yes,” Tom said.

Andy explained. “We think Rahn killed Bob, then took Bob’s truck and came looking for me. He thought you were me and followed you. The snowstorm, the lake, the slippery roads—he improvised. He put you in the lake with no witnesses and returned Bob’s truck to his machine shop and left it.”

“Wait!” Lydia interrupted. She turned to Andy. “You think we look alike? I don’t see it.”

“Me either,” Andy shook her head, puzzled.

I looked at the two of them like they were nuts.

“It was all supposed to look like an accident,” Tom said, pulling everyone back on track. “Bob fiddling with that damned snow blower. You, sliding into the lake. It might have, too, if Will hadn’t pulled your car back on the road and followed you.”

I made a point of not trading glances with my wife. Andy had engineered a sanitized version of Lydia’s rescue in which I managed to get Lydia’s car off our mailbox, chased after Lydia, happened on the scene moments after she went into the lake, pulled her out, and raced her to the hospital in her Mercedes. Not the best lie ever told. Certainly not one that will stand up to close examination.

“Taking Bob’s truck in a snowstorm made the perfect camouflage. No one would think twice about him coming or going. If not for you surviving, we might never have looked at the truck,” Tom said.

“You found it? The truck that pushed me?” Lydia asked.

“It was never lost,” Andy said. “It was right where Bob always parks it, at his machine shop.”

“But how?” Lydia asked. “How could he put the truck back? You told me you were called to his shop when his wife found—you know...”

“Bob was found in the garage behind his home. Rahn returned the truck to the machine shop Bob owns in town. We were all at his garage, which is about half a mile out of town.”

“The truck didn’t have as much snow on it as it should have, if it had been sitting the whole time. It’s the sort of thing you only notice if you’re looking for it,” Tom added. “We’re having the blade tested. We expect to find paint transfer from Andy’s car. But again, we never would have looked at it, if not for you surviving.”

Lydia studied the three of us.

“Why does this feel like an intervention?”

Andy deferred to the Chief.

“Ma’am,” he began.

“Ugh! Don’t call me that. Tom, is it? I’m going to call you Tom. You’re going to call me Lydia.”

“Lydia,” Tom began again. “I’ve got a citizen dead and—accounting for mistaken identity—an attempt on the life of one of my officers. Four of us, in this room, know neither was accidental. Four of us know that a convicted murderer who is supposed to be dead, or at least locked up for life, is responsible. We know what and who we’re dealing with here, but we don’t want him—or Parks—to know how much we know. And we don’t want to give him—or them—reason to come after you again.”

“You want me to keep quiet about being pushed into the lake.”

Andy tapped her nose.

“So basically, I’m supposed to tell people I just drove off the road into a lake?”

“Better that you say you have no memory of the accident,” Andy said. “This is why I told you not to discuss it with anyone in the hospital.”

“I can coach you on the memory thing,” I offered.

“We’re putting added patrols on both you and Sandy Stone,” Tom said. “You, because we just want to be sure. Sandy because, if they’re really trying to eliminate witnesses, she’s a prime target.”

“And Andy! I want you to protect my sister! I don’t care how tough she thinks she is!”

“Yes, Liddy. Me, too. I’ll have a squad car in our driveway every night,” Andy said. “Until we get this sorted out. It’s also best if you don’t mention any of it—the accident—any of it, to Davis.”

“We’re not exactly speaking.”

“It’s best you don’t. If there’s any kind of custody battle coming...”

“Oh fuck that! Davis is not getting anywhere near my children! And he fucking well knows it!” Lydia declared.

“Absolutely, but lawyers can twist things into pretzels if they want. There’s no point in giving them material to work with,” Andy said. She quickly changed the subject. “We’re putting a lot of resources into finding Rahn. Not just local—I doubt he’s anywhere near Essex right now—but state and federal, too.”

Lydia gazed out at the frozen lake.

“I won’t be able to identify him. If you catch him. I never actually saw him.”

“Sweetie,” Andy patted her sister’s hand, “the man is supposed to be dead. And before that, he’s supposed to be serving a triple life sentence. I don’t think your testimony will be needed.”

Bob Thanning was memorialized at the Grace Lutheran Church in Essex. Family and friends filled the church. The casket lay open. The right arm in his Sunday suit was stuffed with sawdust. Following the service his remains were interred at the Lutheran Cemetery behind the church. Due to the fresh snow, the graveside proceedings were limited to immediate family and the crew from Ron Anderson's funeral home.

Despite being planted under the snow and frozen earth, Bob regularly appeared on my dining room table as Andy threw herself into the investigation, pouring through the files and photographs. She stayed at the station well into the evening the initial week after the murder. I worried about her leaving the building alone and driving home late. I demanded that she agree to an escort.

