

# DIVISIBLE MAN™

A man in a dark pilot's uniform with a peaked cap and goggles stands on a runway. The runway has perspective lines leading to a horizon under a dramatic, orange and red sunset sky. The man is centered in the frame, and his uniform is highlighted with a soft white glow.

*"A captivating  
altruistic hero  
and appealing cast  
propel this enjoyable  
collection..."*

*— Kirkus Reviews*

## ENGINE OUT

AND OTHER SHORT FLIGHTS BY

# HOWARD SEABORNE



**DIVISIBLE MAN<sup>TM</sup>**  
**ENGINE OUT**  
**&**  
**OTHER SHORT FLIGHTS**

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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**HHDPU** - Hand Held Directable Power Unit

**SCUZ** - Self-Contained Unit for Zooming

**ZIPPY** - Zoom Implementing Personal Propulsion in the Yard

**FLUB** - Flight Launching Unit - B-Model

**SCRAM** - Special Creation Rendering Aerial Maneuverability

**DOLT** - Discrete Operational Lift Transmitter

**FLOP** - Flight Launching Operational Propulsion

**BLASTER** - Basic Linear Aerial System for Transport, Electric Rechargeable



*For Ariana and Isabella  
because you let me begin with  
“Once upon a time...”*



## 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. 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. 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

## Preface

of a room. The sound is audible only in my head, if that can be considered audible.

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.

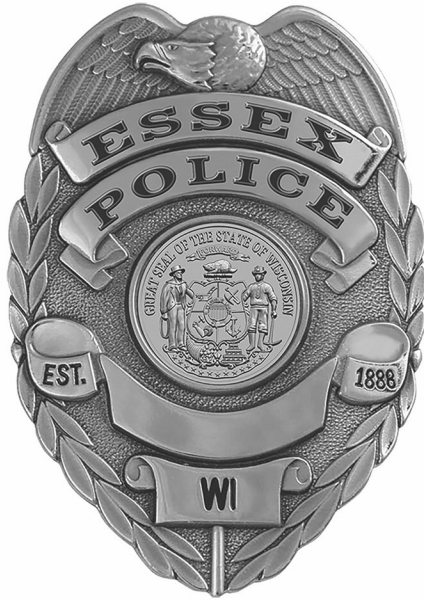
Bleary eyes and tossed hair wink out and the shower curtain behind me—the one with the frogs on it—fills in where my head had been. My feet leave the cold tile floor. My body remains solid, but gravity and I are no longer on speaking terms. I begin to float. A stiff breeze will send me on my way if I 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*.

# Andy



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**ANDY**

**M**y wife likes to tell people we met when she pulled me over for driving while full of myself. She insists such a law exists on the books in Essex County. That she pulled me over in full uniform while on patrol in a City of Essex squad car is not a lie, but she employs a bit of creative license in our origin story. With good reason.

The first time I saw her, the *actual* first time, she walked into the fixed base operation offices at Essex County Airport on the arm of a man named Carl Lofton. I was in my second year working as a pilot for Essex County Air Services, wearing the multiple hats of flight instructor, charter pilot, and—when the weather or slow business meant no bookings—would-be mechanic wearing coveralls in the hangar, assisting with annual inspections and such repairs as Doc, our certified Airframe and Powerplant mechanic, would allow. Doc, thankfully, is about as good-natured a wrench-turner as the cold war Air Force ever minted, a fixture at Essex County Air Service since Bush Senior was president. I can follow directions and handle a set of tools, but I also ask a lot of questions, which Doc answers with endless patience. I think it has something to do with the fact that when I put on a set of coveralls, he hands off the dirtiest, most monotonous jobs to me.

The day Andrea Katherine Taylor walked through our tinted glass

office doors, I was not, thankfully, wearing greasy coveralls. I stood looking my professional pilot best in a clean white shirt with a black tie and epaulets denoting my Captainly Authority, having just returned from an afternoon charter run to the upper peninsula of Michigan. I leaned on the counter, adding to my aura of great aviation prowess by holding a clipboard in one hand and a pen in the other.

Men are men, and when we see a woman like Andrea Taylor, we stop and look. Married men do it from behind sunglasses and with furtive glances. Single guys do it with tongues hanging out. We all do it. And we all run instant calculations, measuring ourselves against the dumb but lucky schmuck the woman is with. From those calculations, we project a flight path into a happily-ever-after future with such a woman. It's a fallacy that men don't want to commit. We do it all the time, all day long, with dozens of women we see on the street and in our minds.

Andrea Taylor could (and still can) stop a clock. Thick waves of auburn hair, taking and shooting back sheens of sunlight. A slender waist my hands instantly imagined gripping, blossoming into hips that signaled procreation to some lizard part of my brain. And legs. Oh, God bless the designer of that summer dress she wore, which shared most of her sculpted legs on one end and hung tastefully yet tantalizingly cut above the bosom at the other end, where she had just slightly more than most women her size and weight carry. Ever so slightly more.

