

# DIVISIBLE MAN™



*"Seaborne  
is never less  
than a  
spellbinding  
storyteller."*

*—Kirkus Reviews*

## NINE LIVES LOST

THE NINTH DIVISIBLE MAN NOVEL BY

# HOWARD SEABORNE



**DIVISIBLE MAN™**  

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**NINE LIVES LOST**

by

Howard Seaborne



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## ALSO BY HOWARD SEABORNE

DIVISIBLE MAN

*A Novel – September 2017*

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SIXTH PAWN

*A Novel – June 2018*

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SECOND GHOST  
ANGEL FLIGHT

*A Novel & Story – September 2018*

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SEVENTH STAR

*A Novel – June 2019*

DIVISIBLE MAN: TEN MAN CREW

*A Novel – November 2019*

DIVISIBLE MAN: THE THIRD LIE

*A Novel – May 2020*

DIVISIBLE MAN: THREE NINES FINE

*A Novel – November 2020*

DIVISIBLE MAN: EIGHT BALL

*A Novel – September 2021*

DIVISIBLE MAN: ENGINE OUT  
AND OTHER SHORT FLIGHTS

*A Story Collection – June 2022*

DIVISIBLE MAN: NINE LIVES LOST

*A Novel – June 2022*

DIVISIBLE MAN: TEN KEYS WEST

*A Novel – May 2023*

## PRAISE FOR HOWARD SEABORNE

### *DIVISIBLE MAN - TEN KEYS WEST* [DM10]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

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

— *BookLife*

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

### *DIVISIBLE MAN - NINE LIVES LOST* [DM9]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

### *DIVISIBLE MAN - ENGINE OUT & OTHER SHORT FLIGHTS*

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

### *DIVISIBLE MAN - EIGHT BALL* [DM8]

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

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

*DIVISIBLE MAN - THREE NINES FINE* [DM7]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

*DIVISIBLE MAN - THE THIRD LIE* [DM6]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

*DIVISIBLE MAN - TEN MAN CREW* [DM5]

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

— *Kirkus Reviews*

*DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SEVENTH STAR* [DM4]

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

—*Kirkus Reviews*

*DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SECOND GHOST* [DM3]

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

—*Kirkus Reviews*

*DIVISIBLE MAN - THE SIXTH PAWN* [DM2]

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

—*Kirkus Reviews*

*DIVISIBLE MAN* [DM1]

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

—*BookLife*

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

—*Kirkus Reviews*

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

—*BookLife*

## THE SERIES



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

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

### **SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL BOOKSELLER**

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

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Sign up today and get a FREE DOWNLOAD.



*For Steve, Kevin and Rebecca.  
Writing requires unconditional love.  
Thank you for teaching me.*

## TWO WEEKS AGO

Although the Corona Andy served lacked a twin, I lifted the bottle anyway.

“Us.”

Andy rapped a knuckle against the bottle. “Us.”

Looking for reassurance where we always found it.

Just as I touched the lime-tinged bottle to my lips, I spotted a silver car decelerating on our quiet country road. Andy turned her no-longer blonde head.

“Who do we know that drives a Prius?”

*Oh, crap.*

# **PART I**

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# 1

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NOW

“E arl’s looking for you.”  
“Pidge did it.”

“What?”

“Whatever has him on the warpath.” I checked the coffee station for Styrofoam cups, figuring I could pour the fresh contents of the mug I held into something portable and make a run for it. Plan B: make my getaway with the ECAS mug in hand and return it later.

“Don’t fucking throw me under the bus, Stewart!” Pidge’s voice hunted me from the flight instructor’s office down the hall.

“Sorry! Didn’t know you were back there!” I turned to Rosemary II and silently mouthed, *She did it*.

“You two are worse than children.” Seated behind the front counter, Rosemary II turned her attention to her computer and the shop orders stacked for billing. She issued commands with her mouse. The computer beeped obedience. I have offered to turn off the audio that announces her every action, but the Goddess of the Sacred Schedule insinuated that touching her computer would result in amputation without anesthetic.

I reconnoitered the hallway that runs down the center of the one-story fixed base operation building attached to the Essex County Air Service

hangar. The stretch outside Earl's office radiated the aura of Mordor. I edged toward the front door.

Without looking up Rosemary II said, "Do not test me."

Earl Jackson may be the owner of Essex County Air Service, but Rosemary II is the commander-in-chief.

"I don't even work here anymore," I muttered.

"Then why are you here every morning drinking the coffee?" She pulled a fresh invoice from the printer and stapled it to the work order.

"It's your fault for making it so good."

"Go. *After* you wash out that mug."

This was not the way I planned to start my day.

EARL JACKSON WAS NOT in his office. I found him reclining on a creeper on the concrete floor of the maintenance shop. He probed an open inspection cover in the aft empennage of a Beechcraft V-tail Bonanza. Doc, the company's licensed mechanic, bent over him, glasses perched on the tip of his nose.

"This one?" Earl asked.

"Which one?"

"This one, dammit. Wiggle it!"

Doc manipulated the airplane's ruddervator.

"Nope."

"How 'bout this one?"

Doc repeated the wiggle.

"That's the one."

Earl pulled his hand out of the tail cone. "Tell 'im he's got to replace it or he's gonna find himself flying with no pitch control."

"That's what I said."

I'd seen this comedy routine before. In a moment, the two of them would vigorously argue the same point. Instead, Earl spotted me. He rolled off the creeper, heaved himself upright and launched his bowlegged stride in my direction.

"You lookin' for me, Boss?"

A head gesture told me to follow him to his office.

"Close the door," he commanded. "Siddown."

In my early days of working as a flight instructor and air charter pilot for Essex County Air Service, Earl's Attila the Hun management style petrified me. I've since determined that true danger only exists when he stops speaking. I took the only other seat in his tiny office. He dropped

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onto his Army surplus office chair and fixed a searing squint in my direction.

Ever since Earl watched me leap out of a Piper Navajo without a parachute one thousand feet above the Chowan River and then saw me vanish, his piercing stare carries something extra. Like he expects me to disappear at any moment.

I can count on my fingers the number of people who know about me and my ability to vanish, which I unimaginatively call *the other thing*. One of those fingers represents a deceased FBI agent named Lee Donaldson. Another represents a Washington lobbyist facing multiple life sentences for murder. A third represents a former White House advisor and Special Counsel to the Director of Homeland Security who was apprehended naked on a hotel ledge after threatening to kill the President. He can talk about me all he wants. It only makes him sound crazier.

Closer to home, Earl Jackson and Essex Police Chief Tom Ceeves both know I can disappear at will. They fall in the “boss” category. Andy works for Tom Ceeves. My paycheck comes from the Christine and Paulette Paulesky Education Foundation, but Earl will be my boss for as long as he draws a breath. Maybe even after that.

Pidge told me that after Earl witnessed my airborne departure from the Foundation’s Piper Navajo, he slid back into the copilot’s seat, snapped his seatbelt, slipped on his headset, and turned his Inquisition Squint on her. She claimed that she seriously considered following me.

Earl asked her one question.

“You knew about this?”

I don’t recall Pidge telling me how she answered, but she did tell me that after my leap, even after the explosion at Siddley Plantation nearly tossed Pidge and Earl into Albemarie Sound, Earl initiated no further discussion on the matter. Since then, opportunities for Earl to interrogate me have come and gone. He asked nothing. I said nothing. Now, bathed in his searing squinty-eye, I surmised that the moment had arrived.

I was wrong.

“Member me telling you about Tommy Day? My backseater?”

“I do.” Lieutenant Thomas Day had been Captain Earl Jackson’s Weapon Systems Officer in the back seat of a McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom II flying out of Udorn Air Force base in Thailand. A lucky shot from the ground hit the jet’s ejection seat and blew Earl out of the plane. Day didn’t make it and was never found. Earl has no memory of the shoot-down. An itch he told me he cannot scratch. He shared the story after my own aviation accident left a hole in my memory.

*So...connect the dots.*

My mind jumped to a woman in Minnesota with five married names trailing her maiden name. Last winter, I met Tommy Day's widow, who later married Earl, albeit briefly. Earl and I helped her dispose of some unwanted property.

I now wondered if the caper had come back to haunt her.

"Tommy had a kid sister," Earl said.

"I didn't know."

"Course you didn't. I never told you. She must'a been twelve years younger than Tommy. I only saw her twice. Once when we were still training at Luke when she was just a little squirt. Then once more when I got out in 'seventy-six. I went up to see her and her parents. They lived in Portland."

The squint shifted from me to somewhere on the Pacific Coast.

"She was older then, a handful of angry hippy teenager who hated the government, hated the Air Force and most vehemently hated me. I had it in my thick skull that I oughta look out for her, or something equally stupid. When she got done laughing at me, she called me names her mommy and daddy never taught her. She kicked my ass off that property right smart."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Yeah, you hear that shit about people calling soldiers baby killers, and some of it is true, but some of it is just fat old farts down at the VFW trying to belong to something that's grown larger with time. I can tell you for dead sure, however, that hippy chick sister of Tommy's had me down as an A-Number-One Murderer of Innocents—starting with her brother. I don't remember leaving anyplace on this earth with my tail between my legs except for that little vegetable patch in Portland."

