



DIVISIBLE MAN™

*"Another
intelligent
and exciting
superpowered
thriller."*

—Kirkus Reviews

THE SECOND GHOST

THE THIRD DIVISIBLE MAN NOVEL BY
Includes the Bonus Short Story: "Angel Flight"

HOWARD SEABORNE



DIVISIBLE MANTM
THE SECOND GHOST

by

Howard Seaborne



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ALSO BY HOWARD SEABORNE

DIVISIBLE MAN

A Novel – September 2017

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SIXTH PAWN

A Novel – June 2018

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SECOND GHOST
ANGEL FLIGHT

A Novel & Story – September 2018

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SEVENTH STAR

A Novel – June 2019

DIVISIBLE MAN: TEN MAN CREW

A Novel – November 2019

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE THIRD LIE

A Novel – May 2020

DIVISIBLE MAN: THREE NINES FINE

A Novel – November 2020

DIVISIBLE MAN: EIGHT BALL

A Novel – September 2021

DIVISIBLE MAN: ENGINE OUT
AND OTHER SHORT FLIGHTS

A Story Collection – June 2022

DIVISIBLE MAN: NINE LIVES LOST

A Novel – June 2022

DIVISIBLE MAN: TEN KEYS WEST

A Novel – May 2023

PRAISE FOR HOWARD SEABORNE

DIVISIBLE MAN - TEN KEYS WEST [DM10]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

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

— *BookLife*

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - NINE LIVES LOST [DM9]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - ENGINE OUT & OTHER SHORT FLIGHTS

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - EIGHT BALL [DM8]

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

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THREE NINES FINE [DM7]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE THIRD LIE [DM6]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - TEN MAN CREW [DM5]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SEVENTH STAR [DM4]

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

—*Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SECOND GHOST [DM3]

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

—*Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SIXTH PAWN [DM2]

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

—*Kirkus Reviews*

DIVISIBLE MAN [DM1]

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

—*BookLife*

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

—*Kirkus Reviews*

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

—*BookLife*

THE SERIES



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

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

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*For Stanley Rankin.
You showed me the magic between paperback covers.*

PART I

T*he four worst words in any relationship.*
“We need to talk.”

Andy lowered the martini glass to the checkered tablecloth and issued a serious look shaded by her long lashes. She’s not a heavy makeup user, but for our date night she had applied something extra, to breath-taking effect.

“God, no,” I said, “you’re finally dumping me. Was it the toilet seat? Because I can work on that, I promise.”

She flashed one of her smiles; the small, private one. The one that creases the corners of her lips and forces dimples to peek from her skin like shy spirits.

Her hand slipped across the table between the two long-stemmed glasses. She closed her fingers around the third finger on my left hand and slowly rotated my wedding ring.

“Pilot, if that day ever comes, it will be because you throw your socks in the laundry inside-out. My lawyer tells me that’s a slam dunk in divorce court.”

“Dammit! Tripped up by my own feet!”

We took a moment and like two dumb kids swallowed by first love, we stared across the table, across the martinis, across the flickering candle meant to bring romance to a cozy venue already awash in it.

I love this woman beyond any ability to measure.

Andy sat with me in the candlelight of Los Lobos, a small Mexican restaurant attached to the other bowling alley in Essex, a goddess in a blue

velvet holiday dress. She'd done her hair up for our date night, wrapping her wavy auburn locks in a sculpted work of art that offered the added benefit of showing off her slender neck. Like a beacon drawing me into rising seas, a single tiny diamond mounted on a slim chain hung from her neck, dipping to a place I wanted to go. Her dress had a blessedly low-cut line on top and high hemline below.

We chose Los Lobos because we had a coupon and because the drinks are two-for-one during Happy Hour. Andy and I are on a tight budget. Los Lobos won't make anybody's list of Most Romantic Getaways, but tonight New York or Paris had nothing on it. A light snow descended outside the window. Holiday pepper lights hung from rafters. Mexican music warmed the ambiance.

"I'm serious," she insisted. "We've been putting this off since California."

She did not exaggerate. It had been a month. I can't say I'd intentionally avoided the subject, but I had readily accepted the way her busy schedule delayed confronting it. Andy had been promoted to Detective, however staffing in the City of Essex Police Department required her to carry on many of her patrol sergeant duties. November pulled a disappearing act on us. We found ourselves atop the first weekend in December, a scant twenty-four days from Christmas.

"Maybe we could save this discussion for a night when you're not seducing me with that dress," I suggested. A bald attempt at procrastination.

"Maybe I should put on my coat," she countered.

My hands went up in surrender.

"Fine, but after we talk, I get equal time to stare at you." I tried to pout. I'm not good at that.

"Love, at some point I'll give you this dress and you can stare all you want." It was a bribe because she went right to the matter at hand. "I want you to see Dr. Stephenson."

This again.

"I really don't see the point."

"How about to confirm that it's *not* a brain tumor! You insist it isn't. Why not make sure?"

I sat back and considered the question.

November marked five calendar months since I fell out of a disintegrating airplane on a landing approach to Essex County Airport. Five months later I'm no closer to understanding the cause of the accident, or the origin of the gift I took from it.

The investigator from the National Transportation Safety Board believes

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SECOND GHOST

I hit something. Whatever I hit left no evidence. No paint scrapings on my airplane. No debris. The federal government doesn't like a void, and while the investigators at the NTSB don't judge, one individual from the Federal Aviation Administration decided that—absent a better conclusion—the blank space under Cause of Accident should be filled in with “Pilot Incapacitation.” My pilot's license and medical certificate were suspended, pending a full medical evaluation. Pure bullshit, but bullshit with a Grade A government stamp on it. Which meant I had to leap through hoops, bend over and cough, and get re-certified. I went through all of it, including examination by a neurologist.

That's when things went south.

A few weeks ago, I sat in Dr. Doug Stephenson's office while he showed me images of my brain. He pointed at something that didn't belong. He ventured to say it didn't look like any brain tumor he had ever seen. It looked to me like wiring for a car stereo, but since I can't blast tunes out my ears, I leaped to the explanation that made the most sense to me.

I think the car stereo wiring in my head is what makes me vanish.

“I'm telling you, it's *the other thing*,”

My stance frustrated Andy. She prefers conclusions supported by evidence.

“All I'm asking is that we make sure,” she said. “And confirm that it's not growing.”

“That's not all you're asking. You're asking me to explain *the other thing* to Stephenson.”

“You know, we really do need a better name for it.”

“I'll get to work on that.” I sensed an opening to change the subject.

“That can wait. And—yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, we should tell Stephenson.”

That took me aback.

“Seriously?”

Andy let the underbite to her otherwise perfect teeth jut slightly. The effect was both alluring and a warning. She leaned closer.

“I'm not the only one worried. Earl is concerned. He doesn't know about the scans and the—you know.”

“It's not a tumor.” I filled in the word she could not bring herself to use twice in a conversation.

“He wants you back, Will.”

Nice try, I thought.

Earl Jackson owns Essex County Air Services. It was his airplane I

wrecked. Since the crash, during my recovery and while the government demanded proof of competency, Earl kept me on the payroll as a ramp rat, parking and gassing airplanes, and a grease-monkey in the shop. A menagerie of useful. Earl's loyalty to me had the dual benefit of a steady paycheck and keeping me around airplanes. After talking with Stephenson about the new wiring in my head, everything changed.

The FAA will never remove a suspension once they get wind of a brain tumor.

Shortly after Stephenson did his show-and-tell, I walked into Earl's office and handed him my resignation. He tore it up, threw the pieces at me and told me to get the fuck out of his office. Since then, I've tried to make the point by not showing up for work. My paycheck direct-deposits as usual.