Men stop and look, and some women collect those looks like Spanish gold, but a woman like Andrea will make you meet her at the eyes. They're too bright, too alert, too alive and they will hunt you down and demand direct contact, and once connected, she's the one doing the appraising, with little mercy. Her lips partnered with her eyes, pursed slightly, equally appraising. Their deep color seemed all her own and the smile they could conjure flashed like a magic spell. Her skin had just enough creamy caramel color to suggest what she took from the summer sun didn't burn and needed no enhancement.

She had the magazine looks, but it was immediately apparent she wasn't a two-dimensional beauty.

My first impression of Andrea Taylor was of a woman who knows when men are looking. When she chooses to look back, she will make you feel like the little boy you are.

*DIVISIBLE MAN - ENGINE OUT & OTHER SHORT FLIGHTS*

My second impression was that she may have been on Carl Lofton's arm, but she flew in formation; she was nobody's cargo.

I didn't like Carl. Hadn't for as long as I'd known him.

Now I hated him.

Aviation is a family of like-minded people with a strong sense of dedication and purpose. The pilots I know, those I learned from, those I taught, and those I met along the way, are sharp, intelligent, precise, and humble before the forces of nature we challenge. Then there are the Carl Loftons. They don't fly because a childhood passion sent balsa wood airplanes zooming around the back yard. They fly because an airplane is another notch in the belt, like the boat, the SL Mercedes or Corvette, or the place on the lake. They fly because money is no object, and yet it is the sole object. So, Carl Lofton, an arrogant ass who made his money being an arrogant ass in real estate or an arrogant ass practicing law or perhaps as an arrogant ass stealing social security checks, added a pilot's license to his hundred-dollar haircuts and single-malt scotch collection.

Carl had passed his Private Pilot Checkride a few months before, and we all knew he would be buying his own airplane too soon. It's an old saw, but a pilot who earns his license—who has passed a difficult written exam and flown a practical test under the severe eye of an FAA examiner—has only earned a license to learn. Except for the Carl Loftons of the world. They already know it all. Instead of continuing to learn, the Carl Loftons go out and buy more airplane than they should, usually a little too fast and a little too complex. And trouble follows.

Standing there, watching Carl and his new girlfriend sweep into the flight office, I faced a choice. Stay, and enjoy the view of the woman, or duck into the inner office and avoid Carl's smug, over-loud baritone. I caught a glance from Rosemary, the white-haired goddess of our front desk (ever since the Wright Brothers, she liked to claim). Her sharp look warned me not to run like the coward she knew I was, and she rolled her eyes when I did just that. Besides, I could still enjoy a view of the woman walking out to the flight line from the inner office, all the less obtrusively. A nice afternoon breeze swept the flight line, and that summer dress—lemonade and roses—looked delightfully light.

Carl rented one of the Cessna 172s he had trained in, and a short

while later I watched the airplane wiggle a little in the crosswind as they climbed out into the late afternoon, summer-hot sky.

\* \* \* \* \*

“That girl is going to be sick,” Rosemary announced a little over an hour later, looking out the office windows.

Leaning on the customer side of the counter, updating my logbook as a means of killing the last duty hour of the day, I had watched Carl’s landing with clinical interest. We had a decent crosswind, ten to fifteen knots about forty degrees off the nose of the airplane. A Cessna 172 is a high-wing airplane, light in a wind, and a little slab sided. I grudgingly gave Carl points for holding a crab angle into the flare on landing yet kicking the rudder enough to line up the wheels on touchdown. He came in hot, though. I marked that against him. He rolled it off the runway and taxied to the gas pumps on the main ramp and shut down.

The woman let herself out of the passenger side without waiting for Carl to open the door. She stepped confidently onto the landing gear strut and down to the apron. She moved with sharp intent. The way she left Carl behind and immediately headed for the office suggested trouble between the dating couple. But Rosemary read people well, and as this dark-haired beauty stepped purposefully up the sidewalk toward the office, I saw what Rosemary saw. The woman’s hands extended at her side with her fingers stretched out, the way someone might reach for balance walking on a beam. Her steps were measured and urgent. Her eyes hid behind a set of Ray Ban aviators, good pilot sunglasses though I later learned they were cop’s sunglasses, but it was easy to see that her focus fixed on the next ten feet of pavement. She hurried.

“Here,” Rosemary said. She handed me the plastic wastebasket from behind the counter. “She ain’t gonna make it.”

The woman’s right hand swept up toward her lips. It was coming.

