

DIVISIBLE MAN™

A silhouette of a man with his arms outstretched, appearing to be cut out of the sky. Below him, a B-24 bomber is flying across a sunset sky. The background is a warm, golden sunset over a landscape.

**"Another
compelling
and hugely
fun adventure
...a thrill ride."**

—Kirkus Reviews

TEN MAN CREW

THE FIFTH DIVISIBLE MAN NOVEL BY

HOWARD SEABORNE



DIVISIBLE MANTM
TEN MAN CREW

by

Howard Seaborne



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ALSO BY HOWARD SEABORNE

DIVISIBLE MAN

A Novel – September 2017

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SIXTH PAWN

A Novel – June 2018

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SECOND GHOST
ANGEL FLIGHT

A Novel & Story – September 2018

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SEVENTH STAR

A Novel – June 2019

DIVISIBLE MAN: TEN MAN CREW

A Novel – November 2019

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE THIRD LIE

A Novel – May 2020

DIVISIBLE MAN: THREE NINES FINE

A Novel – November 2020

DIVISIBLE MAN: EIGHT BALL

A Novel – September 2021

DIVISIBLE MAN: ENGINE OUT
AND OTHER SHORT FLIGHTS

A Story Collection – June 2022

DIVISIBLE MAN: NINE LIVES LOST

A Novel – June 2022

DIVISIBLE MAN: TEN KEYS WEST

A Novel – May 2023

PRAISE FOR HOWARD SEABORNE

DIVISIBLE MAN - TEN KEYS WEST [DM10]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

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

— *BookLife*

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - NINE LIVES LOST [DM9]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - ENGINE OUT & OTHER SHORT FLIGHTS

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - EIGHT BALL [DM8]

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

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THREE NINES FINE [DM7]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE THIRD LIE [DM6]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - TEN MAN CREW [DM5]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SEVENTH STAR [DM4]

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

—*Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SECOND GHOST [DM3]

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

—*Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SIXTH PAWN [DM2]

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

—*Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN [DM1]

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

—*BookLife*

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

—*Kirkus Reviews*

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

—*BookLife*

THE SERIES



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

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

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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 all the boys with one more
takeoff than landing.*

PART I

D*ammit!*

I floated in the high heat of the barn, near the roof. Pinprick shafts of sunset's last light angled through the air around me and through me.

I tried again.

DOWN!

Nothing.

FLOOR!

Nothing.

“Shit!” I barked.

“That doesn't sound good.” Andy's voice rose from the open barn door below and behind me. I rotated in the air, using the strange core muscle that runs down my center when I vanish. For months the sensation of a controllable pivot point had been reliable and consistent.

At least that works.

“God, it's hot in here, Will. Why not do this outside? It's a beautiful evening.”

She stepped out of the framed light and into the shadows of the barn loft. In short shorts, sandals and a tank top, my wife reminded me once again why I love summer. Tonight, she tied her flowing auburn hair in a high ponytail, lifting it off the back of her slender neck for the sake of cooling. In each hand, she held a glistening bottle of Corona with a green lime wedge jammed in the neck.

I pushed the thumb slide on the power unit in my hand. Unseen, a six-

inch carbon fiber model airplane propeller turned, blowing propwash air across my forearm, pulling me forward. I performed a spiral around one of the central barn beams and eased to a landing on the uneven wooden floor.

Fwoomp!

I reappeared in stride, startling Andy. It's been a year, and this still catches her by surprise. She extended the cold beer to me. Free of the cool sensation that *the other thing* wraps around me, the barn heat hit me.

"Seriously," she said, "it's fifteen degrees warmer in here."

"Yup. Old barns. You should stack hay bales in one of these sometime when it's 110 in the loft."

Andy adopted a distant gaze, fixing her gold-flecked green eyes on me and not on me at the same time.

"What?"

"Oh, just picturing you, shirtless, all shiny and sweaty, heaving around fifty-pound bales. My beefcake farmhand."

I took her musing as an invitation and stepped closer. "Want some slippery sweat on your skin? Some hay in your hair?"

"Yuk. It is way too hot in here."

"What kind of seductive farmer's daughter are you?"

"My father is a lawyer and a corporate CEO. He wouldn't know a plow from a cow unless you itemized them in an annual report. Let's get out of here."

Leaving the barn, the cool evening air washed over my skin and made her point. We walked toward our rented farmhouse. The rim of the sun slipped beneath the horizon, abandoning a pale blue, cloudless sky and offering the false promise of an endless twilight. I sent a splash of delicious chilled refreshment down my throat.

"You didn't answer."

"What?"

"Why do that in the barn? It's a beautiful evening."

I shrugged. "I dunno. That's my original training space. Area Fifty-One. It feels...comfortable. It's safer, too. I'm being cautious—trying something I don't understand. You don't want me to go shooting off into space."

"I appreciate the caution." She slipped her hand in mine. "Any luck?"

"No."

She didn't press and thankfully didn't offer suggestions. *Maybe you need to focus. Maybe you have too much on your mind. Maybe you shouldn't try at all.* The last thing I needed was Andy coaching from the sidelines. That happened in my head without her.

And how are you doing?

Getting nowhere faster than usual.

On several occasions while in the vanished state I propelled myself by simply *thinking* a direction or objective. The first time it shot Lane Franklin and me through the window of a burning building. The second time it lifted Andy and me to the ceiling of a motel room seconds before a now-dead Nazi shot up the bed we slept in. The third time—the longest sustained event to date—it launched me halfway across Essex County carrying Andy's nearly-drowned sister Lydia to a hospital.

For months I've tried to recreate the effect without success.

"Maybe it's a by-product of adrenalin," she offered. "We don't know what happens to your physiology when you do what you do. Mix in a shot of a chemical compound that jolts the human body the way adrenalin does—I don't know—maybe it supercharges you."

"I don't think so. I've pumped plenty of adrenalin inside *the other thing* and nothing happened. I think it's something else."

"Like what?"

"Mental. Brain waves. Neurons firing in the right combination with those wires in my head. The difference between generated thought and a flash of pure instinct."

"Speaking of those wires—"

"Yeah, yeah. Stephenson wants me to see him for an updated scan. We just did that, for chrissakes!" I sometimes wonder if the neurologist we trust with my condition is more interested in me as a specimen than as a patient.

"That was in February, dear."

"Nothing changed in February. Nothing is changed now."

Andy answered with a skeptical expression that dismissed my baseless assumption.

Change the subject.

"Hey, it's a gorgeous night. Let's take a joyride."

She stiffened slightly. My wife does not like vanishing and flying with me. Our first experience together introduced the possibility of first dying from hypoxia, then from hypothermia. That was followed by a near-death incident involving a tall building. I hoped a gentle scenic tour of Wisconsin farmland on a summer evening might scrub the bad memories.

"Slow and easy. Just for fun," I said. "I'll even let you drive." I held the propulsion unit out for her.

"Oh, no. Not me. And you've been drinking." She pointed at my half-finished beer.

"All the more reason for you to drive." I flipped the bottle onto the lawn. Foamy gold spray spun from the neck.

“That’s a shameful waste.”

I took her bottle and repeated the gesture with excellent aim. The bottles clinked together in the grass.

“Works best if we snuggle,” I said. I put my left arm around her and pulled her close. Catching a sparkle in her eye, I leaned into a kiss and held it. She kissed back energetically.

Fwoomp!

We vanished.

She pulled her lips from mine. “God! I told you! That’s just weird!”

We began to float. She tightened her hold. I tapped my toes on the gravel and started a vertical ascent.

“Wait! How many propeller-thingies do you have?”

“It’s called a ZAP.”

“No, it isn’t. How many?”

“Just the one.”

“No! Will, go get your vest! We need backups!” She transmitted urgency through fingers digging into my waist. Andy’s fear of floating out of control like an untethered astronaut was well-founded.

Choosing not to sabotage this exercise with an argument, I aimed the power unit straight up and pulled the slide into reverse. The prop hummed. We ceased ascending and slowly dropped to the driveway.

Fwoomp! We reappeared. She stepped away abruptly.

I turned to make a quick trip to the house when we both heard a vehicle approaching from the west on our narrow country road. A car rolled into view a quarter of a mile away. Twilight remained strong and the car ran without headlights. I stopped and watched it approach. Instead of rolling past on the whisper of its tires, the car decelerated and eased into our driveway.

“Do you think he saw us?” Andy asked quietly, as if the driver, inside a closed vehicle seventy feet away, might hear her.

“Not a chance.” I strolled to the grass and picked up the two Corona bottles. Most of one had drained out, but the other still carried a healthy third of the golden liquid. I handed Andy the empty along with a mischievous grin.

The car, a mid-sized silver Nissan sedan, crunched to a stop on our gravel driveway. Reflections in the windshield obscured the driver. With an eye trained by my police detective wife, I noted the Iowa plates.

The driver stepped out.

“Oh, shit!” I muttered out of the side of my mouth. “I know that guy!”

. . .

“Hi! BEAUTIFUL EVENING!” The driver eased around his door and closed it. He walked casually, pitching a disarming smile our way. The smile conflicted with the shoulder holster he wore over a black polo shirt. A semi-automatic handgun hung under his left armpit.

I eased the power unit into my back pocket and slipped my right arm around Andy’s waist. In my head, I closed an imaginary grip on a set of imaginary levers. Pushing those levers forward would make us vanish in less time than it would take for the man to reach for and touch his weapon. Andy tensed beside me. There wasn’t time to explain.

Instead of reaching for his weapon, he slipped his right hand into his trouser hip pocket and pulled out a flat black wallet.

“Detective Stewart?” he asked Andy.

“And you are?”

He flipped the wallet open. “Special Agent Lee Donaldson.” He didn’t need to add “FBI” because the imprint on his ID left no doubt.

“May I?” Andy reached for the wallet. He gave it to her. She examined it closely.

It’s fake, I thought. It has to be!

“What can I do for the FBI, Special Agent Donaldson?” Andy handed the wallet back to him.

“First off, I apologize for dropping in like this. I had hoped to see you at your office, but when I called, your dispatcher said you were off duty. I just got here and thought I’d at least drive by. I saw you from the road and decided to take a chance. I hope you don’t mind.”

“That will depend on the nature of your visit. Got here from where?”

“Pardon?”

“You said you just got here. From where?”

“Oh!” He chuckled. “Sioux City. I’m with the Sioux City field office.”

Bullshit!

“And what does the Sioux City field office of the FBI want that a phone call wouldn’t handle—not meaning to sound rude.”

“No, no. You’re quite right. It was my bad to just drop in like this without calling. If you’d rather, I can make an appointment. However, I would ask if you can make time for me tomorrow. I have to be back in my office first thing Monday morning.”

“That is a shitload of driving,” I commented. “All the way here from Sioux City today, then all the way back again? Must be important.”

Donaldson glanced at me. I put him in his mid-forties. He had the same military bearing, the same buzz-cut hair and the same drill instructor jawline I remembered. His eyes were a muddy green brown, but they powered a

sharp gaze. He briefly studied me. I searched his expression for recognition, but he showed no sign.

There's no way this is a coincidence.

"This is my husband, Will."

I traded a handshake. As expected, he closed a tight grip, which I returned in kind.

"Pleased to meet you."

"Beer?" I lifted mine.

"Thank you, no. But I wouldn't turn down a glass of water." He turned to Andy. "That is, unless you prefer to meet with me tomorrow?"

Andy shook her head. "Nonsense. You're here. Come inside, please."

Rather than head for the back door, Andy led us past Donaldson's parked car to the front of the house and the screened porch.

"I'll get you that water," she said. "Please, make yourself comfortable." She gestured at our motley collection of wicker furniture and the old chaise lounge I like to occupy on summer evenings. Then she hurried away through the house.

Donaldson remained standing but turned to face the front yard. "This is a nice property. Quiet. Family farm?"

"Rental." I considered stopping there. Freezing him out. Then I thought about Andy's motivation for taking us around the house to the porch, rather than through the house via the kitchen. "It's quiet, alright. Except when they're picking the corn. We're practically an island in cornfields here. You must be used to that sort of thing in Iowa. Oh, and then there's the manure spreading. Once in a while, they buy some liquid manure from a couple dairy farms that have big vats on the west side of town, and they fling some pretty ripe stuff. It reeks for a few days. Mostly at the tail end of winter." I went on for a few minutes about farming, about our landlord, and about Essex County. I was about to launch into a monologue about Essex County Air Service when Andy reappeared. She handed Donaldson a tall glass filled with ice and water.

"Thanks," he said. "Did I check out?"

She smiled and held up her phone. "You did."

He returned the smile. "What got your guard up?"

"I did," I said quickly. "I recognized you when you drove in. I told her the last time I saw you was at the wedding at Cinnamon Hills. You were private security for some rich guy." It was a two-part lie in that there hadn't been time to tell Andy how I knew Donaldson—and Cinnamon Hills wasn't the last time I saw this man.

The last time I saw this man, I was about to put a gun to the head of his billionaire boss, Bargo Litton.

Andy took the news in stride.

“Affirmative,” Donaldson acknowledged. “I supervised security for Litton Industries until about eight months ago. Before I worked for Mr. Litton, I was with the FBI for sixteen years. After my service for Mr. Litton terminated, I went back to the FBI.”

Andy maintained a straight face. “That’s unusual. That the FBI would rehire someone who left.”

“You mean someone who jilted government service for the private sector? Yes, it is. May I?” He gestured at one of the wicker chairs. We all sat. I chose a chair beside Andy, rather than my lowrider lounge. “I had to pull in a mountain of favors and do some serious begging. I spent most of my career in L.A. Now I’m in Sioux City. You can do your own math on that one.”

“You didn’t like private security?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Things changed. Mr. Litton’s needs...evolved.”

Evolved, hell. I scared the piss out of the old bastard one night and made it clear I could do it again, whenever and wherever I wanted, regardless of the money he threw at his security apparatus. I left Litton helpless and furious. A breach of security at that level must have cost Donaldson his job.

Which doubled my unease.

“I guess I have law enforcement in my blood. You understand, Detective.”

“I do. It’s not the easiest path.”

“Amen, that.”

“So, Special Agent, what caused you to drive halfway across the Midwest on your day off? Your office said you’re off duty until Monday. Or are you working off book?”

“Sharp. I’m starting to see your fingerprints on the Parks case.”

“Is that why you’re here? Parks? That wrapped up months ago.”

“No. Not Parks. Or Seavers.”

Andy tipped her head. “Brogan?”

“Three for three. That’s an impressive track record.”

“For a small-town cop?” Andy bled a little of the warmth out of her tone. “I also took down a sinister gang of nativity scene vandals last winter.”

“I’m not one of those feds who thinks local LEOs are all hicks, Detective. Skill and intellect deserve recognition wherever they’re found. Your department is lucky to have you. A federal agency would also be lucky to have you.”

“Recruiting? Is that what this is?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Well, not yet anyway.”

“Then it’s Brogan,” Andy deduced. “You would be better served by contacting the prosecuting office. The Brogan case is still playing out.”

“A little more each day, it seems. Six congressmen resigned. More on the chopping block. Senate hearings. The media’s been in a frenzy for months.”

“I’m not involved in the politics and I do my best to stay out of the media,” Andy said. “My concern was Olivia Brogan’s role in a murder and an attempted murder. What’s your concern?”

“The same. Obliquely.”

Andy waited and watched. Donaldson sipped his water. Beyond the porch screens fireflies initiated luminous courtship flights above the lawn.

“Josiah James.” Donaldson cut the still evening air with the name.

Andy stiffened.

“Proof that a turd can walk and talk,” I said without hesitation.

“That and more,” Donaldson nodded, backing me up while working to ignore the increased tension between him and my wife.

“Then ‘obliquely’ is a good choice of terms,” Andy said coldly, “because James was peripheral to Brogan. She funded him. As far as I know, that’s all.”

“James was part of the noise that set off your bomber, Braddock.”

“So was Fox News. So was the man in the White House. Neither have been indicted. Josiah James is an overblown conspiracy theorist selling his brand of racist talk radio to half a dozen remote station groups in the hinterlands.”

“He claims to be syndicated on more than two hundred stations nationwide.”

“He lies. It’s nowhere near that.”