"I'm fine," she said. "I'm in a unit, and Mr. Glock travels with me wherever I go."

"It's your theory. About Parks eliminating witnesses. Either you believe it, or you don't."

"Fine."

After that, Tom Ceeves put her on days and gave permission for her to take the file home with her.

I contributed to the security detail in my own way. Each evening after she returned home I slipped into the back-porch mudroom in the dark and—

Fwoomp!

I vanished.

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SEVENTH STAR

“I’m doing a patrol,” I called out to Andy. I thought it sounded official.

“Mmm-hmm,” came from the dining room table where she sat shuffling papers and checking national crime databases on her laptop.

Wrapped in the cool sensation and shifting to weightlessness, I slipped out the back door. I pushed upward, letting myself rise in silence to a height of two or three hundred feet. At that height, I pulled a battery powered propeller-driven propulsion unit from a pocket in the old fishing vest I wore. I eased the power on the propulsion unit to a low growl. The quiet low power setting pulled me in a spiral above the house, ever widening, checking the landscape for signs of an intruder.

Our farmhouse offers its own security. We’re the only house on the road. Harvested cornfields extended in all directions around us. Anyone approaching would have crossed half a mile of snow-covered field leaving telltale tracks. Except for deer trails, the snow in all directions remained virginal.

I put some genuine effort into those patrols. Flights lasted up to half an hour. I cruised across fields, up and down our road, in and out of the trees on a winter landscape glowing with moonlight.

Weaving and flying, chasing shadows, breathing in crisp air.

Skimming the tops of winter-black trees.

The flying helped loosen the knot in my chest.

On the fourth night, just to be a paragon of thoroughness, I ranged as far as the edge of Essex, then flew back across the airport, catching sight of Pidge as she taxied the Piper Mojave to the hangar after a charter flight. The fifth night I followed the winding road to Leander Lake, checking the property around Lydia’s house. I noted an Essex PD car parked two hundred yards down the road.

That patrol took nearly forty-five minutes and used up two power units.

“Did you have fun?” Andy asked without looking up when I slipped back in the house and pronounced us safe again.

She doesn’t miss a thing.

The morning after Christmas Andy dropped the Rahn file into her shoulder bag with an air of frustrated finality.

“Honestly, I am getting nowhere,” she slid onto a chair facing the breakfast I laid out. “The man is a ghost. I’ve emailed his photo to every hotel within a hundred miles. No hotel, motel, B and B records. No rental car plates popping up on Vantage. Nothing! I can’t figure out how he got to Bob. I can’t figure out how he got Bob’s arm in that contraption. I can’t make sense of his transportation.”

“What do you mean?”

“He needed a means to get to Bob’s garage, right? From there, he took Bob’s truck. So, did he leave a car out near Bob’s home? He left the truck half a mile away at the machine shop. And by the time he was done with the truck, we had the full fire drill going on at Bob’s garage. We would have seen something,” she said.

“Eat.”

“I checked traffic cameras. I checked security cameras. It was a snowstorm, for heaven’s sake! People don’t take long walks in a snowstorm. I spoke to every employee of every business on that side of town to see if someone saw something while they were driving home that day. Somebody walking. Nothing.”

“Eat.”

“Rahn is a loner. His record indicates he’s a thinker. Making murder look accidental is his thing. They convicted him for three deaths, but his file lists

nine other possibles. Accidents related to him. Going back to his parents when he was fourteen.”

“Eat!”

“What?”

“Eat your breakfast,” I said.

She put a fork to the eggs I had scrambled.

“I need to put it aside anyway,” she sighed. “We have this thing with Davis. Lydia wants me to go with her.”

“Wait—what?”

“She sent me a text—time stamped something like three a.m. She booked two tickets for D.C. for tonight.”

“Tonight? What about the kids?”

“Mom and Dad will stay with the girls.”

“I don’t understand. Why is she going at all? The guy was a shit. She left him. Isn’t this a job for his family?”

“Probably, but this changes everything. She’s not a divorcee in the making, she’s a widow. She needs to settle his affairs—no pun intended. They have a house there. *She* has a house there.”

“A house that he hanged himself in.”

“I doubt she plans to move back in,” Andy said. “But there will be things to attend to. It’s only for a couple days, Will. Besides, it might do me some good. I’m nowhere with this Rahn thing. Maybe if I get away for a couple days—step away from it—get a fresh angle on it...”

She looked at me. I gaped at her with a fork full of scrambled eggs hanging in front of my face.

“What?”

To make an evening flight out of Milwaukee, Andy and Lydia departed Essex early in the afternoon. I kissed my wife goodbye after extracting a vague promise that she would be back in a couple days, at most. She set off at the wheel of Lydia's Mercedes, leaving Unit 23 on guard duty in the driveway.