"Doesn't seem fair."

"Nothing about that shit show was fair. I know they would'a hung me for treason but emptying a couple hardpoints on McNamara's head crossed my mind more than once. That foul-mouthed little sister of Tommy's wasn't entirely wrong."

I glanced up at the portrait of Franklin Roosevelt above Earl's desk. A sworn Democrat, Earl did not let party affiliation put rose-tinted lenses on his view of history or the Kennedy/Johnson policies that strapped his ass to an F-4 Phantom II over Vietnam.

"I need you to look in on her."

"What? Who?"

"Tammy. Tammy Day. The kid sister."

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“Uh...” my mouth hung open. “Isn’t she...? Wouldn’t she be like *old*? I mean...grown up?”

“Well, you ain’t gonna find her in bell bottoms shimmying to Janice Joplin. Of course, she’s grown up—although she might still wear bell bottoms. She dove into the deep end of the whole anti-war movement, and the feminist thing after that, and then Greenpeace and what-all.”

“Sounds like you did look out for her.” Earl shrugged off the notion, which told me it was true. “And Joplin had a set of pipes.”

“That, she did.”

“You want me to go to Portland?” Excuses formed ranks in my head. Arun Dewar, the *de facto* boss of the Christine and Paulette Paulesky Education Foundation that writes my paychecks, had been patient with me over the last few weeks, during which time I’d been AWOL from my pilot duties. Not that he hadn’t, on a few occasions, benefitted by my absence when Pidge filled in on one or two overnights. One of the worst kept secrets at Essex County Air Service was that Pidge and Arun were dating.

“Why would you go to Portland?”

“Because you said...”

“She lived in Portland fifty years ago. Nah. She’s up in that little hole in the wall Sandy Stone’s been pumping money into. What-cha-call-it...Ekalaska?”

“Ekalaka. Montana.”

“Ekalaka.”

“No, it’s Eee-kalaka. Eee. Not Eh.”

“Whatever the hell. Tammy Day has a ranch up there, if you can call it that. It ain’t exactly the Ponderosa.”

I had no idea what a chain steak joint had to do with this but chose to conceal my ignorance.

“She claims twenty or thirty thousand acres, but last I checked, she just had a couple double-wide trailers in the weeds, and she spends her time raising vegetables.”

“She’s not a rancher?”

“Hell no. She raised and sold homeopathic veggies or some shit, and before that she ran some new age crystal therapy scam. She might’a farmed some weed, but I don’t think it grows well there.”

“So, you want me to fly to Montana...and what?”

“Look in on her. I told you.”

“You mean...?”

The squint tightened.

“Do what you do. Christ, Will, do I gotta spell it out?”



“No. I just want to confirm that you’re not telling me to drive up to her double-wide, introduce myself and tell her that Earl Jackson says hello.”

“Use my name around that woman and you’re like as not to get your ass full of buckshot. Hell no.” Earl scratched behind his ear. “Look. I got a couple friends up that way.”

“I remember. You told me.” Earl’s tale of hauling a load of marijuana from Tijuana and sliding off Ekalaka’s single runway in a snowstorm still tickles me.

“After I heard that Tammy bought that ranch, I checked up on her from time to time through those friends of mine. Everybody in that part of nowhere knows everybody else. There ain’t enough population to leave anybody a stranger.”

“And?”

“And lately they said she stopped coming into town. Nobody’s seen her doing her shopping up in Baker. She had a couple horses, but the vet says they’re gone. There’s a guide service that used to lease her land for hunting. I hear she cut them off, too. Nobody’s seen her for a while. On top of that, there’s rumors that she took up with some new folks. Outsiders.”

“What outsiders?”

“I dunno. It’s all rumors. Could be anything. Animal rights. Eco terrorists. Save the Montana Whales for all I know. Maybe it’s nothing. Maybe she’s running a nudist camp.”

“You think something serious is going on?”

Earl didn’t answer. His gaze shifted back to the west, this time not as far as Portland. “I tried calling. Got her number from those friends of mine. She didn’t pick up, so I told her if I didn’t hear something from her, I’d be at her door. And if she didn’t want to see my ugly mug, she should get a message to me to stay away. I didn’t hear nothing.” He reeled in his distant gaze and focused on me. “So? Are you up for this or what?”

Earl knew I couldn’t say no, but it was decent of him to ask.

“Just one question. They named their son Tommy and their daughter Tammy?”

“It was the fifties.”

I stood. My Earl Sense told me the meeting was over. “Andy made dinner plans with her sister and her parents for tomorrow night.”

“That mean you’ll go on Saturday?”

“Hell no. It means I’ll leave in the morning.”

Earl gave me the company's other Beechcraft Baron, a 1971 E-55. I like flying the Education Foundation's Navajo, but I love flying that Baron. The E-model arrived near the end of the 55 series production run and uses the larger engines and larger tail intended for the follow-on 58 series. It's a hotrod, stable and solid, easily trimmed, light on the controls and comfortable to fly. Earl's model has up-to-date avionics, including a lovely digital autopilot. I rolled for takeoff just after dawn, tearing up to cruise altitude at 130 knots with a nineteen hundred foot per minute climb rate. I popped out of a layer of lightly iced clouds at sixty-five hundred feet with nothing but blue above. At my cruise altitude of 8,000 feet, I found smooth air and a negligible headwind. Since Earl was picking up the fuel tab, I set the power for speed instead of economy. Even with the headwind, the GPS ground-speed pegged at 189 knots on the Aspen primary flight display.

Full fuel tanks could have taken me all the way to Ekalaka, but only barely and with no reserve. I stopped in Aberdeen, South Dakota to top off the tanks and empty my own. The Hangar 9 FBO offered good coffee, quick service, and a quiet lounge space for the most challenging portion of the trip.

Andy picked up the call after the third ring.

“You’re where?”

“Aberdeen. It’s in South Dakota.”

“I know where Aberdeen is.” I grimaced. Andy’s tone told me she also knew where this conversation was headed.

“Earl asked me to do this. It’s a personal thing. It has to do with Tommy Day. You remember me telling you about him.”

“You’re going to blame this on Earl?”

“Blame what?”

“You know perfectly well what. Dinner tonight. Unless you’re going to tell me that it’s a quick turnaround and you’ll be home in time to change and have cocktails with Lydia, Mom and Dad.”

“Yeah...that’s the thing. Aberdeen is the halfway point. I’m on my way to Ekalaka, Montana.”

Silence.

After years of family warfare, peace broke out between Andy and her parents for two salient reasons. First, after three years of marriage, she finally introduced me and explained that I may have saved their daughter and her unborn granddaughter. And second, because Andy’s father finally saw the passion in Andy’s love of law enforcement, a passion she never could have nurtured in the legal career he had crafted for her. It helped that Andy’s sister Lydia moved the grandchildren—all four of them, counting the stepchild carried and delivered by Lydia’s teenaged nanny—to Leander Lake in Essex County. Lydia’s miserable excuse of a dead ex-husband managed to

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impregnate the nanny within days of doing the same for Lydia. Lydia delivered a beautiful baby girl named Grace. The nanny brought The Infant King Alex into the world—the only male in a household full of women. I admit to a little jealousy of that smiling kid. Giving my nieces a baby brother dislodged me from God-like status in the eyes of Grace’s two older sisters, Elise and Harriet, whom I adore. Those little girls cannot get enough of their baby stepbrother.

Each time the family gathers Andy reminds me that her parents, Louis and Eleanor Taylor, have embraced me. I don’t argue, but a gremlin voice whispers in my ear that her society-conscious mother and father wish their daughter had done better. As much as I love spending time with my atomic-powered nieces, dinner with Mom and Dad rates on par with getting an FAA Flight Physical.

“Sweetheart, you know I was looking forward to dinner.”

“No, you weren’t.” I detected a hint of a smile at Andy’s end of the digital connection, which gave me hope.

I bit my tongue. Half the battle is not overselling.

“When do you think you’ll be back?”

“Earl wants me to look in on Tommy Day’s sister at some ranch. Discretely. I think I can get that done tonight, rest overnight and be outta there in the morning. I’d say I’ll be home for dinner tomorrow night.”

“Okay. That works. Because Mom and Dad are staying through the weekend.”

Now I knew she was smiling.

## 4

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The Ekalaka Airport ramp was deserted when I taxied in. An agricultural operation hangar dominated the ramp, but it appeared closed for the day, if not the season.

I took my time shutting down the myriad switches on the Baron's panel, double-checking that I didn't neglect something that would drain the battery. I spent a minute with the iPad reviewing the flight path to the Day Ranch, which lay ten nautical miles to the south adjacent the highway that bordered the airport. Ten miles fell within the limits of my battery-powered BLASTER—Basic Linear Aerial System for Transport, Electric Rechargeable—a device that looks like a flashlight with an electric motor driving a model airplane propeller on one end. I carried four on this trip, with extra batteries for each. A charged BLASTER yields roughly forty minutes of use at maximum power, which I rarely use. Half power gives me a speed of nearly thirty knots. Reaching the Day ranch required a flight time of twenty minutes each way. That left power in reserve. I brought along a pair of ski goggles to keep the wind out of my eyes at higher speeds.