Donaldson lifted his eyebrows. “You’ve researched Mr. James.” Andy didn’t comment. “You’re right. James lies. He’s a living example of the cliché about moving lips. Until a few years ago he was just another nut job using the internet to vent the worms in his head. Then he polished his image with some tech and some outsourced marketing savvy. Even got the attention of the President.”

“I’ve seen the tweets.”

“Olivia Brogan and others like her—Litton included—poured gasoline on that fire with cash. Next thing we know, James is inspiring people to homebrew plastique. Your guy Braddock, to name one. James calls him a ‘freedom fighter’ now. He regurgitates and enhances the story every few weeks.”

“One man’s terrorist...” I muttered.

“Your name comes up now and then, Detective. Did you know? Along with Off—”

Andy interrupted him. “Special Agent Donaldson, you drove eight hours—”

“Seven.”

“—seven hours on a Saturday, on your own time, to come here and discuss a tangent to a case I worked. That tells me I’m right about you working off book. And not to make assumptions, but it strongly suggests that your supervisors would not approve.”

“Very few supervisors appreciate genuine initiative.”

“I didn’t give you away—just so you know—by calling.”

“Thanks.”

“Given your posting after returning from the private sector, I will also guess that you spend your days running background checks on political appointees, and that your hopes of promotion are nil. Am I hitting the ten ring?”

“Like a pro, Detective. Care to go the distance?”

Andy sat back and thought for a moment while Donaldson watched her. He appeared amused by Andy’s deductive effort.

“Fine,” she said. “You’re here to enlist an ally. You want me to use my access on the Brogan case to dig into James. No. You *need* me to dig into James because your office has already shut you down. Correct?”

Donaldson glanced at me. “Your wife is everything I’ve heard.”

“And then some.”

“Yes,” he said to Andy. “I need help and I need it discretely. Outside of my office.”

“Why?”

“Because the Bureau is hypersensitive about the appearance of political motivation behind an investigation.”

“PR answer. Not good enough.”

“Because James has ties to the President.”

“Fifteen minutes of fame shared by two ruthless opportunists.”

“Because James is a cancer.”

Andy shook her head. “I don’t like him either. For reasons I’m sure you can imagine. But that doesn’t mean I’m willing to launch an investigation off book or use my badge for personal vengeance. Are you?”

“What?”

“Out for personal vengeance? Or is this a play to restore your employment with Litton Industries?”

“No.”

“Revenge then. Against Litton for terminating you.”

Donaldson chuckled. “No, this has nothing to do with Litton. And Litton has nothing to do with me, except for using his influence to guarantee I finish my twenty at a desk in Sioux City.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands together. For a long moment he stared down at those hands.

Twilight slipped into dusk and cool air drifted through the screens, falling around us.

“Josiah James may lie about his syndication, but he is a cancer and he is spreading. He got a pat on the head from the President and it might as well have been a shot of rocket fuel. He’s been pushing his radio syndication hard in the Midwest and middle west. His hate and crazy conspiracy shit plays like a pop tune to the fringes in rural markets.

“A few months before I moved to Sioux City, he pitched one of the radio stations there. The flagship property in a multi-station group. The Nedritch Group. They own stations in Iowa, Nebraska and Kansas. Get a foot in the door with the flagship station and it’s one flick of a switch to syndicate to the whole group. The deal would have expanded his market by forty percent. A big leap.”

Donaldson drew from his ice water, then continued.

“Nedritch turned him down flat. The group isn’t what I’d call progressive, but they’re moderate enough that the James brand of venom would never play on their air. That’s what everybody thought, anyway.”

“He got the deal?” Andy asked.

Donaldson nodded. “Two months ago. Flagship and five affiliates. And not some three AM slot, either. Daytime talk. A first for James.”

“Okay. He’s upped his game. Maybe he’s stretching his fifteen minutes of fame with the White House. Maybe he promised to tone down the crazier shit,” I said.

“No. That’s not it.”

“What then?” Andy asked.

“In early April we had a missing child case. Amber alert. A seven-year-old boy was abducted from his yard. Unquestionably foul play. Three days into the nightmare, the family received an anonymous tip that the kid was in a storage container. He was. Cold, but unharmed. Somebody locked him in there with a box of candy bars and a sleeping bag. Never touched him. My stock isn’t worth much around the office, but since the SAC called for all-hands-on-deck, they let me in on the scramble. I was assigned interviews with extended family. They saddled me with the grandparents, which is

usually an exercise in making note of suspicious foreigners they can't seem to name."

"But not this time," Andy said. "Nedritch."

Donaldson pointed a finger at Andy.

"Himself. And a few weeks later, James cut his deal with the radio group," Andy continued.

"Nobody was interested in my assessment. Nedritch denied any connection and refused to see me after the first interview. His people told my SAC that there was nothing further to discuss once the boy was home again. They made a point of telling me to stay away."

"Wait." I held up a hand. "You're saying that James kidnapped the kid and the ransom was a deal for syndication? Extortion? That's one hell of a stretch. Nedritch must have money, resources, political pull. Why wouldn't he lay on extra security? Twist some arm with the Iowa state police? If what you're saying is true, he had to have been furious."

"He may have been furious, but he was also pragmatic. All the extra security in the world won't stop harm from finding you if the perpetrator is crazy, determined and patient."

He had us there. I played a similar card with Litton. Despite his story, I wondered again if Donaldson knew it was me that breached Litton's security.

Impossible.

"Nedritch has nine children, seventeen grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. They're spread out all over the country. What you might call a target-rich environment. How do you protect them all? Denouncing James wasn't an option. People who do that become talk topics on his show. It's not a position I'd like to be in. The man is a master at dancing just this side of the defamation line. There have been eighteen suits brought against him for libel and defamation, and none of them stuck. James hounded a county sheriff for a year after he got stopped on an OWI. The sheriff lost in the next election."

"You're not exactly gilding your case for joining the cause," Andy said. "Asking me to use my ties to the Brogan prosecution so I can poke around Josiah James—and risk him setting his sights on me—isn't what I'd call appealing."

"No. And you're right. I am not trying to gild the case. Or minimize the risk. I'm stuck in a career backwater. It won't matter if he targets me. I don't have a family he can threaten. I've got nothing to lose."

"She does!" I said.

"Why come to me?" Andy asked.

“Because you have a personal stake in seeing James taken down.”

And there it was.

I looked at Andy and she looked at me. Pain traveled across that glance like lightning.

“You’re talking about Mike,” she said.

“Mike Mackiejewski,” I added. My throat locked up. I thought of Mike and of Corey Braddock, the boy who *wasn’t* a bomber. I thought of Lane Franklin.

Lane had been collateral damage in a tragedy sparked by Ben Braddock and the venom and hate broadcast by Josiah James. But Lane had survived and gained strength in her inimitable way.

Corey Braddock and Mike Mackiejewski—Andy’s subordinate and friend—had not.

“I’m so sorry,” Donaldson said, “about Officer Mackiejewski. That was a double tragedy.”

“Don’t think you’re going to come here and use Mike’s suicide to sign me up on some revenge crusade, Special Agent,” Andy said harshly. “Not when you used to collect your paycheck from Bargo Litton. The only difference between Litton and James is that Litton outsources his hate mongering and murder.”

Donaldson hung his head again. He spoke without looking up. “You’re right. I did work for Litton. I did a job as a professional. A job I was damned good at. I also saw things and heard things and I should have questioned but didn’t. Now I can.”

Andy rose and stood with her arms folded. I read the set of her jaw and knew the conversation was over.

“I need help, Detective.”

“If the Brogan investigation opens a door to a probe of Josiah James, I will go through that door like Tactical. But I will not use my connection to the Brogan case to get you out of a dead-end desk job, Special Agent.”

Donaldson gave it a moment. He took a sip of ice water. He slowly took to his feet.

“Understood.” He nodded to punctuate the point. I waved a hand at the screen door. He followed my gesture down the steps and onto the front lawn. Darkness had nearly consumed the dusk and he slipped into silhouette as he moved out of the porch light toward his car. Andy and I followed him halfway there. At the driver’s door he paused and looked up at the sky where stars glittered against blue-black.

“The thing about Sioux City I can’t get used to is the weather. My time

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with Litton was in the desert.” He looked across the roof of the sedan. “Ever been to the desert? It can be beautiful.”

He ducked into the sedan.

We watched him back onto the road. After a few minutes his taillights winked out in the west.

“Fuck!” I said. “He may not know it was me that got to Litton, but he knows we were there.”

Andy turned and walked back to the house without a word.

“Nothing?”
“That’s what I’m saying.”
“You’re fucking kidding me.”

Pidge hopped up on the propane-powered airport tug. She wiggled on the seat, adjusting it to the full forward position so that her child-sized feet would reach the pedals.

I lifted the tow bar attached to the Piper Navajo’s nose wheel. She turned the key and brought the tug to life, then eased forward on my hand signal. I snapped the bar into the tug hitch and climbed onto the fender. She dropped it in reverse and backed the win-engine airplane away from the gas pumps.

“Why?”

“Whaddya mean, ‘Why?’ Will! You’ve got this freak show thing in your head! You should be out there using it!”

We’ve had this conversation. Five people know what I can do—not counting a drug trafficker who thought I was a ghost. Pidge is one of them.

“To do what?”

“Kick some ass like we did in Chicago!” Pidge twisted in the seat and grabbed the back of the fender, steering in reverse across the ramp toward the open hangar. The ramp lay Sunday-quiet. I had taken a short charter run during the afternoon, picking up a construction work crew in Muskegon and delivering them to Essex. After landing Earl’s Beechcraft Baron, I pulled the Education Foundation’s new Navajo out of the hangar to gas it up for a morning trip. While I wrangled the gas hose, Pidge brought the Essex

County Air Service Piper Mojave in for a landing on Runway 13, completing a two-day trip. By the time I finished fueling, she had the Mojave shut down and ready for a push into the hangar. I disconnected the tug from my ship and gave her a hand. She returned the favor, mostly, I am convinced, to take up her favorite topic with me.

She poked a finger at me. “Go out and take down some bad guys!”

“Okay. Fight crime. Sounds good. So...what? I’m supposed to hang out at the bank, waiting for it to be robbed? Then what?”

“Fly down on their asses!”

“Oh. Sure. Some guy with a gun. I’m supposed to fly down and kick his ass. You saw how that worked out in Montana. Pidge, I have no inertia. I’m weightless. If I punch the sonofabitch it just sends me in the opposite direction. High school physics.”

“Go join the fucking CIA, Will! You’d be the perfect spy.”

“Oh. You mean infiltrate the Kremlin?”

“That’s what I’m talking about!”

“I don’t speak Russian. Or Arabic. Or any other language. I can’t read the Russian signs that say, ‘This Way To Secret World Takeover Laboratory.’ People don’t sit around chatting about their evil plans.”

We approached the hangar. Pidge wheeled the big airplane past the open door and started an arc away from the building. She stopped, shifted to a forward gear, and deftly maneuvered the fuselage to align with the center of the hangar. She eased the Navajo backward until the tip of the nose cleared the threshold. After she stopped, I jumped down and released the tow bar. I lifted the bar into a steel tray on the side of the tug. I expected Pidge to back away and roar off, but she killed the motor and sat looking at me.

“You have no fucking imagination, Stewart. If I had the ability to do what you can do, shit, I’d be hitting all the casinos—”

“Grand larceny.”

“—I’d be sitting on a beach somewhere with a pile of cash—”

“Traceable.”

“—screwing a different hardbody cabana boy nightly.”

“That, I could see. But the beach? You’d flip out without flying.”

“I’d buy a Gulfstream. How do you think I’d get to the fucking beach?”

“You’d get bored.”

She didn’t deny it. “What about you? And this?” She waved at the Navajo behind me. “I mean it’s a beautiful bird, but are you really going to do this? Just fly Sandy Stone around on her Foundation business?”

“I’m in the rotation for charters. So’s the airplane, on lease-back.”

Pidge snorted. “Your wife is holding you back, man. That’s the reason

you keep hanging around here. That's the reason you don't take your show on the road and really do something with it." She read my look. "What? You know I'm right! Hey, I love Andy, but she needs to get her shit together, too. She should be working for the FBI and the two of you should walk right into the director's office and tell him what you can do. She can be your handler."

Pidge's mention of the FBI on the heels of Donaldson's visit sent my thoughts wandering. The pause I gave it only encouraged Pidge.

"You know I'm right!"

"I need to fly," I said.

"Fuck that. You can fly like all of us dream about flying. I've seen you change, Will. I mean it. In the last year. When they took away your ticket, you were like some fucking junkie. Itchy. You were dying to get it back. And then you did. And I shit you not, you're not the same. You don't have the fire for it. I mean, yeah, this is a good gig, talking the Foundation into buying a Navajo so you can cart Sandy around the country. But the charter thing for Earl? Half the time I think you're just doing it because you can't come up with a way to tell him you're done."

"You're full of shit."

Pidge squared herself at me. "You know he thinks you're going to take over this flying circus someday."

"You're completely full of shit."

Pidge simply grinned and shook her head. She twisted the key and fired up the tug. Flourishing middle finger salutes with both hands, she backed away from the hangar and roared away.

I strolled to the side of the hangar and hit the button to bring down the big folding door. After it thumped into place, I walked across the polished concrete to the exit, stroking my hand across the left wingtip as I went.

So full of shit.

I stopped at the exit door and looked back at the airplane, white and gleaming despite the darkness in the hangar. She sat poised and proud on her landing gear over a spot that once contained the shredded pieces of another Navajo, the one that spit me out over an Essex County marsh. The wreck of my accident had occupied this same hangar until someone unknown—at least to me—hailed it away. Now a nearly-identical new bird filled the void, as if born from the ashes.

My mind ran forward to the morning and the trip scheduled for just after dawn. I probed myself, looking for the thrill, the expectation that the next flight always awakened.

I gave it a minute. Then two.

I locked the door and went home.

Sandy Stone initially ran the Christine and Paulette Paulesky Education Foundation out of the home she inherited from her father, the late State Senator Bob Stone. Perhaps naively, she tried to conduct the business of the one hundred million-dollar fund from her dad's old office while staying true to her first love, teaching kindergarten. She thought that by enlisting the help of a board of directors consisting of my boss, Earl Jackson, my wife and me, she could field requests for funding, evaluate grant proposals, and dole out the Foundation's funds to deserving schools, teachers and education programs.

That was her first mistake. Earl was the only member worth his salt as a businessman, but his Attila The Hun personality clashed with the nuances of philanthropy. Andy was earnest in her efforts but found herself too busy in her job as a newly promoted detective with the City of Essex Police Department. Except for having created the fund by putting a gun to the forehead of Bargo Litton, one of the richest men in the world, I was utterly useless.

Sandy made her second mistake by throwing a huge Open For Business sign out through press releases and social media. Pleas for funding poured in, some of them legitimate, many of them scams. Sandy tried judging the cases on her own. That proved overwhelming. She then tried assembling her board to wade through the requests. That failed. None of us had the time.

One problem was the money. Aside from the fact that it attracted flies, it was too damned much. It needed to be invested, accounted for, reported, taxed, not taxed, and God-knows-what-else before distributing

a dime. Earl jumped to Sandy's rescue and tapped an acquaintance, a human computer and accountant named Dewey Larmond. I asked my landlord, James Rankin, a farmer with the largest landholdings in Essex County, for the use of his attorney to assist Sandy in navigating the Foundation's legal limitations. Still, the more help Sandy got, the farther she drifted from the primary task of giving money to schools in need.

Two pieces fell into place to make it work.

The key piece came in the form of the Foundation's first full-time employee, Arun Dewar, a fresh graduate of the Northwestern University School of Business. To hear Sandy tell the story, Arun didn't interview for the job as much as roll in and announce he would be taking over. Just over five feet tall, looking more like a middle-schooler than a business school graduate, Arun spoke a mile-a-minute with an accent more British than Delhi. He sank his formidable intellectual teeth into the task of running the Foundation. He set up shop in one of the empty offices at the hangar at Essex County Airport and soon had the place wired for phone, internet and his boundless energy.

"If the business of this Foundation is the advancement of education, then one obvious mandate is to see education benefit from the unwavering and uninterrupted expertise of one of its stellar practitioners," Arun told Sandy on day one. "You." At which point he gathered up the stacks of applications littering Sandy's home office and loaded them into his Toyota for a trip to his new office in the hangar.