I pushed through the inner doors to the office, shoved open the outer doors and met her one pace beyond. She might have looked at me in horror, wishing no one was there to witness what was about to happen, but sharp appraisal kicked in; the wastebasket offered salvation.

I handed her the wastebasket. Took her by the elbow and pushed

through the doors. She closed a two-handed grip on the wastebasket. Her pace doubled. With my hand on her elbow, I pulled her across the hall to the empty pilot's lounge. Her scent broke through the standard aviation office cologne of grease, fuel, and what traces of tobacco lingered in the ceiling tiles from the days when everybody smoked, and for a moment I caught a whiff of something like fresh fruit at a summer breakfast. She rushed the last few paces to the leather couch and dropped in a flutter of summer dress, doubling over.

I had her hair in my hands as the first retching shook her shoulders. My own stomach announced its intentions to go aerobatic, but I barked back at it in my head. *Stand down.*

It came fast, in body-shaking heaves, then spits and coughs. I continued to hold her hair but extended one leg behind me and kicked the door to the pilot lounge shut.

She gulped some air and vomited again. The first round had been productive. This, not so much. A sheen of sweat broke out on her slender neck and the fine slope where it met her shoulders. A few errant strands of her rich hair curled in glossy moisture forming mysterious glyphs. God help me, the woman was vomiting into a wastebasket, yet for an instant I imagined that sheen of sweat and that dark hair against a pillow.

She tried to rise, but I bunched her hair in one hand and put the other on her shoulder.

"Eyes shut, stay still, just breathe," I said.

I got a nod. She pushed the basket away from her face to escape the smell before it induced another round. I took it from her and set it aside. She nodded again.

"M okay," she whispered.

"No, you're not. This will take a while." I didn't want to let go of her hair, but she turned her head slightly, signaling that the moment was over. "You're going to want to lie down for a bit."

"No, I really—" She started to rise.

"Lasagna," I said.

She dropped onto the leather cushions and her hands shot out, groping. I put the wastebasket in her fingers. She yanked it beneath her face. Her body heaved. More coughing. More spitting. Then gulps of air.

"Bastard."



I had my hands wrapped around her hair again, figuring that gave me temporary immunity.

Her lungs settled into a rhythm of short, strong breaths.

"I'm Will," I said.

"I'm deeply embarrassed," she said into the top of the wastebasket, this time enduring the swill at the bottom, knowing how close she was to launching again.

"Nice to meet you, Deeply," I said. "Been there. Done that."

She didn't speak for a moment. She drew herself upright, and God help me again, but the view improved dramatically from where I stood above her. The light sheen of sweat condensed and traced glistening lines down the center of her chest. Her breathing continued in short, choppy in-outs, with a pause between each to see if the vomiting would be triggered again. After a cautious assessment, she pushed away the wastebasket once more. I took it.

"Lie down. Let the room stop spinning. I'll get rid of this."

Still not looking up, eyes still shut, breathing still quick, she slid across the leather sofa, feeling its dimensions, then she eased herself down.

I stole another long look before I left.

I dumped the wastebasket in the Men's Room toilet and gave it a quick rinse. I left it there.

Carl Lofton walked up the sidewalk toward the office. I took up a casual stance beside the office counter. A light electric sensation eased down the back of my neck. I felt the nerves in my arms answer. I flexed my fingers the way I do when I'm coming up on the final approach fix on an instrument approach, about to drop the landing gear and nail the glide slope needle. All focus. Everything clear and in its place. Something in the look on my face made Rosemary say, "Uh-oh." She rose from the rolling office chair behind the counter and found something to do in the inner office.

"Hey, Carl," I said flatly when he pushed through the doors.

"Will! My man!" The handshake was over-strong. Playing the alpha dog. I grinned at him, and he grinned back, too stupid to see that my grin didn't go any farther than my lips.

I said, "What a great day to fly! A little bumpy, but wow. Did you

show her some stuff?” I flexed my eyebrows, like we were buddies, like I wanted to hear him boast. His shit-eating grin widened. Boasting is what he did best.

“You know it!”

“Yeah? Crankin’ and bankin’? Makin’ big holes in the sky?”

“If you know what you’re doing, even a 172 can sing, am I right?”

*Except you don’t know what you’re doing, asshole.*

“You know it, man! You know it!” I punched his shoulder.

Carl glanced around and adopted a theatrical expression of conspiracy between brother aviators. “I showed her. Rolled that baby.” He puffed himself up like I was supposed to give him a high five. I wanted to punch his greasy nose through the back of his skull, but I kept up the grin, and he bought it like cheap land.

“No shit three-sixty rolled it? Up and over?”

His head bobbed. Idiot. “You know it. She loved it, man.”

I stood there staring at him. Grin fixed. Eyes cold. I saw a flicker of dawning realization.