I felt marginally better about her driving. The fog lifted. Fresh cold air pushed the stagnant air east. New snow frosted the landscape, and more was expected by the weekend. I wasn't happy about her being away but reasoned that travel to another city would be hard for Rahn to follow.

Andy screwed up. It happens so rarely, I considered marking it on the calendar. Her screwup became apparent just after dark.

"Hi, Mr. Stewart!" Lane Franklin stood at my back door flashing a smile.

"Lane!" I greeted the girl. "Who're you gonna fly for?"

"Norwegian Air Shuttle. 787 Dreamliners!"

Rosemary II had her car in reverse on the driveway. She waved. Lane waved back at her mother and stepped into our mudroom.

"You're here to see Andy."

Lane read the expression on my face. "She's not here is she?"

"I'm so sorry, kiddo. We've had an emergency. It's been a bit chaotic."

Lane quickly checked the driveway, but her mother was already on the road, taillights headed west.

"Andy will feel terrible. I know she would have called..."

"Oh, no, no! She probably just forgot. I'm so sorry to bother you!" Lane

dug into her coat pocket and pulled out her phone. “Let me call Mom and turn her around!”

“Hang on!” I stopped her.

I considered the situation.

Not counting my neurologist, Lane, Andy and Pidge are the only people who know what I can do (I don’t count the nurse who saw me jump out of the Angel Flight airplane on Christmas Eve). From time to time, Lane visits, and I treat her to a flight in the barn. To be proper, and because Andy claims Lane carries a crush for me, I make a point of having Andy present. Andy watches from the sidelines, unable to suppress her own laughter when she hears Lane giggling and laughing from the high corners and rafters, unseen.

Ordinarily, obeying a rule of caution around a fourteen-year-old girl, I would have insisted Lane call her mother back to take her home. But Rosemary II trusts Andy and me with the very life of her daughter.

I decided to bank on that trust.

“Hold up,” I said. “I’ll take you home. There’s something I want to show you.”

The fourteen-year-old bubbled to the surface of her sometimes-too-serious face. She grinned. “Is it about *the other thing*?”

“We really do have to come up with another name for it. Yes. There’s been a bit of progress at Area 51,” I said, referring to the barn and my experiments with flight. “You and I haven’t been flying for a while.”

“I know!”

Lane bounced on the balls of her feet in anticipation. I reached into a cabinet and pulled out my old fishing vest and two pairs of ski goggles. I handed one set of goggles to Lane.

“Here. Put these on.”

“Oh! This is new!”

“AREN’T you going to wear a coat?” Lane asked as we stepped out the back door onto the concrete stoop.

I slipped on my goggles and gave her a secretive smile. “Don’t need one. Ready Orville?”

“Ready Wilbur!”

I pulled her into as paternal a hug as I could manage and pushed an imaginary set of levers in my head to their imaginary firewall.

Fwoomp! Lane and I vanished. The dual sensations of coolness and weightlessness enveloped us. I relaxed my embrace and flexed my ankles to give the concrete a gentle push. We launched upward.

“You’re doing this outside!” Lane exclaimed. Until now I restricted our flights to the interior of the barn, where walls, rafters and the roof offered grips and pivots for maneuvering—and protection against drifting away untethered. “Are you sure about this?”

“Stand by,” I said. We continued our climb, slowly approaching rooftop level. Lane tightened her grip. “Okay, now I’m going to hook my arm in your arm. Don’t worry. Andy and I have done this. You don’t need to keep a death grip on me.” I rearranged us until we were arm-in-arm. “See? You can ease up, Lane. I’ve got you. And I need to get in my pocket.”

She relaxed. I pulled a propulsion unit from a pocket in my fishing vest.

“Okay, I know you can’t see it—but, behold! The FLOP!”

I pressed the unseen flashlight tube and propeller combination against her hand. I felt her take the device. For a moment I wondered if it might reappear. Objects, when I let go of them, reappear, regain the influence of gravity, and fall.

In Lane’s hand, the FLOP unit remained unseen.

“Flop?”

“Flight Launching Operational Propulsion unit. Awesome name, right?”

“It is!” she exclaimed. “Is that a propeller? Ohmigod! Does this do what I think it does?”

“Hold it in your hand like a flashlight,” I said. I found her hand and helped her find the right position. “There’s a slide control on the side. Do you feel it? Put your thumb on it, but don’t move it yet.”

“This is what you were doing with those model airplanes last summer!”

“Sharp eye, kiddo,” I said. “Like all great inventions, there’s been an evolution.” I didn’t tell her that the first version nearly killed me. “Okay, hold it out, away from us. Point it.”

“On the axis of the propeller shaft?”