That was in late May. I wasn't sure I'd seen a day since when that red Corolla wasn't parked outside the hangar.

I contributed the second rescue element. I proposed that the Foundation use money left over from another case and I worked to purchase a Piper Navajo. The seven-seat airplane offered Sandy a way to travel quickly and efficiently to small town schools applying for funds. When it wasn't being used for Foundation business, Earl leased it to fill the gaps in the busy Essex County Air Service charter schedule. Arun quickly connected with Rosemary II, Essex County Air's unflappable office manager, and the two of them conspired to handle all planning and scheduling for the aircraft, including maintenance.

Monday morning, after Donaldson's weekend visit, I showed up for a predawn preflight to find Arun had the hangar lit up and his espresso machine pumping.

"Good morning, Will!" Arun flashed his bright smile at me as I maneuvered my flight and overnight bags into the office. "Coffee is ready. And

there are scones. Miss Stone will be here in thirty!” No amount of effort on Sandy’s part convinced Arun to call her by her first name.

“Wheels up in forty-five, then,” I found myself trying to match the young man’s energy, which was absurd absent my first coffee of the day.

Arun and his spotless white shirt disappeared into his office. July had been warm so far, and the air conditioning in the hangar offices struggled to keep pace, but Arun never failed to show up in a white shirt and tie with a suit coat on a hanger behind his office door.

He called out to me from behind said door.

“Do you have the updated itinerary? I emailed it to you last night.”

“Sure,” I said, pouring myself a cup of salvation. “Probably. Maybe. Can you print one for me?”

A sheet of paper appeared at my elbow.

“When are you going to add email to your phone, Will?”

I took the neatly printed trip itinerary. “When...” I tried to think of something pithy involving Hell and frost, but the caffeine had yet to jump-start my brain. “Ah, screw it.”

Arun dashed back into his office. I looked over the schedule. As a practitioner of precise time management, I admired Arun’s to-the-minute plan for the three-day trip. The first leg took us to Bloomington, Indiana for a morning meeting with allowance for an early lunch to follow. The second leg took us to Nashville for another round of meetings and an overnight, with additional meetings on Tuesday morning. An early afternoon departure then took us west to Springfield, Missouri. Another overnight. Meetings on Wednesday, then home. Arun listed arrivals, departures, allocations for ground transportation, hotels, blocks for lunch—I double-checked to see if he wrote in bathroom breaks. He had.

Sandy initially invited me to accompany her to the meetings. I told her I would love nothing more than schmoozing with school superintendents and school board members, touring science wings and preschool programs, but I had already scheduled the time slot to poke sharp sticks in my eyes. Plus, she had Arun at her elbow.

Besides, I had other plans.

SANDY ARRIVED at the hangar within half a minute of Arun’s predicted ETA. I had just finished filing flight plans and updating my weather briefings. I use an old desk in the hangar. The fresh air feels good in summer, and it removes me from Arun’s incessant ministering of minutiae. Through a glass wall between the hangar and a small lounge, I watched Arun hustle to handle

Sandy's overnight bag while bombarding her with details about the day. She, however, spotted me and waved a hand that worked on Arun like a Pause Button. She dropped her purse and launched in my direction.

The dark expression on her face suggested trouble. I leaped to the inevitable conclusion.

Dave.

Sandy Stone is an attractive young woman. Exponentially beyond attractive. Dave Peterson, my pal and fellow Essex Air Pilot, is smitten with her, and he worked on me for a couple months to broker an introduction. She shot him down before his wheels left the turf. Andy and I felt bad for Dave but understood her position, and in fact had warned Dave. Sandy was only a few months past the worst ordeal of her life—a storybook marriage blown to hell by the murder of her father, and then her own near-death experience at the hands of her new husband. She simply wasn't ready for a relationship and she told Dave so. He took it with dignity in her presence but went down hard in her absence.

Now she marched toward me across the polished concrete floor of the hangar wearing the same look my wife wears when I've done something I've been told not to do. I immediately wondered what crime Dave had committed, and just as quickly groped my mind for an alibi.

"Will," she said (not "Good morning, Will" and not smiling).

"It's not my fault."

"What?"

"Standard greeting for any woman wearing that look."

"What? No." She glanced back to confirm that Arun was occupied. He shuffled folders in a leather briefcase. Turning back to me, she gestured for me to walk with her. We moved toward the open hangar door and the first hints of morning light. "The FBI came to see me yesterday."

"A certain Special Agent Donaldson?"

She nodded, again checking to be sure Arun wasn't suddenly behind us. He has that ability. "You know him?"

"Only because he came to the house to talk to Andy. What did he want from you?"

"He asked me a lot of questions about the Foundation. About you and Andy."

Shit.

"Like what? What kind of questions?"

She lifted her crystalline blue eyes high to her right. "What was my connection to Litton Industries? How long had I known Mr. Litton? Was the Foundation set up through Todd before the wedding?" She put her hand on

my arm. "He wanted to know what your involvement was. Before becoming a board member. And the same about Andy. He asked how you both know Bargo Litton. I didn't know that you did."

"I don't." It came out too fast. She looked at me, questioning. "At least not as any kind of acquaintance. I mean, everybody knows who he is. Doesn't mean you know the guy. What did you tell him?"

"I told him that before I or any member of the Foundation board would be divulging proprietary Foundation business, he'd better explain the nature of his inquiry."

"I can tell you the nature of his inquiry. He used to work for Litton. He got fired. I think he's having trouble getting past that. What did he tell you?"

"Nothing. I mean, the usual. 'The FBI doesn't divulge the nature of its investigations.' Do you think he's pursuing something about the Foundation?" She looked worried.

"No. Before he came to see you, he stopped at our place. On Saturday."

"Why?"

"He says he's investigating Josiah James." Sandy made a face, like she caught a whiff of something bad. "Yeah, that guy."

"Well, what on earth does that have to do with the Foundation?"

"I doubt it has anything to do with the Foundation. Look, I wouldn't worry about it. He came looking for help from Andy. The guy is probably just being thorough. Checking us out."

"I suppose, but...when this all happened, with Dad, with Todd...you know I wasn't at my best. I wasn't very clear when Litton's attorneys contacted me about the Foundation. It happened in a blur."

That's because it wasn't Litton's attorney. James Rankin's attorney set up the Foundation. That Sandy didn't remember his role at the time came as no surprise.

"A lot happened."

"I know, but should I be worried? Do you think there's something wrong? Should I contact Mr. Litton?"

"No, no, no." I shook my head. "There's nothing wrong, not with the Foundation. Until someone tells you otherwise, everything was done by the book and according to Litton's wishes. Plus, I hear that these days, the guy has gone all Howard Hughes. Nobody knows where he's hiding. Leave it alone. The Foundation is fine. Like I said, that FBI guy wanted Andy's help with James. I think he was just doing a little background check on her."

"What if Litton wants his money back?"

I laughed. "Then you'd already be up to your eyeballs in attorneys."

She let the laugh infect her and produced a wry smile. “I suppose that’s true.”

“Just let me know if you hear from Donaldson again, okay? I’ll want to tell Andy.”

It seemed to calm her.

Like magic, Arun appeared at her shoulder. “Miss Stone, I believe we’re within our departure window.”

“Well, then, let’s kick the tires and light the fires!” I clapped him on the back.

Early morning summer flight lets you bore holes in a glass-smooth sky before the sun has a chance to cook up thermals that lace the flight path with turbulence. Our ride to Indiana had the quality of floating. The sun climbed into the sky along with us, casting platinum reflections across the metallic surface of Lake Michigan off our left wing. Chicago Center gave me the usual extra vectors around O'Hare, but I didn't mind. The engines sang. My fingers whispered to the controls. And the thrill I had been looking for after Pidge challenged me showed itself. Neither Sandy nor Arun accepted my offer of the right front seat. The cockpit and the sky were all mine.

Two hours and seven minutes after lifting off, our wheels kissed the pavement of Runway 17 at Monroe County airport, the sole airport serving Bloomington. I found a place to park, waved off the lineman offering fuel services, and set about offloading Sandy and Arun. A cluster of suits stood outside the FBO; Sandy's welcoming committee awaited, hats in hand. They all looked like English teachers. I made excuses about seeing to the airplane and sent Sandy and Arun across the ramp into their care.

As the engines cooled and ticked, I climbed back into the cabin and took a seat facing aft with my feet up. I pulled out my phone.

"Hey," Andy said cheerfully.

"What're you up to?"

"Shooting pictures of VINs out on Al Raymond's back lot. Probably getting poison ivy."

I pictured it. Andy on duty favors jeans and a pullover top unless an interview calls for something more businesslike. In the rising summer heat and because she's on duty, she would have her hair tied up or braided.

"Why?"

"Oh, don't ask." She made it sound like her efforts wouldn't crack the case of the century. "Usual Disclaimer?"

"Usual Disclaimer."

"That woman who works in his shop—his chief mechanic?"

"Yeah?" I wanted to say Godzilla because anyone who ever had to deal with the woman walked away knowing how Tokyo felt after a rampage.

"She got drunk last night."

"Destroyed the Ginza Line?"

"What? No. She was with Al at Sully's and she got in a fight with him. They broke one of those video poker machines by the bar. Al ducked out, but she was still there when Sims pulled up. He hauled her in for disorderly."

"Sims? Wow. Points for bravery." Officer Terry Sims might be the smallest cop on the Essex PD roster. Andy is taller by a hand.

"She went on a rant about Al. Taught Sims a few new words. But also claimed Al's been trolling in Milwaukee with his flatbed. Pulling older models onto the truck like he's towing a parking violator, then stashing them in his yard."

"Ah, so you get to chase the wild goose in the back lot."

"I think she's full of it, although that rumor about Al has surfaced before."

"Speaking of full of it, guess who stopped to see Sandy yesterday?"

"Special Agent Donaldson," Andy said, continuing her unbroken run of marching one step ahead of me.

"Oh. You talked to her?"

"She left me a voicemail this morning. I didn't get to follow up with her yet."

"She's off touring now, but I talked to her." I relayed what Sandy told me about her meeting with the FBI. Andy pondered it across cell phone silence for a moment.

"You do know that proving the two of us were in that desert motel is child's play for an experienced FBI agent," she said.

"Don't you need a warrant to search someone's credit card history?"

"Depends." An answer I often get from my law enforcement wife. "But it hardly matters. The question here is whether he's poking around us for what happened with Litton, or is he really pursuing James?"

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This was new. “James? Going after James?”

“I’ve just been thinking.”

I had already decided, the night Lane watched Mike Mackiejewski kill Corey Braddock with a shotgun blast, that Josiah James would pay for his role in the tragedy. I vented my feelings with Andy, who has a habit of talking me out of murder. Nothing she said changed my mind about making James pay. It just meant I would have to make it happen my way.

“Are you saying you want to help Donaldson?”

“That’s not for discussion at this moment, Will.”

“I can’t tell if that’s encouragement or a warning.”

“A request, love. To talk about it when you get home.”

“Fine.”

“But I can answer your question. I have no intention of working with Donaldson.”

“Good.”

“Listen, gotta go. I think there might be a family of raccoons under this car.”

“Love you!”

There are four major hospitals in the Nashville area specializing in the care of children. Of the four, according to my limited research on the web, the Marjorie Ellenwell Children's Hospital and Center for Cancer Care fit my target specifications. Not that the Monroe Carell Hospital at Vanderbilt or the Children's Hospital at TriStar Centennial fell short. I picked Ellenwell because it boasted of advanced research in the treatment of leukemia.

Fucking leukemia.

In the seven months since committing an act of absolute insanity on an Angel Flight into Marshfield, Wisconsin—and then finding out *the other thing* may have saved a dying child—I've been in and out of half a dozen children's hospitals. Always at night. Always unseen. Except for the first one I visited, no one sanctioned the visits. At Children's of Milwaukee, Christie Watkins, an oncology nurse who rode through the night with me over Marshfield, got me in the door, took me to the rooms of the sleeping children, and later reported the mix of miracles and disappointment that followed my visit.

Christie is one of the five people who know what I can do. She's one of only three people who knows that when I wrapped *the other thing* around Emma Parrish, it killed the leukemia that was killing her.

Christie called me four days after she gave me a middle-of-the-night tour of Children's Hospital in early January. I didn't expect the jolt of anticipation, seeing her name on my phone screen. She caught me driving home after work. I pulled over to take the call.

“Three of them! Will! It worked on three of them!”

“Slow down, Christie.”

“Screw that! I’ve been dying to tell you! I waited. I wanted to be sure. But as of the start of my shift tonight, we have three kids here whose current condition cannot be explained. All three had leukemia. Two were advanced. And now—Will! *You did this!*”

She choked up, fought it, then plowed on. And on. About doctors baffled by the unexplained remission. About pharmaceutical reps elbowing each other aside to claim that their particular regimen deserved credit. About three emaciated kids who were suddenly ravenous, full of energy, full of life. About tests and test results.

The more excited she got, the greater the fear I felt welling inside.

I asked her about the other four. We had seen seven kids the night she took me on the tour. Seven rooms where, behind closed doors and under Christie’s watchful eye, I lifted light little bodies off the sheets and closed *the other thing* around them. Most slept. A few moaned. All were tiny and tearing my heart apart.

“Inconclusive,” Christie replied. “But I’m watching them. Maybe it takes time for—”

“What’s the common denominator? Among the three?”

“Well, the diagnosis for each one is different. Complicated. There are factors of—”

“Christie! High school graduate, here. What’s the common denominator?”

“Leukemia.”

“And the others?”

She launched into a list of Latin medical names—a mixed bag of horrors inflicted on children. She said, “We’ll know more after another round. Maybe the others need a higher dose. When are you coming back?”

I didn’t answer.

“Will! You *have to* come back! We have to do more testing!”

“No. We’re done.”

“Will—!”

“Christie! You promised me. You made me a promise about this.” It was her turn not to answer. “Listen. I will pursue this. On my own. But you won’t know. That’s how this works. You won’t know I’ve been there or who I touch.”

She gave it a beat. “Can we discuss—”

“I need time to figure this out.”

“Please—”

I ended the call.

That was in January. Since then, I visited three more hospitals devoted to treating childhood cancer. I've broken and entered, sneaked in with shift-change employees, or most often, arrived during visiting hours and merely floated in a corner until well past midnight. Once silence and low light took command, I eased my way through empty halls, squeezing past partially open doors to find children in restless sleep. Some wore bandages over clear plastic IV tubes. Some were bald and thin. Some recoiled at the touch of a stranger in their sleep. Twice, the children woke as I held them above their beds. One cried out, "I'm flying!" I had to warn her that she must remain quiet or the magic would end. She solemnly promised to be quiet but begged for more, so I flew her around the room, pushing off the walls, careful not to topple any of the equipment at her bedside. She giggled in delight.

When I left that room, I prayed she would be one of the miracles. But then I prayed for all of them.

Getting in and out is anything but easy. I don't know if they've always been so rigid about security, but a children's hospital is a fortress at night. They're locked up tight, with single-point entry and exit, armed guards and myriad cameras. While none of that stops me, it does make the mission difficult.

I don't know how it works—what I'm doing—any more than I know the origin of *the other thing*.

I don't learn the names of the children. I try to find kids fighting leukemia in its various forms, but it's nearly impossible for me to know the specific diagnosis. There's no "chart" hanging at the end of the bed. In-room computer terminals blink at me, but I have no access and would hardly know how to read the chart if I managed a log-in. There are signs. Specific sections of the floor. Physical indicators. My aim may not be perfect, but I'm pretty sure I can tell the difference between a child on chemotherapy and a retired banker recovering from a triple bypass.

I tell myself that I'm experimenting, the same way I've been experimenting with self-propulsion in the barn. The effect of *the other thing* on sick children may be science, but what I'm doing is far from scientific method. It is literally shooting in the dark.

I haven't asked myself why I'm doing it, because that's a stupid question. I can do it. Therefore, I should do it. In a dark hospital room, looking at a sleeping child, the equation is simple.

The hard questions come outside the room when I consider how this aspect of *the other thing* fits in the world of medicine, moral obligation and

money. I've already glimpsed the answer to that in the face of the Angel Flight nurse, Christie Watkins. I see what she wants, and it scares me.