Cracking the cabin door open introduced a sharp chill to the heated cabin. I grabbed my flight jacket and gloves from the back seat and shoved them out on the wing. I laid the row of BLASTERS and their companion propellers next to my phone on the seat, then scooted over them and performed the gymnastic move that is climbing out of the Baron's front seat onto the wing.

“Hi! You must be Will.”

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A woman wearing a goose down vest over a flannel shirt and jeans leaned against a well-worn Chevy Tahoe that she had parked behind the tail of the Baron. She had short brown hair, an attractive face with a confident smile built in. Her chipper presence and friendly recognition of me caught me by surprise. I stood upright on the wing and pulled on my jacket, leaving the power units on the front seat out of sight.

"I'm Sue," she said. "I heard you fly over. I live right over there." She pointed across the runway at several buildings on the other side of the highway, the last structures counted in the town census before empty ranchland took over.

The confused look on my face changed her smile from one of greeting to amusement.

"Deb called me. She would have come, but she doesn't have a car right now. Terry has the rear end taken apart. She had to use a neighbor's car this week to deliver meals to seniors."

"Okay," I said cautiously. "I have no idea who Deb is. Or Terry."

"Oh." Sue laughed. "Deb and Terry are your boss's friends. Your boss is Earl Jackson, right?"

"That's the boss."

"Mr. Jackson called Deb to let her know you were coming. He thought she might be able to give you a car and a place to stay. Unless you planned on staying up at the Midway or the Guest House, but this time of year, during hunting season, they're booked up." I guess I still had a lost look on my face, because she repeated, slowly, "Earl called Deb. Deb called me."

"And you are...?"

"Sue. I'm still Sue." She laughed. "My husband and I own J&J Guide Service. And since Deb doesn't have a car or a place for you to stay, here I am. You can have this SUV, and we have one empty bunk—if you don't mind snoring hunters. We're fully booked, but one fella dropped out sick."

"I don't know what to say. Thank you."

"Well, hop in."

"Uh...okay. Lemme get my bag."

I leaned into the cockpit and stuffed the four power units back into my flight bag.

SUE DROVE out of the airport gate and followed a narrow road toward the cluster of buildings that constituted metropolitan Ekalaka. For the next five minutes she identified town landmarks with pride in her voice. The post office. A church. The new hospital. She explained that the hospital joined the

senior living facility, and that she worked as a nurse at both when she wasn't cooking meals for hunting parties. And sometimes when she was if staffing fell short.

The "downtown" area appeared to be a triangle of gravel roads. She identified the fire department, the storefront public library, and the Dawg House Pub. A message board at the Dawg House advertised an all-male dancer review appearing for one night only, about which Sue made no mention.

"That's the new Mexican restaurant." She pointed. Neon signs decorated the windows of a brick building that had the look of a bank. "It's really good. Everything is authentic—although I wouldn't try to get in much after five. It gets pretty busy." She turned from one gravel road onto another. "That's the Carter County Museum." A stone building topped with a cavalry fort blockhouse hugged the sidewalk. An Indian lance crossed with a cavalry sword shared signage with silhouettes of dinosaurs. "It's a great museum, if you have extra time."

"Probably not on this trip."

"Hey, my brother is a pilot."

"I like him already. What does he fly?"

"I think he flies something with two engines, like what you came in. And he flies a helicopter. He built it himself. In his garage."

I thought that was crazy but didn't say so.

"You're here about Tammy Day."

I glanced at her to determine if this friendly reception masqueraded as a warning against poking around where I didn't belong. Her friendly aura remained undimmed.

"My boss, Earl, knew her brother."

"Didn't he die in Vietnam? The brother, I mean."

"Do you know Ms. Day?"

"Yes. Oh, yes. We buy vegetables from her. Or we did. Not so much this past year. We used to buy a lot of her stuff. Fresh raspberries, lots and lots of zucchini."

"People who grow zucchini always have lots and lots of it."

The smile faded a little, replaced by a cooler assessment aimed at me. "I trust Deb. Deb trusts Earl. That means you should be trustworthy. Are you trustworthy?"

"My wife tells me that I blush automatically if I stray from the truth. I guess that means you'll be able to tell."

"And you're not here from ParaTransit? Or Energy Stone?"

"I don't know who either of those are. Is that something you might want

to tell me?"

"I wish I could. We've been worried about..." She let the sentence trail off. She assessed the nonexistent traffic and turned onto the widest paved road I'd seen so far. The highway marked Montana 323 headed out of town.

"Worried about?"

"Well...like I told you. My husband and I run a guide service."

"I'm not sure what that is."

"We lease land, government land and private ranch land, and we guide hunters. My husband Rich and our hired guides. All the seasons. Gun and bow. We have three camps in Montana. We're the second-largest service in the state with access to over a million and a half acres."

"Impressive. Is that a good business?"

"We're booked up for the next three years. In fact, I'd go with you, but I start cooking for fourteen hungry hunters in about an hour. I know, it sounds like I'm bragging, but my point is that we depend on leases and Tammy's land was one of them. Until this year. She didn't renew. And she stopped providing produce for us. She never was much for visiting town, but she wasn't unfriendly either. Something changed. I haven't seen her since summer."

"Does she live alone out there?"

"Mostly. I heard that recently she had outsiders with her. People said it was kind of a religious thing. Other people said it was oil speculators. We have no shortage of rumors in our small town. Honestly...I'm not sure."

"So, who is Para...Transfer? Or that other thing?"

"ParaTransit and Energy Stone. We don't know. That was another rumor. People said a real estate agent from Baker went out to the ranch, representing those two names. That's the rumor. I have a feeling Tammy would have run somebody like that off the property."

"Do you think it's about oil or mineral rights?"

"Not much of that around here. You'll see a few wells down by Alzada."

"Anybody been out to the ranch to check on her?"

"I went last month. She had a locked gate on the road up to her place. I called a few times, but she didn't answer."

"Did you report any of this to the local authorities?"

She chuckled and pointed to the left side of the road. A black and white Sheriff's SUV sat nosed up to a small ranch house on a cluttered property.

"That's our deputy. Not a bad guy, but not exactly an investigator. Most of the time, that's where you'll find him. But a locked gate could mean she isn't home, or it could mean she just doesn't want to be bothered."

Just as the highway entered open country, she pulled off the road onto a



broad gravel shoulder. To my right, on the other side of a grassy field, I could see the airport and the Baron tied to the ramp. Sue pointed left.

“This is me.” A tidy house spread itself beneath shade trees at the end of a mid-length driveway. A small cabin shared the property on one side of the house. A Quonset-style shed hid behind trees on the other side. I had expected a hunting lodge made of logs and adorned with antlers. This residence had the pleasant look of suburbia. Small gardens, now brown for winter, accented the home. “The mail came, so I’ll get out here. The truck has gas. When you’re done, just drive it in and knock. Don’t worry if it’s late. I’ll set you up in the new cabin. Oh. Do you need a map?”

“I have my iPad.” I patted the flight bag between my knees.

Sue’s smile and the sparkle in her eyes remained undiminished, but she hesitated for a moment before climbing out.

“If you see Tammy, ask her to call me. I’d be careful about trespassing, though. That’s a thing around here.”

“Noted. And thanks for the wheels. Much appreciated. It was nice meeting you.”

“You, too!”

We both hopped out. She crossed the road. I trotted around the front grille and took the driver’s seat. She tossed me a cheerful wave as I pulled away.

This hadn’t been my plan. Earl’s interference twice removed had derailed my intention to simply fly up to the ranch property for a look around. Now I saw the benefits. Connecting me with this pleasant woman provided information. The owner of the guide service also revealed another vital detail.

The location of a good Mexican restaurant.

I performed a U-turn and drove back into Ekalaka.

THE WARMLY LIT café had the interior dimensions of a railroad car. Tables lined the wall to my right. A bar occupied the first quarter of the room to my left. A narrow kitchen joined the bar and took up the remaining space. At the far end of the room, a glass-fronted cooler offered bottled soft drinks and beer, and a second entrance. None of the tables were occupied at three-fifteen in the afternoon.

I seated myself at a table for two along the wall. A moment later, a dark-haired woman wearing a blue sweater over jeans approached the table bearing a greeting and a menu. I checked for a name tag but found none. Her dress and demeanor suggested owner. Her quick appraisal of me said she

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knew a stranger when she saw one. I expected small talk, but she opened by asking what I'd like to drink. I ordered an iced tea and she hustled off to the kitchen.

A few minutes later, the iced tea arrived.

"Give it a try. It's a new batch. If it's not right, I can get you something else." She waited. I sipped.

"Mmm. Good tea." Her smile told me I'd been set up.

"Our homemade recipe. Would you like to hear the special?"

"I'm sure it's special, but I'm a sucker for a good enchilada. With beef, hold the onions please."

"You can't go wrong there." She plucked the menu from my hand.

"Can I ask you something?"

"If I don't know the answer, I'll make something up."

"A lady by the name of Tammy Day. Do you know her?"

"I know everybody. And yes. Nice lady. I bought produce from her for a short time, but she stopped selling last summer. Too bad. She had some fine tomatoes. We used to buy a lot of her stuff. Never knew what to do with all the zucchini, though."