“Yeah. You get it. Now ease the slide switch forward. Just a hair. Just to get the prop turning. And be careful. That’s a carbon fiber prop and it’s sharp as hell. It will take a finger off if you put it in the blades.”

The FLOP growled. I felt the wind generated by the propeller. We immediately moved forward, away from the house.

“That’s it. You point. We fly.”

Lane released a sparkling laugh.

“OH—MY—GOD!”

We eased forward over the long shadows cast in the snow by the yard lights. The garage roof slid toward us.

“Oh-my-God-oh-my-God-oh-my-God-oh-my-God!”

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SEVENTH STAR

“That’s it. Give it just a hair more power,” I said. “Not too much. This baby has a lot more thrust than you might imagine.”

“Of course, it does! Thrust without having to overcome inertia!”

We floated over the roof of the garage. The open fields beyond the low structure spread before us. The afternoon’s lingering cloud cover had broken up, revealing moon and starlight that painted the snow-covered landscape. Light pollution from the City of Essex gave the few remaining clouds a soft glow. Our eyes adjusted as we moved away from the blazing yard lights.

“This is amazing!” she cried.

Snow-covered corn stubble flowed beneath us. Lane accepted the side-by-side posture but squeezed her arm tightly against mine. I reached over and closed a grip on her forearm to offer reassurance.

“You’re doing great. Add power.”

She complied, and we picked up speed. The FLOP unit hummed.

“Hey! I’m not cold!”

“Right. I can do this with no jacket on. All I feel is—”

“That coolness! That’s amazing! I can feel the wind, but *the other thing*—it’s thermal insulating! Amazing! What am I saying? This whole thing is AMAZING!”

“It gets even better. Use your wrist to turn.”

She did. We changed course.

“Work your hand back and forth.”

We curved right, then left.

She laughed. The sound danced across the snow-covered landscape.

“See the woods coming up?”

“Uh-huh!”

“Okay, change your power vector upward,” I said. “This is three-dimensional flying.”

She moved. We began to climb. In a moment, we were above the plateau of treetops.

“See how it works?”

“UNBELIEVABLE!”

“There’s a thrust reverser, too. Try it. Slide the switch back until you feel the neutral detent.”

I heard the power change its tone until it stopped. We continued to glide above the black tops of the trees.

“Now ease it back. You have the same thrust in reverse as you have going forward.”

She did as she was told, and we stopped. Then we began to back up.

She laughed again.

“Okay, Captain. Your aircraft. You have the controls. Let’s go!”

Lane stopped the unit again, then gave it forward thrust. We reverted to forward flight.

“Don’t be afraid. Give it some power. See what it can do.”

Slowly, ever the cautious child, she tested the power, adding to it, gaining speed. As the relative wind sweeping around us grew and tugged at our clothing, she laughed and cried out.

LANE GAINED confidence quickly and took us on a winding path across the Essex county farm country. I monitored her movements like I would any flight student, checking the route ahead, watching for obstacles, protecting the margin for error. With my free hand, I slipped another power unit out of my pocket and held it in reserve. If Lane encountered trouble, I planned to tell her to cut the power on the unit she held. Then I would take over with mine. Reaching for a spinning propeller that I couldn’t see wouldn’t be in the best interests of my fingertips.

We flew.

We skimmed over dark wooded expanses and broad open fields. Over frozen marshes and snowplowed back roads. The world lay still and white beneath us, with accents of black trees and brush. Fresh winter scent filled our nostrils. Crossing roads, I instructed Lane to avoid the wires by flying over the poles. Twice, we followed cars moving through the night below us. In the center of an open field, we found a small herd of deer. Their ears shot up and they stood still at the sound of the buzzing propulsion unit. They listened but did not hightail it away. Lane eased off and performed a wide circle around them with a degree of finesse that I complimented.

She turned toward the herd and slid the power to neutral. We coasted in silence just yards above their alert heads. I wondered if they sensed us. As if in answer, their tails twitched and went up, and they bolted away across the field.

Lane did not resume powered flight. She let us glide in silence until the deer disappeared in a thicket of brush on the edge of the field. We floated thirty feet above the snow. I was about to ask if the power unit had died when she spoke up.

“Can I talk to you about something?” she asked.

“Anything you like.”

She let a long pause hang in the air with us.

“There’s a boy in my class.”

Oh, no... I tensed.

“Lane...is this what you wanted to talk to Andy about?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Because she’ll be back in a day or two. Plus, you know you can always call her.”

“You’re turning red right now, Mr. Stewart! And NO, this is not *that* kind of boy thing. Oh, my God!”

“I am not turning red. See?”

“Funny,” she said flatly. “No, this is something else. I thought I should talk to Andy about it because she is a police officer. But now I’m not sure that’s the best idea. I think maybe I should talk to you first.”

