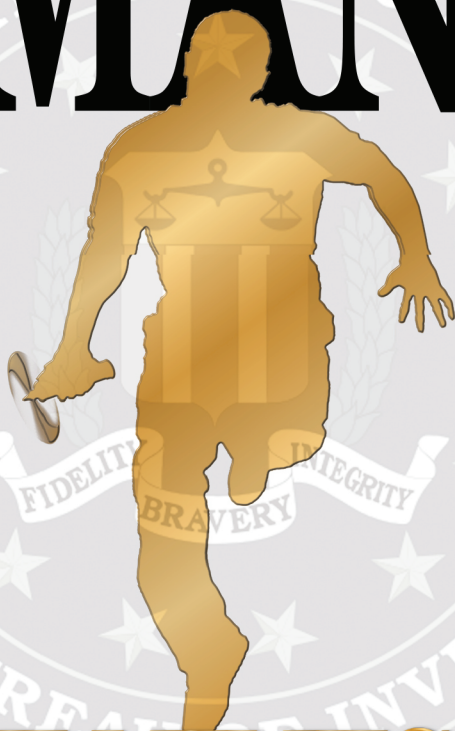


DIVISIBLE MAN™



*"Exciting,
intricately
plotted, and
thoroughly
entertaining."*

—Kirkus Reviews

THREE NINES FINE

THE SEVEN7H DIVISIBLE MAN NOVEL BY

HOWARD SEABORNE



DIVISIBLE MANTM
THREE NINES FINE

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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Sign up today and get a FREE DOWNLOAD.

*For everyone who serves
with decency, respect and the
true bearings provided by
a moral compass.*

PREFACE

THE OTHER THING

It's like this: I wake up nearly every morning in the bed I share with my wife. After devoting a religious moment to appreciating the stunning, loving woman beside me, I ease off the mattress and pick my way across the minefield of creaks and groans in the old farmhouse's wooden floor. I slip into the hall and head for the guest bathroom two doors down—the one with the quietest toilet flush in the house. I take care of essential business, then pull up to the mirror. The face offers no surprises. I give it a moment, then picture a set of levers in my head—part of the throttle-prop-mixture quadrant on a twin-engine Piper Navajo. The levers I imagine are to the right, a fourth set not found on any airplane, topped with classic round balls. I see them fully retracted, pulled toward me, the pilot. My eyes are open—it makes no difference—I can see the levers either way. I close my hand on them. I push. They move smoothly and swiftly to the forward stops. Balls to the wall.

For a split second I wonder, as I did the day before, and the day before that, if this trick will work again. Then—

Fwoomp!

—I hear it. A deep and breathy sound—like the air being sucked out of a room. I've learned that the sound is audible only in my head.

A cool sensation flashes over my skin. The first dip in a farm pond after a hot, dusty day. The shift of an evening breeze after sunset.

I vanish.

Preface

I see myself disappear in the mirror. Bleary eyes and tossed hair wink out and the shower curtain behind me—the one with the frogs on it—fills in where my head had been. As soon as I see those frogs, my feet leave the cold tile floor. My body remains solid, but gravity and I are no longer on speaking terms. I begin to float. A stiff breeze will send me on my way if I don't hang on to something.

The routine never varies. I've tested it nearly every morning since I piloted an air charter flight down the RNAV 31 Approach to Essex County Airport but never made the field. I have no memory of the crash. The running theory is that I collided with something in midair. I have dreams of hitting something, but I'm not sure if the dreams come from the event or were suggested afterward. In the dreams, everything is peachy until something—it's just a hole in the sky—tears the airplane apart under me. Evidence suggests I fell more than five hundred feet and landed in a marsh, sitting in the pilot's seat. That's where the Essex Volunteer Fire Department found me.

Since the night of the crash, whenever I picture that set of levers in my mind and I push them fully forward, I vanish. Pull them back, and I reappear.

Now you know as much as I do about *the other thing*.

PART I

“What happened to you?”

Earl Jackson leaned farther back than usual on his Army surplus office chair, challenging it to throw him over backward. He leveled his left leg on the only other chair in his tiny office. Ordinarily, I wouldn't have asked an intrusive personal question of the boss, but his open office door guaranteed a quick exit if any of the objects on his desk became projectiles.

“S my goddamned arthritis. Woke up Sunday morning with that knee all swolled up. Hurts like a hot poker.”

Rosemary II, the Essex County Air Service Office Manager and Goddess of The Schedule, leaned in the open doorway and gently nudged me aside. “He's not supposed to be here. And he's supposed to use this.” She leaned a cane against the chair supporting his leg.

“Yeah, I'll use it alright,” Earl muttered.

I grabbed the cane and handed it back to Rosemary II. “Best not to arm the man in this condition.” She scoffed at me and returned it.

“I'm calling your doctor, Earl. I'll take you myself if I have to.” She breezed out of sight, ignoring the withering glare that followed her.

“What's going on with the new bird?”

I shrugged. “They finished the pre-buy inspection on Friday. Dewey Larmond is wiring payment today. I planned on picking her up this week, but the pre-buy recommended a new set of tires and replacing one of the brake lines. Probably next week.”

The search to replace the Piper Navajo belonging to the Christine and Paulette Paulesky Education Foundation unfolded quickly after the FBI confirmed for the insurance company that the aircraft had been stolen and subsequently crashed in Lake Michigan. The Feds listed the cause of the crash as Dumbass Without Pilot License Loses Control in Non-Visual Flight Conditions Over Water at Night. My role in causing the crash that killed two mass murderers did not make it into the report. I mourned the loss of the airplane but had to admit to some excitement over her replacement, which had been found in San Diego.

“Compressions good?” Earl asked.

“Tip top.”

“They check the lifters for pitting?”

“Yup.”

Earl’s blessing mattered. Earl Jackson has bought and sold more airplanes than I will ever fly. He can smell a good or bad deal across half a continent.

The new Navajo, a powerful cabin-class twin-engine airplane with seats for up to eight, would transport Sandy Stone and Arun Dewar on the Education Foundation’s business, which typically meant day trips to small towns for on-site assessments—towns well beyond the sphere of commercial airline service. The aircraft would also fill in flying charters for Essex County Air Service, my previous employer, thanks to a lease/maintenance agreement. I planned to fly the Navajo for both the Foundation and Essex County Air, occasionally returning to my old job to take a charter when demand ran high or pilot staff fell short.

I figured being shorthanded prompted Earl to call me to his office this Tuesday morning, although it struck an off-key note that the call came from Earl, and not Rosemary II, who governed the air service booking schedule.

“So, what’s up, Boss?”

“Close the door.” I did as commanded. He made no move to shift his leg. I remained standing. “I need a favor. Off the books.”

“Anything.”

Earl glanced at the door as if he detected Rosemary II pressing an ear to the other side. He reached up and rubbed the sun-baked surface of his bald head with a gnarled, calloused hand. He lowered his voice.

“I need you to fly down to La Crosse and pick up a passenger. I was gonna do it, but...”

I pointed at his knee.

“That? Hell, I can fly one-legged. I flew for two months in South America with t’other leg in a cast.”

Another Earl Jackson story noted for future inquiry.

“Then what do you need me for?”

Earl scratched his scalp. “They asked if you were available.”

“Somebody I know?”

“Nope,” he said sharply. “Prob’ly picked up your name from when you were famous. Can you take it?”

I didn’t like being famous. I was less happy with the idea of someone thinking they were fixing the odds of a safe flight by choosing a pilot who fell out of the sky and lived. I imagined the passenger rubbing my head for luck—and me punching their face for fun.

“Sure. Out to LaCrosse and then what—back here?”

“Nope. Make the pickup and then she’ll tell you where to go from there. Let her do her business. Then take her back.”

“Back to La Crosse?”

“Yup.”

Earl wears a perpetual scowl, but something in the granite angles and crevices of his face shifted. This request carried a personal priority.

“Wherever you take her, don’t file. No flight plan. No record. Got it?”