I SLIPPED AWAY from Sandy and Arun after we checked into the Holiday Inn Express near the airport in Smyrna—which I chose for landing near Nashville because the services are less expensive and more convenient than those at the international airport, and because it was closer to the rural school district on Sandy's itinerary.

I waited thirty minutes in the room, just to allow for the possibility that Arun might rap on my door with last-minute itinerary changes. When he didn't appear, I left the hotel, caught a cab, and took a short ride to Ellenwell. The cab dropped me at a main entrance to the modern, five-story hospital. Revolving doors ushered me into an atrium decorated with green palms, a small pond and a fountain. A grand piano occupied one corner, playing something light and jazzy on its own. Opposite the piano, a long, curved information desk faced the doors. Behind the desk, a young woman welcomed me with a warm smile.

I glanced at my watch as I walked up. "How am I doing on time? Do I have enough to hit the gift shop before visiting hours end?"

"Which floor will you be visiting?"

I had no idea. "Children's. Cancer treatment. I forget..."

"Three. You've got about fifteen minutes. Visiting hours end at eight for the children. But I need to register you. Who are you here to see?"

I glanced at the small gift shop tucked in the corner of a hallway behind the expansive desk. "Tell you what," I said, pulling out my phone, "while I go get my niece a teddy bear, I'll call my sister. She's upstairs now. She can come down and either validate me or take the bear up to her daughter."

"Okay, but you'll need a badge to get onto the floor, so have your sister meet you here."

"Got it!" I hurried toward the gift shop. Noting cameras everywhere, I diverted to the men's room just beyond the small shop. No cameras in the men's room. No men, either.

Fwoomp! Holding a grip on the door handle, I vanished. Pressing one hand on the wall, I pulled the door open and slipped through.

The hall remained blessedly empty. I pulled a propulsion unit from my flight jacket pocket, snapped a propeller in place, and thumbed it to life. It pulled me back toward the atrium. I kept the power level low, barely a growl. Jazz piano covered the sound.

The young woman at Reception devoted most of her attention to a book

spread on the desk in front of her, but she glanced back at the gift shop as I passed her. She hadn't forgotten about me.

A bank of elevators rose the full height of the atrium behind the front desk. In the fashion of modern architecture featuring atriums, each floor offered a view of the greenery and fountain below. I ascended, counted off three floors and passed over a waist-high railing onto a carpeted hallway.

"Damn. I like this place," I said aloud when I spotted a sign that read *Children's Oncology*. The sign pointed down the hall, underscoring my point with Pidge. Without good signage, sneaking around unseen is futile.

I held a glide a few inches above the carpet and floated down the hall, vigilant for visitors or staff. Luck stayed with me. Neither appeared. The hallway split at a Y junction, and more good signage directed me forward. Patient rooms lined either side of a hall sporting brightly colored doors and cartoon characters from the Disney library. A clear plastic frame at each door displayed hand-drawn artwork and featured the first name of the room's occupant. Marcy. Tobie. Jean. Cody. Most of the artwork looked tender-aged, as Andy would call it. One sheet, however, showed significant talent and skill, suggesting the occupant might be older. Older kids pose challenges.

I came up on a nurse's station serving as a hub to four hallways branched in cardinal directions. Three women and one man in pastel scrubs worked at various computer terminals around the station.

A man and a woman in civilian clothing, each tugging the hand of a toddler between them, emerged from one of the rooms and moved down the hall toward me. I pushed the power slide and rose toward the ceiling, extending my legs to let them pass beneath me. They called out "Good-night" to the staff at the nurse's station and continued toward the elevators.

Beyond the nurse's station I found a small lounge. In one corner, a television broadcast silent images over closed captions. The opposite wall offered kitchen features: a sink, refrigerator, microwave and one of those glorious little single-serving coffee makers. I settled in a hover facing the counter and spent some time figuring out how to brew a cup without anyone seeing poltergeist objects move above the countertop. With coffee made, I settled in to kill time in the muted company of ESPN.

Christie Watkins taught me the basic routines common to many hospitals. Ellenwell seemed to uphold those routines. The seven-to-seven rotation staff spent the first part of their on-shift hour getting their patient assignments and reviewing charts. At eight they fanned out for the first of a night's hourly assessments and to administer medications. Parents leaving filed out. Parents staying the night prepared for restless sleep on cots and couches. At

nine, the nurses repeated the hourly assessment routine. Most of the patients remained awake but followed the lights-out instructions of the staff. From then on, hourly, the nurses slipped into their assigned patient rooms for assessment, checking IV and infusion connections, and caring for those whose pain denied sleep.

I waited until almost eleven-thirty before striking out.

Some of the doors near the nurse's station were closed to protect the patients from noise, but most kids seem to want their door partly open at night. Slipping into those rooms without moving the door was easy. Once inside, I let my eyes adjust to the dark. The rooms maintain a design consistency. Bathrooms to the left or right of the door. Beds perpendicular to the entry. The beds were designed for children, small and low.

In my first room, the bed was a crib and the child within not quite a toddler. A woman lay under a thin blanket on a couch beside the crib. Even in the dark, even in slumber, I saw wear and worry in the woman's cheeks.

I maneuvered over the side of the crib and reached in. I removed a blanket, careful to avoid tangling with the plastic IV line taped in place on the child's arm. I placed my hands on either side of the child's ribcage over its fuzzy one-piece sleeper. Initially, I had feared pushing *the other thing* around someone unless I held them in a full embrace. I feared not enveloping them completely, with dreadful consequences. I've since grown confident that all I need is a firm touch.

The child wiggled and made a soft sound, a nearly-inaudible signal that magically transmitted to the mother, causing her to stir restlessly. I waited. Both settled back into sound sleep.

I pushed.

Fwoomp! Gone, the child had no weight. I lifted it to my chest—boy or girl, I had no way of knowing in the dark. I smelled its baby-scented scalp. It floated helpless against me, serene in its dreams. The IV line hung in the air, vanishing where it met the edge of *the other thing*.

I don't know if duration matters, but I floated over that crib for a long time, holding the child against my chest with one hand and the top rail of the crib with the other. I listened to its shallow breathing long enough to be made drowsy by the gentle rhythm. Eventually, wary of the on-the-hour nursing assessment due soon, I shook off the sleepiness dragging my eyelids down and eased the child back to the mattress.

Fwoomp! It settled and fussed, alerted by the shift in gravity when it reappeared. Fussing caused the mother to stir. This time she lifted her head and looked. Seeing the blanket out of place, she sat up and reached into the crib to cover her child. She stroked its head.

I slipped out the door, fingers crossed.

Working between the clockwork care visits of the nurses, I entered eight rooms over the next four hours.

Nearing the end of my rounds, I came to the room with the crisply drawn name display. Swirls and delicate lines surrounded the name Anastasia. The door hung open far enough to let me glide in.

She sat on her bed with a sketch pad on her knees. A girl of twelve or thirteen wearing an elaborate twist of colorful kerchiefs over her bald head. Her skin glowed, pale under a single desk lamp positioned on a small table beside the bed. Her eyes were Asian, but I lack the knowledge to guess her national origin. She focused dark eyes intently on the strokes of her pencil across the paper's surface. I eased closer to examine her drawing.

The picture portrayed a girl. Thin. Hairless, like the artist who drew her. She was rendered upright above a pond. She floated several inches above the surface of still water. Her hands were open, and her arms were spread at her waist; her face was upturned. The scene, to my eye, was expertly rendered. Delicately shaded. Perfectly proportioned. This girl had talent. And I had a dilemma.

Show myself. She freaks out.

Make her vanish. She freaks out.

Move on.

And what if she's one of the miracles?

The pink tip of her tongue peeked from the corner of her mouth, a signal of deep concentration. She deftly wiggled the pencil lead, shading the eyes of her image. Making them smoky. Making the girl in the picture darker, sadder.

Making up my mind for me.

Fwoomp! I edged into the room, fully visible.

"Hey."

She startled, looked up and blinked at me. The pencil hung frozen over her picture. "Who are you?"

"Doctor?" It came off as a lame guess.

I got the look, the one that belongs exclusively to preadolescent girls. "You don't look like a doctor."

"Visiting art critic?"

She reflexively turned the picture away from me. I saw the call button beside her on the bed. She didn't reach for it.

"Lemme see." I pointed. "Come on. Please."

"Are you another therapist? Did my parents send you?"

"At this hour? I saw your light. Come on. Show me. I won't tell

anyone.” I realized saying those words to a preteen girl in the middle of the night while lurking around a children’s hospital carried a huge creepy factor.

She studied me long enough to convince herself that she had studied me, then eased the sketch pad toward me. Although I’d already seen it, I took a long moment to study it. Whatever I said next might save her life.

“I see this as the moment of transition. Am I correct?”

She nodded.

“Is she already across? Because she casts no reflection on the water.”

She nodded again, this time bringing her eyes up to read me, looking for trust she didn’t expect to find.

“Are you going to tell me I’m really good?”

“Nope. Everyone tells you that. And you can’t be sure they mean it—or if they’re just being nice because you’re sick. I want to ask you something.” I pointed at the picture. “Do you think you’re ready for that?”

She didn’t hesitate. “My mom and dad aren’t. But I am.”

“You sure? That floating thing looks scary.” I gestured at the foot of her bed, at the open space in the room. “Want to try it out first? Take it for a test drive?”

The *look* came back, complete with tucked lip and knit brows. I decided I wouldn’t want to be her parents; this one would be a challenge. I reached out and closed a gentle grip on her sketch pad. She let me take it. I placed it on the tray beside the bed. I stepped to the foot of the bed and held out my hands.

“I’m not getting out of bed with you! I’m going to call someone.” Her hand fell to the call button.

“Wait! Let me show you something. Okay? Here.” *Fwoomp!* I vanished. Her eyes opened wide. Astonished pupils floated on bright white—hunting for me in the empty space at the foot of her bed. “Relax. I’m still here.” *Fwoomp!* I settled on my feet and held out my hands. “Come on. Try it with me.”

She stared at me, deeply uncertain, fear growing on her face. “Are you—? Is it time? Are you here for me?”

“Oh hell, no! I’m just here to give you a ride. So you don’t have to be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid!”

“Honey, everybody’s afraid. If they tell you otherwise, they’re lying. C’mon.”

I held out my hands.

She wiggled to her knees, then to her feet on the bed. The heavy plastic

infusion line running into the top of her gown tugged at her. She reached up, closed a valve and pulled it free.

“Should you be doing that?”

“I do it all the time.”

She took two hesitant steps closer and her hands came forward to meet mine. I gently closed my larger hands around hers.

“No giggling,” I warned her. She suppressed a smile.

FWOOMP! I pushed a little extra hard and *the other thing* snapped around us.

“Heeee!” she squeaked.

“*Shhhhhhh!*” I worried about the open door and the cluster of night nurses down the hall. The girl’s breathing grew urgent, louder. “Relax. We’re going to float now. Like in your picture.” My feet left the floor. I flexed my ankles for a light push-off. Her hands clamped on mine like vices. She rose with me. “I’m going to let go with one hand. Just relax.” I had to pull my right hand out of her tight grip. She wobbled and began flailing. “Easy! Easy! Just hang loose. Just float.” She calmed down.

We floated free of the bed. In short order I had to touch the ceiling to stop our ascent. I used the core muscle to rotate her around me like a dancer. She didn’t giggle or laugh like Lane, but her rapid breathing telegraphed her excitement. We toured the small dimensions of the room. I kept her aloft for what felt like a long while, though it may only have been minutes.

Eventually I guided her to a position over the bed.

Fwoomp!

She reappeared and bobbed on the mattress. I dropped to the floor beside her. She stood frozen, astonished, searching her body and mine.

“Is that—is that what it will be like?”

“I don’t have a clue. Here. Sit before you fall down.” She dropped onto the mattress. The preteen skepticism was gone. She stared at me with wonder. She maintained a rigid grip on my left hand.

“Anastasia, this wasn’t a preview of death. You shouldn’t be thinking in those terms. But, no matter what happens, you don’t have to be afraid,” I said. I had to hustle the words out. My throat threatened to close. I peeled my hand free, picked up the sketch pad and looked at the image again. “May I have this?”

She nodded. I handed the pad to her. “You have to sign it.”

She released a shy smile, found her pencil and added her name to the lower right corner in flourishing cursive. She dotted the *i* with a heart, then tore the sheet off the pad and handed it to me. I folded it carefully and slipped it into the breast pocket of my flight jacket.

“Thanks.”

“What’s your name?”

I considered lying to her. Giving my name might be one too many clues left behind. A kid telling a story about a strange man who made him or her disappear and fly won’t gain a lot of traction, but when you start adding a name and possibly an image from a security camera, things begin to take shape. It brought Donaldson to mind. A dangerous man collecting puzzle pieces.

“Will,” I told her, despite caution and logic. “And listen to me.” I leaned in close to her, picked up her hand again and squeezed. “Do you feel this?” I squeezed harder. Pinched.

“Uh-huh.” She winced at the pressure.

I let her hand go. She rubbed it. “That was real. This wasn’t a dream. Whatever you think for the rest of your life, I promise you, this wasn’t a dream. I can’t explain it, but don’t ever doubt yourself. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Okay. I gotta go. And yes.”

“What?”

“You are good.” I patted the drawing in my pocket.

Fighting an overwhelming urge to kiss her on the forehead, I backed away, vanished, and pulled myself out of the room as she stared at the empty space I had occupied.

I made my first solo flight after just six and a half hours of training. Every instructor I've ever flown with has told me I have a touch. I was sixteen and full of myself. My confidence grew disproportionately. A few weeks after that first solo, around the time I had fourteen or fifteen hours, I was practicing takeoffs and landings. I had this thing *down*. I was hot shit. On the fifth or sixth landing I guided the Cessna 152 down the final approach toward the runway numbers I'd been hitting the way Robin Hood hits bullseyes. Just as I eased the nose up to flare for the landing, a rogue gust of wind swept across the runway. The aircraft ballooned skyward, what with the big barn-door flaps hanging out. My airspeed dropped and the aircraft heaved off to the left. Grass replaced asphalt below me. I slammed the throttle forward for full power but felt the shudder of a stall. At that point I hung thirty feet in the air in the worst possible position. Without forward speed, the wing ceases to produce lift. Instead of flying, I sat in an aluminum can about to fall to earth. To this day, I'm not sure how that little trainer clawed its way out of a crash. I remember wallowing along above the edge of the taxiway, feeling the flaps resist forward speed. I don't remember raising the flaps. I don't remember climbing out and flying the traffic pattern back to another landing. I remember touching down and braking to get off the runway as fast as possible. And I remember sitting there, shaken, thinking I needed to taxi back to the hangar to get the hell out of this machine. I don't remember consciously deciding instead to taxi to the end of the runway for another takeoff, and then another landing.

Possibly the most important takeoff and landing of my career. I don't remember either.

Floating outside Anastasia's room with her sketch tucked in my jacket, I wanted to get out of that hospital and never return. I wanted to be done with it. I wished that the Angel Flight had never happened, and I had never learned that *the other thing* does more than let me vanish and float. I looked for good signage that would allow me to escape. And I would have.

Except for Benny.

Benny's door sign had an airplane on it. He either had my artistic talent, or he was somewhere in the preschool age range. The airplane had two wings and a tail and a scribble for a propeller. A stick figure sat in the pilot's seat with a round head and a big fat grin. The name Benny was spelled across the bottom of the page in uneven, block letters, but this kid wanted to make sure everyone got it. He wrote "me" above the airplane and used an arrow to point at the pilot.

Benny.

I took one look at Benny's sign and knew I had to make one more take-off, and one more landing.

If the sign wasn't enough, I heard a child's voice call out from within his room. "Yeeeeooooowwwwnnnnn!" It translated easily for me.

"Benny! Go to sleep!" One of the nurses called out from across the hall. I prepared to hustle out of the way, but she didn't move from her station. Apparently, dealing with Benny in the middle of the night was routine.

"Okay!" Benny called out cheerfully.

I used my propulsion unit to glide through his door and into his room.

Benny sat on his bed in the dark, nowhere near asleep. He waved his hand above his head, pushing a small die-cast airplane through the blue skies of his imagination. His arm wore tape for an IV plug, but the plastic tube was disconnected and hung dripping at the side of his bed.