“Uh...okay.” I couldn’t imagine how that was a better idea.

“Okay,” she said, and I could feel her posture change, seeking resolve. “This boy in my class. I don’t think he’s a bad kid. I mean, I talked to Sarah and some of my friends about him, because they knew him from grade school, before I came here. And they said he was always nice. But his mom died a few years ago. And he’s had a hard time of that, and it’s just him and his dad now, and...um, his dad is kind of a big old racist. I’ve seen him. He has stickers on the back of his truck that totally spell out his feelings about anybody who isn’t white. The Confederate flag is there, too. And some other stuff. And I get it. I get there are people like that. But now, well, now this boy is...I don’t know...changing.”

We continued drifting. I noted a string of power lines bordering the field, half a mile away. No need to adjust yet.

“I think he’s becoming like his dad.”

“Racists aren’t born, honey. They’re made.”

“I know that. I don’t blame him. I know it’s coming from his dad. And his dad is all he has. Like me and Mom. I know how that feels. But now he’s—I don’t know how to put this. I think he’s using me like a test subject. Like a way to test out his new, um, way of thinking.”

My protective instinct kicked in.

“Has he done something to you?”

“No! No, nothing. Well...”

“What?”

She hesitated.

“He gives me looks.”

“What kind?”

More hesitation.

“Just...I don’t know. Sometimes when I walk past him in the hall. He looks at me like I’m some kind of bug.”

“Has he threatened you?”

“Nothing like that.” Lane fell silent again. I waited. After a moment, she said, “He, um, he doodles stuff. In class. He’s a really good artist. I think he likes graphic novels. Sarah said he was always good in art class.”

“What kind of doodles?”

“Stuff. He does it sometimes with his paper angled so only I can see them.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Lots of stuff.”

We approached the road. I gave her time. But in minutes we would have to divert or rise above the power lines.

“Swastikas.” She said it in a small voice. “And that SS symbol—the lightning bolts. And...”

She let the vast silence of the winter night press in on us.

When she finally spoke, the words slipped free just above a whisper.

“Last week he drew a cross and I think it was supposed to be burning.”

“Hang on,” I said. I pulsed the power unit in my hand and we stopped drifting. “A burning cross? Did you report him?”

“No.”

“Lane this is serious shit! Stuff. This is serious stuff!”

“It’s serious shit, Mr. Stewart. But no, I didn’t report him.”

“Why not?”

She hesitated.

“I don’t know. I guess because I don’t want to let him push me into becoming what he’s trying to see me as. I mean—he wants me to be his enemy so what better way for me to become his enemy than by ratting him out?”

“Well, okay,” I said. “That’s a ridiculously mature chain of thought, but he’s only going to become bolder. You need to report this to someone. There could be more to this. Does he ever talk about guns?”

“He doesn’t talk to me at all. I just think I’m his guinea pig. There aren’t all that many kids who look like me in Essex, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“Beautiful? Smart?”

“Brown. Mr. Stewart, I’m not going to become one of those people whose whole identity centers around the color of their skin. I’m just not. I mean, that’s almost as bad as what he’s doing.”

“It’s nothing like what he’s doing!”

“I don’t know what to do. I don’t want to escalate this!”

“Okay. Okay. Let me think.” We drifted. An owl made an early territorial call. After a minute, I said, “Okay. First off, maybe it’s good you told me before Andy. I mean, you know you can talk to Andy, but she might have

gone all Essex PD on this. Let me give it some thought. And let me tell Andy. Is that okay?"

"Sure."

"You don't see this kid during winter break, do you?"

"He comes into the store with his dad sometimes, but otherwise, no."

"You're working again? At Farm and Fleet?"

"Uh-huh. God, it took me four months to get Mama to let me go back!"

Last summer, Lane persuaded Leo Willis to let her work at Farm and Fleet, stocking shelves. Her abduction happened after work one Saturday night. I knew that the idea of Lane returning to the part time job terrified her mother. I was a little surprised that Rosemary II relented.

"Are you working during break?"

"A couple days during the week. And Saturday. But only days, and only until five. Mama drops me off and picks me up."

"What's his name?"

"Corey Braddock."

Shit. Of course.

"Don't let it worry you. I'll talk to Andy about it."

"I guess... it's just...please don't let her get too upset and do something—I don't know, harsh?"

"Lane, I can't guarantee anything. It's a different world now. Too much has happened in schools that might have been prevented if people spoke up sooner."

"I know, but..."

"Andy will be cool. I'll chat with her about it and make sure she understands the way you feel. If she needs to take steps, I'm sure she'll do it in a way that doesn't implicate you. Maybe there's a way to head this off. But you *definitely* should not do anything on your own. And promise me, swear to me that if anything, and I mean *anything* escalates, you will tell me. Does this kid have friends? Kids with the same attitude?"