“Okay. But I’m not doing this without asking questions.”

“I wouldn’t. Shoot.”

“Her? Who is she?”

Earl checked the door again.

“Lonnie Penn.”

I blinked. “*The Lonnie Penn? The actress?*”

“Actor. Don’t call her an actress unless you want an earful.”

Why on earth would an A-list Hollywood name call Essex County Air Service when she surely owned her own jet?

The answer jumped at me. “You know Lonnie Penn?”

“Knew her dad.”

“Okay.” I wondered if I would ever stop being amazed by the slowly revealed threads of Earl Jackson’s life. “Equally impressive. You knew Dahl Penn? *The Dahl Penn?* Ran with John Wayne and John Ford? Said to have drunk Peter O’Toole under the table?”

“I knew some of ‘em. I was a snot-nosed kid building time in the right seat with the old Honeymoon Express—Paul Mantz’s air charter company.” I added the famous Hollywood stunt pilot to the list of people I planned to ask Earl about. “Hauled Dahl Penn out of a Tijuana jail one night after we got the deputy hammered on tequila. We stayed in touch after that.”

“Jesus Christ, Earl!”

“Get your head back in the cockpit, Will. This has to be done quietly.”

I forced the bald wonder off my face. “Lonnie Penn called *you* for this?”

“Yup. Fly to La Crosse. Park at the FBO. Wait in the airplane for her and then fly her wherever she tells you. She takes care of business. You fly her back to La Crosse. Don’t ask her any questions and don’t pester her. Got it?”

“I guess.”

“Take the Arrow. I had Pidge put it out on the line. Stay off the radio, except for La Crosse.” He drilled me with a serious expression. “What? Spit it out. I gotta know if you’re all in on this.”

“I am. It’s just...I have a thing on Thursday. With Andy.”

“You meet Lonnie at ten in La Crosse. A couple hours out. Wait for her. A couple hours back. If it all goes right, you’ll be home rubbing your wife’s feet for beddy-bye.”

If all goes right. In every hare-brained scheme I’ve ever joined, there’s always a moment when a gremlin peeks through the fabric of the plan. I felt sure its arrival had just been announced.

Earl stared at me.

“Okay, Boss.”

“Good. Get moving.”

PIDGE SPOTTED me heading toward the flight line. She told the passengers boarding the Essex County Air Service Piper Mojave to go ahead and take their seats, then she ducked under the wing and trotted after me.

“Stewart!” She caught up as I dropped my flight bag on the wing root of the Piper Arrow, a four-passenger high-performance single-engine airplane. “What the fuck is this all about?”

No secret goes unnoticed at Essex County Air.

“You hauling drugs now? Smuggling guns?”

“Can’t tell you. I’d have to kill you.”

“Oh, c’mon!”

I shook my head. “Nope.”

Pidge propped her fists on her hips. At twenty-three, she holds every rating on the books except seaplane and helicopter. She’s the best pilot I’ve ever seen. Better than me, and I trained her. Her pixie size and appearance mask a stubborn streak that rivals that of my wife. She’ll tear into you if you slide onto her bad side, but her loyalty is carbon steel. Pidge is one of a handful of people who knows I can disappear at will. Trust wasn’t an issue. I simply didn’t want to tell her about Lonnie Penn until I met the woman. The whole thing seemed odd.

“Honest truth? I don’t know. I’ll tell you when I get back.”

“Fuck you,” she replied, living up to the nickname she earned as a teenaged student pilot. Pidge is short for Pidgeon, so named because she talks dirty and flies. “Hey, are you still meeting up with the feds on Thursday?”

Pidge had been hammering me to do something meaningful with *the other thing* for months.

“If it doesn’t get put off again.”

“What?”

“It was supposed to be today, but the guy we saw in New York stalled it,” I said. “Or his secretary did. Miss Carlisle-Plinkham, or some such. Sounds like a British nanny. Anyway, we got the call Sunday. She said her boss had meetings in Washington.”

Pidge laughed. “Probably testifying before a Senate subcommittee on dumbshits who can disappear.”

“Don’t even.”

She glanced back at the twin-engine Mojave crouched by the gas pumps, waiting for a pilot. “I gotta go. Call me tonight! I have GOT to hear about this!”

“You and me both,” I said. She darted away.

I CONDUCTED a thorough preflight inspection of the Arrow. Fuel had been topped. I planned to refill the tanks in La Crosse. Without destination information, the best fuel status would be full tanks. I checked the weather again, using the iPad rather than calling Flight Service for an on-the-record briefing, adhering to Earl’s mandate that the tail number of the Arrow only be used with LaCrosse tower.

The Foreflight app on my tablet told me a trough of low pressure extended from the Canadian province of Saskatchewan all the way to Tennessee, causing widespread areas of marginal VFR and in some places IFR conditions—low clouds and poor visibilities in drizzle and mist. This did not mesh with Earl’s admonition not to file a flight plan. Getting to La Crosse from Essex didn’t pose a challenge but depending on where my passenger wanted to go from there, I might run into lousy conditions for visual flight.

I tabled my concerns. Earl wouldn’t have asked me to do this if he didn’t think it could be done.

I loaded my flight bag and dropped into the pilot’s seat of the Arrow.

HOWARD SEABORNE

After plotting a course, I pulled the checklist and settled into pilot mode. Ten minutes later I lifted the landing gear and banked in a climbing turn toward La Crosse.

“Hey.”

“Hey, you,” Andy replied. Her warm voice came from somewhere in the center of my head, thanks to the Bluetooth connection between my headset and phone. I sat in the pilot’s seat of the Arrow on the ramp adjacent to Colgan Air Services at La Crosse Municipal Airport. A light mist fogged the windshield and glossed the wings. I landed under Visual Flight Rules, but the weather was marginal. The airport reported an overcast ceiling of 1700 feet and visibility of four miles. “What did Earl want?”

“Run an errand. I’m in La Crosse right now. How about you?”

“Office. Paperwork.” The Clayton Johns prosecution was making the county DA as nervous as a bride’s mother before the wedding. The former NFL star accused of rape mustered a high-powered defense team. At least one of the attorneys practically owned a box as a talking head on Fox News. The DA, in turn, applied constant pressure on Andy to ensure that nothing in the conduct of the investigation would blindside the prosecution. Andy described it as playing nursemaid to controlled hysteria. “Will you be home for dinner?”

“Better not plan on it. However, I hope to be there in time to rub your feet.”

“What?”

“Something Earl said.”

“That’s gross...although...” I pictured dimples appearing at the corners of her lips.

“No. I’m not rubbing your smelly feet.”

“What a thing to say to your wife.”

I felt a strong urge to say more about my mission, but also knew that whatever story unfolded, it would be better whole. “Anything new about Thursday?”

“God, I hope not.” Andy had been disappointed by the delay. We had discussed to death the decision to meet with the Deputy Director of the FBI. The call from his assistant lent it a feeling of low priority that made us both insecure. Andy more than me.

I tried to brush off her doubts. “Dee, what’s the one thing we know about plans?”

“They change,” we said in unison. I added, “I thought you might have heard from Donaldson.”

“Not since this was set up. It’s been radio silence.”

“That’s over two weeks. Makes me think he’s got something up his sleeve.”

“Will, you have to get over your distrust of the man,” she said. Andy placed firm professional faith in FBI Special Agent Lee Donaldson, who had been the conduit to Deputy Director Mitchell Lindsay. She was wrong about me. My distrust of the man was long past its expiration date, chiefly because Donaldson had saved Andy’s life, for which I owed him a deep debt. He also ranked among the handful of people aware of my ability to vanish.

“I think I’ve shown trust.”

“Well, I expect he’ll be there on Thursday as planned,” Andy said. She paused for a moment, then asked, “Am I getting a hint that this errand you’re running for Earl might disrupt our plans?”

“No,” I said quickly, feeling a vague sense that I had just lied to my wife.

“Will! You can’t. It’s been postponed once. We can’t just not show up.”