"Have you heard from her lately?"

She touched her pen to her temple and squinted. "Not for a while. She started up with some Moonies or Hindus or some such a year or so ago. Wasn't very social after that. We weren't friends or anything, and nobody takes it personal when someone around here wants privacy. I just took it to mean she was busy with visitors. We get that kind up here sometimes."

"What kind?"

"Religious. Cultish. You know. A little...out there. Looking to bond with or worship nature here in the wild west. Most of 'em don't make it past the first winter storm." She chuckled. "I don't judge. One man's Bible is another man's crystals or pyramid or ancient aliens."

"Was she alone on her ranch?"

"Mostly. But like I said, I heard there were some new folks up there with her. You planning to pay a visit?"

"Looking in on her for a friend."

"Well, if you see her, tell her the TSO Cantina would still love some of her tomatoes. I'll take 'em fresh, canned or stewed."

"I will."

CHARTER FLYING TAUGHT me the art of eating alone. Before the age of the personal device, the trick was to carry a paperback. I filled countless hours

of pilot wait time in the company of C.S. Forester, Stephen King, Ian Fleming and Craig Johnson. I fed my appetite for history with James Holland, Stephen Ambrose, Edwin Hoyt and a dozen others. For a time, I resisted reading on a screen, but the ease and convenience of carrying an entire library on my iPad eventually overcame my preference for the familiar feel of a book in hand.

The iPad served as my dinner companion while I savored my new number one all-time favorite enchilada. Instead of picking up where I left off in a Holland book on the air battles over Europe during World War Two, I went hunting on the internet for ParaTransit and Energy Stone.

I learned that *paratransit* is a commonplace term meaning a supplement to scheduled public transportation, most often in the form of for-hire transport of disabled individuals. Lift vans and the like. Beyond that, I found nothing.

A Google search for Energy Stone opened a floodgate of links to healing crystals, chakra gems, copper power spheres and dozens of equally inventive ways to part people with their money. I thought Energy Stone might be the name of a corporation—maybe an oil exploration outfit—but nothing floated to the surface of the internet cistern.

The restaurant remained mid-day empty. The owner/server visited the table from time to time. She demonstrated earnest interest in my satisfaction. I have no idea how she imagined I would order a dessert after eating an enchilada the size of a tortoise, but she asked. I countered with a request for the bill and left a generous tip.

A high cloud deck seeped in from the west during my early dinner. An hour of daylight remained, but the world dimmed quickly as the sun lost its battle with the clouds. Once again, Earl's inadvertent interference benefited my planning. Night seemed like a better time to visit the Day Ranch. Not because I wanted the cover of darkness, but because it reduced the chances that the rancher would be out tending to her property or animals, if she had any. Nightfall, I hoped, would find her cooking her supper for her guests, or curling up with a good book and a glass of cabernet.

*She's fine Earl. Just playing the hermit.*

I had in mind that later that evening I'd leave Sue's Chevy Tahoe in her driveway with the keys and a twenty for gas, then scoot back to the Baron and depart. Sue would assume I hiked across the field to the airport. I took her at her word about the local hotels being booked. A short flight up to Dickenson or even a longer flight back to Aberdeen, and I could easily find a room.

Departing the TSO Cantina, I followed Sue's route out of town

Tammy Day not only put a sturdy steel gate across her ranch driveway, she also dumped stones the size of golf carts on either side of the gate posts, eliminating the possibility of bypassing the gate. Both sides of the driveway sloped sharply into a rough gully that effectively became a moat with the driveway as drawbridge. The Tahoe's headlights showed me a heavy log chain and padlock the size of my fist. Somebody meant business, as if the stern No Trespassing sign hand painted on the gate's steel cross-piece failed to convey the message.

Beyond this impediment, the driveway carved a straight-arrow lane across a grassy field before it ascended into a tree line. Halfway up the slope, gravel gave way to tire tracks on grass. Higher still, the lane curved right and disappeared behind the trees. The view from the road deceptively suggested the ranch proper lay on top of that first rise. I knew from studying the satellite imagery on Google Maps that the driveway snaked through wooded terrain, crossed more open range, then followed a dry creek bed for a mile or so before swinging left where it rose onto a plateau. The southern edge of the plateau gave the impression of a miles-long plate of land that had been shoved two hundred feet upward, creating a flat, rocky cliff. The road ran parallel to the cliff line for several miles until finally coming to open land on which, from Google's sky view, I had seen rectangles representing structures.

It was into this cluster of civilization that I eventually descended behind my handheld power unit and propeller after following the dirt track from the

gate. My concept of a ranch springs entirely from the silver screen; Hollywood cowboys living in bunkhouses and rich ranchers playing lord of the land in broad-shouldered log or timber homes. Those notions bore no resemblance to the sagging double-wide trailers and random fencing I found.

Tammy Day's little piece of Montana heaven consisted of the two double-wide trailers, a leaning garage I hadn't noticed on Google, and a fenced patch too large to be called a garden, too small to be called a field. Rows of wire towers identified the source of the TSP Café's favored tomatoes. Missing from this scene was any kind farm implement. The only vehicle in sight was a Saab parked beside one of the trailer units. In a land of pickup trucks and SUVs, the yuppie chariot from Sweden stood out enough that I made it my first stop. I navigated close to the back of the vehicle to check the license plate and lost a bet with myself. Colorado, not California.

The second thing I checked was the windshield. Clean. If the vehicle had been sitting for any amount of time, there would have been dust. The wind hissing through the trees guaranteed it.

The windows of both trailers were black and lightless. A pole at the corner of the nearest edge of the tilled garden mounted a light. Unlit.

The word that came to mind was *deserted*.

This ranch wasn't deserted in the sense of having been abandoned to the elements. The buildings were closed and looked secure. Nothing littered the yard. I began to wonder if Earl's secret ward had simply headed off to sun herself at an Airbnb on the Gulf Coast.

I cruised around the trailer beside the Saab and found no sign of life. Starlight sharpened detail but that didn't help with the windows on the trailer. I could not tell if the glass covered closed curtains, pulled shades, plywood panels, or simply dark rooms. Pulling up nose-close to the panes didn't help. I saw nothing.

The garage gave away no secrets either. It had seen better days. A slight lean testified to the relentless Montana wind, but the wood siding had been maintained. A window frame on the side of the building had been covered over by plywood. Recently. The wood was new and smooth.

A power line connected to a glass insulator near the garage peak. I followed the line to the garden area where I found an upright fuel tank and a generator. The generator motor smelled of oil and grease and recent exhaust. I wondered how long a full tank of fuel lasted in the winter.

From the garage, I rose over the wire fence bordering the tilled land. Gaining height, I saw sections of varying vegetation. Stakes and tomato towers had been driven into the soil. Rows corrugated the ground. Mounds of discarded plant matter and mulch punctuated the rows and lent an odor of

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rot to the air. On a fence post, a weathervane with a prop not much larger than the one in my hand charged into the wind, spinning furiously. The weathervane snapped left and right with each gust. In the same way, I maintained steady application of power to my handheld unit, fighting the wind to hold my position.

The gardens were done for the year. A few rotting vegetables lay in the dirt, but the harvest had ended some time ago. Any day now the entire area could be blanketed in snow. It might bury the garden for the rest of a long winter, or it might come and go on the whim of a warm front carrying heat from the American southwest. Either way, the plot below me was as lifeless as the rest of the ranch.

My theory about the ranch owner dipping her toes in warm Gulf waters gained weight. I turned the BLASTER in the direction of the remaining trailer. One more circuit and then I'd fly a tailwind-enhanced route back to the parked Tahoe where I would rehearse my report to Earl. Make the call. Return the vehicle to its owner. Zip across the field to where the Baron lay waiting. Make a quick hop to Dickenson, SD and check into a nice hotel. Maybe grab a late dinner if the enchilada allowed it. A call to Andy would top off the day.

I lined up on a path for the second trailer.

The door burst open.

A figure filled the frame, backlit by soft yellow light that threw the occupant's shadow halfway across the yard toward me. His appearance startled me. I cut the BLASTER and glided silently, rapidly losing speed against the wind.

I expected a woman. The figure in the door was male, young, thin, and wiry. He held the door open with one hand and posed with his head turned. Listening. Light escaped the trailer via the doorway. None of the black windows hinted that the unit had been occupied. Tammy Day owned some serious curtains.

I lost headway. The wind brought me to a standstill, then started to push. I needed to think fast about using power to hold my position—thereby creating noise that threatened to let this guy know he wasn't alone.

I decided to accept the drift when I heard what he heard.

Motors.

I don't know how I missed it before. Perhaps the wind flow carried the sound away from me, or my power unit drowned it out. Somehow the guy in the trailer heard the sound before I did. Motorcycle engines. Probably not motorcycles, given the terrain. ATVs. More than one. The sound carried from the direction of the dirt track.

The guy in the doorway jumped back into the lighted room, briefly solving the problem of drift. I gave the power unit a shot and re-established forward movement.

I cut the power again when light spilling from the door extinguished. A moment later, the shadow figure leaped through the frame. He stopped long enough to spin around, close the door, and snap a padlock in a hasp and loop. He carried a backpack slung over one shoulder and a collection of what looked like clothing, a wadded sleeping bag and some other gear clutched against his chest.