"Earl wants to talk to Stephenson," Andy told me.

"Stephenson won't tell him the problem. I don't care how close they are."

Earl Jackson knew Stephenson during the Vietnam War. No matter what their back story, Stephenson would never betray my patient confidentiality to Earl. I was about to point that out when I realized patient confidentiality worked in favor of Andy's argument.

"Earl's no dummy, Will. He knows something is wrong."

"You shouldn't involve him."

"I didn't involve him. He called me. He's been calling me."

Her eyes, subtle green flecked with gold, fixed on me and held a mildly angry stare as Julio, our server, deposited a fresh basket of chips and new bowl of salsa between us. Julio must have felt some heat on his hands because he slipped away quickly.

"Dee, flying is risk management. Being a cop is risk management. We both know how that works. We don't know the risks of someone—someone outside of our little circle of trust—finding out about *the other thing*. For starters, there are all the clichés. Winding up in a secret government lab. Having to wear tights and a cape. Becoming the boy toy of a female super villain."

She stabbed a chip into the salsa, suppressing a smile.

"The point is, *not* telling Stephenson why there are little wire-looking things on my brain scan is a means of managing risk."

"Knowing that the *thing* in your head isn't growing, isn't a tumor, isn't going to hurt you—that's also risk management." She pointed the salsa-painted chip at me. "You're the one who insists it isn't a—a *problem*. Prove it."

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SECOND GHOST

As so often happens in a debate with my wife, I felt the earth slipping away under my feet.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Well, think about it all you want, but Earl set up an appointment with Stephenson for Tuesday morning.”

“We can’t go Tuesday. We’ve got that thing with Sandy.” Sandy Stone, a close friend who teaches kindergarten in Essex, also suddenly found herself the administrator of a one-hundred-million-dollar education trust fund—because I recently extorted one hundred million dollars from a corrupt old bastard and set it up in a trust. No good deed goes unpunished. Both Andy and I got roped into serving on a board to help Sandy manage and disperse the fund, even though I protested vigorously, citing the fact that I know nothing about such things.

“That’s Thursday. Evening. Tuesday is all set. Earl wants you to fly down to Madison. Says you’re going to get rusty sitting around on your ass.” She smiled triumphantly at me.

To administer the *coup de grace*, she tugged the low neckline of her dress down slightly and said, “You may now stare.”

“IT’S LANE.”

We had just ordered dinner and the free Happy Hour second round when the phone in Andy’s purse chirped. I gave her a reproachful look for picking it up.

“Wishing us a pleasant and un-interrupted date night?”

Andy read the incoming text. Her face said not.

“She needs us. Both of us. It sounds serious. See if you can get the check. I’m going to the Ladies and then to get my coat.”

With no small regret, I watched Andy’s short dress and long legs weave their way out of the room toward the hall with the restrooms. So much for our romantic dinner. I clung to hope for the remainder of our evening plans.

At the same time, I felt a low-wattage alarm at Andy’s rapid assessment. Lane Franklin, the fourteen-year-old daughter of the office manager at Essex County Air Services, possesses an exceptional intellect and advanced maturity. She wouldn’t send up a flare unless it was serious.

I found the waiter, explained we had an emergency, and asked for the check. He offered to ask the kitchen staff if the entrees had already been made. The news wasn’t good when he returned. I handed him the coupon and enough cash to cover the bill plus a decent tip. Andy reappeared, slipping her arms into her winter coat. She hurried out the door.

“Hey!” I caught the waiter’s attention. “Give our entrees to these folks.” I pointed at a couple stepping into the restaurant and shaking flakes of snow off their shoulders. To the startled pair, I said, “Don’t know if you want ‘em or not, but we have a couple meals ordered and paid for, and we have to run. Babysitter problem. Merry Christmas!”

I hustled out, leaving surprise and hasty gratitude in our wake.

“WHAT, EXACTLY, DID SHE SAY?” I asked as Andy wheeled out of the parking lot. Andy’s car has a better heater, and one of her cop habits is to insist on driving. She has a heavy foot, but tonight she gave ample respect to the snow that had been falling all afternoon, our first of the year. The temperature hovered just above twenty, which made the snow stick. Roads not treated posed a slick hazard. I wondered if Bob Thanning, who plows our driveway, might have the job done by the time we got home. Probably not. He tends to show up at four in the morning and wake us with his rattling diesel pickup.

Andy handed me the phone. I read the text.

“*Emergency. Need help. Serious. Bring Will.*” The address that followed wasn’t Lane’s home.

Andy’s reply read, “*Coming.*”

“She might be at a party,” Andy offered. “I had a talk with her. A couple months ago. You know, if you’re ever in a circumstance you don’t like, or you do something stupid and need an out, call me. No questions asked. It could be a situation like that.”

“Lane’s fourteen. Her wildest activity is Philosophy Club.”

“Lane’s a living, breathing, growing adolescent girl. An attractive one, to boot. With a mature mind and body. Don’t think for a minute that boys aren’t interested in her.”

“Sounds like you two have talked about more than designated drivers.”

“We have.” Andy let it go at that. Lane, an only child, had found a big sister in Andy. According to Andy, Lane nurtured a bit of a crush on me.

The address took us to an unfinished subdivision on the west side of Essex. Andy followed a winding street to one of only four homes that had been completed before the housing market collapsed in ’08, and the builder went bankrupt. The saltbox-style house stood beside an attached two-car garage on a landscaped lot. The property wore the appearance of stability and success. Fresh snow covered the driveway, which displayed no recent tire tracks. Christmas lights lined the eaves. Lane’s bicycle lay on the lawn, becoming a snow sculpture as flakes gathered on the frame and tires.

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SECOND GHOST

“She rode her bike? At night, in the snow?”

“Dangerous,” Andy said, scanning the house, the yard, and the street. She parked in the driveway and killed the lights. We stepped out of the car, closing the doors without attempting stealth.

A yard light came on as we stepped to the front door. The door opened before we could knock. Lane Franklin appeared. Her long black hair hung damp on her shoulders. She wore sweats, and the knees and thighs of her pants were wet. Despite her milk chocolate complexion, she looked flushed, like someone warming up after a serious chill.

“Andy, Will, thank you *so much* for coming!” Lane spoke at barely a whisper. She hurried us in the door. As soon as we were inside, she closed the door and turned to me. “Will, you need to disappear!”

“What’s going—”

“Quick! You have to be here, but you can’t be here!” Lane gestured with her hands, making an urgent winding motion. I glanced at Andy, who gave a play-along nod.

Fwoomp! I vanished. I relished the comfortable cool sensation enveloping my body. It chased away the winter chill. I immediately began to float, weightless. I clamped a hand around the belt on Andy’s coat.

“Do I have snow melt on me?”

Lane did a quick survey. “Can’t see any.”

I had not yet experimented with disappearing in a snowfall. I wondered if I would show up as an outline of accumulating snow on my head and shoulders.

“Lane, what’s going on?” Andy asked, her tone laced with concern.

“It’s my friend Sarah. Hurry! And whatever you do, Will, don’t show yourself!”

We moved into the house. Weightless and without my battery-powered propulsion units, I can only move by gripping objects and structure or by hanging on to my wife’s coat. Andy towed me forward.

A dozen different scenarios involving kids, drugs, partying, drinking, sex, and other teen mischief ran through my head. I had no idea what to expect as we passed through a comfortable, tidy kitchen into an open-concept family room.

A girl, fair-skinned and blonde, the same age and size as Lane, sat cross-legged on the floor in front of an unlit fireplace. Like Lane, she wore comfortable sweats. A phone lay on the carpet at her knee. In her lap she held a large-caliber revolver. She sat with her small hand wrapped around the grip and index finger inside the trigger guard.