“Dee, it’s two days away. I told you. I plan to be home tonight.”

“Rubbing my feet.”

“It could happen.”

I WATCHED the jet touch down. Symmetrical curls of spray spun into the air behind each wingtip. I had been watching the approach path to Runway 18. The landing light emerged from the low clouds about a mile out. That told me the ceiling was dropping. Not good.

Something else not good was my passenger’s decision to arrive in a Gulfstream G650, the current pet jet and status symbol among Hollywood A listers. Not exactly discreet, although I was mildly amused by the idea of a

pampered queen of the screen jumping out of her leather upholstered executive jet and into my single-engine Piper Arrow. I glanced at the seat beside me. No duct tape patching the upholstery, but the forty-plus-year-old airplane had seen better days. Champagne service on this flight consisted of two plastic water bottles lying on the back seat waiting to be served with a warning not to drink them early in the flight because there's no onboard toilet.

The G650 made a stately entrance to the general aviation ramp, enthusiastically waved to priority parking by a ramp rat wearing a reflective vest over a yellow rain slicker. The jet's nose bobbed to a halt and the ramp rat hustled to the unfolding airstair. He produced and opened an umbrella.

There was no mistaking Lonnie Penn. Blonde and trim, she wore a white leather jacket over black tights that advertised her figure. She followed a crewman down the steps and accepted his hand for the transition to the ramp, quickly ducking under the proffered umbrella and paying the ramp rat with a red-carpet smile. A cadre of young men and women hurried down the stairs after her. A woman wearing a ball cap and a long dark ponytail took the star by the arm to guide her forward. The entourage disappeared into the FBO.

If she wanted discretion, she had a funny way of showing it.

I waited in the cockpit of the Arrow. Earl's instructions had been clear. She'll find you. Sit tight.

I obeyed Earl for a fruitless fifteen minutes, maintaining watch over the jet and the FBO. I also had a partial view of the road fronting the FBO offices. When a pair of stretched black SUVs pulled away, I decided the whole plan had gone seriously wrong.

I let another ten minutes tick off the clock. Nothing moved on the ramp. No one emerged from the office. The jet crew eventually disembarked and made their way to the building. A fuel truck rolled up to fill the thirsty jet.

You learn patience as a charter pilot. Customers promise to be back at the airport for departure at a certain hour and then leave you twiddling thumbs for another two hours. It's tempting to call and ask what they're thinking, but I don't bother. Nothing I say or do alters their schedule, their momentum, or their perception of time. On several occasions I met the client at the door hours late and calmly explained to them that they could make hotel arrangements, since the weather window for departure had closed, precisely as I had explained to them upon arrival. Of course, such news is always my fault and the flight home the next day tends to be cold and quiet.

I waited, using the time to check the weather, which continued to deteriorate. Earl's restriction on filing an instrument flight plan weighed heavily

on any outbound planning. If Her Hollywood Majesty needed a kale and cappuccino lunch before dashing off on her mystery mission, she was well on her way to screwing things up. I'll fly in marginal weather up to a point, but the derogatory term for it is "scud running" and the practice often generates an accident report.

I checked METAR reports for a two hundred-mile radius—since I had no idea in which direction my passenger would point. Head down in the cockpit, I nearly missed seeing the woman cross the ramp toward me. She wore a brown leather flight jacket over jeans. A ball cap and dark ponytail suggested Penn's assistant—no doubt headed my way to deliver bad news. The mist had turned to a drizzle, but she did not hurry or duck under an umbrella. Despite the low-hanging clouds, she wore aviator sunglasses.

"Come to tell me your boss is getting a pedicure?" I muttered to the empty cockpit as she rounded the wing. I leaned over and pulled the door latch. The door issued a shabby squeak as it swung open. I felt her mount the step behind the trailing edge of the flaps, then watched her jeans, artfully sliced and frayed at the knees, climb the low wing. A heavy leather attaché case dropped into the back seat. In one gymnastic move, she lowered herself into the seat beside me.

"Are you Will?" I instantly recognized the voice from a dozen movies. She put out her hand. "I'm Lonnie."

I'll admit to being starstruck. I've met a few celebrities in my life, and there is *something* about them. An alertness. A sense that they're operating with the On switch thrown at all times. An undefined possession of the moment that we mere mortals can't muster.

The woman sitting behind the copilot's yoke radiated that *something* in a measure off the charts. I didn't expect the effect it had on me and no doubt looked as befuddled as a thousand other idiots she has met in her life. Enroute to La Crosse, I imagined being cool when meeting her. I wasn't.

I stared until her expectant expression forced a few words free.

"I didn't expect a disguise," I said. She held up her hand until I belatedly produced mine. She shook it firmly.

"The price of fame," she said. She turned and pulled the door closed.

"I'm sorry." I collected myself and reached carefully across her chest. "There's a trick to it." I opened the latch and pushed the door out, then slammed it and locked the latch forward. I reached over her head and snapped the overhead latch. "If we need to leave in a hurry...to open this, flip the latch above you, then pull this one up and toward you."

"Is that the emergency briefing?"

"Part of it. The other part is that if we're in serious trouble the best idea will be to follow the back of my jeans because I'll be outta here *post haste*."

"Got it."

I heard an actor once say of making it in Hollywood that you have a better chance of becoming an astronaut. The alchemy of right place, right

time, right face and voice may be even more secretive than producing gold from base metals.

Lonnie Penn held a patent on the magic formula. The face wasn't cookie cutter beautiful, yet she possessed a magnetism. She had morphed its smooth contours into dozens of vivid characters throughout her career—beautiful and sweet, vicious and cunning. Her body wasn't centerfold material, yet it stole men's breath when backlit in a love scene or wrapped in golden silk for one of her perfume ads. I'd seen most of her films and found it hard to reconcile the idealized star of the screen as a living, breathing woman in a worn seat beside me.

My wife's beauty and intensity can suck the air from a room.

Lonnie Penn would stroll in and steal the scene.

Focus, idiot, I told myself.

"Where are we going?"

"Wayne County, South Dakota."

"Roger that."

I concentrated on the aviating task at hand.

The flight planning picture looked grim. Heavy low clouds and poor visibilities draped our intended route. I couldn't climb up through the clouds to bright clear air above because the cloud tops were reported above fifteen thousand feet and we had no oxygen on board. Flying in the clouds meant talking to ATC, and that was a no-go.

The destination pushed the envelope, too. I had anticipated a short hop somewhere, possibly into a small municipal airport. One without runway length or services to accommodate her G650. Wayne County listed Prince Henry as its county seat. The Prince Henry Municipal Airport owned a single hard surface runway and offered self-service fuel. I touched off a flight plan on my iPad. It tallied up 255 nautical miles—just over two hours flying time.

I briefly wondered why she had flown to Wisconsin, only to backtrack to South Dakota. She could have landed at half a dozen closer airports.

I zoomed the iPad screen with my fingers and scanned the purple line describing the flight route. Along the way, I picked out obstacles. Towers. Where they touched the flight route, I planted a waypoint and created a deviation padding my path with a couple miles clearance. Then I looked for and noted safety valve airports along the way. The process took a few minutes.

I expected her to put pressure on me, but she remained silent.

At length, I said, "Well, you're going to get a low-level tour of Minnesota, but it'll go by fast and you won't see much."

She nodded.

I killed the engine and released the control yoke. My fingers had grown stiff with tension. I wanted to fill the sudden cockpit silence with something witty about disembarking, but the truth was, I was just glad to be on the ground. The last ten miles of the trip were flown below 500 feet, which is damned low. Worse yet, the visibility challenged the 1 mile minimum required for legal flight. I didn't see the airport until we were on top of it.

Before takeoff, she turned down my offer of a headset, which eliminated intercom conversation, for which I was grateful. The two-plus hour flight required all my attention and left me wrung out.

I worked to get feeling back in my fingers. She broke the silence. "Is this it?" She studied the airport.