I waited a minute to make sure he didn't let loose with more airplane noises. He had been warned. Keep it quiet, and no one would come in and force him to duck under the covers. He operated his airplane in silence.

When I felt reasonably certain he wouldn't draw trouble, I reappeared.

Fwoomp!

Benny scarcely gave me a glance.

"What are you flying?" I asked, whispering.

"Airplane." There was a hint of *dummy* in the reply.

"I can see that," I shot back. "What kind of airplane?"

He looked at me. I would have guessed four or five, but I've found that kids waging war with cancer run small. His face read slightly older. Seven?

He had the signature bald head, but didn't wear a cap, although I saw one on his nightstand. It advertised Southwest Airlines.

"Lemme see it," I said. I put my hand out. He surrendered the toy to me, but with an expectant look.

"F4U Corsair," I said. "You can always tell. They have the gull wing." I pointed out the wing shape on the blue toy. "Navy fighter. One of the best."

Benny looked at his toy with new appreciation. I bent down, resting my elbows on the protective bars of his bed.

"I'm a pilot," I said.

"For real?"

"Gimme five." I held up my hand which he slapped vigorously. "As real as that. I fly airplanes all the time."

"My uncle is a pilot. He gave me this. And he gave me a hat."

"Does he ever take you flying?"

Benny shook his head. *Well, what kind of crap is that?* A kid like this, you gotta take him flying.

"Ever been in an airplane?"

"We rode in an airplane to come here!"

"One like that?" I pointed at his Corsair.

Benny shook his head. "It was really big! It was orange!"

"I like this blue one better. How would you like to go flying right now?"

Benny's eyes lit up. His whole body shivered suddenly, like he'd taken a mild electric charge.

"Okay. But we pilots obey the rules. First rule, be really, really quiet. The nurses will make us stop if they hear you. Can you do that?"

His head bobbed a solemn vow of silence.

"Alright, then. You're my copilot. This is going to feel funny. Put your airplane down and stand up."

He stood. I reached out and picked him up off the bed. He was thin and light. He threw an arm around my neck.

"Can I wear my hat?" He pointed. I plucked the hat from the nightstand and dropped it on his head. He grinned.

"Okay, copilot. Here we go!"

Fwoomp!

We began a slow rise. I expected a giggle or an outcry, but Benny fell silent.

"You okay pal?"

He didn't speak.

"What's wrong?"

"When are we going to fly?" he whispered.

“Um...” My feet were already six inches off the floor, but I realized that from Benny’s perspective this wasn’t all that impressive. I wondered if he even noticed that his body had disappeared. I checked the clock to see how much time we had before the next hourly assessment. “Okay, hang tight. And keep quiet!”

“Shhhhh!” he signaled.

I pulled the power unit from my pocket and rotated. A shot of power took me to the door. After scanning for trouble, I cleared the hall and eased out. I pushed the power to a low, subaudible growl. We eased forward and I aimed upward. The grip on my neck tightened and Benny wiggled, telling me he was sure as shit flying now.

We took to the hallway, rising. Benny’s breathing quickened.

“What do you think?” I whispered when we were well out of earshot of the nurse’s station.

“Cool!”

We passed the Y junction and eased down the hall toward the elevators. Beside the elevators, the waist-height railing overlooked the atrium. I pushed slightly higher and we floated across the top of the railing, out over the huge atrium, three stories up.

“WOW!” Benny cried out, full voice. I had expected his arm around my neck to strangle me, but he remained relaxed.

“Shhhhh!” I checked. The reception desk was empty, as was the atrium. Still, a kid calling out at three a.m. might set off alarms.

We flew. We flew figure eights. We flew down to the fountain and back up to the skylights at the top of the atrium, higher than the fifth floor. We circled and dove and climbed and Benny broke the rules and giggled and laughed. I had to shush him when a man in blue scrubs hurried across the atrium floor below us. The man fingered his phone as he walked. If he heard a tiny boy giggling in the rafters, he didn’t pay it any mind.

I watched the time. When the session began to feel long, I gave Benny a last circuit, down to the floor, around the piano, which someone had unplugged, then back up to the skylight. It was time to go home.

Back on Benny’s floor, we passed the lounge with the coffee station. A clock showed that the minute hand had edged past three-thirty. The coffee called out to me. I decided this was going to be an all-nighter and resolved to grab a cup on my way out of the hospital.

The television hanging on the wall opposite the coffee station stopped me cold.

Josiah James’s puffy head filled the screen, his mouth working furiously, baring canines. Big bold graphics splashed across the screen behind him.

JOSIAH JAMES AMERICAN REVOLUTION TOUR

Quick cuts of the American flag waving, of jets screaming overhead in formation, of battleships and marching American soldiers joined the onscreen barrage of images. The big metallic title graphic returned with another image of James, this one striking a noble and patriotic pose with his face turned skyward. A series of city names and dates appeared.

A tour.

The asshole was taking his show on the road.

I hung there staring when a long, low muttering sound broke the silence.

“I farted!” Benny announced loudly, giggling.

“BENNY, GO TO SLEEP!” someone called out from the nurse’s station.

I turned my head to where I thought his ear was and whispered, “You sure did! Something stinks!” He laughed.

“BENNY!”

The Josiah James commercial faded to black, but I found myself smiling at Benny’s contribution to the sound track.

I took Benny back to his bed and warned him that pilots need their sleep and airplanes need to rest. I put his die-cast Corsair on the nightstand along with his hat and tucked him in.

He checked his airplane and hat, gave me an inscrutable look, then closed his eyes.

I slipped out.

One more takeoff and landing.

“Hey.” Andy’s voice.

“Hi!” I said it a little too brightly.

“Were you sleeping? Oh, god! I’m so sorry!”

The room was dark, but decent hotels have decent curtains. I rolled up on one elbow to check the night stand clock. Eight oh five. Hell, yes, I was sleeping. For all of about an hour.

“No, no,” I said automatically and for no intelligent reason.

“You’re a bad liar, especially when you’re half asleep. I’ll call you later.”

“Wait!” I sat up and worked some saliva around in my mouth. I keep a water bottle by the bed in hotels. “No, it’s fine. I had the alarm set for whatever time this is anyway.”

“Liar.”

“How did your raccoon hunt go?” I reached for the water bottle.

“Al’s no dummy. If he’s poaching parked cars in Milwaukee, he’s not stupid enough to hide them in his back lot. We didn’t find anything, but yes, there was a family of raccoons under that car. I told Al to call that wildlife rescue place down in Fredonia.”

The water cleared my throat. I rubbed lingering sleep from my eyes.

“Did you grill Godzilla?”

“Who?”

“Al’s mechanic.”

“Will, that’s terrible! But, yes. Except once she sobered up, she shut up about the whole thing. How’s the trip going?”

“Good, I guess. I can’t speak for the meetings, but the flights have been superb. The throttle jockey up front has a masterful touch.”

“I can attest to that.”

“Oh, don’t do that to me at this hour of the day. Hold that thought.”

“How long?” she asked, all but purring.

“As far as I know, we’re on schedule to be home for dinner tomorrow.” We slipped into small talk about dinner, menus, shopping and household minutiae. Asleep or not, I liked that she called. The sound of her voice soothed emotions rubbed raw when I make hospital visits.

She brought up Friday night.

“What about Friday night?”

“Do we have plans?”

“You’re the keeper of the calendar,” I said. “You tell me.”

“Are you scheduled?”

“Not with Sandy. Why?”

She hesitated for a second, then said, “I can get off a little early. What about a weekend in Milwaukee?”

“Are you asking me out on a date?” My mind already raced ahead to thoughts of a nice dinner, a nice hotel and Andy... “I’d have to check with my people.”

“Well, have your people contact my people. Now go back to sleep.”

Fat chance of that.

“What’s he doing here?”

I stopped. Andy took another step, then turned to me with an entirely insincere look of innocence.

We stood at the entrance to the back lounge of Elsa’s, an upscale restaurant on Cathedral Square in Milwaukee. The Friday night crowd gave the place an electricity that made me glad I’d come.

A visit to Elsa’s is a treat, a must whenever we run away to the big city, garnished with superb martinis and the best cheeseburger I’ve ever tasted. The bar draws a crowd, especially on weekends. Being an old married couple more interested in what awaits back at the hotel, we don’t close the joint, but we linger over a great meal and romantic conversation blessed with brimming martinis. The crowd building around the time we make our exit strikes me as a ‘see and be seen’ demographic. I suspect that later in the evening, Elsa’s is a busy hookup bar.

The front of the long, narrow restaurant features the bar and traditional tables. The back lounge is darker and offers low leather chairs and small round tables. Andy and I usually choose the subdued atmosphere of the lounge.

Greg LeMore, a wiry MPD detective with raging facial stubble, sat at a corner table for three. His presence did not contribute to the ambiance I had in mind.

“Uh, I invited him,” Andy said. She stepped intimately closer.

“Don’t bat those beautiful lashes at me, woman. Was this your plan all along?”

“No!” Her hands found my waist. “I mean, yes. But seducing you remains a priority. I want you to keep that in mind while we talk cop shop over dinner with Greg.” She pecked me on the cheek and bounced away.

LeMore issued a broad smile as he traded a hug with my wife.

“Will!” He shook hands with me. “Good to see you!”

“Good to see you, too, Greg,” I said. He pulled a chair for Andy. I slipped into another beside her. LeMore took the third seat in the triangle.

I like LeMore. Under a low-key countenance, he’s a sharp, nerdy detective with the Milwaukee Police Department. He’s been an invaluable resource for Andy on several occasions. My appreciation for LeMore outweighed my disappointment that Andy and I wouldn’t be dining alone.

A waitress checked in with us, laying small square napkins on the table in anticipation of drink orders. Andy favors the Cosmopolitan. I ordered a Kamikaze. LeMore waved off a drink and asked for water.

“I’m on the clock,” he said. He nodded at Andy. “Chief Schultz said to tell you your desk is gathering dusk.”

Andy may have blushed slightly. Deputy Chief Don Schultz’s standing offer of a job with the Milwaukee Police Department was a high compliment to Andy.

“Please give my best to the Chief,” Andy said politely.

LeMore sat back and looked us over.

“You two look good. It’s been a while! And may I say, Andrea, holy shit! Brogan!” Andy offered a humble shrug. LeMore grinned. “Don’t give me that, Detective. That was impressive! I take it you were in on that, too, Will?”

“Not me,” I lied. “I’m just a float in the parade.”

“Yeah, right.” LeMore looked us over a second time, noting Andy’s dress and my black jacket over a black shirt and tie. “Wait a minute. You two look like you’re doing date night. Jesus, Andrea, what the hell am I doing here? We can meet up tomorrow.”

“No! Greg, no. It’s okay,” Andy pleaded. “Will and I are spending the weekend. This is fine.”

LeMore adopted a skeptical look. “Okay. But I’m not third-wheeling your dinner.” He reached back and pulled a file folder from a shoulder bag slung on the back of his chair. He offered a wry smile. “You can go through this at your hotel tonight if you have nothing better to do.”

“Thank goodness,” I said.

LeMore said, “That guy is a piece of shit. Undiluted. We dug into him

after Braddock tried to blow himself up a block from the Pfister Hotel. It's like James and his conspiracy bullshit was hard wired into Braddock's head—which carries no weight in court, of course."

Andy flipped the file open.

"Anyway, there's some background on James. Interesting connections and associates. I wrote up a ton of notes on his web presence, his business model, and some of his recent political moves. I emailed you a long list of links, too. Articles about the guy, his tactics, some of his nefarious practices. People have been watching. The Nebraska state attorney's office had an interest for a while, but no matter what gets reported, nothing seems to stick to the guy. Our DA poked around him, too."

Andy turned pages, absorbed. Too absorbed to notice the questioning look on my face.

"James?" I asked. She didn't hear me. Or chose not to.

Greg leaned forward and pointed at one of the pages. "I wrote up some notes on his web structure, the servers he's using."

"Josiah James?" I asked.

"Yes, dear," Andy said absently, or tried to make it seem so.

"He scored a big infusion of cash in the last couple years. He's got some big-bucks equipment and serious firewalls."

If Andy and I were to discuss this, it clearly wasn't happening across the table from Greg LeMore.

"Did you hack into him?" I asked LeMore.

"Firewalls, Will. That's what they're for. To keep people out. It's not like in the movies where some joker taps on a keyboard and plows right through."

Andy looked up. LeMore looked her in the eye. "We all heard about Officer Mackiejewski. If giving you this balances the scale for Mike, you have my full support. But if you're going to do something stupid, tell me now and I'll take it with me and burn it."

"Doing something stupid is my role," I interrupted.

Andy gave LeMore a solemn nod. "By the book."

"Fuck the book. I just don't want you putting yourself in the shit over this piece of crap." She closed the folder and tucked it between her purse and the wall beside her.

"Second that," I said. Our drinks arrived. Martinis poured to the rim. The server landed them on the napkins without spilling a drop. Unable to lift them, Andy and I unabashedly leaned over the table to slurp the first sips.

"Did you know James is touring?" LeMore asked.

"We just found out," Andy said.

“He’s following Great Leader’s ‘rally’ model. He’s also recording the rallies and using them as broadcasts. That’s partly how he draws audiences. He bills it as the live recording of his show, so people think they’re going to be on TV. It’s not live, of course. He edits the shit out of it. There have been hecklers, protesters, people trying to call him out and disrupt. None of that makes it into the final cut. Also, he’s not drawing big crowds, so he edits to make them look bigger than they are. I called one of the venues in Nebraska. Talked to a manager there who told me that James’s people herded everyone into the front floor section to make it look like standing room only. Then they moved the whole bunch onto bleachers behind him and handed out signs to wave while he strutted around the stage.”

“The Big Lie,” Andy said. “Why is that so hard for people to grasp? He lies, of course, in the stories he reports—the statistics, the sequence of events. It’s all easy to fact check, but then he lies about the fact check. And anything or anyone that comes out against him is ‘fake news’—”

“All hail Dr. Goebbels,” I muttered.

LeMore grew intense. “That’s the craziest part! James pretends to be part of the press. He uses that news set to make himself look like a legitimate news organization. Which is *another* lie, because it’s just a glossy set in a low-rent warehouse in Lincoln, Nebraska. He ambushes known political figures just to get his picture taken with them, then he inserts the images into his video graphics to make it look like he’s Ted Koppel. Most of the people in those images have never heard of him! His content is all bullshit, but his image manipulation is masterful!”

Andy and I stared at LeMore for a moment. He shrugged.

“Yeah, I get a little worked up. How much of his stuff have you seen?”

“Too much,” Andy replied. “I dug into it around the time—when Mike—when it was bad. I had to. The bastard said some things about Mike, about the Braddock shooting—it was hard to take.”

“He’s a snake. Out of one side of his mouth he cries about truth—”

“He wouldn’t know truth if it bit him on the ass,” I said.

“—and out of the other side he’s telling the Ben Braddocks of the world to mix up plastique in the kitchen sink,” LeMore said. “It’s easy to get caught up in the emotion. Trust me, I know. My grandparents were Armenian. I can’t take James’s shit about immigrants. That shithead is second-generation Greek, for God’s sake! Another ‘let me in and slam the door behind me’ immigrant bigot.”

“I shouldn’t say this at a table with two cops,” I said, “but I’d like to see him fall in a wood chipper. Accidentally, of course.” The idea wasn’t new. Andy squashed my suggestion months ago.

LeMore, the senior detective present, grew emphatic. “You’ve got to stay between the lines, Andrea. I mean it. From behind the badge, you can only look at what he’s doing that’s criminal. If you get near him, you better have cause. If you get caught poking around him without cause, he’ll scream all kinds of lies about you until someone who matters takes notice and that shit will fly right back in your face.”

“Ever hear of an FBI special agent by the name of Donaldson?” Andy asked.

LeMore shook his head.

Andy explained, including Donaldson’s story about the radio syndication.

“Kidnapping.” LeMore’s eyes grew wider. His wheels turned. “That’s something we can sink our teeth into.”

“We?” she asked. “What happened to Detective By The Book?”

“Yeah,” I piled on. “What happened to stay the hell away from this snake?”

LeMore grinned. “As if you’d listen. And as if I’m going to miss another wild ride with you two!”

The server appeared. I held up my hand for her to stand by for a moment.