With the lock secure, he bolted across the yard for the Saab. He pounded the ground at a dead run. Reaching the side of the Saab, he jerked open the back door and tossed his goods inside. He slammed the door, opened the driver's door, and jumped behind the wheel. Brake lights flashed. The car started. Tires ground dirt and threw pebbles. He launched the Saab across the yard.

Instead of taking to the driveway, he drove in the opposite direction, parallel to the garden plot fence. At the end of the fence, he angled onto open terrain. The car exited the smooth yard and heaved over uneven ground. He ran without lights.

His pursuers did not.

Beams of light bounced through the trees, sweeping the grasses and junipers with each turn and jog. Headlights emerged from the trees. Four off-road all-terrain vehicles—the kind with motorcycle grip steering and controls—raced into the ranch yard. Light splashed the trailers and terrain, making shadows dart away. Two of the ATVs were driven solo; two mounted riders behind the driver. The vehicles charged across the ranch yard and into the field, chasing the Saab, catching air from bumps in their path.

The Saab lurched across the landscape. One unseen gully or lurking boulder and that passenger car would be finished. The driver's wild attempt to escape these visitors suggested he felt greater threat from them than from a broken axle or smashed radiator.

All five vehicles kicked up dust that hurried away on the rising wind. The pursuers fanned out behind the Saab. Two of the ATVs broke to the right, racing to flank the Saab. The move made sense. To the Saab's left, closing in quickly, the plateau's cliff eliminated any avenue of escape for miles.

I pushed my ski goggles down over my eyes and aimed the BLASTER in the direction of the high-speed pursuit. The jury was still out on who was who in this drama, but rifles slung across the backs of two of the four-wheeler riders pushed my allegiance in the direction of the outnumbered

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Saab driver. From the feel of the wind against me as I accelerated, this chase closed in on sixty miles per hour. I played catchup behind a BLASTER whining at full power. The wind eddying across the treetops bumped and jarred me.

The flankers achieved their goal, herding the Saab toward scattered trees that lined the top of the cliff. I hoped the poor sod behind the wheel knew about the precipice, or that Saab was going to imitate its namesake Swedish fighter jets. Briefly.

I raced to catch up. Relative wind streaked against my skin. My clothing flapped.

*Crump!*

The Saab's end came quickly. I don't know what he hit, but the vehicle nose-dived to a hard stop in a cloud of dust. The hood flew up over the windshield. The jolt blew the airbags, which covered the side windows. Dust billowed up around the vehicle. The pursuers circled and closed in, hemming the crash scene against the cliff line two dozen yards away.

As I caught up, a black figure burst out of the dust cloud at a dead run. He sprinted on a line paralleling the cliff. One of the four-wheelers launched to cut him off. Another zoomed in from the side. For a moment, it looked like the driver of the second ATV intended to scoop him up. Instead, an arm and fist shot out. The Saab driver took a blow to the side of his head and tumbled, arms and legs flying.

The ATVs skidded to a halt. A semi-circle of headlights braced the victim lying in the dry grass. The wind cleared dust from the air and six men dismounted. I counted on the idling ATV engines to cover the noise from my power unit. Twenty feet overhead, I reached the scene.

One of the men, broad-shouldered with tattooed and muscled arms hanging from a puffy down vest, strolled to the figure on the ground and delivered a rib-cracking kick. I heard the Saab driver grunt sharply, then gasp to fight for the air ejected from his lungs.

The muscled man reached down and scooped up the Saab driver's collar. He lifted the convulsing victim out of the grass like a child. The Saab driver's thin arms and legs flailed and kicked but posed no threat to his attacker. I dropped into hover upwind and used a light application of BLASTER power to maintain my position.

"You don't seem to take a hint, asshole."

Saab Driver didn't answer.

"Maybe I need to make a stronger impression."

"I think *he* needs to make a strong impression." One of the riflemen gestured at the drop-off.



“Teach this fucker to fly, Danzig,” another man said.

Danzig glanced at the cliff, then dragged the Saab driver onto a rock platform jutting into empty air. Saab Driver alternately clawed at the grip on his collar and clutched his torso in agony. Lack of air prevented him from speaking, or even screaming. Harsh wheezing and weak kicking summed up his protest. He tried in vain to dig his heels into the ground. He failed.

Danzig dragged him across rough stone then stopped at the edge. He lifted Saab driver high enough to mutter something in his ear that I could not hear.

Then he threw him over the cliff.

I saw it coming.

The moment Danzig marched to the edge I thumbed the BLASTER slide control. I descended over the heads of the men who paraded behind Danzig and the kid. I dove for grass that became rock. I skimmed the rock and shot out over the top of a gnarled tree clinging impossibly to the side of the cliff. A tight turn took me into position within arm's reach of a rock face that dropped straight down for at least two hundred feet before a slope of rocks, gravel, trees, and ancient debris descended to flatland below.

I pulsed the BLASTER and stopped low and in front of the outcropping onto which Danzig dragged his helpless victim. I watched Danzig speak into Saab Driver's ear, then heave him over the edge.

Gravity snatched Saab Driver.

I dropped the BLASTER and spread my arms. Saab Driver dropped and hit me hard. His head glanced off the side of my skull. The impact tore away my goggles and left sparks in my vision. Flailing arms and legs kicked and punched me.

I threw my arms around him. We accelerated toward hard earth.

*FWOOOMP!*

The black form writhing on top of me vanished. I clasped my hands behind his back and pulled him tight to deny his limbs room to do me damage. He flailed and struggled. Rocks swept past us. In seconds, we dropped a hundred feet with barely half that much remaining. The earth

raced to meet us. Starlight brought every rugged feature of the harsh surface below into stark relief.

There was no time to reach for a fresh BLASTER to arrest our fall.

Boulders grew larger and charged at us.

*STOP!*

The visceral impulse flashed in my head faster than my mind could form the word. The core muscle that runs down my center when I vanish tightened like a steel cable.

We stopped.

Silence.

Saab Driver froze, as if moving or struggling might renew the fall.

I freed one hand, reached down, and touched the rough stones that carpeted the steep slope. We had come to within an arm's length of smashing into the rugged surface.

I rotated and released Saab Driver. He dropped onto the stone surface and cried out in pain. He skidded then stopped.

I reached down and clamped a fistful of his shirt in one hand. I jerked myself close against his ear. "Quiet!" I whispered harshly. "Play dead. Do it!"

He grabbed the rocks and splayed his legs. I didn't think his would-be killers could see his features at this distance, but he closed his eyes tightly just the same.

I searched the cliff face. Two hundred feet overhead, the rock platform that facilitated Saab Driver's execution dominated the sky above me. Black space populated with stars formed a backdrop. I could not tell if anyone looked over the edge or not. If they did, their silhouettes made no impression against the night sky.

Saab Driver struggled to suppress a rattling wheeze pumped out with each breath. I prayed the sound would not rise to the top of the cliff.

I waited.

ATV noise spilled over the cliff, modulated by revving throttles and gear shifts before being carried away by the wind. The noise faded quickly at first, then lingered at a low level until it was hard to tell if I was still hearing it or imagining it. Eventually the steady wind swallowed the manmade motor noise.

I realized I'd been holding my breath. I let it go along with the Saab driver's shirt and one of Pidge's favorite expressions. I tried to steady my hands, which had begun to tremble. I took in, held, and blew air using a four-count to help slow my racing pulse. Wind rising against the cliff face

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caused me to ascend. After some fumbling, I produced a new BLASTER, attached a prop, and maneuvered back down to where the Saab driver lay.

His eyes flashed open. Dark irises ringed by panicked white probed the air. He stared at the cliff above and patted the earth below in disbelief.

Between ragged breaths he whispered.

*“Double-U — (huff) — Tee — (huff) — Eff!”*

I maneuvered into position beside the sprawled figure, grabbed a rock edge and lodged one foot against the slope.

*Fwoomp!*

I reappeared and dropped a few inches to the surface. My appearance startled him. Wide-eyed, he tried to speak, but either his ragged breathing or utter disbelief cut him off.

“Don’t talk.” I clawed my way closer. The slope—at least sixty degrees—invited gravity to take another bite. Had he fallen as planned, I think he would have kept on bouncing well into a stand of trees several hundred feet below us. “Just breathe.”

“*How—?*” The word came out as a squeak.

I held up a hand between us. “Lemme check you out first. Okay?”

I gingerly laid my hands on his torso and probed his ribs through a thin black t-shirt. He gritted his teeth and bit down on a scream.

“Pretty sure you’ve got one or more broken ribs.”

“*You—(wheeze)—doctor?*”

“No. But I got kicked in the ribs by a cow once. Hurt like a sonofabitch.”

He tried to speak but broke into a cough which ignited pain and prompted another muted scream.

“Relax. Don’t talk. Nod yes or no. Does it hurt to breathe?”

Yes.

“Left side?”

Yes.

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“Right side?”

He lifted one hand and tipped it back and forth. *No-ish.*

“Can you sit up?”

He tried. Sharp pain prompted a deep groan. He shook his head. No.

“Then don’t.”

“*How—?*” Another squeak. He pointed at the cliff above us. His eyes flared, emphasizing the question.