What looked like a normal small town airport to me probably looked like a deserted movie set to Lonnie Penn. A self-serve gas pump sat at the edge of a small ramp containing half a dozen empty tiedowns, one of which we would soon occupy. A shack the size of a small RV bore a sign proclaiming the name of the airport and the field elevation of 1,235 feet. A row of simple T-hangars extended away from the edge of the ramp.

"I'm going to say yes," I answered tentatively. "Have you been here before?"

She shook her head.

"Is someone meeting you?"

"No. I need a cab. Or a rental car."

"Um..."

“There isn’t one, is there.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it. But there might be a crew car.” Her expression asked for explanation. “Somebody’s spare wheels. They leave it at the airport for transient pilots to use.”

“With the keys in it?”

“The keys are probably in that shack over there. Let’s have a look.”

They were. The shack door had a sophisticated magnetic lock with a numeric keypad. A small sign over the pad advised me to enter the VFR Squawk Code. Simple enough for any pilot. I tapped in the number and the latch snapped open.

The shack interior lay dark and still. I found a light switch, which flicked on a lamp with a brittle yellow shade. It cast a warm light over a small desk at the side of the room. A guest book on the desk invited pilots to sign in and take the vehicle. A set of GM keys beside the book confirmed that the single vehicle in the parking lot, a rusted Chevy Astro, awaited us.

“We’re in luck.”

“Do we have to sign it?”

“I have to write down an expected return time, which would be...?”

“I don’t know.”

My internal caution light flickered.

“Couple hours?”

“Less,” she said. “I hope.”

“Good. I’ll put my name on this. Why don’t you wait here while I gas up the airplane?”

“Well, no...that is...you can’t come with me.” She picked up the keys.

“Okay. Look, Earl made it clear that what you’re doing here is none of my business and I’m okay with that. But something tells me that whatever you’re doing may or may not go as planned.” She didn’t comment. “Which means I don’t want to be sitting here in the dark wondering when you’ll be back. I don’t need to go with you for whatever business you plan to conduct, but at the very least, you can drop me at a local bar. I’ll order Coke, I promise. You can take care of business and pick me up on the way out of town.”

She hesitated.

“Fine,” she said. “Let’s go.”

“Gas first. In case we need to leave in a hurry.”

The aptly named Airport Road took us to a highway marked County H. A sign told us that Prince Henry lay four miles to the left. Lonnie let me drive the thirty-something-year-old Chevy van. The vehicle's worn interior smelled like pizza. She sat with her case on her lap, holding it just a little more possessively than seemed necessary.

On the way, her phone chirped. She lifted it and read the screen notification. I glanced over to try and interpret her expression, but she betrayed nothing. She worked the screen for a moment, then looked up.

"There's a place—it says it's on the west side of town on Highway H. White Bluff Motel. Take me there."

"Should be easy. We're on Highway H."

"It says there's a café. You can wait for me there."

Better yet. I was hungry. We ticked off a mile before I came up with a way to ask. "Miss Penn—"

"Lonnie."

"Lonnie...it's not my business, but it sounds like you're meeting someone. I'm no bodyguard. In fact, I'm a grade A coward when it comes to getting in a fight, but if you want some company."

She turned her head to watch the wet gray landscape flow past the van. Silence hung in the rattling van. Her pause struck me as overly dramatic. I wondered if she lived every moment as if a camera focused on her.

"No." Without turning her head back to me, she said, "I'm just here to get my Oscar."

We rounded a curve in the highway and I nearly missed the sign. Runnels of rust partially obscured the name. White Bluff Motel. Neither the word Vacancy nor the word No were lighted. In eight-foot letters mounted on a sign above it all, the word EAT. A diner occupied the bottom half of a two-story main building. Stretched in either direction, a one-story row of undersized motel rooms looked as if they were built into the hillside behind the establishment. The doors wore glossy blue paint with stupidly large red numerals near the kickplates.

“Park here.” She pointed at the end space in front of the diner. No other vehicles graced the gravel lot.

I followed orders. She looked up and down the row of motel rooms, then checked her phone. She craned her neck to peer through the windshield at the second story above the diner. After a moment, she cracked the van door.

“My offer stands,” I said. “If you need—”

“What?” she snapped at me. “Company? In a motel room? Just sit in the goddamned van or in the restaurant. I don’t care. But if I catch you posting even a hint of this or my name on social media, you’ll spend the rest of your life and every penny you ever saw in court. Got it?”

“Hey, all I—”

“I know what you were offering. Keep it in your goddamned pants.” She slammed the door and stalked forward, past the grille of the van toward a metal staircase hung on the side of the building.

I watched her climb the stairs, pounding anger into each step. At the top

she reversed and marched to the front of the building and counted off two of the doors. She stopped at the third. A glance over her shoulder satisfied her of something, then she turned the knob. To my surprise, the door opened. She slipped in.

“Well, okay then.”

I decided not to take her outburst personally. My stomach reminded me that breakfast lay five hundred miles behind me. The scent of fried onions nudged aside the lingering smell of pizza in the crew van. I decided to implement a cardinal rule of charter flying. Never miss an opportunity to eat a good meal.

Roadside diners with no franchise affiliation rely on regulars. Regulars expect certain standards. My favorite breakfast stops usually have a dozen pickup trucks parked in front. Granted, the coffee can range from heavenly to something better used to grease an axle, but I will take the chance if the bacon is crisp and the eggs are not overcooked. When the refills are free, I feel rich.

I found a seat at the end of the counter. The lunch crowd had come and gone. The dinner rush, if they had one, had a few hours to wait. During the in-between part of the day you either got a chatty waitress who had no one else to talk to, or you couldn't find one.

My waitress was a wiry sixty-something man in a white apron and grease-stained t-shirt. He had thin, slicked-back hair and faded tattoos on skinny forearms. He smelled like cigarette smoke but had the courtesy not to dangle one from his lips when he approached to take my order. I took him for the head chef because he seemed none too happy to see me.

“Kinahgetcha?”

“A cheeseburger with bacon. Onion rings. And a coffee.”

He didn't write any of it down. The coffee came swiftly from a pot sitting on a shelf under the Order Up window. He muttered something about the rest taking a few minutes.

“No hurry.”

I'm just here for my Oscar.

My mind tapped out a B-movie screenplay centered on a famous actress who dallied with an opportunistic younger man, a leech whose affections only went as deep as her A-list connections. When she catches her lover straying with a scheming starlet, the Hollywood queen torches the affair along with the young man's hopes. Tossed off the gravy train, the rejected lothario grabs her Academy Award on his way out the door. She wants it back, but without fanfare. The kid bolts for East Nowhere, South Dakota with the gold statue wrapped in underwear and buried in a

duffle bag. He demands a payoff. She shows up with a satchel full of cash.

I wondered if Lonnie Penn would give her former lover the same speech about posting on social media. I wondered why she didn't send hired muscle (one of today's body-builder actors got the part in my mind movie). Or a couple leg breakers scrounged up from a former romance with an underworld—

“Wancatchupwiddat?”

The cook shoved a plate across the counter in front of me. A burger hid under a mound of onion rings

“Um, yeah, thanks.”

He grabbed a red squirt bottle and slid it toward me.

“Got mustard?”

He gave me a cold look suggesting that my request impugned the delicate flavor of his creation. Maybe yellow conflicted with his cuisine's presentation. He produced a plastic squeeze bottle from under the counter, then beat a sullen retreat to the kitchen.

While I painted red and yellow over the bacon hiding under the bun, the door to the diner opened and closed. I looked up to see a man studying me. Work boots. Cargo pants speckled with old paint. A camo t-shirt. Central casting sent a “rust belt construction worker” into my bad screenplay. He matched my height but carried at least fifty pounds more than me. Most of which hung over his belt. His face had paunch under buzz-cut black hair and eyes laden with baggage. I checked out his ride. The mud-spattered Dodge Ram pickup fit him like the pack of cigarettes accenting his t-shirt pocket.