“Have you had the cheeseburger here?” I asked LeMore.

“To die for.”

“Then stay. Please,” Andy insisted. “Will and I have all night to drink and get silly. I want to talk more about this.”

I studied my wife long enough for her to notice and look back at me with a flash of guilt.

This wasn’t what I expected. And I wasn’t referring to our interrupted date.

WE GROUND through the subject of Josiah James for several hours with LeMore. The meal came and went. LeMore declared himself off the clock and joined us in a cocktail, a scotch that smelled like burnt rubber. He and Andy bashed James back and forth across the table like tennis pros hammering the ball. The two of them knew enough to write a biography—from James’s earliest days in college as a campus evangelist to his current arch-conservative attempt to construe his venom as the voice of Real America. They pulled out the file and LeMore pointed out pages that suggested possible criminal angles. Andy surprised me. Not the degree to which she had researched James, because Andy doesn’t do anything half-assed. She surprised me because she had clearly nurtured an interest in putting an end to

the man. Until now she had suppressed my proposals for squashing James like a bug—although that may have had something to do with the fact that most of my suggestions ended in a gaudy murder, usually involving a fall from something high.

We broke up the conference around nine-thirty. I felt bad about tying up the table so long and left an extravagant tip. Outside Elsa's glass front door, on a sidewalk infused with something that glittered, Andy and LeMore made plans to talk again at the end of the week. She promised to review all the material he had assembled. He promised to scare up more. He hugged my wife, shook my hand, then hurried off.

The still night hung warm and humid around us, with the electric charge of approaching thunderstorms in the air. The forecast projected a line passing through southeastern Wisconsin after midnight. Our hotel, carefully selected because Rosemary II gave Andy a Groupon that promised the second night free on select weekends, stood only a few blocks away. I hooked Andy's arm in mine and led her across the street for a stroll through the Cathedral Square park. The lighted face of the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist cast a warm artificial twilight over us.

Greg LeMore's departure terminated the topic of Josiah James. I wanted to talk to Andy about him—not so much about him, but about her awakened interest. I sensed that she didn't, and since I can only take Josiah James and his ilk in small doses, the moment moved on.

We let the conversation wander. First commenting on Elsa's, then on the park, then on the city lights around us. I nurtured a lively buzz, having downed three of the oversized Kamikazes. Andy, a lightweight, went two rounds with Cosmos, but left the last third of her second drink for me to finish. Between the food, the drink and the touch of a beautiful woman beside me, I cruised happily on autopilot through the winding paths of the park.

"This is nice."

"Uh-huh."

She pulled me closer. We traded glances.

"Romantic," she said.

"Sure is."

We strolled past the bandstand on the eastern third of the park. A banner proclaimed Jazz In The Park every Thursday night during the summer. Andy and I have seen a few of the outdoor shows, sitting on a blanket with a bottle of wine between us.

"So, can I ask a question?" she asked.

"Anything."

“This strolling through the park thing...is this some kind of movie you see playing in your head, or would you rather take me back to the hotel and tear my clothes off?”

If not for her high heels, I would have run.

SOMETIME AFTER TWO A.M., I slipped my arm from beneath my sleeping wife's head and eased a pillow in its place. I slid off the bed and stood for a moment appreciating her shape on the sheets. Faint light defined the slope from her shoulders to her waist, the rise and curve of her hips. The room was warm, but I leaned down and lifted the sheet over her.

I slipped silently away to use the bathroom. The plumbing made excessive noise when I finished, but I sustained the effort to avoid waking her by turning the light off before opening the door.

She sat at the room's desk with a light on.

The sheet I had pulled over her hung around her, wrapped loosely across her bosom, leaving her shoulders bare. She leaned over the open file LeMore had given her. Her long hair, after-sex wild, hid her face until she turned and looked at me.

“Well, don't you know how to make an entrance.”

“I wasn't expecting lights. Maybe I better put something on.”

She appraised the situation. “I'd rather you didn't.” She closed the folder.

“Find something interesting?”

She stood and moved toward the bed, then stopped, letting the sheet fall. “I believe I have.”

Convinced she wasn't referring to the file, I went to the desk and killed the light. I found her in the dark and we tumbled back onto the bed.

I was wrong. Just before speech became impossible, she said, “He's doing one of his rallies in Des Moines next week. I want to go.”

I hoped she wasn't expecting a discussion. Josiah James was the farthest thing from my mind.

“Who was it?”

“Stephenson again.” I closed the screen on my phone and undid my seat belt. I helped Andy secure her headphones.

“Did he leave a voicemail?”

“He never does. I think he’s paranoid about leaving recorded messages.”

She didn’t move from the copilot’s seat. Outside the cockpit window, I saw the fuel truck approach across the Des Moines airport ramp. I wanted to catch the guy and top off.

“What do you mean ‘never’? How often has he been calling?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Couple times.”

“Couple?”

“Six.” I suppressed a grin. *Six out of eight!*

“Will!”

“I need to catch this fuel truck.” I lifted myself out of the seat, twisted and scooted down the short aisle. I released the cabin stair door.

“You have to call him back!” Andy called after me.

I ducked out and dropped to the ground. The ramp was hot in the midday sun. Motivated, Andy wasn’t far behind.

“Will, why aren’t you picking up his calls?”

“Just now? Because I was expertly piloting a high-performance aircraft through three hundred miles of pop-up thunderstorms.”

She followed me around the wing. I waved to the fuel truck driver who angled his tank truck toward the nose of the Navajo.

“When we get to the hotel, you’re calling him.” She moved in front of me and planted her hands on her hips. I’m taller and haul around fifty-five pounds more than she has, but I know formidable when I see it.

“Yes, ma’am.”

While Andy found the restroom in the FBO, I finished securing the aircraft, handling the fuel ticket, and hustling our overnight bags from the plane into the air-conditioned office. I gave the airplane a glance as we prepared to transition to a rental car. She sat on the ramp in bright sunlight, white against a darkening western sky. Seventy or eighty miles away lightning flickered in rising cumulus tops.

“Hang on,” I told Andy. I went back to the desk and flagged down the young man working reception. “Hey, we just came in with that Navajo out there. Twenty-One Hotel Whiskey. We’ll be here overnight. Can you pull it into a hangar for us? I’m worried about hail.”

“Uh...” he looked around for someone with more knowledge or more authority. “I can ask. I think so but let me get your number to confirm.”

I recited my mobile number. “Thanks. It’s chocked, but the brakes are off.”

I caught up with Andy outside the FBO entrance.

“This place is a dump,” Andy observed. She leaned forward to look through the windshield.

We sat in the parked rental looking at a cream brick building with a lumpy, stained dome roof. The overall effect suggested one of those pale fungus bulbs that materialize in a damp, dark woods. A sign above a span of entrance doors said *Coliseum*. I think the Romans would have taken offense. Behind us, the cracked asphalt parking lot stretched to a chain-link fence that sagged between leaning posts. On the other side of the building, a scrubby field stretched to where state highway 65 cut a north-south line across the Des Moines River. The field gave the impression it was once used for additional parking.

“What was it supposed to be?” Sitting here in the middle of nowhere, someone surely planted this monstrosity for a reason.

“It was supposed to be a country music festival venue. Ten or fifteen years ago. I think. It’s mentioned on the website. Seems like the grand plan failed. Now it sees marginal use. James is on the calendar for tonight. There’s a gun show in two weeks. And there’s some seventies hair band playing in September. That’s it.”

“You sure you want to go in? Have you had your shots?”

“We’re early.” Andy sat back.

Early or not, the parking lot already contained a couple dozen cars. Our rental was by far the newest and nicest. Half were pickup trucks, and of those, half had tailgates plastered with stickers proclaiming the political

leanings of the vehicle's owner. Calling them 'conservative' seemed euphemistic.

A line had formed at the doors. Beer bellies hung over jeans accessorized with wallet chains. John Deere caps slouched over puffy, overweight faces. A few women wore the tights currently in fashion which let no panty line or cellulite bulge go unseen. T-shirts displayed personal statements ranging from Confederate flags to calls for imprisonment of various political figures. If James planned on pulling together a rally crowd for his cameras, he had slim pickings.

I became more conscious than usual of my wife sitting next to me. Outside of a calendar, I didn't think many in this crowd often encountered a woman who looked like Andy.

Coming here had been her idea, although I had already determined I would attend one of the shows on the Josiah James tour. My plan had been to do it as a tangent to one of Sandy's trips. Andy's surprise invitation to LeMore, her awakened interest in James, and her declaration she would attend his Des Moines rally caught me off guard. Until our evening with LeMore, her attitude had been to let this rabid dog lie. When I asked her about the sudden interest, she told me Donaldson's visit triggered the change. If so, it suited me.

Her presence altered but did not derail what I had in mind for James. It simply introduced a need to improvise.

"I'm not sure going in the front door is the best idea," I said.

"I'm not going to badge my way in. I'm not here to draw attention I don't need."

"How tight can security be for a dump like this? A couple of rent-a-cops, maybe?"

She didn't answer. More cars and trucks arrived. A steady stream traversed the dirt road leading to the parking lot. I checked the line. The one vehicle I had hoped for had not appeared.

"Do you think Donaldson will be here?" she asked. It startled me. She had seen me looking, but I had not considered the possibility.

"Why would he be here?"

"Iowa, dear. This is his home stomping ground. And this is the only date James has on his schedule for Iowa."

"Christ, Dee! If he sees you here, he's going to think—or figure out—that you're doing exactly what he asked you to do! Then what?"

"Doesn't mean I'm going to help him."

I wasn't sure she had that right. Donaldson had all but threatened us with his desert comment.

Just as I formulated an argument for Andy to abort, the vehicle I'd been looking for pulled into the line of cars. Andy pointed.

"What are they doing here?"

There was no mistaking the television news remote truck with its retractable transmission tower and the bold graphics emblazoned on the sides.

I didn't respond. I can get away with omission, but generally fail any attempt to lie to Andy.

I had called all four television stations in Des Moines. Getting one out of four to show up was all I needed. The van followed the flow into the lot but veered away from the cars seeking parking spaces. It rolled past us and positioned itself at the side of the building, blatantly ignoring Fire Lane warnings. A young woman jumped out of the right front seat. A moment later, the boom on the top of the van unfolded and rose.

Less than a minute later, the venue doors opened. Four men walked out. Three of them looked like football linebackers. They wore black tactical clothing and belts with conspicuous holstered weapons. No badges. Andy blew out a soft breath.

"So much for rent-a-cops."

The fourth man in the group wore a business suit. He approached the young woman and began a conversation. Andy pulled out her phone and lifted it into position to snap several photos through the windshield.

From the driver's side of the van, a man in a t-shirt and cargo shorts emerged, swinging a camera onto his shoulder. Immediately, one of the linebackers put a flat hand in front of the lens. A rapid discussion followed between the woman and the man in the suit. I expected the encounter to become confrontational, but it took on the appearance of a negotiation. The man, about Andy's size, silver-haired and carrying himself with authority, waved a hand between himself and the reporter. She spoke energetically, holding her microphone and her ground. He listened. After a moment he nodded, gave a short speech enumerating his points with his fingers, and then waved for them to enter the building. The security men took point and brought up the rear. All disappeared inside.

"I wasn't expecting that," Andy said. "It looks like the James people weren't either. I wonder why local news would cover this? More to the point, I wonder why they would let them in?"

"Are you kidding? That's mainstream coverage. James would eat that up."

The anonymous tip I called in had been crafted to serve the local news stations' underlying lust for a scoop. *James plans to jump into the race for*

President. He's planting people in his audiences who are supposed to start up chants demanding he run. The code words are "Declaration of Independence." When that happens, turn your cameras on the audience and you'll see the shills start up the chant. He's wants to announce in Iowa, but he wants it to look spontaneous. You can catch him in the act. It was a thin fabrication layered over an even thinner fabrication. I hoped it was laced with just enough conspiracy spice to draw out a hungry reporter.

I was mildly surprised it worked.

"Why don't you let me get us in there?" I suggested to Andy. "We can try a back entrance. There has to be a loading dock."

"We're not breaking in. We go in the front door." She twisted around until she faced the back seat. She unzipped her overnight bag and rummaged through the bag until she pulled out the Metallica t-shirt she likes to sleep in. She unbuttoned the white blouse she wore over jeans. "Hey. Can I get a little privacy here?"

"Would you do the same for me?"

She cracked a smile and continued stripping off her blouse. "Not a chance."

I sat back and watched. Smiling the whole time, she laid her blouse across the back seat, then maneuvered into the t-shirt. Twisting back to face forward, she reached down and grabbed two handfuls of t-shirt and tied a knot just below the line of her bra, exposing her midriff above her jeans. She then broke her hair free from a ponytail and shook it over her shoulders.

"Your sunglasses," she said, holding out her hand. I plucked them from a pocket. She put them on. "How's this?"

"Every guy in that line is going to hit on you."

"Good. The distraction might come in handy." She reached for the car door.

"Hold on." I laid my hand on her shoulder bag. "Gun and badge are in here?"

"Yes."

I shook my head. "Those goons in the black bad-guy costumes are serious, which means I'll bet you dollars to donuts they're checking bags going in. Might even have metal detectors. Do you want them to know you're a cop?"

She bit her lower lip, thinking. "Do you think I should leave it here?"

"No. I'll feel better if you have it. Why not let me take it in? You go in the front door. I'll try the back. If I can't get in, I'll bring it back here, stash it and join the line. If I can get in, I'll find you and drop it in your lap."

"No breaking and entering!"

“Deal.”

“Okay.”

Good. Because that’s what I had in mind all along.

It was my turn to twist in the seat. I pulled my old fishing vest from my overnight bag. I had already loaded it with three fully charged power units. I felt the pocket to confirm their presence. Then I touched another pocket. The weapon I had acquired for this trip was also present and accounted for.

After returning from Nashville, putting the Foundation’s Navajo to bed and waving Sandy and Arun on their way, I stayed behind in the hangar. I fired up the office computer and found what I wanted on Amazon. I used the Foundation’s credit card, the one meant for gas, hotels and travel. I didn’t want the purchase showing up on any card that Andy monitors. The idea was too crazy to explain, and I gave strong odds that she would shoot it down before it ever left the ground. I had the package delivered to Essex County Air Service and paid extra for express shipping.

The weapon occupied the right front pocket of the vest.

I slipped into the vest. Andy handed me the shoulder bag. I felt the weight of her Glock and the extra magazine she carries. I shoved the compact bag into my vest and looped her shoulder strap around my neck.

We searched our surroundings. The line snaking away from the building stretched into the parking lot but angled away from the corner space we had selected. The lot filled quickly now. I had hoped it wouldn’t, in part wishing there weren’t that many American citizens lured by Josiah James’s ludicrous conspiracy fabrications and dangerous hate mongering. The Heartland disappointed me. People streamed from their cars to join the lines. Couples. Parents with kids. Seniors. More disturbing than the numbers was the look of awe and excitement on most of the faces. Some of these people came to see a show. Many came to see their messiah.

“Dee, promise me you won’t do anything to call attention to yourself in there.”

“You either. Leave him alone. This is not a friendly crowd. This is purely research.”

For her. Not for me.

“Are we clear?” I looked around. No one strolled near our car. People crossing the lot eyed the line, hurrying to get a place that guaranteed good seats.

“Wait! Put in your earpiece!”

I had nearly forgotten. I located the Bluetooth earpiece and slipped it in my right ear with the microphone extending along my cheek. She pulled the rental keys from the ignition and stuffed them in her jeans pocket.

“Be careful,” Andy warned.

Fwoomp! I vanished.

She climbed out of the car, stepped to my side and opened the door. I used a grip on the roofline to heave myself free and upward.

“Clear.”

She closed the door and locked it, then hurried to join the crowd.

ANDY’S SATCHEL posed no problem. It lost its weight when it vanished along with me but remained snug in the vest. I snapped a propeller onto a propulsion unit and eased the power slide forward. It hummed and pulled me. Thirty feet above the parking lot, I tracked a path over Andy’s head as she walked to join the line. Men and women alike watched my wife. She used their attention to her advantage and initiated an animated conversation with a small group when she joined the line. I understood her tactic. She didn’t want to pass through the security line as a lone wolf. Chatting with others helped her fit in.