Andy stopped cold when she saw the weapon. I released my grip on

Andy's coat and pushed against the floor with my toes. I immediately rose to the ceiling. I touched the ceiling with my fingertips, stopped, stretched my legs horizontally, then used the kitchen door frame to propel myself into the family room above the girl.

"Sarah?" Lane started forward, but Andy threw an arm out and stopped her. "Sarah, this is my friend Andy."

The girl had been looking down at her lap. At the sound of Lane's voice, she raised her head, showing us a petite and pretty face with long black lines of melted mascara on her cheeks. Wet smears ran to her chin. Her nose and eyes were red from crying. Her blue eyes were alert but fixed on a distance. I looked around the room for drug paraphernalia, empty bottles, anything that might complicate matters. Nothing revealed itself.

"Hi, Sarah," Andy said softly. "May we come in?"

Sarah didn't answer. She shook her head minutely, a gesture that said it didn't matter one way or the other.

Keeping Lane behind her, Andy moved into the room, slowly. She slipped her coat off and draped it over a chair. From the same chair, Andy pulled an ottoman toward Sarah, careful not draw too close. Andy sat on the ottoman with her hands folded on her knees.

My mission appeared clear.

Andy spoke gently. "Sarah, no one is going to do anything. We just want to make sure you're safe. Okay?"

Again, Sarah's head shook, side to side. Like it didn't matter.

I didn't have much to work with. The smooth ceiling lacked light fixtures or beams to grip. I fixed a course toward the space on the floor beside the girl and pushed off carefully. In mid-flight, I curled my legs up into a cannonball position. I arrived a few feet from the girl, adjacent to the fireplace hearth. The hearth had a slate stone surface with just enough overhang to grab. It anchored me within reach of the gun.

"Sarah is anyone else home?" Andy asked.

"My parents are at the movies," she replied in a small but clear voice.

"So, it's just you and Lane?"

"Just me and Lane. I told her to go home because she shouldn't be here when I kill myself."

Andy glanced at Lane, who nodded.

"But you know Lane. She's—she's—" Sarah began to cry. "She's a *really good person*."

"She is. Lane is a really good person," Andy said. "She's my best friend. I tell her everything."

"Me, too," Sarah said, high, thin, weeping.

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SECOND GHOST

“Did you tell Lane about this? About what’s going on?”

“Uh-huh.”

“That’s good. Maybe, since Lane is your friend, and Lane is my friend, maybe we could all be friends. Together. Just us girls.”

“That would be nice. But I need to be dead soon. I’m sorry.”

“The thing is, Sarah, I don’t get to see Lane very much, and I miss her. And it would really be nice to have another friend to talk to sometimes. Is Lane your best friend?”

“Lane is *the* best friend. OMG, she rode her bike all the way out here tonight, in like this snowstorm. That’s like two miles.”

“She cares about you.”

“I really, really do, Sarah!”

“Sarah let’s talk about it. Okay? Just us girls. Let’s talk about why you think you need to be dead. Because that’s kinda forever, and it would be so hard on Lane.”

Sarah squeezed out the words, high and thin. “I need to be dead because I don’t want to be a whore.”

“Nobody can make you be a whore,” Andy said. “Nobody.”

Sarah huffed out a breath. She leaned forward and pushed her phone toward Andy.

“That’s not true! See what he sends me? If I won’t be his whore, he’s going to put it everywhere. My parents will see it. My boyfriend will see it. Everybody will see it!”

Andy picked up the phone and opened the screen to a photo. Lane leaned over, but from her expression I knew she’d seen the photo. Andy’s face remained neutral, despite the image she confronted.

“Everybody is going to see me naked,” Sarah declared with helpless resignation.

“Who’s doing this? Is it your boyfriend?”

“No! I don’t know! Some guy. He just texted it to me. Then he started texting me and telling me what I had to do to keep him from sharing it with the whole world. He told me *exactly* what I had to do. Like, in really gross detail. And if I didn’t...”

“Do you have any idea how this picture was taken?”

“No.”

“Okay.” Andy backed off the subject. “Your boyfriend—is he a good guy?”

“Yes.”

“Would he have taken this picture? And maybe shared it with someone?”

“Ohmigod, no. He never...we never...did it. We don’t do it. God. I only

let him touch my boobs once!” Sarah suddenly burst into loud sobs. Through the sobs, she cried out, “I’m going to kill myself and I never even got to *do it* once!”

She pulled the revolver out of her lap and swung it toward her head.

I leaned forward and clamped my hand down on the cylinder and hammer. My grip prevented her from bringing the pistol to bear on her head. Sarah startled. Her finger convulsed on the trigger, pulling it all the way through. The hammer snapped back, then forward, pinching the flesh of my palm. I tightened my hold, preventing the action from dropping the hammer and firing. I jerked the pistol upward, breaking Sarah’s grip. To Andy and Lane, the weapon shot up a foot or two on its own, then floated away from Sarah’s reach.

Sarah didn’t pay any attention. She bent double and wailed. Andy flashed Lane a signal and Lane dove to the floor, pulling her friend into a tight embrace.

I eased the hammer down into a safe position and handed the revolver to Andy. With practiced fingers, she removed the ammunition and carried the weapon into the kitchen. She laid the revolver on top of the refrigerator and dropped the cartridges into a drawer. She spent a moment there, thumbing the phone. I pushed off the hearth in her direction. Lane and Sarah held each other, both crying.

“What the hell?” I floated to a position beside Andy and spoke softly.

“I don’t know, how does someone get a picture like this?”

She showed me. It was Sarah, nude, standing full frontal to the camera. The picture had been retouched so that everything around Sarah was blurred. Her body glittered, wet. Water glistened at her feet.

“She must have let someone take it.”

“Maybe,” Andy didn’t commit. “Keep out of sight. Look around, okay?”

“Got it.”

Andy found a glass and filled it with water. She took a box of tissues from the kitchen counter and walked back to the girls on the floor. She dropped down beside Sarah and drew both her and Lane into a comforting hug. It renewed Sarah’s capacity for crying.

I cruised through the house. Had Sarah managed to kill herself, the newspaper article would have commented on what a happy, healthy home she came from. Appearances can certainly deceive, but the house had all the trappings of being comfortable, full of life and belonging to a close family. Photos told a story of mother, father and daughter loving and enjoying each other. Not just posed portraits, but candid shots that showed impromptu smiles, warm embraces, and caught-off-guard looks of love and admiration. A china cabinet displayed soccer trophies. Perfect-grade report cards hung on the refrigerator door. A piano sat in the living room, not as a dusty decoration, but with sheet music tipped against the front panel, including paper lined with stanzas full of hand-scribbled musical notes. Sarah composed, old school.

I cruised upstairs. Her bedroom looked practical. School books from Essex High School lay on a desk beside a laptop. Clothes lay on the floor. The bed was made but bore the impression of someone lying on it, along with more books and a bag of Cheetos. She had her own television and cable box. Clothing nicer than Lane's mostly second-hand collection filled a closet and overflowed onto a dresser. An electronic keyboard sat in one corner. MIDI cables ran from mysterious boxes into her laptop.

If there were signs of something amiss in the house, I didn't see them. In the photos, her father appeared young and well-groomed. Nothing I saw suggested his occupation. Her mother took pretty pictures that captured

warm, friendly eyes. The house was tidy, but not obsessive-neat-freak clean, if the master bedroom and her mother's cluttered closet were any indication.

Conversation in the family room continued at a low murmur as I glided back through the kitchen. I floated into a hover over the kitchen island.