“How are you alive? Yeah, good question. That’s one hell of a fall. You’re a lucky guy. I just happened to be doing some rock climbing, heard the commotion, and the next thing I knew you came flying over the edge. Lucky I was there. I grabbed you and we rappelled down. My safety ropes saved us. And here we are. You should buy a lottery ticket today.”

He looked up at the cliff, then at me.

“*Bull—(wheeze)—shit.*”

“Pure, unadulterated. But let me ask you a question. Are you really going to look this gift horse in the mouth?”

He didn’t seem too sure.

“You’d better not. Because that’s the story we’re both going to tell if anybody ever asks. And by my count, there are only six people who would ask, and not very politely. I wouldn’t run into them again if I were you. They didn’t like finding you at Tammy Day’s ranch.”

He coughed and grimaced.

“Yeah, we’ll discuss that, but right now we’ve got to get you down off this mountain and to a hospital.”

He shook his head sharply and waved his hands in the air. A definite No.

“Really? I’m not sure a rib bone didn’t puncture your lung. It won’t kill you right now, but if it did poke a hole, you’re probably leaking air into the sack around the lungs. I forget what that’s called but if you keep it up your lung will collapse. If you think you’re having trouble breathing now, brother...”

He lifted his head and surveyed the slope below us. I did the same. Fit and in daylight, the hike to flat ground half a mile away would have been a challenge. In the dark, even if I found a way to carry him without causing more damage, chances were good we’d both wind up in a heap.

He looked at me and shook his head. He wasn’t wrong.

I picked up a stone and tossed it into the starlit grass and rocks. The tap and rattle ricocheting down the slope affirmed the hazard facing us.

“You’re probably right. Even if I get you down to the flat, we’re looking at a five-mile hike to my car. And that’s if we don’t run into your friends.”

He gasped and grimaced against the pain, and maybe against the hopelessness of the situation.

Our options narrowed down to one. I leaned closer. “Here’s the deal. I need you to name your most cherished possession. Something you’re willing to die for. Something that means more to you than life itself.”

I got the blank look I expected.

“No,” I said. “I don’t want it. I want to know—what is the most sacred person or thing in your life that you’d be willing to swear an oath on? A blood oath. Bible? Michael Jordan rookie card? Old sock worn by Brett Favre? Your mother?”

Bewilderment morphed into suspicion.

“Dude. I need you to swear to keep a secret.”

He lay silent for a moment. I mistook contemplation for confusion and was about to try another tactic when he spoke.

“*Metallica*,” he whispered, pushing it with just a hint of vocal tone. “*I have the entire ... (wheeze) ... catalog in vinyl including the ... (wheeze) ... Metal Massacre I ... (wheeze) ... pressing with the misspelled name.*”

“Misspelled name?”

The kid nodded. He broke into a coughing fit, clutched his ribs, and groaned.

“No shit. Okay.” I waited for the coughing to subside, and for his breathing to even out. “Works for me. Raise your right hand and swear on your vinyl Metallica collection that you will never speak of what’s about to happen.”

“**T**his is ...(wheeze)... fucked up.”

We cruised above the descending tree line. I applied a strong crab angle into the wind to hold a steady course. The high cloud deck had dissipated. Montana starlight nearly approximated the intensity I expected from moonlight. The landscape glowed in black and white. The BLASTER in my hand hummed. I kept the speed low, having lost my ski goggles. Even with low power, we moved quickly over the ground, energized by a tailwind.

“*This is ...(wheeze)... so fucked up.*”

“Language, kid. My ears are delicate.”

His breathing had steadied, but he continued gasping for air. Shedding gravity’s pull on his body by making him vanish, the pressure on his lungs and ribs had diminished. It seemed to help. We traveled upright, my left hand claspng his right, which I’d taken after he swore on his thrash metal treasures that he would never speak about this night or what he was about to see. Or not see.

“What’s your name?”

“Uh... Wally.”

“What? You’re not sure?”

“*Wally. Look ...(wheeze)... I know I swore, but ...(wheeze)... WTF!*” The string of words and the emphasis made him gasp again.

“Gift horse, Wally. Who were those guys?”

He tried to say something but broke into a cough, which made him bite down on a scream. I felt him clench against the pain.



“Okay, okay, okay. I’ll stop asking questions. You stop talking.”

He regained control, but now I felt him shivering. I eased more power into the BLASTER.

We cruised parallel to the cliff face. To my right, the land flattened out in the direction of Wyoming. Devil’s Tower couldn’t be far from here. I’d always wanted to visit the lava monolith associated with Indian lore and more recently as a terminal for Hollywood space aliens. Several miles ahead, the highway crossed the T of our path.

I didn’t park the borrowed Chevy Tahoe at the ranch gate. I parked it half a mile away using the back side of a small hill to hide and disassociate it from the ranch. I wondered if the marauders who threw Wally over the cliff spotted the vehicle, and if they did, did they think anything of it? On the other hand, they traveled by ATV, which might mean they didn’t use the highway.

We’d know soon.

I pressed the doorbell, but hearing nothing, added an urgent knock. Almost immediately, I detected movement against the warm light inside. Footsteps approached.

Sue opened the front door to her sedate home and launched her friendly smile in my direction. She noted the Tahoe in the driveway.

“I’m so sorry to interrupt your dinner—”

“Oh, don’t be silly! We’re just cleaning up. Come in! Come in! I’ll fix you a plate.”

“Thank you, but no, I need your help. You said you were a nurse.” Her expression darkened quickly. “I’ve got somebody out here. He’s hurt.”

“Rich!” she called into the house behind her. “Rich, come out here!”

She pushed past me and hurried down the steps to where I’d parked her SUV. She opened the passenger door and leaned in over Wally whose breathing had grown shallow on the ten-mile drive back to Ekalaka.

“What’s all this noise?” A large man filled the door behind me. He had short dark hair and a friendly face that harbored quick, inquisitive eyes. He took in the entire scene in a split second.

“Fetch me a blanket,” Sue ordered. The big man reversed into the house. “And my phone!”

I joined Sue at the vehicle.

“What happened?”

“No idea. I found the kid lying on the side of the road. He said he got

jumped by some guys on ATVs. One of them kicked him in the ribs. Might have broken one or two.”

Rich reappeared, nudged me aside, and handed Sue a blanket. Several men assembled in the house and watched us through a big window.

“You the pilot?” Rich asked me.

“I am.”

“Did you get up to the Day ranch?”

I shook my head. “The gate was locked and blocked.”

“I could’a told you that.” The comment might have landed as judgmental, but he delivered it as simple fact. “Where did this happen?”

“About a mile from the Day ranch gate.”

Sue probed Wally, touching his torso, checking his breathing. She unfolded the blanket and spread it over him. Rich handed her a phone.

“He said it was guys on ATVs?” Rich asked. “What was he doing out there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you see anything?”

“I didn’t see anybody by the road. Are you calling an ambulance?” I asked Sue, partly to evade Rich’s rapid interrogation.

“Got one right here,” Sue said. “Rich, I’m taking him to the hospital. I’ll call Maryanne on my way in. Can you finish up inside?”

“Go. Just go.”

“You should come with me,” Sue said in my direction as she hurried around the front of the SUV. The sweet tone remained, but it wasn’t a request. Rich opened the Chevy’s back door for me to emphasize the point. I had hoped to deliver the injured kid and simply slip away.

“Okay.” I climbed in. “Maybe after we drop him off you could take me back to the airport.”

Sue drove the SUV directly to a sally port bordered with blazing red corrugated steel marked with a sign that said EMERGENCY. She tapped the horn and the garage-like door rattled open. She pulled inside.

“I’ll give you a hand,” I offered, climbing out.

“They’re coming out.” She no sooner spoke than an electric entry door opened and a man and woman in scrubs pushed a gurney to the side of the Tahoe. Wally bit down hard to fight cries of pain when they lifted him from the front of the SUV and seated him on the gurney. Sue took his shoulders. The woman in scrubs took his feet. The man held the gurney. They rotated Wally and laid him down, then flipped blankets over him. The duo in scrubs pushed the gurney toward the doors. I tapped Sue on the shoulder.

“I can walk to the airport from here. I just want to thank you.” I pressed a folded twenty I’d been holding into her hand. “This is for the gas.”

“Oh, no! You should stay. I can fix supper for you, and you should probably talk to the sheriff about this.”

“I don’t have anything worthwhile to say. I didn’t see anything. That kid can tell the sheriff whatever he knows. All I did was give him a ride.”

“I really think you should stay.”

“If the sheriff has questions for me, Deb has Earl’s number and Earl can get a message to me. But I need to get going.”

The gurney disappeared inside, tugging Sue’s attention with it.

“It was good meeting you,” I said, freeing her.

“You, too.” She hurried inside.

I grabbed my flight bag and slipped out the open sally port door looking for a place to vanish. The gravel street in both directions was broad and open. Homes lined both sides, right up to the hospital. Houses were set back, fronted by small lawns or gravel lots hosting multiple vehicles, some on blocks and skirted by weeds. There were no alleys to duck into. None of the buildings hugged their neighbor or the street. The hospital had a tall light above the emergency entrance, but the street I faced had no lights. Illumination from random yard-, garage- and house-mounted bulbs spilled all around me.