I left her smiling and laughing with new friends and angled toward the domed building. The bulging roof was made of a white composite material. Large green mildew blotches and rust lines from the hardware that secured the panels added to the structure’s derelict look. I crested the top and angled downward. The back side of the building joined a cracked asphalt lot. An eighteen-wheeler and half a dozen cars and SUVs sat on the weed-infested pavement. The truck positioned its trailer against the loading dock. As I cleared the roof, I saw that the dock door was open. Perfect.

Music throbbed from within the building. I descended, reversed course, and eased through the space between the trailer roof and the top of the open door. My eyes required a moment to adjust to the dark interior. Wary of hitting a hanging cable or light or fixture, I used the power unit to stop.

The cluttered floor below might have belonged to any warehouse, but racks of lights, scaffolding and ropes above me established this as a backstage space. Crates, boxes, tool kits and tarps had been cast about after disgorging their on-stage contents. The set James used had been unpacked and assembled hours ago.

Several large cloth backdrops, extending from the black plank floor to the ranks of steel trusses above, shielded the stage from the backstage area. Feeling confident in my adjusted vision, I tracked forward to the edge of the nearest panel. Rounding it, I passed from the gritty backstage world to the false polish of the stage and set. At center stage, on a riser, the gleaming glass surface of a broad news anchor desk reflected bright overhead spot-

lights. Upstage of the desk rows of illuminated LCD screens formed a backdrop. Racks of black speakers poured out a driving rock anthem. The bass beat slammed against my diaphragm. The LCD screens blinked through fast cuts in time with the music. Flags. Military hardware. Farm equipment. Shots of national monuments and pretty girls. And slogans.

Tear Down Fear With Truth.

Take Back America.

Fight to Preserve Freedom.

Stop The Invasion.

With this last slogan, live-action scenes of dark-skinned people hurling rocks at police played across the screens. The images came and went quickly. Cuts of riots. Cuts of people running amid chaos. Cuts of police holding the line.

I stopped. One scene showed a group of black youths harassing, then assaulting, a young blonde woman. The cut was shaky and grainy, suggesting it had been taken by a bystander, but it also flashed the familiar wavy lines that intrude when video shoots video. I stared. It looked familiar.

“Son of a bitch,” I muttered to myself. The scene had been lifted from a movie. Another scene followed, showing masses of people surging toward a bridge. I recognized it from a Will Smith film about zombies.

The mash-up panorama of plagiarized fear rolled on. I turned away. Twenty feet above the stage, I pointed the power unit at the auditorium’s seating, which formed a half-circle around the stage.

People filed in, hurrying forward to find seats nearest the stage. Sections to the left and right had been roped off so that the crowd would fill the center section. Men acting as ushers stopped people from moving into seats farther from the stage. They waved the audience forward, funneling them, admonishing them to leave no empties.

Two main doors fed the audience into two main aisles. More and more people filed in, moving quickly, energized by the thundering music.

Andy stepped into the darkened auditorium and as I expected, separated herself from the patrons surging forward. She edged sideways beside the last row and stood examining the space around her, the unused second tier of seating above and behind her, the stage, and the linebackers in black stationed at the foot of the stage.

I hit the power and accelerated toward her, then reversed strongly to stop above her. The buzz from the propulsion unit was easily drowned out by the grinding rock music. I lowered myself over the last seat in the row and tapped her on the shoulder. She nodded while resisting the impulse to flinch or look for me. She lifted her left forearm, extending it perpendicular to her

DIVISIBLE MAN: TEN MAN CREW

body. I extracted her satchel strap from around my neck and maneuvered the bag into position so that the strap would snag her arm. I let it go. A cold electric snap slapped my hand. The bag reappeared and succumbed to gravity. Her arm hooked the strap. She lifted it over her shoulder. Then she untied the t-shirt knot and let her shirt fall around her hips. She pulled her badge from the purse pocket and snapped it in place on her belt under her shirt.

She slid into the seat in the last row.

We waited.

Forty minutes later, playing to a crowd that filled only half of the center section of the auditorium, the Josiah James show began.

The auditorium went dark. LCD screens onstage faded to black. Two cameras mounted on floor dollies moved into position stage-left and -right. A third on a crane swung in over the heads of the first row.

A voice, deep and polished, thundered in the darkness.

“While you breathe the last whiff of free American air, neocons and progressive puppets are preparing arrest warrants for heroes of the new revolution!” The voice stirred electric anticipation in the crowd. “While liberals ship your dwindling food supply overseas, the deep state is preparing starvation camps for those who oppose leftist tyranny!”

The crowd rumbled its outrage.

“While fighters like Josiah James uphold American values with their dying breath, gay and lesbian anarchists plot to burn The Constitution!”

The crowd roared. A few of the patrons seated below me shouted obscenities at such a heinous idea.

“While your mothers and sisters bar their doors against the rapists and murderers streaming across our borders, demon leftist Democrats are moving to pass laws that will take away your God-given right to defend yourself!”

This was too much to bear. Men took to their feet, fists raised.

“One man stands between you and the deep state liberal hordes!”

Feet stomped. Music swelled.

“One man carries the light of Truth in the black darkness brought by diseased homosexuals!”

Pounding drumbeats joined the roar of the crowd. The LCD screens flashed to life, spreading giant metallic letters across the stage, flashing in time with the drums.

JOSIAH JAMES

The crowd shouted the name.

“JOSIAH JAMES!”

“One man holds the Bible in his hand and Jesus in his heart and rages against the ruin of Western Civilization!”

“JOSIAH JAMES!”

“One man defends the supremacy that made this nation GREAT!”

“JOSIAH JAMES!”

The pace accelerated. Music thundered.

Suddenly the entire stage erupted in light and pyrotechnics. James appeared. He marched through swirls of smoke into a pool of bright light, holding his right fist high. A cameraman onstage shadowed him. James’s head, rendered giant-sized, appeared on the LCD screens.

The crowd howled.

Hovering above the chanting and shouting audience felt like hanging over a pit full of vipers. My chest constricted. I suppressed fear that *the other thing* might fail me and drop me into this mob to be torn apart.

I twisted to check on Andy. She watched the spectacle from her seat at the back.

This is a really bad idea. I felt a stark irrational fear that a spotlight would land on my wife while James denounced her as a spy from the stage.

James held his pose. The screens shifted from his portrait image to a giant multi-panel image of the American flag. Martial music played.

In any other setting, Josiah James might have gone unnoticed. The only thin thing about him was his short black hair. A bald spot caught and kicked back spotlight reflections. His hands were pudgy. His belly pressed on his belt. He might not be considered fat, but in a poster for fitness, James would be the Before image.

Standing in an orchestrated whirlwind of light, smoke and noise with his fist thrown high, he looked like a man fantasizing himself as Hero.

The music tempo accelerated. He marched, first left, then right. He pointed at his adoring fans. With each stab of his finger, isolated patches of frenzy erupted in the crowd. He performed this back-and-forth maneuver with his cameraman trailing until the screens changed again. Blazing computer-generated chrome and sparkling graphics appeared, displaying his name. The announcer’s voice boomed.

“From over three hundred broadcast stations in America, from the largest

internet news platform on the web, backed by dozens of reporters gathering news from our bureaus worldwide—ladies and gentlemen, the award-winning, ass-kicking, take no prisoners defender of truth and justice! The salvation of freedom! The pillar of the righteous! Here now to bring you the voice of Real America—JOSIAH JAMES!”

I didn't think the crowd had the capacity to get louder, especially over the blasting music, but the space filled with the sound of people screaming themselves hoarse.

James stopped his left-right march. He bowed, waved, pointed. He placed his hand solemnly over his heart. He turned to the waving flag on his LCD screen and saluted.

The music took up a new beat. James bolted into a short-stride run, leaping the small riser and jogging to the chair behind the broad glistening desk. The boom camera and both floor cameras moved in. The crowd continued cheering. I looked down. Most of them dropped into their seats. Looking closer, I saw that many had stopped cheering and were settling in for the show. Yet the crowd noise hit a crescendo. It dawned on me that the frenzied cheering came from speakers lined up below the lip of the stage.

James took up the seated anchorman position familiar to his internet fans. He reached under the desk and pulled out a sheaf of papers, tamping them together. He gazed out at the audience and pounded the desk with his fist. He reached under the desk again and pulled up a big desktop microphone, the kind last seen in radio broadcasts of the fifties. Utterly unnecessary, except as a giant symbol. He leaned into the silver monster microphone.

“Thank you! Please, be seated!” The crowd was already seated. The recorded cheering continued. He waved his arms. “Please! You're too kind! Thank you!” For several minutes he worked the humble celebrity host routine against the prerecorded cheers of an adoring audience.

The television news cameraman and the on-air reporter took up a position near the stage. The cameraman shouldered his camera and fixed it on James, but occasionally swung it to capture the center section audience. Standing nearby, two of the black-clad security men watched over the news team.

The news crew reminded me of my mission. I patted the device in my pocket. Carefully operating the propulsion unit with my left hand, I eased toward the stage, mindful of the swinging boom camera.

The rapt crowd settled in. Many raised their phones to record video of their hero. Good. I needed to act before they tired of holding their arms high.

James attacked the big microphone with his snarling gravelly voice. He

promised his audience that what they were about to hear would shock them. He lamented that it was his sad duty to report to the great Americans here tonight a news story so depraved, so heart-stopping, that words failed him. He shouted out familiar names from mainstream headlines. The President. The Speaker of the House of Representatives. Senators. He gushed over some and sneered at others. He railed against fake news networks that refused to acknowledge the REAL TRUTH (on cue, the words appeared behind him in four-foot letters) he was about to share. He informed all present that not only would they hear Real Truth, but more Real Truth was available on CD and DVD at the kiosks in the lobby, along with t-shirts, hats and other authentic Josiah James paraphernalia—cash and all major credit cards plus Pay Pal accepted.

I floated across the space between the audience and the edge of the stage. Rows of lights blazed down on James from above me. I pulsed the power unit to reduce my forward flight to a crawl. Using the core muscle running down my center, I rotated my body to a horizontal position, belly down, facing James below me. I approached the riser and desk. Eight feet away. Seven. I flicked the power unit to take me lower. Six feet. Five.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Good Americans! Before I get to my lead story for the night, before I can muster the strength to share with you horrifying details I have acquired from multiple reliable sources—and at great risk—before we confront the treachery and villainy that has seeped into our government, into the very fabric of America—I need you to know that I am here tonight in defiance of countless threats against my life!”

He paused for effect. The screen behind him flashed DEATH THREATS.

“That’s right! You would not believe it if I told you how many actionable threats have been posted against me. You would not believe me if I told you the names of the gay, and liberal, and lesbian, and neocon, and progressive traitors we have traced these threats to! The government agencies plotting against me on behalf of Hillary Clinton!”

The crowd boomed.

“The Hollywood elite!”

More booming.

“The homo *New York Times*!”

Shouts and epithets joined the booming. James bobbed his head emphatically.

“Names you see praised in fake news headlines! Names you see every day! Names of politicians taking your money to spend it on abortion!” Boos. “On serums that make our children gay!” More boos. “On secret programs to

bring murderers and rapists and drugs across our borders!” More boos mixed with curses.

I reached in my pocket and closed my hand around the device.

Three feet away. James’s bald spot glistened with sweat. His polished desktop acquired spots of spittle. I pulled the device from my pocket and held it as close to him as I dared, allowing for the possibility that he might flail his arms or jump to his feet abruptly.

I waited for the right moment. Glancing back, I noted that the news crew had fixed their camera on James.

“Bombs! Poison! Snipers! My team has uncovered plot after plot against me! But do I waver?”

“NO!”

“Do I falter?”

“NO!”

“I will never waver! I will never falter!” He dramatically held up a hand. I’d seen this gesture in his online broadcasts—the pregnant pause holding his breathless audience hostage for the next shocking revelation. He leaned closer to the microphone and lowered his voice to a secretive semi-whisper that thundered around the room. “I need to share something with you. Something that will tear open your soul.”

I extended my hand and squeezed.

Brrr-rrrr-rrrr-pppt!

Benny’s proud and joyful declaration filled my mind. *I farted!* The sound from the rubber device in my hand dominated James’s dramatic silence.

James blinked. A giggle rippled through the crowd. James glanced sharply at the side of the stage where his black-clad stage manager stood holding a clipboard. The stage manager stared at him, wide-eyed, mouth hanging open.

“I—I am here tonight to sound a warning call to all of you!” James struggled back into his monologue. The ripple of giggling died under his thundering voice. “This may be the most important message ever to reach your ears!”

I squeezed again.

Bpppt! Bpppt! Bpppt!

The tiny rubber device in my hand sang out, a farting virtuoso. Three ninety-nine on the internet, plus shipping and handling. Tonight, worth more than the New York Philharmonic.

James shifted in his seat, a move which underscored his guilt. Giggles grew into open laughter. Under a sheen of glistening sweat, James’s

complexion turned scarlet. I glanced at the audience. More hands came up with phone cameras aimed at the stage.

James fired a look of rage at his stage manager. The stage manager shrugged.

James grabbed the microphone and stood up abruptly. The move came close to me, but I had allowed for it and remained clear.

“People! There are forces lined up against me, against all you good Americans in this room today. There are forces that will do anything to take me down!”

Pfffft! Braaaaaaappppt! I had practiced. The small handheld device generated a surprising variety of highly authentic fart noises. The long. The short. The staccato.

The crowd broke into open laughter.

“This is not right! This is not right! That wasn’t me!” James cried out.

I pulsed the power unit and moved into position behind him, then swung my legs down.

James shouted against the laughter flooding the stage. “We’re having—we’re having technical difficulties! *Listen to me! Listen to me!*”

I swung my foot forward and tapped him on the ass.

Pfffft! Pfffft! Braaaap!

He jumped, whirled around searching.

The crowd roared laughter. Cameras rose high over heads. I saw the news cameraman edging closer to center stage, fixed on James.

The red in James’s face went white. He froze, quivering. Off-stage, the manager hurled his hand across his neck over and over, signaling James to cut, to end it.

I pulsed the power unit and rose slightly, then backed into position above James again. He glared at the audience. The microphone shook in his hand. His jaw, hanging open, quivered.

One last shot. I reached down.

Brrrrraaaaaaaaaaappppppp!

The crowd grew hysterical.

James dropped the microphone as if it had burned him. He stood shaking his head, shouting.

“That’s not me! We’re being attacked!”

A voice from the front row called out, “You got that right! Whoooooee!”

“They got a pill for that!”

He looked at his stage crew for help. None came. He hesitated, then bolted from his place behind the desk. His feet tangled in his rolling chair.

He stumbled, caught himself on the desk, regained his feet and darted off the stage.

Laughter followed him, then morphed into a loud rumble. People turned to one another to repeat and imitate what they had just seen. A few young men shoved their hands up into their armpits and offered their own flatulent refrain. Those with cameras stopped recording and began to play it back, breaking into laughter again as the playbacks repeated. People tapped their phones rapidly.

Sending the video into the night.

Worldwide.

I felt the knot of tension in my arms and legs begin to ease. I calmed my breathing. I hadn't realized how tightly wound I had become. The rubber device in my hand felt slippery with my sweat. I carefully pushed it back into my pocket, then used the power unit to rise over the audience.

I looked for Andy in the back row but failed to find her. The seat she occupied earlier was empty.

"Ladies and gentlemen, ladies and gentlemen, please be seated. We are experiencing technical difficulties and will continue shortly." The voice making the announcement sounded high and strained. It was not the polished professional announcer from the intro recording.

"Technical ass difficulties!" someone cried out.

"Him that smelt it, dealt it!" another shouted, harvesting more laughs.

People rose from their seats. A few, phones in hand, perhaps unable to get a signal, hurried up the aisle.

"Josiah James will return shortly!" The announcer voice sounded uncertain.

My phone buzzed in my ear. I touched the button.

"Hi there!"

"Outside," Andy said tersely.

The call ended.

Uh-oh.

I thumbed the power slide and began a circuit of the auditorium that would take me across the stage, through the darkened backstage and out the open loading dock. Before transiting the black backdrop, I looked down to see the news cameraman set up on his talent. A light mounted on his camera illuminated the young live-on-the-scene reporter as she spoke into a hand-held microphone, trying to be professional while suppressing a grin that wouldn't quit.