Andy, Lane, and Sarah had moved to a U-shaped sofa, with Sarah in the middle. The two girls sat like sisters, hugging. Andy sat with her legs folded under her, facing Sarah. Andy spoke softly, steadily, looking like a big sister telling bedtime stories to the siblings.

"Well, he's tall, handsome, smart," Andy said, ticking each item off on her fingers. "I met him when I arrested him—well, not really arrested him. I stopped him—like a traffic stop—but really, and don't tell anyone I told you this, I did it to ask him out."

"That's so cool. What else?" Sarah asked. Her voice carried weakness and strain, the traces of crying, but her question had the energy of genuine interest. I got the impression that this girl talk was about love, and about caring for and connecting with someone.

"He makes me laugh."

"My parents are like that, too." Sarah told a halting story of a couple that met over a steaming sink in a campus kitchen; two college freshmen serving time in a work study program.

"You're lucky to have them." Andy put a hand on Sarah's leg. "When are they supposed to be home?"

"They went to a four o'clock show. Mom always makes dad take us to the matinee-priced shows. They like to go to Los Lobos after."

Andy didn't mention the coincidence. She took a serious tack.

"Honey, you know I have to stay here and tell them."

"*No!*" Sarah's composure collapsed. "*No, please don't tell them!*"

"Sweetie, can you even for a second imagine that they love you less or care for you less than Lane and I do? Even for a second?"

"You can't show them that picture! You can't show my dad!"

Andy gave it a moment of serious thought.

"I don't think I will have to. Do you trust me?"

Sarah's head bobbed.

"I need to keep your phone. For police business. Okay?"

Another head-bob.

"Good. And I promise you, while I have your phone, no one will see this picture except me. No one."

I thought it a tough promise to make, but Andy seemed determined.

"Andy's a kick-ass cop," Lane said. "She shot a guy." Lane didn't elabo-

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SECOND GHOST

rate on her role in that tale. I wondered if she ever told the story of her abduction.

“He was a very bad man who attacked me,” Andy said. “As a rule, I don’t go around shooting people.”

“You can shoot this guy,” Sarah said.

We heard them enter through the garage door. Sarah's parents came in on full alert. Andy stood ready for them, badge in hand.

"Sarah! What's going on? Is everything okay?" Sarah's mother, a blonde reflection of her daughter, asked urgently. Andy stepped forward.

"Mrs. Lewis, I'm Detective Andrea Stewart and a very close friend of Lane's."

"Hi, Mrs. Lewis! Hi, Mr. Lewis!" Lane waved. They waved back hesitantly.

"Robert Lewis, my wife Donna." The man shook hands with Andy.

I recognized him. From the restaurant. He must not have looked too closely at Andy when we left, because he didn't seem to recognize her as having been with the stranger who gave him and his wife two free dinners.

"Honey, what's going on?" Donna Lewis rushed to put an arm around her daughter. Sarah folded into her mother.

"What's this about?" Lewis wanted to know.

"Lane called me," Andy said. "Can we chat in the other room? I'm sure the girls will be fine here for a while."

Andy didn't wait for an answer but gestured for the parents to follow her through the kitchen, through a dining room, into the living room on the opposite corner of the first floor. The move inconvenienced me. I crabbed my way across the kitchen ceiling, pulled myself into the dining room using the doorway, and fixed a hover where I could see and hear them. Andy

directed the couple to sit. The three adults formed a triangle on formal-looking furniture that probably saw little use.

“What’s going on?” Sarah’s father pressed.

Andy held up Sarah’s phone with the screen facing away from the parents.

“Someone has taken a compromising photograph of your daughter and is using it to threaten her, and as an attempt to extort her.”

“What photograph?” Mr. Lewis reached for the phone. Andy pulled it back.

“Your daughter would rather you not see it. It’s up to you, but I’d like to endorse her position for the moment. It will be hard on her if she knows you’ve seen it.”

“Has it been posted? Is it all over the internet?” Lewis demanded. “Oh, God!”

Andy shook her head. “I don’t think so. Not yet. A threat’s been made, but the person making the threat appears to be using it to pressure Sarah into providing sexual favors.”

Donna Lewis pressed a hand to her mouth. “How could this happen? Did she—?”

“She says she hasn’t had any contact with him. Sarah’s been very forthcoming about all this. She said she has had no sexual contact with anyone. I’m inclined to believe her.”

“Is it Michael? Her boyfriend?” Lewis asked, anger rising. “Is he taking pictures of her?”

“No.”

“But she knows this person, right? Can you find him? Arrest him? Stop him?” Donna Lewis begged.

“She doesn’t know who it is. The picture was taken without her consent,” Andy said. “But it’s possible we will be able to lure the person who took the picture into a position where we can make an arrest and prevent the distribution of the image. Possible.”

“How could this happen? How did some stranger get this photo?”

“Sarah says she doesn’t know how it was taken.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Lewis shook his head.

“I need to have the image examined,” Andy said. “With Sarah’s help, we might be able to determine its origin.”

“Is it even her? I mean, did Sarah say it was even a picture of her? Not something doctored up?” Lewis asked. “One of those deep fakes?”

“Sarah seems to feel the image is genuine.”

“That’s ridiculous! Let me see it!” Lewis put his hand out, his voice firm.

Andy held the phone back again.

“Sir, I understand. Would you wait here a moment? Just a moment?”

He nodded. She stood and went to the kitchen. When she returned, she held up the revolver, but did not hand it over.

“Is this yours?”

Both parents looked at it, wide-eyed.

“Yes,” Lewis acknowledged the weapon. “I keep it upstairs, in a gun safe.”

“Does Sarah have access?”

“I taught both Sarah and Donna how to access it and use it. I think they’re both safer if they have had instruction.”

Andy sat down. She held up the phone again.

“Sarah called Lane, and Lane called me to come here tonight because Sarah said—because of this—” Andy gestured with the phone, “she had decided on suicide.” Both parents gasped. “Your daughter had this weapon when Lane got here. When we got here.”

I noticed the slip-up, the *we*. Neither of the Lewis parents, awlirl in their worst nightmare, caught it.

“*Oh God...*” Donna Lewis’s eyes spilled tears.

“Now I want you to listen to me. You’re asking to see this photo, Mr. Lewis. But consider the lengths to which your daughter was willing to go to defend her honor, to defend your good impression of her. For a moment tonight, she thought death would be preferable to having you look at her with the same eyes that have seen this.” Andy let the point settle, then said, “So you can ask me again, and I will hand this over. Or you can let me take it with me. Your job is to care for your daughter. My job is to conduct an investigation. I can’t promise anything, but if you let me take this, there’s a chance we can find this person before he can threaten your daughter again or make this image public. There’s a chance no one else will ever see this. It’s up to you.”

“Take it,” Lewis said.

“Good choice. Now, your daughter needs you.” Andy stood up. “And I would like to start moving on this.”

Getting me out of the house became a bit of a trick.

After Lane embraced Sarah in a lengthy good-bye, Andy handed Lane her keys and told her to put her bike in the trunk of the car. Andy stayed behind to have a final word with the Lewis family. Part of that may have been a bit of theater designed to get me out the front door with Lane.

“I’m grabbing the back of your sweatshirt, kiddo,” I whispered to Lane after she pulled on a hoodie in the front hall. “Lead the way.”

Lane pulled me through the front door, careful not to let the storm door slam into me. She led me down the sidewalk.

“This feels funny. You have no inertia.”

“Science!” I performed my best Thomas Dolby imitation.

When we reached her bike, I reappeared.

Fwoomp! Dropping to the pavement, my feet almost slid out from under me on the snow-covered driveway. The TV-weather prediction had been for up to half an inch, but accumulation already measured double that. I opened the trunk and helped Lane load her bike after shaking off the snow.