"He hangs with some other boys, but I've never seen them show the same—I guess—symptoms."

Maybe not, I thought, but boys tend to spin each other up.

"If you get a whiff of anything, you take it seriously and tell me—and if you can't reach me, tell your Mom and find Andy."

"Oh, God, Mom will freak!"

"Freaking isn't the worst thing sometimes. Promise?"

"I promise."

"Good. Okay." We drifted toward a country lane. Beyond the road, a farm spread out in the dusky gray night. Squares of bright yellow light lay

on the ground outside the windows of a milking parlor. The vacuum system compressor sounded lonely in the winter night.

“Let’s get you home,” I said. “Fire it up and set course for Essex. Mind the power lines!”

“Seriously!?”

“Why not? Let’s get you home in style!” I declared.

I LET Lane do the flying, the same way I would have given a student pilot the controls in an airplane. I gave her a hint here and there, but she managed the power unit and determined the flight path. We skimmed over the farm country, then angled higher as city street lights sprouted in front of us. She expressed electric wonder at the way the landscape flowed below us, and her laughter broke over the steady sound of the power unit. I liked the sound. It suggested that by telling me about Braddock, she had unburdened herself.

We flew across town to where the streets became orderly and cookie-cutter houses stood in rows that sprouted when young soldiers returning from the Second World War fulfilled a need to create life. I told Lane to cut the power. With my FLOP unit I showed off by flying a sweeping arc around her small house and landing us on the front sidewalk.

I performed a quick search to ensure there were no eyes on us, and—

Fwoomp! We reappeared. Gravity re-established its relentless grip and we settled onto the concrete.

Lane threw a healthy hug around me.

“That is so awesome!” she bubbled. “We *have* to do that again! Soon! Promise?”

“Promise. Listen, Lane,” I stopped her. “I need you to do something for me. Something online.” I explained what I was after, knowing she could run rings around me with a mouse and keyboard. She accepted the assignment enthusiastically. I proposed a deadline. “Tomorrow okay?”

“No problem, Mr. Stewart! I can have my mom bring me over again.”

I recognized the play. She wanted to fly again. And I wanted to take her flying again, but I preferred it be with Andy around.

“Just call me. We’ll talk on the phone,” I said. “Tell your Mom I said Hi!”

“I will! Thank you! This was absolutely awesome!”

She handed me her goggles and the FLOP unit and skipped toward her front door.

Fwoomp!

I kicked the pavement away.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



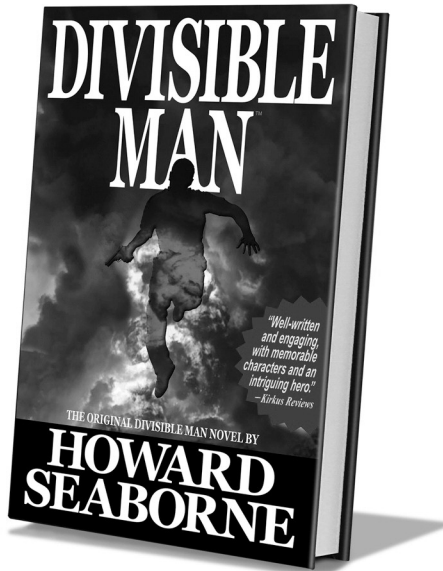
HOWARD SEABORNE is the author of the DIVISIBLE MAN™ series of novels and a collection of short stories featuring the same cast of characters.

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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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.

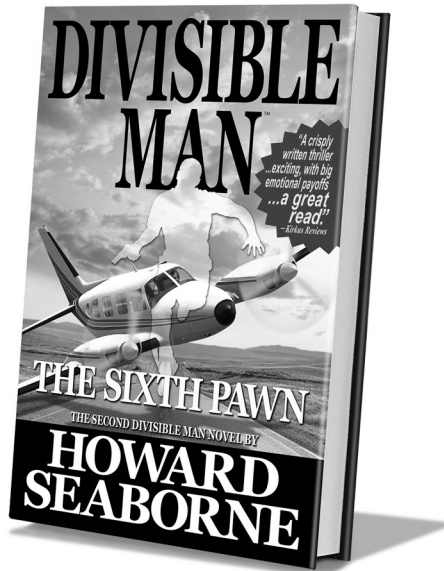
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When the Essex County “Wedding of the Century” erupts in gunfire, Will and Andy Stewart confront a criminal element no one could have foreseen. Will tests the extraordinary aftereffect of surviving a devastating airplane crash while Andy works a case obstructed by powerful people wielding the sinister influence of unlimited money in politics.