“Say, where is she?”

“You rolled it?”

More dawning. “Well, yeah. A nice barrel roll, you know. Pretty much just one gee.”

“Carl, what category aircraft is a 172?”

“Huh? A 172? Say, did you see where she went? Is she in the can?”

He gestured down the hall. “It was kinda bumpy out there today. I think she was getting a little green toward the end. Maybe I should check on her—”

“Carl, what category aircraft is a 172?”

I got a hesitant look from him. Somewhere in his smug self-confidence, a that’s-not-right moment intruded on his lordly command of Carl’s World. It’s the moment when a pilot hears an engine misfire. When a landing gear light doesn’t turn green. When the oil pressure needle wavers. Men like Carl generally don’t recognize such moments. They don’t listen when tiny voices whisper at them. But he looked at me now. My grin evaporated. Ice formed in my eyes.

“A 172 is not an aerobatic category aircraft, Carl.”

“I know, but I can keep the gees well within limits. A barrel roll, that’s just—that’s easy, one gee if you do it ri—”

“You fucking barrel rolled one of our aircraft?”

“Look, I, uh—”

“Scared the shit out of some poor passenger?”

“C’mon, man, I know what—”

“You know what you’re doing? Really?” My tone was smooth, even. Ice on a still pond. “You’ve had aerobatic training? You were in an aircraft rated for aerobatics?”

He stared.

“Hey, I was careful.”

“You’re done here, Carl. You’re never renting another aircraft from us. Do you understand me?”

“You can’t—”

“Oh, yes I can. And I’m going to e-mail every other FBO in the state, so you can forget about taking your shit show on the road. You’re an arrogant prick who doesn’t belong in the cockpit.”

“Fuck you!” Red streaks rose in his cheeks. Carl probably had twenty pounds on me, most of it billowing over his belt, but I had an inch of height. This wasn’t going anywhere. “You can’t do that!”

“Take your shit and go.”

I think he was close to jittering, like an old car with a bad clutch trying to take a hill it shouldn’t. Nobody talks to Carl Lofton like that. But I just did.

“Fine,” he said, like it was suddenly his idea. “Where’s the broad?”

*‘The broad?’ Are you fucking kidding me?*

“She left. She said to tell you never to call her again.”

The red ran from his cheeks down into his neck. A vein throbbled above his right eye. I noticed for the first time that his hair was thinning badly. *Gonna need plugs soon, buddy.*

He still had the flight board in hand, with the aircraft key and the timecard showing how much rental time had been logged on the flight. He tossed it onto the counter. It slid across and dropped to the floor with a flat slap.

“I ain’t fucking paying for this!” He started to turn.

My left hand clamped on his bicep, just above the elbow. He tried to

jerk free, but I had it at the bone. With my right hand, I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket. I held it up in front of his face with the screen toward me.

“You’re going to pull out your fucking Gold MasterCard and give it to Rosemary, and you’re going to pay for this rental and anything else you have on your account. Because if you don’t, the recording I just made of this conversation where you admitted violating several Federal Aviation Regulations and admitted to careless and reckless operation of an aircraft is going directly to the Feds, where it, and my testimony, and the testimony of that woman will guarantee your license is suspended, do you copy?”

Rosemary emerged from the inner office, her face aimed at the floor, probably to suppress a cheer. She picked up the flight board and began to work the keyboard on the front desk computer. I released my grip on Carl’s arm.

Rosemary took her sweet time. She tallied up Carl’s account. Today’s rental. Two from earlier in the month. She ran his card while he stood staring, silent. His signature scratched through the slip. He threw down the pen.

“Fuck you,” he muttered as he walked out of the office.

Rosemary squeezed her lips together, holding her tongue, watching him go.

After a moment, I jogged out the front doors after him. The sun hung low in the west, but a steady early-evening breeze pushed out the wind-sock. It may have been a beautiful summer day, but such days produce sharp thermals over the farmland and forests of Wisconsin, and the ride in a light plane can be rough, hot, and uncomfortable. Between that and Carl’s bad judgment, I understood how the flight had spun the woman’s head.

“Carl!” I called after him. He was on a march to his car, the inevitable Corvette. “Hey, man! Wait up a second!” I let a little softness ease into my tone, a little brother-to-brother.

He hesitated. He looked over his shoulder at me.

“Wait up a second, man,” I said with a mild shrug, the kind he read as the signal an apology would follow. He was wrong. I let my eyes fall to his shoes for a second. Let him be the alpha dog. He waited for me.

“Listen, I want to ask you one thing, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Don’t take anyone with you.”

He stood still, ready for the apology, but those weren’t the words he expected.

“What?”