“Take the front seat,” I told Lane. I slid into the back seat and—

Fwoomp! I disappeared again after strapping in. I couldn’t be sure one or both of the Lewis parents wouldn’t walk Andy to the car. The last thing anyone needed was for Sarah’s parents to see some strange man appearing and disappearing.

“You’re a good friend to Sarah,” I told Lane. “You saved her life tonight.”

Lane didn't answer. We watched Andy working her way out of the house, answering last-minute questions, giving last-minute instructions. Before saying a final goodnight, we saw Sarah push past her parents and close a powerful hug around Andy. They held on for a moment.

“May I have the phone?” Lane asked Andy as we backed out of the Lewis driveway. Andy handed it over. Lane bowed her head over the lighted screen while Andy drove. Seated in the backseat, I couldn’t see what she was doing.

“Don’t delete anything,” Andy warned.

“I won’t. I’m sending the picture to my e-mail.”

“Why?” Andy asked, going on alert, ready to explain the obvious about letting this picture get out.

“I need to look at it on my Mac.”

Andy drove us to Lane Franklin’s tiny house in Essex.

“WHERE’S YOUR MOM TONIGHT?” Andy asked as Lane powered up her computer.

We stood in Lane Franklin’s living room. Lane sat at a secondhand desk tucked in one corner. Lane has a skilled touch with Photoshop. Not long ago, she performed a key bit of photo retouching to help Andy identify a suspect in the killing of a state senator.

“Mama’s out with the ladies from church. God, it was like pulling teeth to get her to leave me home alone! She’s still so clingy!”

Since Lane’s abduction last summer, Rosemary II struggled with allowing her daughter to go beyond arm’s length. I understood. Looking at

Lane, remembering things I didn't want to remember, I saw vulnerability, too.

Lane busied herself with her mouse. Photoshop woke up on her screen.

Andy and I leaned closer. In an instant, Lane had Sarah's photo fully framed on her iMac screen. Moving too quickly to follow, she created a rectangle of opaque color over Sarah's naked torso. With a few more clicks of the mouse, Lane magnified the image to a point where the pixilation made it nearly impossible to discern detail.

"There!" Lane pointed at the screen.

"What are we looking at?" I asked.

"Right here," Lane said. "Under her feet."

"Back it out a little," Andy directed. Lane complied.

We could see Sarah's bare feet. The blackmailer had blurred the image all around Sarah, possibly using Photoshop as well. But he had been careful not to let the blur effect wash onto Sarah. He left a tiny border all the way around her naked body. The portion between her feet escaped the effect.

"She's wet. You can see the water on her skin. And here," Lane pointed again, "that's water on the floor. But look at this pattern, right here along the edge of her foot. That's tile."

Andy and I studied the image cues as Lane pointed them out.

"It is," I agreed.

Lane looked up at us, her face bright with certainty.

"I know where that photo was taken!"

Mike Mackiejewski parked his patrol car behind Andy's car. We had been sitting curbside for less than ten minutes, but snow already covered the car. Mike stepped out and pulled on a coat. In his mid-twenties, a little shorter than Andy, Mike served under Andy's command for the two years he'd been on patrol with the Essex PD.

"Sup, Sarge?" He looked at me. "Hey, Will."

"Hey."

He looked at Lane.

"Hey, Lane," he said, casting a questioning look at Andy. Everybody on the Essex PD knew Lane Franklin. Her abduction case went in the Win column.

Lane had not only convinced us of what she saw in the photo but insisted on showing us in person. Andy resisted, but Lane made the case that she had a stake in this, in her friend, Sarah. Andy agreed to let Lane tag along only on the condition that she call her mother and let Andy speak to Rosemary II. Lane saw no problem in that. She knew her mother would say Yes to anything Andy and I asked. After a brief conversation, Andy promised Rosemary II we would have Lane home by eleven.

"I need the security fob to get into the pool," Andy told Mike, gesturing at the glass doors at the end of the sidewalk. The high school pool has a public entrance for conference swim meets and for providing public swim access that had been a condition of the original referendum to build the pool.

Mike hiked up the sidewalk, pulling a heavy ring of keys from his jacket

pocket. At the brick wall adjacent to the farthest glass door, he removed a metal cover from a small box. He found the fob he needed and swiped it across the small box. Something buzzed and snapped loudly. Mike reached over and pulled the door open.

“Want me to come in with you?”

Andy shook her head. “We got it from here. Thanks, Mike!”

We filed into the pool lobby, past the glass trophy cases, past the closed snack bar counters, toward the entrance to the pool itself. Andy’s high heels clicked on the tile floor. Chlorine odor and humidity contrasted with the winter atmosphere outside. Of the two, I preferred the scent of fresh snow.

The pool annex, larger than the original high school gymnasium and smaller than the recently added athletic field house, offered eight Olympic-scale lanes, plus individual diving wells that included a ten-meter platform. I like swimming, and even enjoy diving off a good flexible board. No way in hell I’d take a plunge off a thirty-foot high diving platform.

We skirted the big pool and then the diving wells, both looking like vast sheets of glass. At the far end of the building, a pair of doorways opened to a hallway that led to the locker rooms.

“Hold up,” Lane touched my sleeve.

Andy and I stopped and looked at her. We stood in semidarkness, illuminated only by small walk lights and the exit signs above each doorway. The halogen overhead lights hung dormant above us.

“Ever see those stupid movies where someone searches a room for a bug, then tears apart a light fixture and holds it up for everyone to see?” she asked. She pantomimed. “Hey, look, A bug.”

Andy got it right away. “Completely overlooking the fact that the people listening can hear the whole thing.”

“Right,” Lane said. “That photo was taken without Sarah knowing it.”

“Probably from a fixed position. Which means there’s a good chance the camera wasn’t some schmuck holding his iPhone up and pretending to scroll his play list,” I offered, trying to keep up.

“Exactly,” Andy said, looking past us at the dark entrance. “But a camera planted in a locker room—that would be quite a trick. If it’s a fixed mount, how does the pervert collect his photos?”

“Transmitted,” Lane said. “Maybe a Bluetooth connection or the school’s Wi-Fi.” She bounced up and down. “I bet it uses motion detection! The camera only wakes up and shoots when there’s a subject. And it could be set to send the images as a compressed burst!”

“Hold on here,” I said. “Isn’t this getting a little sophisticated for some perv shooting locker room pictures?”

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SECOND GHOST

Lane gave me a join-the-century-old-man look. “Do you have any idea the technology that’s in the phone sitting in your pocket? Oh—my—God! You can get all kinds of spy tech from Amazon. What we’re talking about is totally doable.”

“The point is,” Andy put us back on track, “we could walk in there, wake up the camera, and have the camera taking and transmitting pictures of us fumbling around looking for a camera.”

“Which would tip off our guy,” I said. “And might point a finger at Sarah for going to the police, prompting the pervert to broadcast the photo.”

Woman and girl both turned and landed expectant gazes on me.

“Do your thing, Divisible Man,” Andy said.

“Wait! What did you call him?” Lane, startled, asked.

I looked around. “Any security cameras in here?”

Andy shook her head. “They monitor the halls and entrances.”

Fwoomp! I vanished. I grasped Andy’s arm to stay anchored.

“Oh! That is so effing cool!” Lane exclaimed. “Seriously, what did you call him?”

“Andy, I’ll need to turn on some lights. Do you think that’s a problem?”

“Shouldn’t be. Janitors must go in there at night to clean and must turn on the lights in the process. If any of the high tech we suspect is at play, more than likely the camera pays no attention to lights turning on and off. The perv probably gets all kinds of photos of middle-aged janitors.”