I walked in the direction of the road leading to the airport. I felt exposed on the edge of the gravel road. My boots sounded absurdly loud on the gritty surface.

From the hospital I walked to the first intersection and turned right on a street called Putnam Avenue. I hiked one block then crossed a gravel lane called School Street. I searched both directions but spotted nothing resembling a school. Ahead, the road curved left, looking more like someone's driveway than a town avenue. A scattering of sheds occupied an otherwise empty lot. Beyond that, the town abruptly ended. Unpopulated land stretched into the dark distance. Long grass undulated with the steady night wind.

I performed a quick three-sixty scan, saw no one watching and gambled that I had sufficiently merged with the starlit landscape to confuse anyone watching. I pulled my flight bag against my chest.

*Fwoomp!*

## *DIVISIBLE MAN - NINE LIVES LOST*

I vanished, checked for wires above, and gently kicked the ground. The wind swept me back the way I had come. I drew a BLASTER from a zippered pants pocket. The unit had burned up most of its battery power on the run from the cliff to the parked SUV, but I didn't need much for the return to the hospital. The wind did most of the work.

At the hospital I returned to the Emergency Entrance. The sally port joined a brick doorway into the building. I maneuvered to the flat roof where the doorway's brick wall joined the corrugated steel of the sally port. I located an exhaust pipe and grabbed it, then released my grip on the flight bag. It dropped into sight on the tarred flat roof. I stuffed the used BLASTER in a pocket and extracted a fresh one, my third of the evening. Satisfied that the bag could not be seen from the street, I maneuvered into position so that the steady wind pushed me against the rectangular exhaust pipe, holding me reliably anchored.

There, I waited.

SUE DIDN'T STAY LONG. Unable to see my watch, I could only guess that around twenty minutes passed before I heard the sally port exit open. A moment later, Sue's SUV appeared and turned onto the gravel street. She hurried away to resume her duties as hostess to a dozen hunters.

I remained stationary for what felt like another half hour, then launched from my perch. Beneath the overhang protecting the street entrance, a set of powered doors made entry to the ER easy. Inside, I found a layout similar to Essex County Memorial, albeit proportionally smaller. Recessed fluorescent lights illuminated sterile tile floors and white walls. A central desk with multiple workstations faced two examination beds. A curtain had been drawn around one of the beds. The other lay empty beside a wall of cabinets finished in warm brown and filled with medical supplies behind glass cabinet doors.

I checked to affirm that no one was in sight. Using a handrail to steer myself toward the split in the curtains, I disturbed the gray cloth briefly as I passed through.

Wally occupied the bed within. The protective rails on each side had been pulled up. His street clothing had been removed. A pale blue hospital gown draped his shoulders. The gown disappeared under white blankets. The head of the bed had been raised and he rested upright against stacked pillows.

My first real look at Wally in the light reinforced my initial impression of someone in his early twenties. He mustered about five feet and seven or

eight inches, but I would have been surprised if he topped one-thirty on a scale. No wonder Danzig had been able to drag him across the ground with one hand and effortlessly throw him into the air. The kid had a narrow face with handsome proportional features under thick, long-ish black hair. In the stock teen movie, he would play the rogue outsider who hangs in until the last reel for a shot at getting the girl.

I watch way too many movies.

Wally rested alone in his cubicle. No one occupied the nurses' station or any other part of the ER that I could see.

I grabbed the side rail and edged to the head of the bed. An IV stand dispensed clear liquid down a line into Wally's right forearm. The young man's breathing remained labored, but he no longer gritted his teeth or pressed his eyes shut. The deep pain saturating his expression on the long drive into town had drained, leaving him pale but serene, probably thanks to a painkiller administered through the IV line.

I leaned over and spoke softly.

"Wally, keep your eyes closed."

He alerted to the sound of my voice. His eyelids quivered but remained lowered.

"Keep your shit together."

His brow furrowed.

"It's me. From the cliff."

His eyes popped open. He scanned the room. Seeing nothing made his eyes grow wider.

"Goddammit, kid. I told you to keep your eyes closed. I'm starting to see why you got thrown off a cliff. You don't listen very well."

"*Where are you?*" He grimaced. Talking hurt. "*How do you—?*"

"Shut up. Just listen. Got it? Nod if you got it."

He nodded.

"Close your eyes again. If anybody walks by, I want them to see you resting."

He squeezed his eyes.

"Relax, kid. Just relax. You look constipated. That's better. Now tell me, what were you doing up at that ranch? Whisper."

"*Looking for my Aunt Stephanie. Stephanie Cullen.*"

"What about the ranch owner? Tammy Day? Did you see her there?"

He shook his head, a tight minimal movement.

"How did you get past the gate?"

"*Bolt cutter—replaced all the padlocks with my own.*"

Smart kid.

*DIVISIBLE MAN - NINE LIVES LOST*

“Was anybody else there—aside from those goons who threw you over the cliff?”

Another headshake. Sweat beaded on his brow. He added, “*They’re all gone.*”

“Who’s all gone? Where?”

He tipped his head at the side of the room. A sink and countertop lined the wall beneath a row of cabinets.

“*Pants pocket.*”

The kid’s clothing had been folded and placed on the countertop. I reached for the sink and gained a grip. The first pocket I probed yielded a wrinkled photograph. Who prints photos anymore? This one had been rendered on plain paper by an inkjet printer, which significantly lowered the quality. Folded several times, torn in one place, and taped back together, the image had some miles on it.

The photo had been taken on the open range beyond the tilled vegetable patch. I recognized the trailers in the distance, the garden a bit closer. A group of people stood closer still in a rough semi-circle. One of them held the remote control typical of a small consumer drone. A few of them looked up at the camera, which explained the location of the drone. The rest stared at the foreground.

Between the drone’s eye and the ten people, a flat expanse of grass filled the lower half of the photo. On that grass, a series of black singed-grass circles dominated the image—a large central double circle with four smaller single circles at cardinal points. The graphic spanned at least forty feet.

I’d seen similar pictures. All of them struck me as absolute nonsense. Jokes, even. I lifted the photo back across to Wally who opened his eyes in time to see it levitate into view.

“Is your aunt in this photo?”

He slid his non-IV hand out from under the blanket and pointed at a woman with blonde-gone-gray hair, third from the right. Middle-aged. Fit. Decked out in bib overalls and wearing work gloves.

“Which one is Tammy Day?”

He shrugged.

“Do you know any of the other people?”

He shook his head. I pointed at the circles.

“Any idea what this is?”

He nodded.

“What?”

“*Proof.*”



“**A**re you—?”  
“What?”  
“One of them?”

I chuckled. I knew exactly what he was asking. “Forget it, kid. I have a birth certificate from Waukesha County Wisconsin. Straight up natural human live birth.”

“Those can be—(wheeze)—faked.”

“People who want you to believe bullshit conspiracy theories tell you that things like that can be faked. It’s a lot harder in the real world. But no, I’m not from outer space.”

“Could’a fooled me.”

“Well, I’m not. Neither are these circles. Any halfwit with a plumb line and a propane flame thrower can create these.”

He nodded. At what, I wasn’t sure, although I sensed that, like me, he wasn’t buying the alien artwork.

“Then how are you—this—?” He waved his free hand at where I floated beside the bed.

“Bad accident in a government lab.”

“Bullshit.”

“Dude. We had a deal. Don’t make me come for your Metallica collection. Who are these people with your Aunt Stephanie?”

He huffed a sigh. “I can’t believe I’m sitting here talking—(wheeze)—to an inv—”

A voice approaching the door cut him off.

“Wally, how are you doing?”

I slapped the photo against my chest and covered it with my hands to make it vanish. The woman in scrubs who assisted with Wally’s emergency admission breezed through the curtains. Thankfully, she had been absorbed in her phone screen and missed the magic floating photo act. I quickly assessed my space options. I prepared to launch for the ceiling to avoid a collision, however the physician’s assistant—according to the title embroidered on her scrubs above the name Maryanne—stopped at the foot of the bed.

“Breathing a little better?” He nodded. “Good. I’m going to let that fentanyl drip do its business, then we’ll take you to Imaging and get some pictures of those ribs, okay?” Wally nodded again. “Can I get you anything? Ice water? Another blanket?” He shook his head. “Okay. Don’t move. Don’t talk. Be back in a jiff.”

She hurried away.

“*Some people pronounce it gif,*” Wally muttered, cracking a loopy smile. Evidently the drip was working.

I gave it a moment, then said, “You were up at that ranch looking for something. Did you find anything?”

Head shake.

“How long were you there?”

“*Two days.*”

“Any idea who those goons were that tossed you off the cliff?”

This time he shrugged emphatically. A hard shake of the head ignited a gasp and grimace in pain.

“Kid, you’re lying to me. Goon Leader said you don’t listen. You had a run in with him before. Plus, when you heard them coming, you knew what to expect. Don’t lie to me.”

“*Not lying. That guy—Danzig—he saw me at the gate when—(wheeze)—I tried to get up there the first time—(wheeze)—he got up in my face—made me leave—(wheeze)—*”

“Okay, okay. Relax. You’re gonna hurt yourself.”