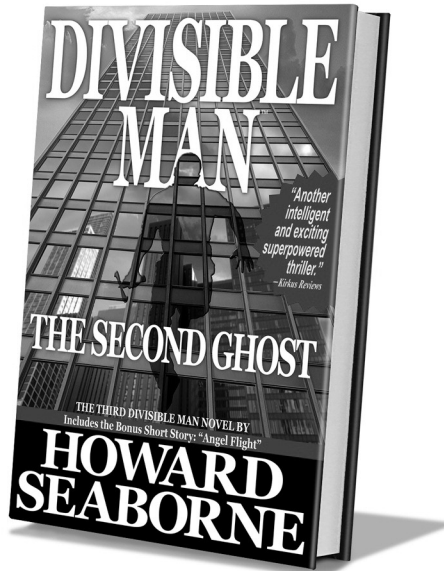
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Tormented by a cyber stalker, Lane Franklin's best friend turns to suicide. Lane's frantic call to Will and Andy Stewart launches them on a desperate rescue. When it all goes bad, Will must adapt his extraordinary ability to survive the dangerous high steel and glass of Chicago as Andy and Pidge encounter the edge of disaster.

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

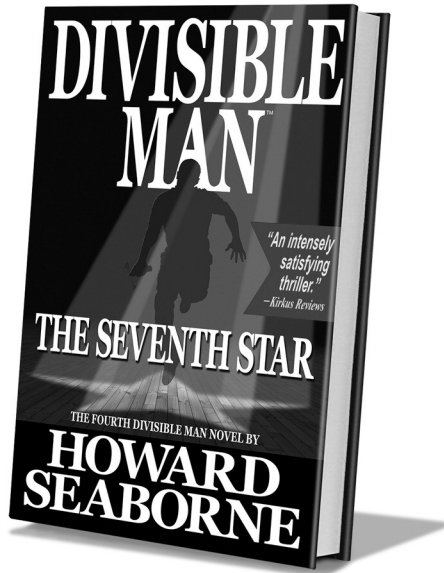
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DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SEVENTH STAR



A horrifying message turns a holiday gathering tragic. An unsolved murder hangs a death threat over Detective Andy Stewart's head. And internet-fueled hatred targets Will and Andy's friend Lane. Will and Andy struggle to keep the ones they love safe, while hunting a dead murderer before he can kill again. As the tension tightens, Will confronts a troubling revelation about the extraordinary aftereffect of his midair collision.

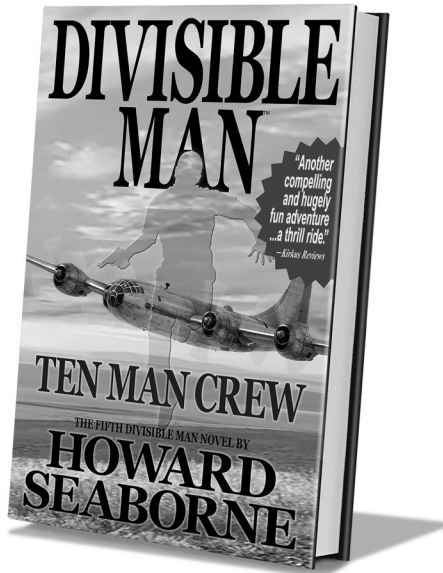
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DIVISIBLE MAN: TEN MAN CREW



An unexpected visit from the FBI threatens Will Stewart's secret and sends Detective Andy Stewart on a collision course with her darkest impulses. A twisted road reveals how a long-buried Cold War secret has been weaponized. And Pidge shows a daring side of herself that could cost her dearly.

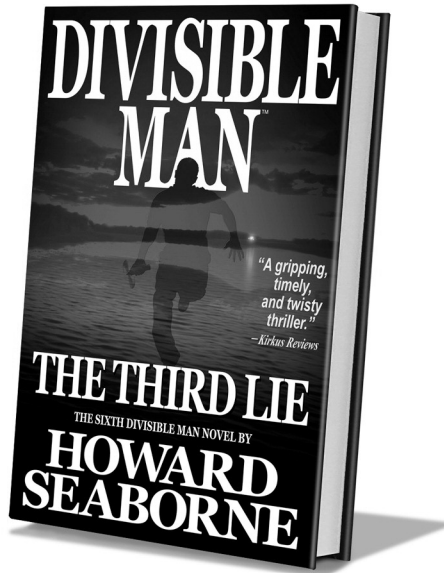
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DIVISIBLE MAN: THE THIRD LIE



Caught up in a series of hideous crimes that generate national headlines, Will faces the critical question of whether to reveal himself or allow innocent lives to be lost.

The stakes go higher than ever when Andy uncovers the real reason behind a celebrity athlete's assault on an underaged girl. And Will discovers that the limits of his ability can lead to disaster.