“Wait!” Lane dug into her back pocket and pulled out her phone. “If you find a spot you think is right, see if you can get some photos.”

“Why?” Andy asked.

“I want to apply a blur effect on my computer,” she said. She read Andy’s confused expression. “We can’t reverse his blur effect like they do in the movies. You know, ‘Computer, enhance!’ That doesn’t really work. But we can shoot a picture that matches Sarah’s photo, apply the same effect, and see if it matches up.”

“Good thinking,” I said.

Lane held out her phone. I put my hand around it and pulled it out of her hand. She broke into a bright smile, seeing the phone float before her eyes.

“The camera is on. Just push the button, here,” she pointed.

“Got it.”

I opened my jacket and pushed the phone in, causing it to vanish. When I pulled it back out and held it openly in my hand, it remained unseen, but I could still feel the shutter button. I pushed away from Andy’s arm.

“Okay, I’m off. Hang loose.”

I didn't get far.

The entrance from the pool s-turned into the women's locker room, shrouded in black with no light switches in sight. Not wanting to float blindly through a locker room darker than a coal mine, I abandoned the approach and went back to Lane and Andy. I reappeared. We repositioned in the lobby near the locker room entrance and I started again.

I found a bank of light switches and flicked them on. The entire locker room lit up.

Except for an absence of urinals and the use of more feminine colors, I didn't see much difference between the women's locker room and any men's locker room I'd ever seen. Regiments of square, powder pink lockers stood divided by low plastic benches. Mirrors above sinks lined one wall. Tile in rose and pink shades covered the floor, with white tile covering the walls.

I went high as usual, floating just below the ceiling and gripping the rows of lockers for propulsion. Maintenance needed to do a better job of dusting the tops of the lockers. I passed over several socks and a pair of panties, careful not to touch. At one point, I passed over a pair of swim goggles. They reminded me of ski goggles I had purchased and planned on using tonight as part of Date Night. If Andy and I ever got home, that is. Faith in that outcome faded fast.

Opposite the entrance, the shower rooms lay between the locker room and the pool. As I passed over the last row of lockers, I pulled myself downward and unfurled my feet under me. I let them touch the tiles in a weird,

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SECOND GHOST

weightless trot that took me to the first pillar of shower nozzles in the expansive room.

Tile floor. Drains placed at evenly measured intervals. Chrome shower nozzles and water controls lining the walls. An orderly forest of stainless-steel pillars at attention in rows filled the center of the space. Here, the chlorine pool smell mingled with cleanser scent. A basic institutional shower room large enough to handle an entire gym class of girls.

I began to wonder if the camera streamed video. And I began to see a problem with a much broader scope than Sarah Lewis.

I studied the floor and the tiles Lane pointed out.

Lane hit the mark dead on. The tile matched the photo.

The image of Sarah showed a girl, naked, full-frontal to the camera, with her weight on her right foot, her hips cocked slightly, her left arm hanging limp, and her right arm raised with her right hand at the back of her head. She stood with her face upturned and her eyes closed, looking serene, or seductive—if taken out of the mundane context of an athlete trying to wash chlorine out of her hair.

After Lane saw the tiles and told us where to find them, she pointed out that Sarah had joined the freshman swim team.

I considered the image and the moment it had been shot.

She had been showering when the photo was shot, with her back to the stream of water. Where would she have been standing?

The question was not so much which nozzle was she standing at, but which one put her in a position where a mounted camera could snap her image?

I eliminated the outer wall. A trough at the base of the wall dropped half an inch below the rest of the floor. No such line could be seen at Sarah's feet. Also, the outer wall had white tile, with a band of rose-colored tiles running through it around waist height. Sarah's photo showed the same color band, but distant, blurred and higher in the frame.

That put Sarah at one of the central pillars. Three ranks of pillars, with four pillars in each, filled the center of the room. Each pillar sported four nozzles, set at cardinal points around the pillar.

I needed a matched pair. One nozzle to spray and a companion pillar for the camera.

Again, I considered the background of Sarah's photo. The color band gave a strong hint. It meant the photo had been taken in one of three directions, eliminating the shower room entrance as a backdrop, where no color band could be seen.

I did the math. There were nine options facing the back wall. Eight options facing the right-side wall, and eight options facing the left side wall.

Only twenty-five possibilities.

Again, thinking of the image of Sarah, I recalled that the blurred color band appeared high behind her, running even with her shoulders. Since the image had a slight down angle, it had been taken by a camera mounted roughly at the height of her face. The down angle on the camera and the location of the color band in relation to Sarah's body put the color band farther, rather than nearer to Sarah.

That stopped me.

How the hell do you mount a camera in a shower room at face height?

Holy shit!

Floating beside the first of the pillars, I realized I was staring right at the most likely answer.

The shower nozzle.

Each pillar had four shower nozzles, mounted even with my eyes, which put them close to six feet above the floor. Each station had a pull-type knob that turned on the water, and a soap dish. Both the knob and the soap dish were mounted much lower, around bellybutton level.

The shower nozzle.

I studied the one directly in front of me. Slightly phallic (or perhaps strongly phallic, if you see things that way), the design formed a simple chrome cylinder with a half-sphere tip and a single outlet hole.

Or eye if the thing were a camera instead of a nozzle.

I reached for the control knob ninety degrees to my right, fixed a grip on the pillar with one hand and prepared to pull the knob with the other. Then I stopped.

If I create a stream of water, will the motion activate the camera? Then what?

I moved around the pillar and peered into the nozzle. It had a diffuser and tiny hints of mineral buildup. Normal. I moved to the next nozzle.

I found the camera on the fifth try. Center row, first pillar, the nozzle facing the back wall.

The exterior of the nozzle looked no different than any of the other thirty-one nozzles in the room. But when I maneuvered around to look into the single outlet hole, I saw a glint where there should be none. A lens.

Got you, you son of a bitch!

“Here,” I handed Lane her phone. “I shot a bunch of photos from right in front of the camera. Should be the same point of view. There has to be at least one good one you can use for your blur experiment.”

“That actually worked?” Lane seemed surprised. “With the camera gone?”

“Seems like.”

“You’re sure it’s the camera?” Andy asked.

“As sure as I can be. But the question now is, how do we remove it without tipping off the pervert?”

“I know the answer to that,” Lane said.

That came as no surprise to me.

“Going on the assumption that the camera is using the school Wi-Fi to transmit images, we simply shut down the Wi-Fi and remove the camera while it’s out of touch,” Lane explained.

“Exactly what I was thinking” I lied. Andy gave me a no-you-weren’t look.

“Of course,” Lane went on, “the catch is that the camera may perform a routine signal check—like a regular check-in. That’s how I would do it. So that the perv will get an alert when it goes offline, or when it fails to check in.”

“So, this could also tip him off that Sarah reported him. And make him release the photo preemptively.”

“Maybe,” Lane said. “But going offline could mean anything. Power failure. Software glitch. It doesn’t have to mean that Sarah ratted him out.”

“Except we don’t get the chance to debate it with the guy,” Andy said. She stood still for a moment, looking through the walls at the nozzle-camera with her mind’s eye. “I really need to have that hardware looked at by an expert. That’s going to take time.”

“Target fixation,” I said.

Andy and Lane looked at me.

“Target fixation,” I repeated. “That might not be the right term for it, but we induce target fixation on the perv. We set him up to make an assumption about why the camera has gone offline. An assumption that steers him away from thinking Sarah turned him in. He gets his mind fixed on the answer he thinks *he* came up with and doesn’t explore other possibilities.”

I explained what I had in mind.

When I finished, Andy gave it a moment’s thought, then said, “Okay. Let’s try it. First, we need to take Lane home. Then we pay a visit to Chet Allison, the high school principal.”