The silver-haired man I had seen earlier dashed across the stage, waving

his arms and shouting at the linebackers standing a few feet away frozen in confusion.

I didn't wait to see what happened. It hardly mattered. The security men had no options. Video from the news camera had already transmitted to the truck in real time—and from the truck to the control room at the station. I passed over the stage and hooked around the backstage panels.

“Credit where credit is due,” I said aloud, gliding over increasing backstage chaos toward the exit. “James was a contender, but you're the reigning fart champion, Benny!”

Boiling black clouds towered overhead when I emerged from the loading dock. Stormfront wind knocked me off my flight path as soon as I cleared the protection of the building. The anticipated line of storms announced its arrival with a volley of thunderclaps and strobe lightning flashes. I needed full power to hold a course over the roof. Below me, people streaming from the building darted for their cars and trucks.

I glanced to my left and saw a dust cloud boiling up as a microburst front roared across the landscape. With no weight and no inertia, I was about to become a dandelion fluff in a maelstrom.

I had no choice. I dove hard for the surface near where Andy stood with her arms folded beside the rental. Fat raindrops splattered the pavement and sheet metal on the parked cars. Dust driven by the wind hit my back just as my feet touched down.

Fwoomp! I reappeared and staggered, pumping my legs to catch up with my forward speed. Another second and the gusting wind would have scooped me up and sent me to Illinois.

“Get in the car!” I shouted at Andy. She stood still long enough to affirm that I had arrived, then jerked open the driver’s door and dropped into the car.

Sheets of rain hissed across the parking lot and hit me the moment my hand closed on the door handle. I dropped into the passenger seat with a cold sheen of rain on the back of my shirt.

“Holy crap! I hope they got the airplane inside,” I ran my hands down my face to wipe away the rain.

Andy said nothing.

I pinched my shirt and pulled it away from my skin. I shook it to knock a few drops of water free. Trouble sat beside me. I shook my fingers through my hair and wiped the drops on my pants. Rain fell in buckets. It roared on the roof of the car.

Having nothing left to stall the inevitable, I turned to my wife.

She sat rigid in the driver’s seat, staring at me, eyes blazing.

“Dammit, Will!” She locked her jaw.

“What?”

She hesitated for a moment, digging deep for the words she needed to make her idiot husband understand.

“Do you have ANY idea why I came here?”

Trick question. I wasn’t about to answer.

She shook her head, a gesture that suggested I wasn’t worth an explanation.

“What?”

“I came here—I came here—” She hitched a breath and I saw something I didn’t expect. Water glistened in her eyes.

And then I knew.

It had been months. She held this in for months.

When Mike Mackiejewski took his own life, alone in a car parked at the edge of the city’s utility lot behind the police department building, Andy had been shocked but not shocked. She had been closer to Mike than anyone. She had seen him struggle. Despite counseling and the support of his entire department, despite Andy’s personal pleading, Mike never reconciled shooting Corey Braddock. Andy told him over and over that the circumstances gave him no choice. Had Braddock reached for a real detonator, the shot Mike took would have saved countless lives, including his own.

But it wasn’t a detonator. It was just a phone plugged into a portable speaker playing out Corey Braddock’s shy adolescent adoration for Lane Franklin, feelings that were forbidden under his father’s doctrine of white supremacy.

Although she worked to save him, Andy couldn’t prevent Mike from ending the pain in the only way he knew how. Andy grieved, but mustered stoic strength for the public eye. She shed private tears but banded together with her fellow officers and they buried their pain behind stone faces as they buried their brother officer.

“God, Will! You don’t understand anything!”

“What, then? Tell me.”

“I—I came here—*dammit!*” She turned away.

“Talk to me, Dee!”

Her head shook, then lowered. I saw her hand form a fist and wondered if it was headed my way.

“I came here to kill him!”

The moment the words left her lips, I knew they were wrong. She knew they were wrong.

“No, you didn’t.”

“HE’S RESPONSIBLE!”

“Yes. He is. But you didn’t come here to kill him.”

She spun on me. “How do you know? What do you know? I’ve done it before!”

“That has nothing to do with this.”

“I did! I did, Will! I—” A sob broke through her anger. “I—oh, *dammit!* Damn you! You’re supposed to know me—!” She struggled to sustain anger, but a tear fell from her eye and ran down her cheek. Her lower lip quivered.

“I do know you. I know that—that this has been eating at you. I know that you’ve been bottling it up. But I also know that you didn’t come here to kill him. You came here to *want* to kill him.”

She lifted her eyes to look at me. The connection broke through her anger and she shook suddenly. She sobbed. “*I—I wanted so badly to want it!*”

I leaned across the console and pulled her to me. She cried against my shoulder.

“*Oh, G—G—God! Mike! That p—poor boy!*”

“You had no way of knowing, Dee! No way!”

“*I suh-suh-sent him in there! I told him! I told him to stop Corey, wuh-wuh-whatever it took!*”

I pulled her tighter.

“Jesus, Andy, you would have done the same thing. You and Tom and Jeff and every cop on the force would have taken the same shot. You all had the same intel.”

“*I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry!*”

We sat for a long time with the rain falling hard, inside and outside the car. There’s no counting the minutes at a time like that.

Eventually, Andy pushed herself upright. She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. Her face glistened, her eyes glowed red, and her nose ran. I stabbed a hand into my overnight case and pulled out a t-shirt and handed it to her. She refused it.

“There are no tissues in the car.” I pushed it into her hands.

She wiped her face and blew her nose. She hitched in several deep breaths and blew them out, then sank back in her seat.

“God, I’m so sorry.” She pushed her fingers into her hair for a moment. “It was James. All along. I tried to tell myself he was just one of the voices pushing Braddock. But after—when he started saying those things about Mike, about Essex PD—calling Braddock a hero—”

She raised her eyes to me.

“I wanted him to pay. I’ve had this pain for so long,” she began to cry again, sucked in a huge breath and blew it out to force the tears away. “I hate myself for wanting that.”

“Stop. I mean it. Stop. Dee, listen to me. Wanting it is only human.”

She hitched a sob and suppressed it with another breath drawn and released.

“Hold on a sec,” I said. I pulled my phone from my jeans pocket and began tapping the screen. The 4G connection seemed strong, but it still took a moment to find what I was looking for. “Here.” I held out the phone for her.

Josiah James Gas Attack, the search engine read. A lineup of videos ran down the page.

“We killed him.” I slipped my hand in my pocket and closed it around the weapon I had used to kill Josiah James.

Andy threw her hand over her mouth. She spasmed again, a burst of laughter, another sob.

“We—” I squeezed. *Braaapppt!* “Oh, excuse me. That was bad.”

Andy giggled helplessly between hitching sobs.

“I’m so sorr—” *Pffffft! Brop! Brop!* “Oh, jeez, it must have been something I ate. I’m really sorry.”

She laughed. She shook and laughed and sniffled and wiped the water from her eyes. I held up the phone and the little rubber device. “We killed him, Andy.”

She stroked her finger up the screen, revealing a long line of posted videos. She let go of a long cleansing breath.

“We did. We killed him in the best possible way.”

She reached up and touched my cheek.

“You’re a genius.”

“I am! I’m a fucking genius!”

She abruptly twisted across the console, threw her hand behind my head and pulled me into a kiss. She shared the tears on her cheeks with my cheeks. I kissed back, pulling her closer, awkwardly, delivering love she

asked for like medicine. I expected this to last a moment, but she kept coming, pulling me into her with both hands. She heaved herself across the console onto me.

“Does this seat go back?” she whispered desperately in my ear. I fumbled with the side of the seat, clawing at the upholstery until I found a lever. I pulled it. We fell flat into the back seat.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



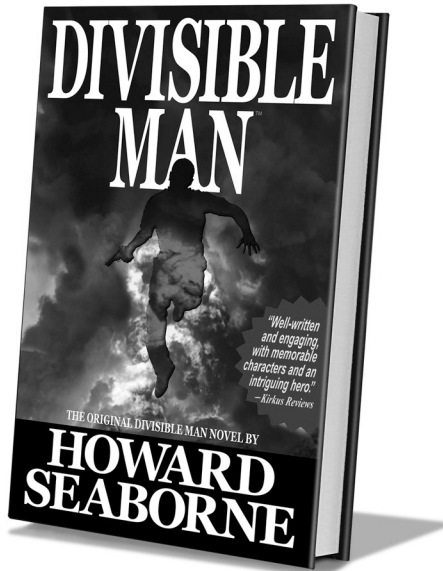
HOWARD SEABORNE is the author of the DIVISIBLE MAN™ series of novels and a collection of short stories featuring the same cast of characters.

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

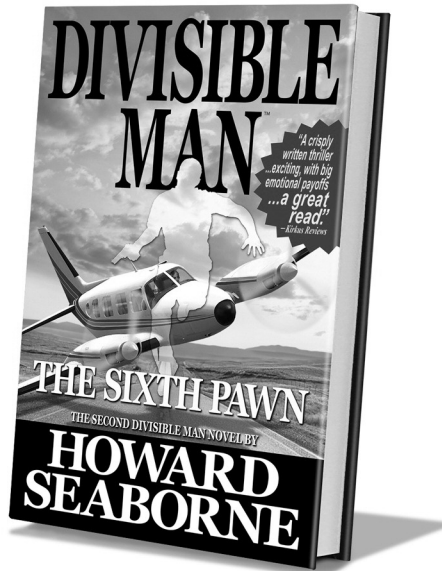
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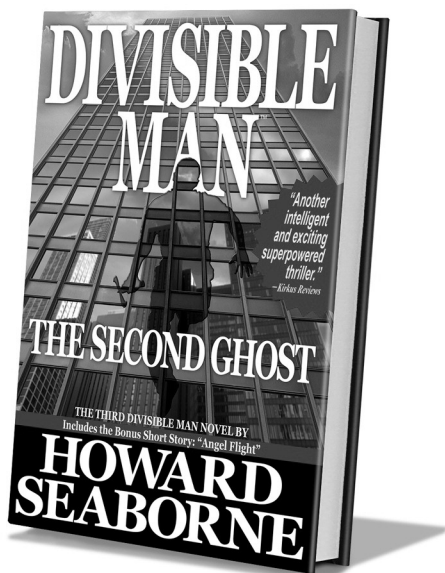
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Includes the short story, "Angel Flight," a bridge to the fourth DIVISIBLE MAN novel that follows.

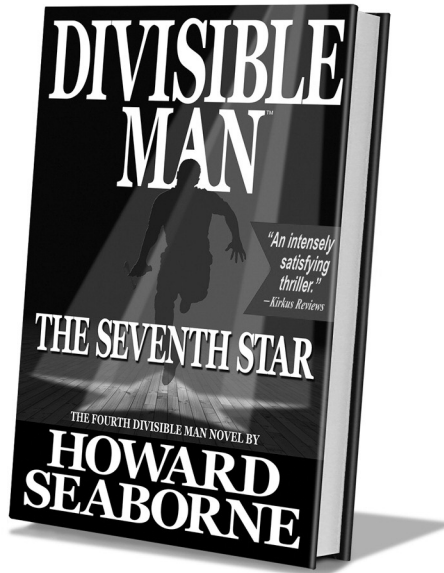
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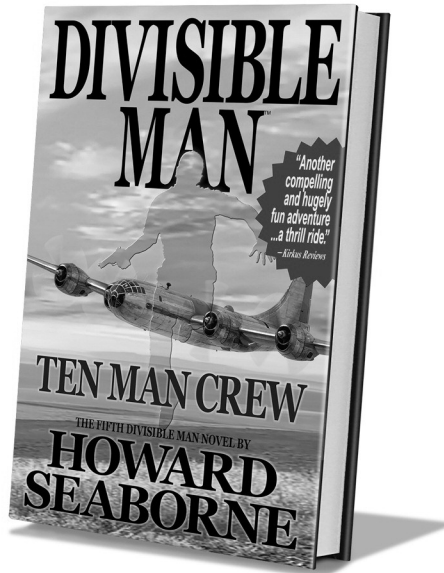
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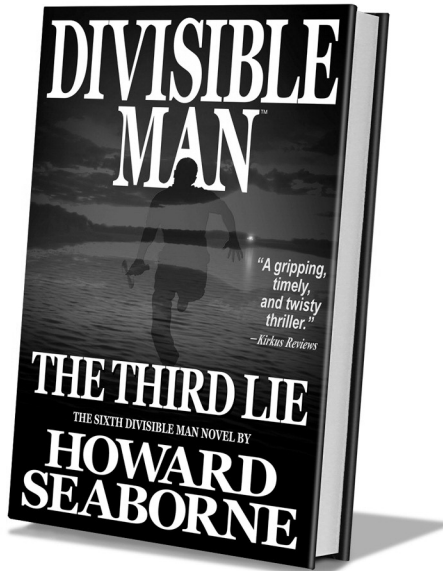
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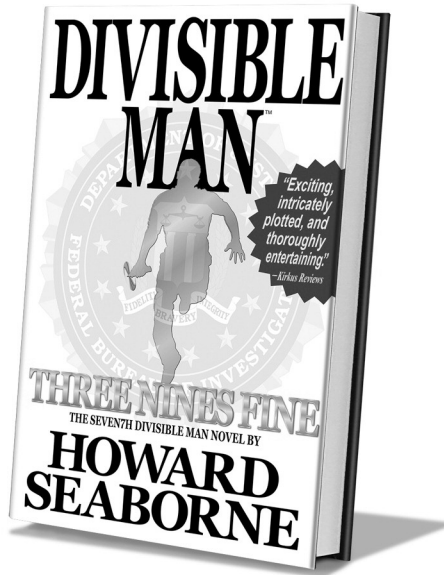
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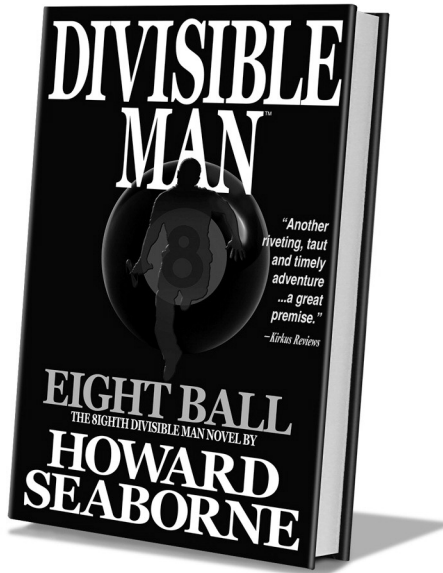
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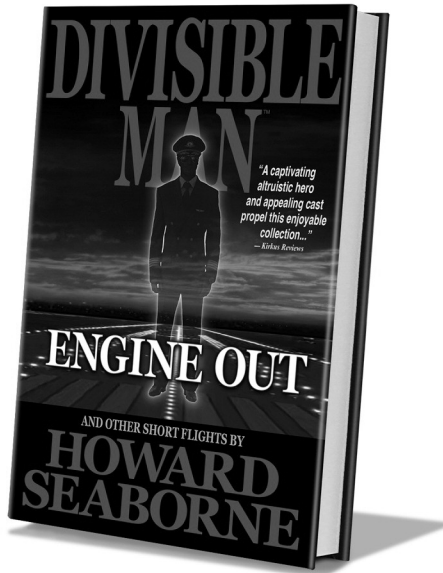
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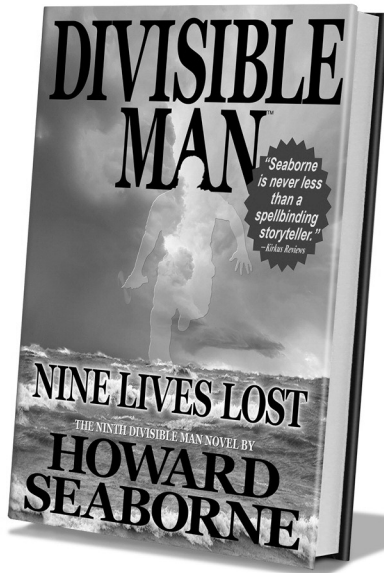
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A simple request from Earl Jackson sends Will on a desperate cross-country chase. The twisted path for answers reveals a mystery that literally lands at Will and Andy's mailbox. At the same time, a threat to Andy's career takes a deadly turn. Before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

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