Just about the time I wrote him off as a late-lunch customer, I caught movement past the window at the far end of the room. Someone large and dark climbed the stairs Lonnie had taken.

“Hi.” The newcomer made no move to take a seat. “That your van out front?”

“Nope.” I lie best when what I'm saying is true.

He took a long look at the van parked beside his truck.

“How'd you get here?”

The classic *Who wants to know?* danced on the tip of my tongue, but I decided to play a different role.

“Just waiting for my ride,” I said. I used a hefty bite of the burger to prohibit elaboration. The cook had a point about the mustard. His burger was excellent.

The man at the door curled the corners of his lips downward and bobbed his head, letting me know my story was being considered, if not fully

accepted. I feared he might pull up to the counter. Not beside me—men don't do that—but a stool away, now that we were such good buddies.

He put my fear to rest. He turned and strolled out. I watched the windows. He crossed in front of the van and turned to follow his companion on Lonnie's path up the stairs.

The gremlin peeking through the fabric of Earl's mission planning suddenly appeared, armed to the teeth. I put the burger down and considered my options.

The cook reappeared. He looked at the truck parked outside, then leaned on the counter toward me.

"That's eight-fifty. You want that to go?"

"Wouldja?" I caught myself adopting his one-word dialect. I pulled a ten from my wallet as I stood. "Keep it. You got a back door?"

He picked up the ten and pronounced my exit plan a good one by flicking his eyebrows toward the kitchen. "Follow me."

I paralleled him on my side of the counter until I came to a gap by the register. He turned and passed through an opening in the wall hiding the kitchen. I followed.

The kitchen showcased the cook's pride in spotless floors, shining stainless steel counters and orderly utensils. He dodged left behind a pair of steel prep tables, then right down a constricted hallway, past a small office and then past an open storage pantry. Light shined through a small mesh window topping a heavy steel door at the end of the hall. He pushed the door open and waved me out. The hillside I saw from the motel parking lot ascended abruptly from the other side of a narrow concrete walk.

"Can you put that burger on the front seat of the van out front?" I asked. "It's really good."

"Would'a been even better if you hadn't'a slathered it with mustard."

"Point taken." I touched the phone in my hip pocket. "What do you have for cops around here?"

This brought a clipped laugh. The door swung shut but not before he muttered, "You're funny."

The windowless back wall of the building and the close angle of a scrubby hillside gave the narrow sidewalk a claustrophobic feel. I moved to the side of the building where an alley between the diner and the wing of motel rooms offered access to the front lot. The diner's dumpster shared space with an ice machine; both nudged the side of the building beneath the stairs Lonnie and her visitors had climbed.

The diner parking lot contained just the two vehicles. Three other cars nosed up to the motel rooms. I wondered where the cook parked, but then

considered that maybe he lived in one of the rooms above the diner. Maybe he owned the joint.

I moved to the wrought iron railing of the stairs and looked up.

No point in stumbling into someone.

Fwoomp! The cool sensation enveloped my body. I pushed with my toes and rose easily in defiance of gravity. The stairs climbed to my left while I ascended to the second floor. Fixing a grip on the rail, I performed a hand over hand move to the front of the building. I floated unseen over the van, then over the gray pickup.

The door Lonnie had opened and entered wore the numeral 9 above the kickplate. A single window to the right revealed nothing of the interior thanks to drawn curtains.

Just as I pulled myself over the railing and pushed across the narrow balcony, I heard Lonnie cry out.

“No! No, goddammit! Get off me!” Rising panic in her voice pushed the muffled words through the motel door. “Just tell me and go! Get off me!”

I grabbed the door and turned the knob to burst in. The knob resisted. Locked.

Lonnie’s outcries became muffled. Something in the room thumped.

“Shuddup, bitch!” A man’s voice, not the one from the diner, overrode the sound of stifled screams.

I began to push *the other thing* down my arm and into the doorknob. Sometimes if I push the cool sensation over metal and make it vanish, at the borderline the metal becomes frayed. Shredded. If I apply pressure, the metal breaks. It seemed the thing to do now.

And then what?

I stopped.

What if busting in on her was precisely what she didn’t want? What if she wasn’t looking for an idiot playing hero? What if she was engaged in a deliberate act that needed to be played out? The notion felt crazy, but it fit with the brief shot of venom she issued when she exited the van. What if she knew perfectly well what she had gotten herself into and me bursting in like The Lone Ranger ruined some carefully scripted theater?

“Ow! You miserable bitch!” the man cried out. I heard a sharp slap.

Nope.

I drew back *the other thing* before it spread to the doorknob. Instead, I fixed a grip on the knob and hammered my fist on the door.

“Wayne County Sheriff! Open up!”

I expected silence. I expected the warning to startle them into freezing,

and maybe letting Lonnie go before getting caught doing something worse than they already had.

I did not expect the laugh that came from the other side of the door.

“Goddammit, Mallorin, I knew you’d want a piece,” a voice—not the man from the diner—said from within. The knob turned. The door flew open.

He filled the frame, bigger than his rust belt companion. His dark brown skin competed with a black t-shirt to absorb what thin light seeped through the drizzly clouds. His face mounted a powerful jaw. Badly pocked skin marred cheeks with uneven beard stubble.

His grin jarred the moment. White teeth, just below eye level with me, looked more menacing than friendly. Yet for someone answering a door summons by law enforcement, he looked anything but worried.

The absence of a living soul outside the door stopped him in his tracks. He shot his head back and forth, checking the balcony in both directions.

“Not funny, Mallorin,” he said loudly.

I could not see past him into the dark motel room, but I heard Lonnie issue a stifled closed-mouth scream. If she thought there were cops at the door, she seemed to want their attention.

The Black man leaned out, searching the balcony in both directions for someone named Mallorin.

I reached for and clamped a grip on his forearm. He jolted. He tried to jerk himself back, but before he could, I pushed the levers in my head hard against the stops.

FWOOMP! The man in the doorway disappeared.

“*What the—?*”

I gave him no time to absorb what had happened. I planted my right hand on the motel wall and heaved him through the door with my left.

He may have weighed seventy or eighty pounds more than me when fully visible, but when I vanish, the influence of gravity and the rules of inertia vanish with me. He had no more resistance to me than a dandelion fluff has to the wind. The motel wall provided leverage. I yanked him across the balcony on an upward angle, lifting him over the railing. I felt him flail and jerk but without weight, leverage and inertia, his wild movements offered no resistance.

When I had stretched as far as I could, I let go.

Fwoomp!

He reappeared.

He screamed. He dropped.

Most of his body stretched over the balcony railing. His kicking legs

slammed the handrail and flipped his body. I heard a metallic bang. A short scream ended when the hood of the pickup truck punched the air from his lungs.

I gripped the railing and looked down. He lay sliding slowly toward the truck grille with his legs splayed on the shattered spiderweb of windshield glass. His eyes were flat slits, pressed tightly shut against pain. I saw no blood. He clawed at the dented hood with his hands and gasped for new air.

I could not assess his damage, but his landing put a few hundred dollars-worth of body work in the truck's future.

A heavy crash inside the room jerked my attention away from the amateur skydiver. I heard Lonnie cry out, first in pain, then shouting, "*No! NO! NO!*"

Floating without weight or inertia means I have no force in a fight.

Sometimes a fight is just a fight.

Fwoomp! I retracted the levers in my head and reappeared. My feet dropped to the metal plates forming the balcony footing. I took a second to stabilize; a second I didn't have.

Rust Belt Man burst out the door and slammed into me. The collision caught me off balance. I ricocheted off his tucked shoulder into the balcony railing. For an instant, I pictured the old wrought iron giving way and sending me overboard to join the man below. The railing held and slammed me in the kidney. I folded sideways and went down. Stars danced across my vision. I felt the second man's pounding footsteps on the balcony as he sprinted away.

From darkness within the room, Lonnie Penn wailed like a wounded animal.

“Let me get some ice for that.”