“We have another problem,” Andy said after we dropped Lane at her door and made her promise to say nothing to anyone about what happened to Sarah, or what we found—not even to Sarah. Lane, both dutiful and smart, agreed, but she made Andy promise to keep her up to date on the case.

“Here.” Andy handed me Sarah’s phone.

“We have more than one problem,” I said, taking it, and thinking further about the camera mount and location. “What’s yours?”

“Scroll through the text messages on this thread.”

She backed out of the driveway and started driving while I read. When I finished, I handed the phone back.

“That last one came in while you were in the locker room.” Andy thumbed the phone to close the screen. She put it in her coat pocket while she drove.

The string of messages went from a coy, teasing hello to a tone of smug superiority, to showing Sarah the photo, then into a string of explicit messages telling the girl what, precisely, she would have to do to ensure the photo never went public. Sexually explicit messages.

The last note in the string said, *Candy Store. Midnight or the pix goes viral.*

“What the hell is the ‘Candy Store?’”

“I don’t know, but that only gives us two and a half hours.” Andy

fastened her eyes on the snowy road ahead. Falling snowflakes raced toward the windshield, then dodged our passage at the last second.

“Sarah must know, or he wouldn’t have used it as a reference. This should make it easy. We find out where this Candy Store is and set a trap for the asshole. Grab him and this all ends.”

Andy didn’t speak.

“What?”

“Say we find out. Say we text him back and agree to the meet. Say we get lucky and grab him, which is only likely if he’s a complete idiot, and I have my doubts about that. Then say he claims he was just driving by...saw a kid who looked like she needed help...doesn’t know a thing about any photo, or camera, or computers. And say he’s smart enough not to have any evidence where we can find it. Locks his phone. Hides his computer. Suddenly, we have nothing. We can’t hold him. And we can’t stop him from publishing the photo—which can happen with a click of a mouse or touch of a screen. Will, I know next to nothing about the web, how these perverts can lurk there, how they hide behind east-European IP addresses and trade their disease with other perverts on the ‘Dark Web’—whatever the heck *that* is!”

“Got any friends at the FBI who handle this sort of thing?”

Andy laughed. “At nine-thirty on a Saturday night? With a two-and-a-half-hour window? And that’s assuming they don’t brush it all off as kids sexting each other.”

I admit, it seemed unlikely to me that this situation would attract federal interest.

“We need to buy some time.”

“So, buy time.”

Andy turned off Main Street onto a county road that would eventually slip out of Essex into farm country. She checked her mirrors, then eased the car to the side of the road and stopped. The snow fell heavier than it had all day.

“Do you think it will work?” she asked, pulling the phone out again.

“Yes, If you word it right.”

She activated the screen and brought up the text messaging app. She located the thread that Sarah, thankfully, had saved. “I need to get to the station to run this number,” Andy muttered to herself. “Although I’m sure it’s a burner phone.”

She busied her thumbs for a minute. Regarded her work. Made a change. Then showed me the screen.

“*Parents have me locked down. They’re out of town tomorrow night. PLS don’t post the photo!*” I read.

DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SECOND GHOST

“It lets him dictate the schedule change.”

“It’s good. Send it. But then send another right behind it. Add *PLS. I’ll do anything you want.*”

Andy looked at me, frowning.

“It’s what he wants to hear. Sorry.”

She tapped Send. Worked the phone. Tapped send again. After heaving a resigned sigh, she laid the phone on the console and pulled back onto the road.

Less than a hundred yards down the road, Sarah’s phone gave an ironically angelic bell chime. I picked it up. I read aloud.

“Bitch. You’ll do what I tell you.”

Andy continued driving.

“Let me,” I said. I worked my thumbs on the screen.

“PLS! Anything for you. Everything. Tomorrow night!” I read it to Andy.

“Send.”

The message flew from Sarah’s phone, joining the snowflakes in the cold, black air around us. I felt something equally cold and equally black deep inside. A frigid simmering anger surrounded with contrasting heat. I had felt it before when Lane had been abducted. I felt it again, not long ago, when I found two children, two small girls, dead in a forest.

Murder.

I thought about Sarah, another helpless victim, and I touched that cold black thing in my heart.

Sarah’s phone dinged. I picked it up and read the response to Andy.

“Say it. Say you’ll be my sex bitch.”

Andy held grimly onto the wheel, perhaps suppressing the same feelings that were rising in me. There are times when I don’t know how she does her job.

I worked the screen. When I finished, I sat still for a minute, holding the phone, with the message ready, but unsent.

I waited. Let him think this cost her, hurt her, made her cry. Let him think this pushed her to the edge.

The tires spoke to us in a steady wet whisper as we drove on.

I will be your sex bitch. Whatever you want.

I didn’t read it to Andy.

I hit Send.

Looking out the windshield, I thought of the snowflakes charging our headlights, our windshield, as messages flying through digital skies. Some benign. Some silly. Some urgent.

Some malevolent. Sick.

I wanted to vanish, float free of this car, and chase the message I just sent—chase it down the path of this sick exchange. I wanted to find this worm and yank him out of his black fantasies into a cold, harsh light.

Andy turned off the county road into a subdivision marked with a pair of landscaped brick half walls. One side bore the name Covent Creek Estates in sweeping metal script. Oversized homes spaced out on five-acre lots spread into the night distance. Each one glowed in the snowfall, tastefully lighted for Christmas, a scene of winter postcard perfection.

We found the Allison home on a cul-de-sac. A jolly inflatable Santa Claus waved at us from the front lawn. Icicle lights dripped from the eaves. When Andy stopped the car, we sat for a moment regarding the phone in my hand.

Ding!

Midnight. Tomorrow. One minute late and the whole world gets to see your...

I didn't read the rest.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



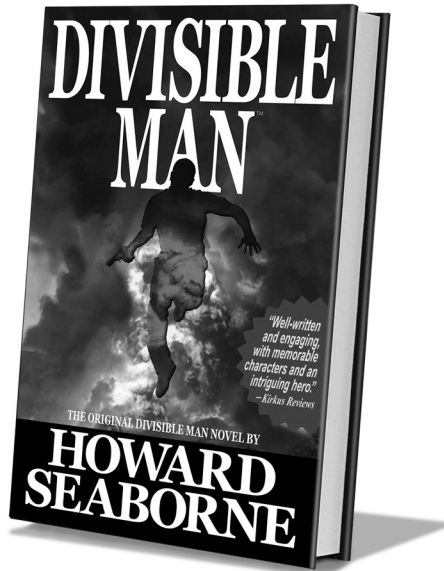
HOWARD SEABORNE is the author of the DIVISIBLE MAN™ series of novels and a collection of short stories featuring the same cast of characters.