“Don’t take anyone with you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I heaved a sigh. “You’re an arrogant prick. You think you know it all. That makes you a dangerous pilot. So, don’t take anyone with you. When you fuck up and kill yourself. Don’t take anyone with you. A girl. A wife. Kids. Don’t kill them, too. Please.”

He took a thousand miles off the tires of his Corvette when he peeled out of the parking lot.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rosemary waved her keys at me when I walked back into the office. The wall clock said closing time. The door to the pilot lounge stood open.

“She come out?”

Rosemary nodded. “She went down to the Ladies. Are you going to take her home?”

I shrugged with all the Casual I was able to muster up, but it didn’t fool her. Her cheeks balled up over a knowing smile that, unlike my grin for Carl, rode high into her pale eyes and lit them up like landing lights. She laughed and started to leave.

At the door, she stopped and looked at me.

“That girl is going to marry you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

I didn’t think so after I drove the woman home.

Except for curt directions, she hardly spoke. She didn’t tell me her name. It wasn’t a cold ride, but it was solitary. She directed me to an apartment building on the west side of Essex. I considered asking how

she was feeling, but decided the question invited too much review of what had happened.

For some reason, I felt acutely aware that my car was an eleven-year-old Toyota Corolla that hadn't seen a car wash, well, ever. I wanted to reach over and scoop up the litter on the passenger-side floor, but I didn't want her thinking I was reaching for those beautiful bare legs. Except for shifting, I kept my hands at ten and two on the wheel.

Pulling into the parking space she indicated, I let the engine run.

To my surprise, she turned and looked frankly at me, eyes squeezed down slightly, like someone searching for a landmark on a distant horizon.

"I heard what you said. To Carl. Outside."

I suddenly wondered if she'd also heard me lie to the bastard, telling him she'd gone and never to call her again. The pilot's lounge door was closed, but it's not soundproof. She probably thought me an opportunistic ass.

"Did you mean it?"

"Mean what?"

"Will he kill someone?"

"I hope not."

She got out of the car without another word.

Rosemary was full of shit.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two weeks later, as I turned onto the narrow blacktop about a quarter mile from the driveway to the farmhouse I'd been renting, a City of Essex squad car rolled up behind me with its light bar exploding blue and red against a high summer twilight. I felt a cold anchor drop in my stomach, the one everyone feels when the blazing cop car lights fill up the rearview mirror. I pulled over and fished my wallet out of my back pocket and held it in my hand. No sense reaching for something in the near-dark, something a cop can't see. Shit, was I speeding? I hadn't paid attention, but the default answer to that is approximately twelve over the limit. *Shit.*

The officer strolled up, filling my side-view mirror with utility belt

and a black semi-automatic service weapon. I already had the window open. The air conditioning on the Corolla died long before I bought it used.

I looked up at the face beneath the peaked cap and the anchor in my stomach turned to a cloud of butterflies, like some sappy Disney animation.

She wore her hair in an official-looking bun. I had a split second to feel disappointed that she wouldn't need me to hold it.

"Hello, Will Stewart," she said. Dummy that I am, I wondered how she knew my last name.

"Hello, Deeply Embarrassed," I said, instantly wishing I hadn't, and just as instantly feeling better when it brought a smile. She let the smile linger.

"Yes, well, do you blame me?"

"I told you. Been there, done that. And I was the pilot."

"You were airsick?"

"Blew my breakfast out the side window."

"That's not exactly reassuring to the passengers." The smile stayed. It seemed to dance on her face, lit like a party by the blue and red lights from her squad car.

"Is there a problem, officer?" Stupid, stupid question.

"It's Sergeant. Andrea Taylor," she said. Her hand came out. I took it. We shook warmly, curtly, professionally. I wanted to hold that hand. "And yes, there is a problem if you ever tell my chief why I stopped you."

"Okay. I won't tell. Why did you stop me?"

"I want you to take me flying."

She could have been speaking a foreign language, it was so utterly beyond what I expected her to say. I looked at her for a long moment, to see if some joke lay beneath the surface. She gave no hint of anything but sincerity.

"No."

Surprise flashed in her eyes, then doubt, and maybe embarrassment, the genuine kind that follows when a sure-fire plan flops.

"No? You're the pilot."

"Why?"

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“Because you have the license.” Cute. The joke sparkled in her eyes. I liked those eyes.

“Why?” I repeated. “Why do you want me to take you flying?”

She hesitated.

“I don’t like being defeated. I never flew in a small plane before, and I felt defeated afterward. I don’t like that.”

“Okay. Still No.”

She rocked back on one foot. Her eyes darkened. “You won’t take me flying?”

I shook my head. “You take me.”

“Um, again. You’re the pilot.”

“Yes. But you do the flying. You take the controls. You’ll be hands on. You’ll be in control. You’ll feel the aircraft and know what it’s doing. I’ll get you onto the runway, but you’ll push the throttle up. You’ll do the takeoff, and you’ll do the flying.”