I knelt on the shabby carpet. The welt on the side of Lonnie’s face didn’t look bad. She’d been slapped. I made out lines from individual fingers. The red rims of her eyes made the injury look worse. That and the tracks of tears and wet snot running from her nose. She sniffled loudly and wiped both away with her forearm.

Her shirt was toast, ripped down the front to expose a black bra. Another series of welts tattooed the high side of her left breast. One of them had pawed her. Painfully.

She stared dully at the door, sniffing loudly.

I felt awkward and helpless.

“Wait here, okay? I’ll be right back.”

I stood and hurried out the door, down the stairs and into the diner, still empty. The pickup and its two occupants had departed quickly, spinning tires and kicking up parking lot gravel.

I ducked past the counter and into the kitchen where the cook unwrapped white butcher’s paper containing meat.

“Got any ice?” I asked.

He lifted his eyes toward the ceiling, toward the room above the diner. I said nothing to answer the implied question. He finished unwrapping the package and extracted a slab of steak from the paper. Producing a knife, he sliced off a piece and handed it to me.

“This works better.”

“Thanks.”

I hurried back up to the room. Lonnie had lifted herself off the floor and found her jacket. She wore it zipped to her throat to hide the torn shirt. She sat on the bed. Her face flickered between dazed and angry. I added confusion to her expression by holding out a slab of steak.

“For your cheek. The swelling.”

She flashed anger but took the slab and gingerly applied the red meat to her cheekbone. She closed her eyes.

“Are you going to ask?”

“Would you answer?”

She said nothing.

“Look,” I said. “I understand how important it must be to you. It’s the top award. But it’s just a statue, right? Can’t you get another? Isn’t it insured?” I had no idea how those things work.

Her eyes remained closed, but her head moved minutely from side to side.

“Why don’t you let me call the cops? Those guys can’t be too far away.” I reached for my phone.

“No.”

She made no move to explain. She made no move at all. We sat in heavy silence.

Eventually I asked, “Are they the ones who stole it? Those guys?”

“No.”

My wife taught me that when a woman has a problem, a man always wants to solve it, but a woman doesn’t always want it solved. Sometimes she just wants to air out the problem.

Neither seemed to be the case with Lonnie Penn, so I pressed on.

“Does the Academy allow you to get a replacement? If it’s stolen?”

“What?”

“Your Oscar.”

She issued a two-note laugh and shook her head again.

“Oscar isn’t a statue,” she said softly. “Oscar is my grandson.”

My cheeseburger sat in a bag on the table. The aroma ignited my appetite, but I left it untouched.

Lonnie had cleaned her face in the motel room's tiny bathroom. I expected her to argue in favor of chasing after the pickup truck. Instead, she followed me down to the diner. She closed her hand self-consciously around the steak and wore her hat and sunglasses when we entered, but the diner remained empty. I suggested a booth by the window. I wanted to keep an eye on the parking lot. A moment after we sat, the cook appeared with two glasses of ice water and my unfinished coffee. Lonnie sheepishly offered to return his cut of meat.

"You put that on your cheek, honey," he said. "I'll getcha cuppacoffee." He sauntered off.

Lonnie drew a lungful of air, releasing it on a long slow breath.

"What was in the bag?" I asked. The man who ran a Packer Sweep on me outside the room had been clutching her attaché case to his chest.

Her sharp blue eyes lifted and narrowed, bearing down on me. "Hey, I don't know you. Okay? The poor damsel in distress tells all for the big strong man who will save her? That may be your fantasy, but it's not mine."

"Nope. You don't know me. You don't have to tell me anything. We can grab a cup of coffee here and beat feet for the airport and that's fine with me. Better, in fact, because as bad as that weather was coming in, you won't see me flying in it after dark. In fact, if you don't want to say another word, then all I want is to finish the cheeseburger in this bag and be on our way."

I gave back some of her icy stare.

She blinked.

The cook delivered a cup of hot coffee to her side of the table and poured a heat-up in mine.

“Kinahgecha?” he asked Lonnie.

She shook her head. “I’m fine. Coffee’s fine. Thanks.”

He left again. I wondered if he recognized the woman wearing dark glasses on such a gray and cloudy day.

“Half a million dollars,” she said. I whistled softly. She pointed at the paper bag on the table. “That smells good. Go ahead. Really.”

I pulled out the wrapped burger and onion rings. “Want some?”

“No. Well, maybe an onion ring.”

I spread the meal on the table between us. I took a grateful bite of the burger while she picked up a small breaded circle of fried onion.

“That’s a lot of money. Do you want to go after them?”

She shook her head. I tried again.

“I know people in the FBI. If those guys kidnapped your grandson...”

“No,” she said quickly, then added, “he wasn’t kidnapped.”

I took another bite. She sat in silence.

“Okay, this is my last question. How the hell do you have a grandson? You can’t be older than me. I’m only thirty-four, for chrissakes!” I made a gesture at her face, her body.

This brought a shallow smile. She lowered the meat slab to the paper on the table and pulled some napkins from the holder to wipe her cheek.

“I’m not. You’re not supposed to ask my age, but when you were a senior in college, I would have been a sophomore.”

“I didn’t go to college so I can’t do the math.”

“Neither did I.”

“A grandson? Really? How old is the kid?”

“Three.”

I shook my head. “Impossible.”

“That’s my life, Will. The ten percent of the tabloid version that’s true.”

“Then let me help. I told you. I have connections with the FBI. Not just some acquaintance. Serious firepower. Plus, my wife is a kick-ass cop. A detective. Let us help you find him.”

“I know where he is.” She said it calmly, firmly. I wondered if this explained her lack of panic. I waited for her to explain. She didn’t. Instead, she asked, “You’re married?”

I lifted both hands to show the only two rings on my fingers. A wedding

band on my left hand and an old Army Air Corps ring on my right. “Married to my wife. And to airplanes.”

“Lucky for her. Lucky for me.”

I wolfed another bite of the burger. “You really should try this. I don’t know what that guy puts in it, but it’s awesome.”

She looked longingly at it. “Do you know how long it’s been since I ate a cheeseburger?”

I held it out. She conjured a pained expression. I pushed it toward her. She stole a glance at the empty diner, then snatched it from my fingers and took a bite. She closed her eyes and savored it, humming erotically.

“Finish it. And now I know your second deepest secret. Why don’t you tell me about your first?”

She thought it over while chewing. I leaned back and worked on the heap of onion rings.

“My grandson wasn’t kidnapped. He’s in custody. Here. In Wayne County at the Eastern State Detention Center.” She spoke between bites. “He’s an illegal. One of those murdering, raping immigrants you hear so much about. He’s in detention pending deportation.”

“To?”

“Mexico.”

“We’re a little far from the border here in South Dakota, aren’t we? I thought those detention centers were in the border states.”

“No. No, they’re all over. ICE has facilities all over.”

“And how did a three-year-old climb the mighty wall and get all the way to the Dakotas?”

“He was with my daughter.” She finished the last bite of the burger.

“Was she keeping him from you?”

“She was.” I watched her silver-blue eyes fill with water. “Until she died in ICE custody.”

I froze, dangling an onion ring between us. After a moment, I mustered a soft, “I’m so sorry.”

Lonnie took a drink of water, using the pause to compose herself. “She must have been sick. When they arrested her and the boy. I was told she was in a lot of pain. I don’t have any details. I don’t know if she got medical attention. I don’t know what caused it. The officer I spoke to said she...uh, her remains...were cremated...and they will be returned with the boy to Mexico. Deported. They’re deporting her remains along with her son.”

“Can’t you step in? Stop it? Do you have standing with the kid as a relative? Can’t you send in an army of lawyers?”

“Doesn’t work that way.”

“How can it not work that way? You’re her mother.”

Lonnie trembled with a breathless laugh. “I never knew her.”

“Then how...? What...?” I gave it a moment’s thought. “You got a call. Somebody figured out who she was to you.”

Lonnie nodded and her face darkened. I marveled at how quickly she moved from expression to expression.