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

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DIVISIBLE MAN



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

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

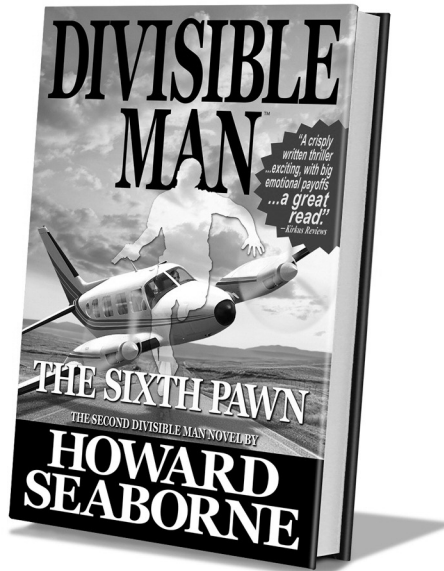
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When the Essex County “Wedding of the Century” erupts in gunfire, Will and Andy Stewart confront a criminal element no one could have foreseen. Will tests the extraordinary aftereffect of surviving a devastating airplane crash while Andy works a case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

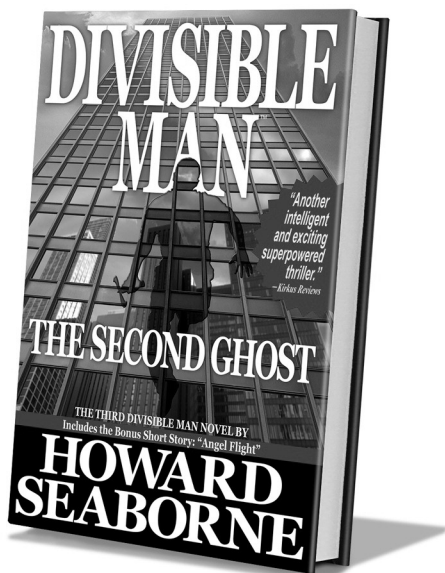
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Tormented by a cyber stalker, Lane Franklin's best friend turns to suicide. Lane's frantic call to Will and Andy Stewart launches them on a desperate rescue. When it all goes bad, Will must adapt his extraordinary ability to survive the dangerous high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

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

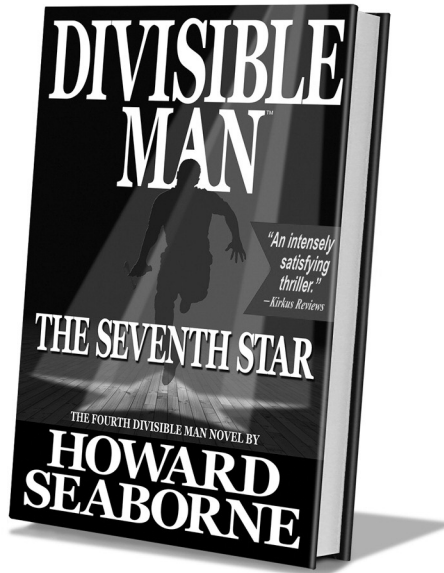
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DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SEVENTH STAR



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

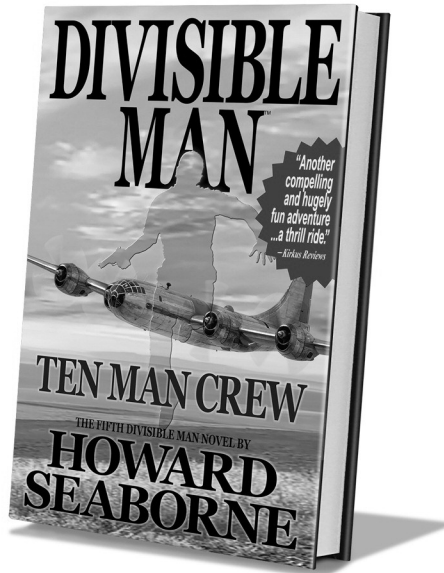
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DIVISIBLE MAN: TEN MAN CREW



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

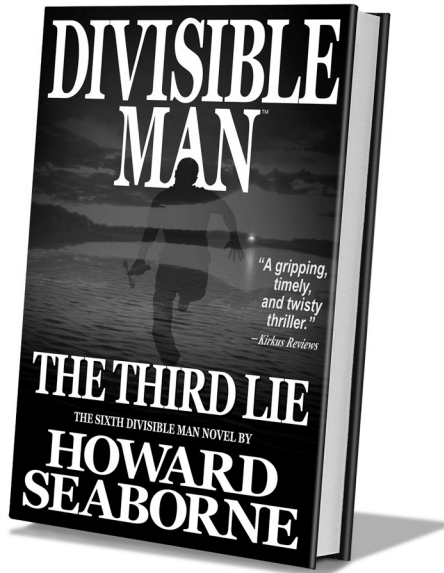
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DIVISIBLE MAN: THE THIRD LIE



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

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

A Kirkus Starred Review.

A Kirkus Star is awarded to "books of exceptional merit."

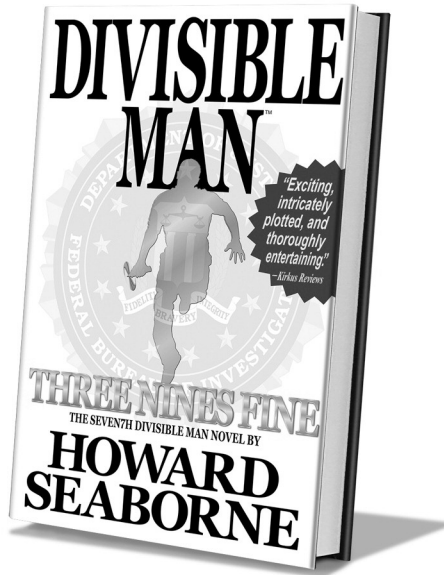
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DIVISIBLE MAN: THREE NINES FINE



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

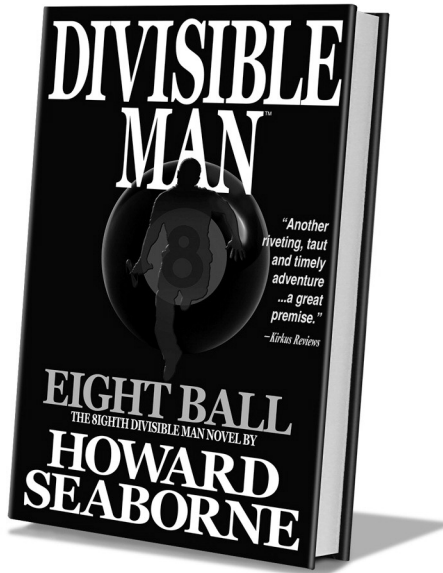
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DIVISIBLE MAN: EIGHT BALL



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

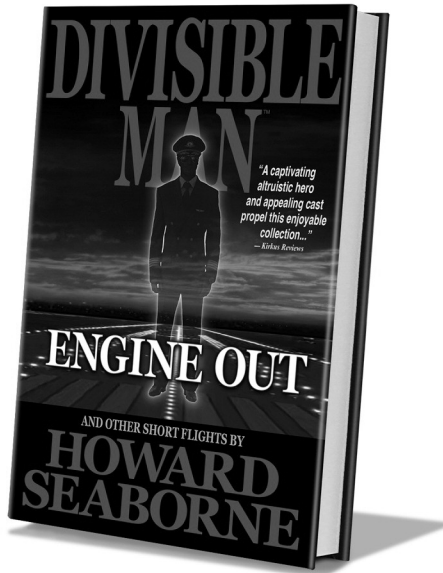
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ENGINE OUT AND OTHER SHORT FLIGHTS



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

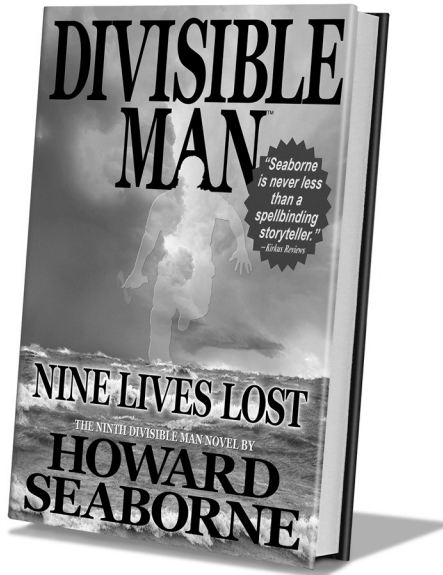
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DIVISIBLE MAN: NINE LIVES LOST



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

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