A figure moved past the curtain outside the examination bay. The sheriff’s deputy stole a glance at Wally through the curtain slit before moving on. I made a guess that the deputy wanted to speak to the medical staff first, and that he would soon be in the room to chat with Wally.

“Cops are here. What are you going to tell him?”

Wally giggled. “*I’m gonna tell him I’m on drugs.*”

“Yeah. That’ll go over well. Where did you get this photo?”

“*Martian Mike posted it.*” A goofy smile undermined my confidence in an already absurd answer, then Wally added, “*Podcaster. Abductee. He knows about—(wheeze)—ParaTransit.*”

“What do you know about ParaTransit?”

“*I know Aunt Steffie—(wheeze)—thought it was her ticket.*”

“Ticket for what?”

“*Off the planet.*”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



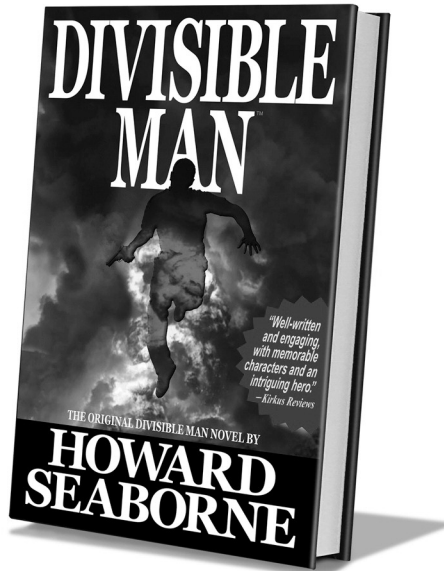
HOWARD SEABORNE is the author of the DIVISIBLE MAN™ series of novels and a collection of short stories featuring the same cast of characters.

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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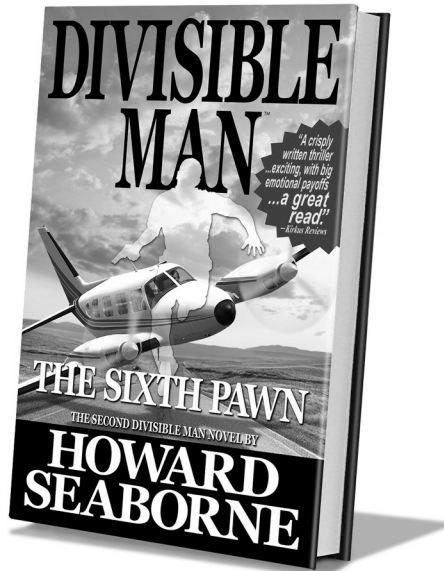
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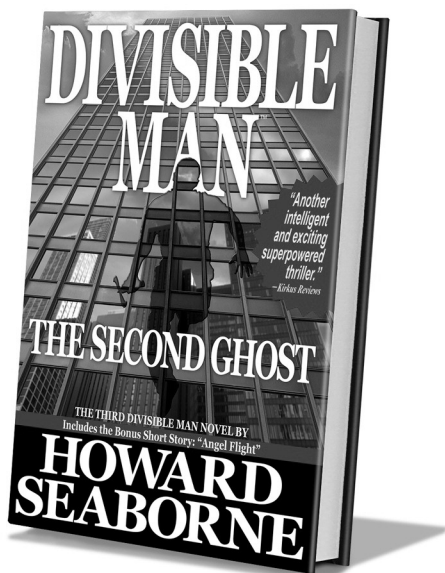
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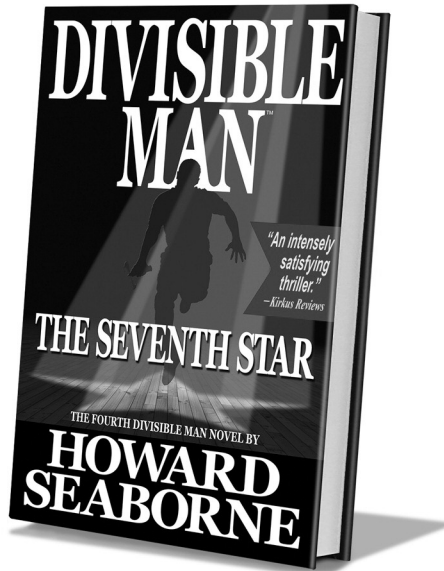
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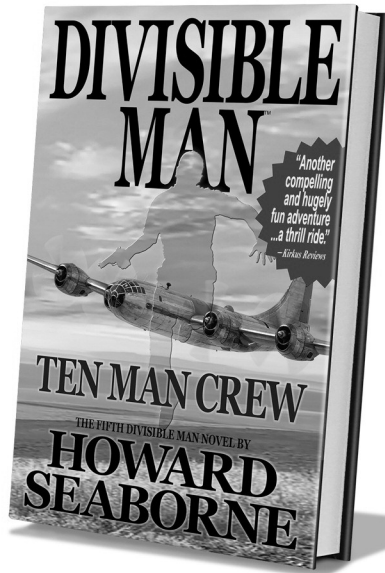
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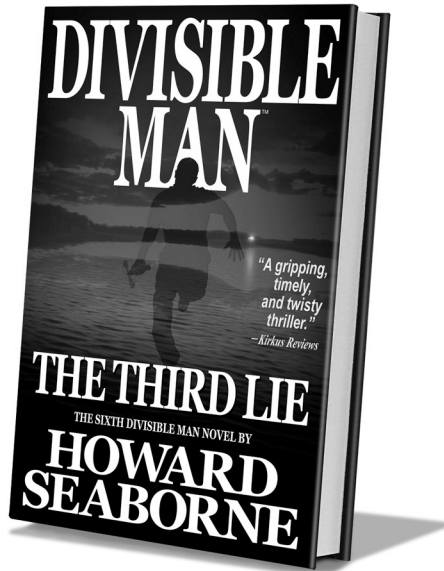
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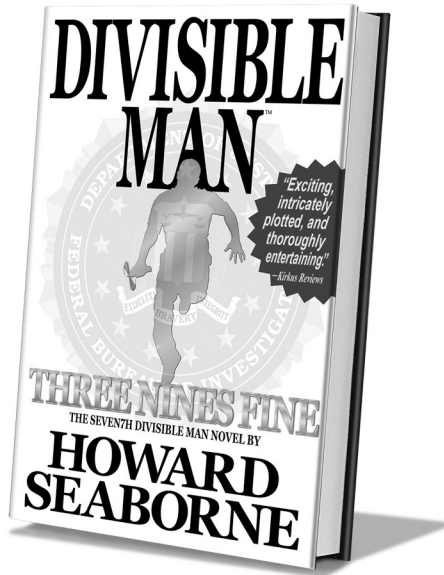
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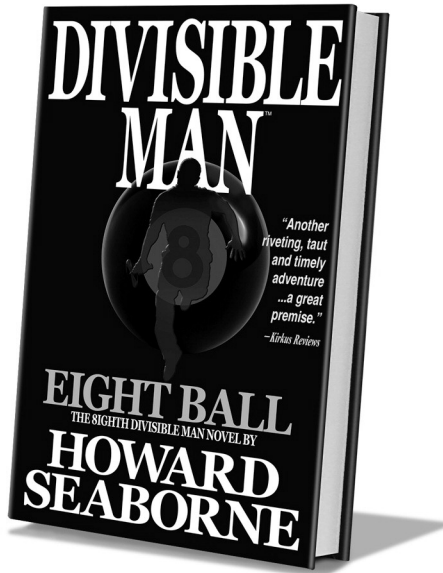
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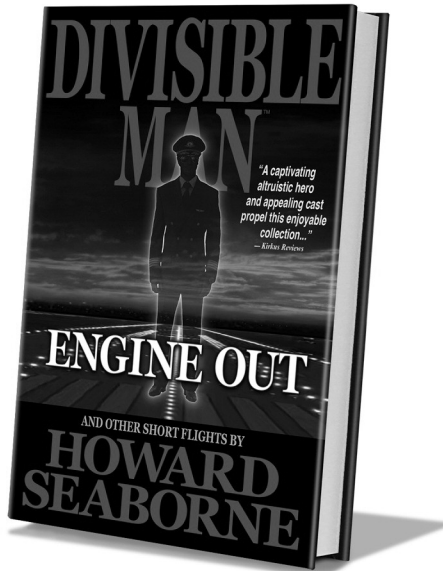
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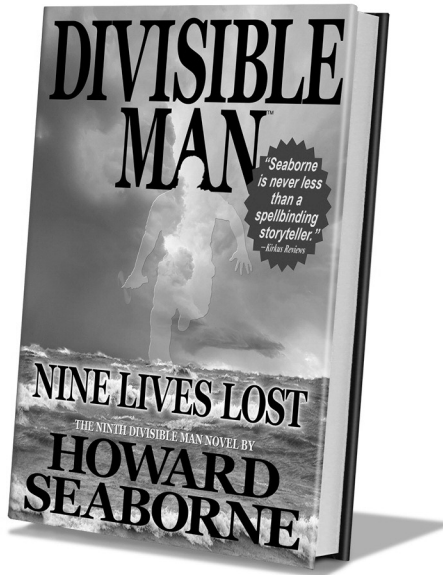
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