“She knew who her mother was. She knew all her life but wanted nothing to do with me. I didn’t even know she had a child. That I had a grandson. She probably would never have had anything to do with me. I... I...left her...when she was a baby. In Mexico. I left her with her father. She knew who I was...but I never...I never tried to reach out to her.”

“How did she end up as an illegal alien?”

“I don’t really know. Her father was on a long, slow path to failure, even back when I was infatuated with him. I heard he died a few years ago. I didn’t know what had become of her until someone—I think it was one of those two men—called me. And that’s not easy to do, you know. Big Hollywood star, you can’t just pick up a phone and get past my agent, my publicist, my assistant, my lawyer, my whole fucking—” She stopped and bit her lip. Her voice grew high and thin. “My daughter was dying and she couldn’t get past my—”

I concentrated on the diminishing pile of onion rings.

“She must have been desperate—at the end. She must have told someone at the detention center who she was. *Who I was*. She told someone—I don’t know who—he didn’t identify himself. He finally got through. He texted me a picture.”

She pulled her phone from the pocket of the leather jacket. After swiping the screen, she held it up for me to see.

The photo framed a dark-haired girl clutching a small boy. She looked afraid and in pain. Her hair was matted with sweat. Both faces in the photo shared Lonnie Penn’s eyes.

“She named him Oscar. Probably to spite me. He was born the year I won—the second one.” Lonnie gazed at the photo before putting the phone away. “I got a call from a man. He told me my daughter died in ICE custody and her child would be deported. He said if I brought half a million dollars here, to this place,” she pointed at the ceiling, “he would get the boy out of detention and turn him over to me.”

“Why not just go to Mexico and wait there for delivery? Then work out the connection with the authorities?”

“The caller said if I didn’t show up with the money, they would have him sent back as an Unidentified Individual. He said that’s what they do with

kids who have no parents and no idea who they are. South of the border they get off-loaded into the Mexican orphanage system. He said if I didn't pay, he would see to it that I would never find him."

"He might have just been trying to scare you."

"And succeeding. I couldn't take the chance."

"This detention facility. You say it's an ICE facility?"

"It's a county jail. ICE uses it."

"Now it makes sense," I said.

"What?"

I lined up my thoughts before answering. She leaned forward. I saw the rapid transformation of her expression, from mournful to curious to demanding.

"What makes sense?"

"First, a question. What happened up there?"

The expression shifted to disgust.

"I was a fool. They told me to wait in that room. Alone. They showed up and I was supposed to give them the money. They were supposed to have the boy. I could tell right away they didn't have him. They took the money. They wanted more."

"Money?"

"No."

"Oh." I recalled the image of red skin on her breast. "They assaulted you."

"Not me. Some character on the screen that they probably masturbate to." She laughed sourly. "Do you know how often men grab me? They own Lonnie Penn on DVD. They think they own her body. That's what that was."

"I'm sorry," I said. "On behalf of the *not* slimy members of my species, I'm sorry."

She cracked a thin smile. It didn't last long. "What did you mean? You said it made sense. What made sense?"

"Did you hear what I said when I knocked on the door?"

"Not really."

"I told them I was the Wayne County Sheriff's Department. You sounded like you were being attacked so I thought cops at the door might scare whoever was in there into running away. But they didn't."

I watched realization dawn on her face.

"No, they didn't..."

"No. They thought it was someone named Mallorin. And I bet—"

"—that he's a deputy at the detention center!"

“**Y**ou want to know *what?*” Andy asked.

“ICE. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. I want to know if you can find out if they have a child in custody at the Eastern State Detention Center in Prince Henry, South—”

“Will! Stop. What’s this about?”

“Usual disclaimer?”

“Um...I’m not sure that applies. Is this the errand Earl sent you on?”

“Yeah.”

Andy let dead air hang for a moment. Lonnie plucked an onion ring from the diminishing pile.

“Are you with someone right now?” Andy asked. I have no idea how she senses these things.

“I am.”

“Can you talk in front of them?”

I knew what she was asking. “Not about everything.”

“Can you tell me what’s going on?”

“You know I will, but for now I need information and time may be short.” I repeated my question. Andy thought it over for a moment.

“ICE uses regional detention centers. Usually through agreements with county agencies. One or two per state. The one you mentioned could be part of their program. We have one in Wisconsin, in Racine. I don’t know much about it, though.”

“Can you find out if they have a certain individual in custody?”

“I doubt it. Not quickly, at least. You said it’s a child?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Do we know the name of the child? Part of the problem right now is identifying tender-aged individuals. A lot of them arrive without ID. It got worse when they started separating adults and kids, especially when they got the bright idea to deport one or the other. In some cases, they lost track of who the kids are. It’s a mess.”

“That’s not the deal here. They know who the kid is.”

“Do you have a name?”

I held the phone aside.

“What’s the boy’s name?”

“Oscar Rilling.”

“Oscar Rilling,” I repeated for Andy.

“Middle name?”

I asked. Lonnie shrugged.

“Don’t know,” I relayed. “See what you can find out about the boy’s mother, too. She died in custody.”

“That’s a big deal, Will. That’s a huge deal. What was her name?”

I asked Lonnie. She replied.

“Gloria Rilling,” I relayed.

Lonnie abruptly waved her hands, signaling me to pause.

“Hold on a sec,” I said.

“When they called me, they told me my daughter was traveling under an alias. Um...Apalona...no! Apalacio! First name Maria—ach! No! Mira! Mira Apalacio!”

Andy heard the exchange. “Did the boy have an alias?”

I asked. Lonnie didn’t know.

“Doubtful they recorded her alias if they knew her real name,” Andy said. “I’ll see what I can find out.”

“Thanks. I gotta go. Love you!” I wanted to end the call before Andy asked me too many questions, like whether I still thought I’d be home before dark or not.

“LET’S GO,” Lonnie slid sideways in the booth.

“Where?”

“Jail. We know where he is. Now we may know who set me up. I’ll file charges. Bribery. Assault. Extortion. C’mon!”

She blew out the diner front door before I could slide out of the booth. I pulled another ten from my wallet to leave for the coffee and the steak.

“Hang on!” I called after her as she climbed into the van. I double-checked that the keys were still in my hip pocket. She slammed her door and waited for me.

I slipped behind the wheel. When I made no move to start the vehicle she spun her hand in a get-on-with-it gesture.

“Really?” I asked. “Where’s the jail? And when we find it, where’s the public entrance? What authority do we have? What are visiting protocols? Visiting hours? Are ICE detainees allowed visitors? Are they even acknowledged as detainees? Because from what I hear that branch of federal law enforcement is anything but transparent. Plus, we know someone on the inside just did something seriously illegal and ripped you off for half a million. How anxious do you think they will be to help you? Are you getting the picture here?”

“I can’t just sit here. They’re going to move him.”

“And you know this how?”

“This!” She pointed at the room above the diner. “This meet! It had to be today. They made it clear that today was the only day they could get him out. They said he was being deported and today was the last day they would be able to get him to me. For all I know they’re loading him up tomorrow morning.”

I pulled out my phone.

“Who are you calling?”

“Not calling. Texting.”

Find out what their protocols are for deporting. When? How? Transport?

I hit send, then pocketed the phone. I reached behind the seat for my flight bag and slid my iPad free.

“Now what?” she demanded.

“Unless you can give me directions, I need to know where the hell this county jail is located.”

“Oh.”