A Kirkus Starred Review.

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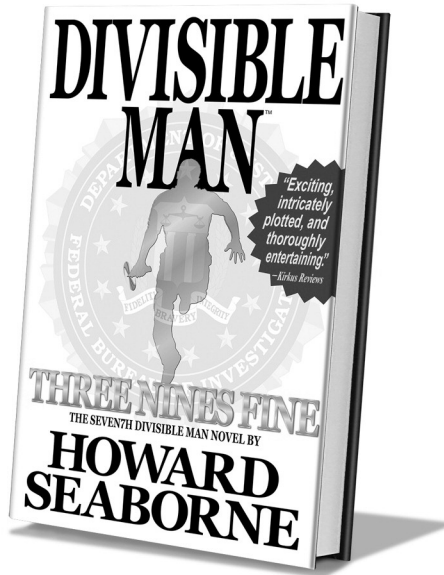
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DIVISIBLE MAN: THREE NINES FINE



A mysterious mission request from Earl Jackson sends Will into the sphere of a troubled celebrity. A meeting with the Deputy Director of the FBI goes terribly wrong. Will and Andy find themselves on the run from Federal authorities, infiltrating a notorious cartel, and racing to prevent what might prove to be the crime of the century.

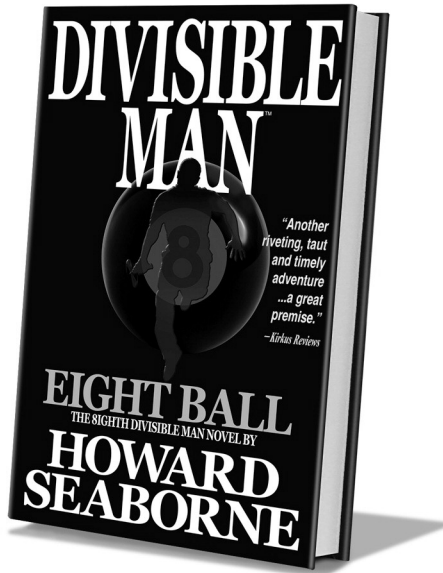
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DIVISIBLE MAN: EIGHT BALL



Will's encounter with a deadly sniper on a serial killing rampage sends him deeper into the FBI's hands with costly consequences for Andy. And when billionaire Spiro Lewko makes an appearance, Will and Andy's future takes a dark turn. The stakes could not be higher when the sniper's ultimate target is revealed.

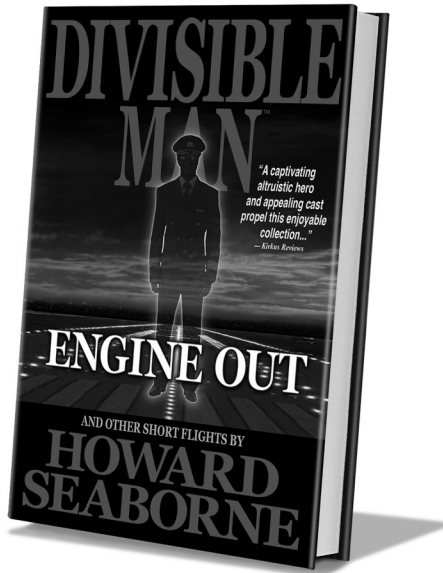
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ENGINE OUT AND OTHER SHORT FLIGHTS



Things just have a way of happening around Will and Andy Stewart. In this collection of twelve tales from Essex County, boy meets girl, a mercy flight goes badly wrong, and Will crashes and burns when he tries dating again. Engines fail. Shots are fired. A rash of the unexpected breaks loose—from bank jobs to zombies.

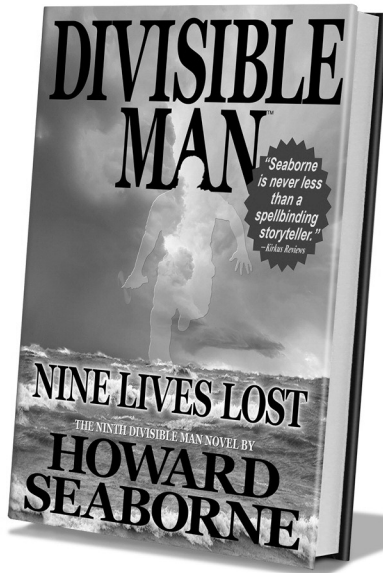
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DIVISIBLE MAN: NINE LIVES LOST



A simple request from Earl Jackson sends Will on a desperate cross-country chase. The twisted path for answers reveals a mystery that literally lands at Will and Andy's mailbox. At the same time, a threat to Andy's career takes a deadly turn. Before it all ends, Will confronts a deep, dark place he never imagined.

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