“Me? Takeoff?”

“Little known secret. Airplanes fly nicely without us. The airplane will take off practically by itself.”

She drew a breath and considered the idea.

“I’ll be there, right there, the whole time. But no stunts. No bullshit. Not like—”

“That asshole?”

“I didn’t know if the two of you, um, were...”

“It was the second date. My mind was made up after the first date, but he offered to take me flying and it’s something I always wanted to do. And I got sick and that took it away from me. I want it back.”

This had nothing to do with saving face or showing me something. This was between her and her expectations, between her and the sky.

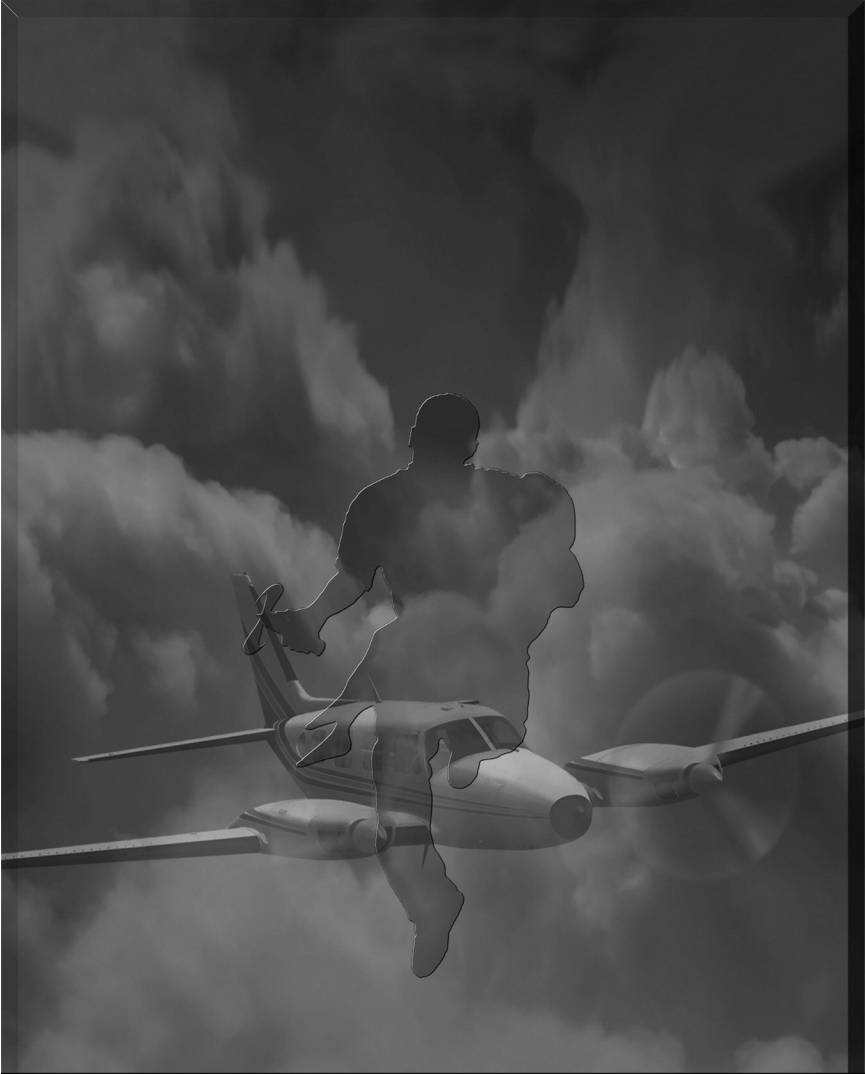
“Then take me flying,” I said.

And she did.

I knew before I showed her how to start the engine I was in love.

ANDY  
June 2017





# ANGEL FLIGHT

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## ANGEL FLIGHT

“Mistletoe?”  
Andy looked up at me. I watched her sleepy eyes squeeze, attempting to focus on the sprig of leaf and berry I had taped to my forehead.

Her hair spread on the pillow, framing her face in sweet symmetry.

“Damn, how did that get there?” I asked.

She let a pair of dimples peek from the corners of her mouth.

“Bring it in, Pilot,” she said, almost purring. “But we’re going to have to be quick. I’m taking a patrol shift today.”

“I don’t think I can do quick.” I lifted the covers and slid into the warm bed beside her.

“Right. You just keep on believing that.”

Challenge accepted.

I made a point of not being quick. She did not protest.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andy did that thing she does, the one where she rushes around the house performing half a dozen tasks simultaneously. She worked her hair into a bun, put on her belt, poured coffee into a thermos, holstered her

weapon, and located her patrol uniform hat after asking me where she put it. I sat in the kitchen at the counter-height table and sipped my own coffee, feeling a certain pride in the fact she was running late.