“And while we’re driving there, you’re going to tell me what you haven’t told me yet.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



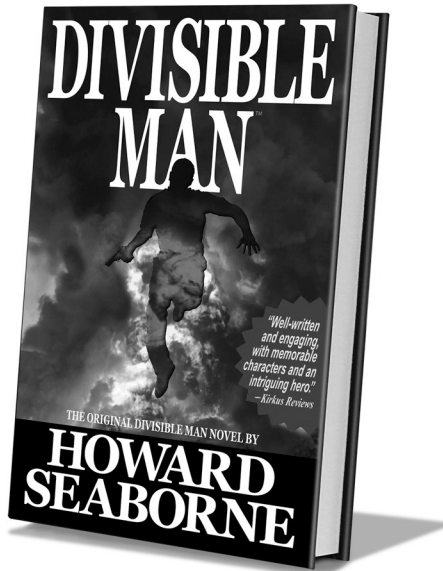
HOWARD SEABORNE is the author of the DIVISIBLE MAN™ series of novels and a collection of short stories featuring the same cast of characters.

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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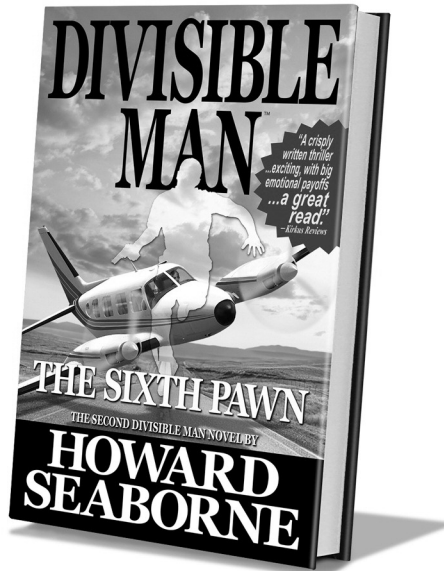
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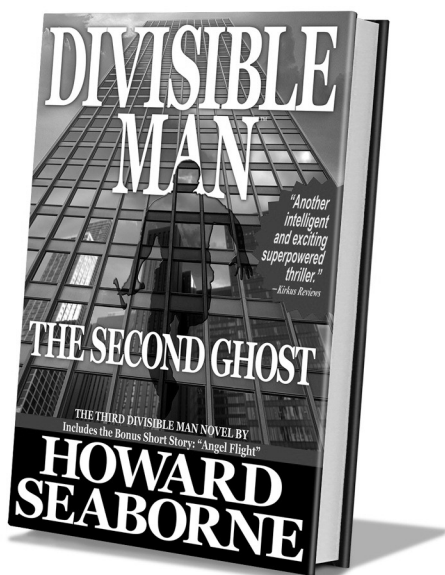
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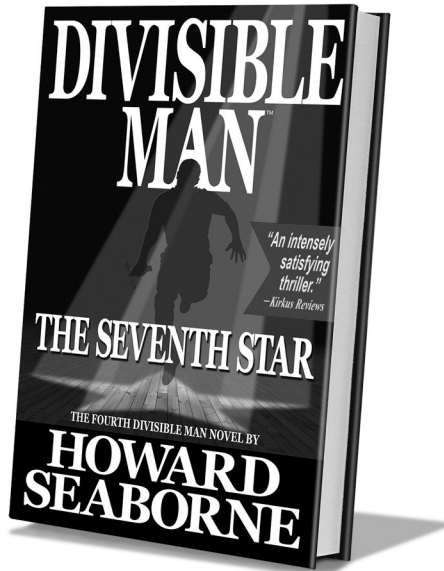
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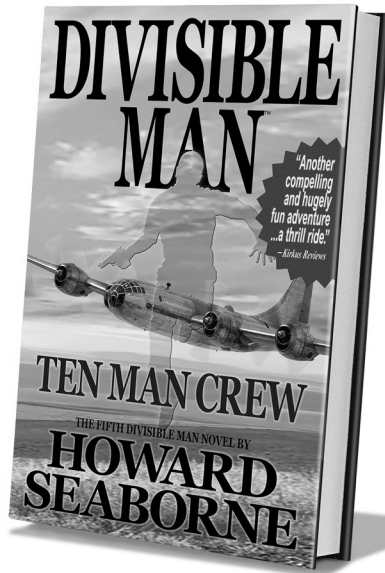
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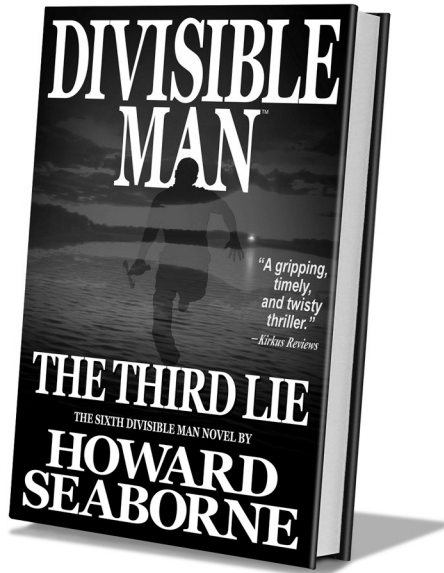
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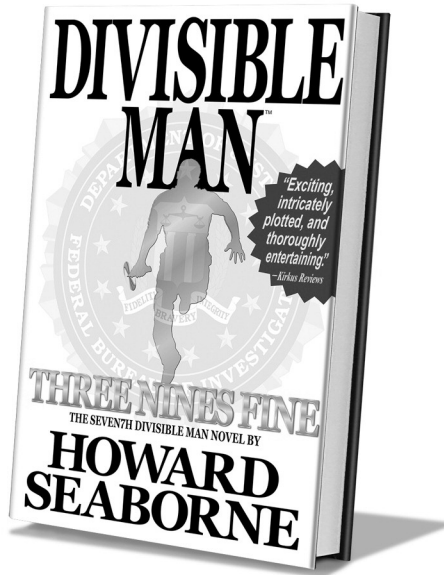
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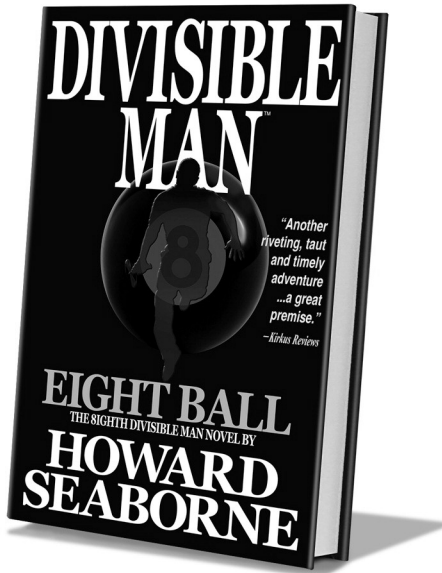
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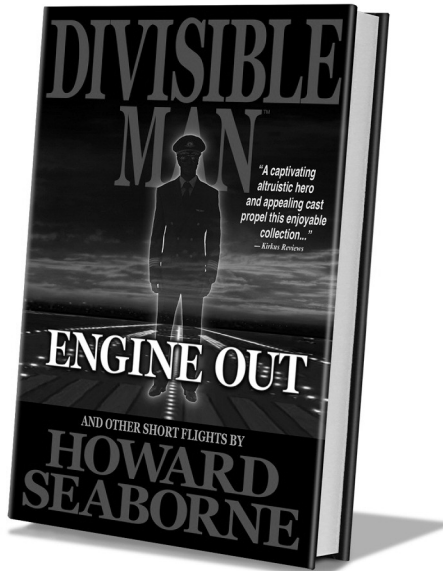
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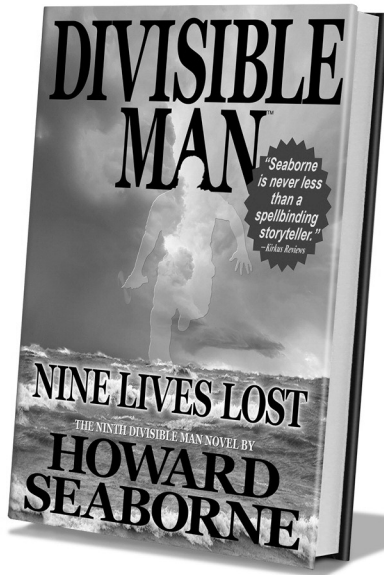
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