“Are you going to the airport?” she asked on the move from somewhere in the living room.

“Thought I’d play Santa,” I called back. “Although I don’t know if anyone will be there in this weather. If they shut everything down, I may have to deliver house to house. Santa old school.”

I glanced out the kitchen window. Still couldn’t see the barn. People who don’t fly often ask me what it’s like being in a cloud. Stand outside on a foggy day. That’s what it’s like.

“Don’t take Lane’s gift, okay?” Andy blew into the kitchen in full uniform. Despite her promotion to detective, the scheduling needs of the department still required her to take an occasional shift as patrol sergeant. Especially around the Christmas holiday. “And don’t take Rosemary II’s. I want to drop them off on the way to Lydia’s tonight.”

“That’s the opposite direction,” I pointed out. “Maybe we should just go hang out with Lane and Rosemary II tonight instead.”

The idea got no traction.

I didn’t hide my trepidation about Christmas Eve at Lydia’s recently rented lake house. Had it been simply Andy and Lydia and I, sipping wine (in Lydia’s pregnant case, grape juice) and watching Lydia’s little girls jumping out of their skin in anticipation of Santa’s visit—that I would have loved.

Such was not the plan.

Lydia, flush with the success of reuniting with her sister Andy, had plunged ahead on the path of restoring peace in the family. She invited her parents and her brother and his wife for a family Christmas. Holidays bear a stress load all their own without attempting to implement an armistice in a six-year war—The Shitstorm, as Andy and I called it. Six years of Andy rejecting her father’s wishes, and he in turn rejecting her.

Lydia decided the time had come to end it.

I did not foresee this going well.

“We have to give this a chance,” Andy said, slipping into her Essex PD jacket. “We’ll have Lane and her mom over for dinner this week. But tonight—tonight will be tonight.”

*Well, that makes it all better.*

I'd been pulling for Lydia. But my opinion, which is as weightless as I am when I vanish, was that Lydia had campaigned a bridge too far. I was surprised by Andy's willingness to participate in Lydia's peacemaking. I thought she might want to firm up her new alliance with her older sister before taking on their father. I chalked it up to holiday spirit. And maybe Lydia's recent near-death experience.

Andy scooped up her keys and pulled me into a kiss.

"Thanks for the mistletoe," she hummed in my ear.

"There's more on the vine."

"Good."

I followed her to the door.

"Be safe out there. It's zero-zero."

"Roger that."

\* \* \* \* \*

After Andy left, I finished the last-minute Christmas wrapping I traditionally save for Christmas Eve (and sometimes Christmas morning). In other words, Andy's gift.

This year, Andy's gift was easy. She strongly hinted for a rail-mounted laser sight compatible with her Beretta Model 92A—as in she e-mailed me a link to the item on the manufacturer's website. The compact box proved easy to wrap, but before I did so, I removed the laser sight and replaced it with a small, velvet-lined box containing a thin chain and a single tiny diamond framed in a stylized heart. I caught Andy admiring the necklace at Shinamon's Jewelers the night of the Essex Winter Festival. We had been walking from shop to shop under city-hung Christmas lights when Andy stopped at the window. I asked if she wanted to try it on, but she declined. Not in the family budget, she claimed. I protested that you only adhere to a budget if you have actual money. She claimed that I just proved her point. Of course, she didn't know I'd been salting away a few dollars here and there all year for precisely this sort of emergency. Now I looked forward to scoring extra points not only for the gift, but for the frugal foresight and the whole noticing-that-she-liked-it thing.

I planned to give her the gift tonight before we set off for Lydia's. I wasn't about to jeopardize my shot at Hero Husband status by waiting until the holiday lay in ruins.

Andy managed the rest of the gift wrapping, which I deemed only fair since she's the one who did all the shopping. There were gifts for Lydia and her two little girls. Gifts for Pidge and Dave Peterson, fellow pilots at Essex County Air Services. Something for Andy's boss, Tom Ceeves. Andy found something for Rosemary II—I'll be honest, I didn't pay attention when Andy described it to me. We purchased a Bluetooth speaker for Lane. Andy bought something for our friend, Sandy Stone—and again, I have no clue what. (It's a condition I call Girl Gift Blindness, and I insist it's a real thing.)

My second-favorite gift was a framed photo of Earl Jackson standing in front of his newly acquired King Air 90. Andy snapped the picture surreptitiously, catching my boss in a rare moment of introspection in the shadow of a beautiful airplane. Honestly, the intimacy of the photo stuns me. Earl is a human built on a gargoyle mold, with a head as bald as a boulder and a perpetual scowl on his face. The intimidating exterior makes perfect camouflage for a heart so big it requires a solid fireplug body to contain it. Yet the photo reveals a man connected to a machine and the sky beyond it in ways that perhaps only a pilot would understand.

Despite Earl's secret heart, I argued that Andy should be the one to give him the photo. I reasoned there would be less chance Earl would throw it back at her. Earl doesn't like gifts, but he has a giant soft spot for my wife.

I slipped into the afternoon by spending time reloading and fine-tuning the latest version of my flashlight-battery-powered propulsion units. The newest editions had detachable propellers, making them easier to carry in my flight jacket. The propellers simply snapped on and locked in place. I've learned to keep at least one of the compact power units at my fingertips at all times.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the FLOP!" I announced to a capacity crowd cheering in my head. "Flight Launching Operational Propulsion!" I couldn't wait to tell Andy the new name. Maybe when I give her the diamond.

A little after two p.m. I loaded the Christmas packages in my car and edged my way into the fog.

Early December brought several icy Alberta Clippers through Wisconsin—fast-moving low-pressure systems followed by giant masses of frigid Canadian air. Starting the first weekend of the month, we had snowfall after snowfall, almost guaranteeing a white Christmas. Two days before the holiday, a warm air mass crept into the state, drawn by a broad low-pressure system that trudged east in no particular hurry. Temperatures rose above freezing. Snow melted by day, then refroze in the night as sheets of ice. Warm air flowed across a snow-covered landscape, which caused moisture in the air to condense as fog. Dense fog stretched from central Illinois all the way to the Canadian border. Holiday travelers at every major airport in the Midwest found themselves stranded as the airlines cancelled flights in record numbers.

Exiting our driveway, I glanced back. I couldn't see the house. There was no question in my mind. Nobody but Santa Claus would be flying today. I felt sure I'd find the offices at Essex County Air Service empty.

Wrong.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What's the Mojave doing on the ramp?" I asked Rosemary II the moment I cleared the tinted glass doors.

She held up her just-a-minute hand and then touched the earpiece on her headset to send me her on-the-phone gesture.

She wore a grim expression.

I deposited the cardboard box containing Christmas gifts on the floor under the artificial tree in the corner. Colored tree lights along with the scent of fresh coffee warmed the flying service office. Rosemary II makes superb coffee. I helped myself to a cup while she carried on her largely silent side of what seemed to be a troubling conversation.

I finished a third of the heavenly brew before Rosemary II ended the call.

"Oh, dear," she said. She's not much older than me but she projects a potent mothering influence on everyone at Essex Air. We love her for it.

"What's going on?"

“That was Earl. He’s been trying to work out an Angel Flight all morning, and it’s going badly.”

Earl Jackson donates his airplanes and pilots to Angel Flight, an organization that provides private aircraft transportation to families needing to travel long distances for medical treatment. I’ve flown a few Angel Flights for him. The missions are both fulfilling and heartbreaking, especially when transporting children.

“Jesus, nothing’s flying in this,” I said, but I had a bad feeling, noting again that the Piper Mojave had been pulled out of the hangar. Even from the office, just a few hundred feet away, fog softened the outline of the airplane.

“That’s the problem,” Rosemary II said. She suddenly remembered something and hurried through the inner office and out the door which put her on my side of the front counter. Almost spilling my coffee, she threw a big hug around me.

“Merry Christmas, Will,” she whispered in my ear. “And thank you again.”

She squeezed me in a deep and appreciative embrace, then backed away, leaving the scent of her perfume between us.

“Merry Christmas to you, too,” I fumbled, feeling awkward.

She gave me a long look with dark brown eyes, then nodded and went back the way she came.

Six months ago, I had a hand in saving her daughter’s life. One Thank-You would have long-since covered it, but I guess the holiday spirit reignites memories of the episode for Rosemary II.

“You were saying?” I sought a quick change of subject.

Rosemary II returned to her station behind the counter.

“Earl had an Angel Flight scheduled for this morning. Pick up at Milwaukee Mitchell, then up to Marshfield.” Angel Flights to Marshfield and its world-famous research clinic were not uncommon.

“Well, that’s not happening,” I said, feeling grateful that someone employed sound decision-making.

Rosemary II drew a long breath and tipped her head from side to side.

“Tell me that’s not happening.”

“Oh, it’s fucking happening!” Pidge marched out of the pilot briefing

office with her flight bag in one hand and an iPad in the other. She wore her work uniform, which made her look like a teenaged girl dressed up as a pilot. At twenty-three she holds every rating including Airline Transport Pilot, and she flies everything Earl owns. She and Earl get along like fire and gasoline vapor, but the one thing they can both agree on is that she's the best pilot either of them knows.

"You can't be serious," I said. "Marshfield has to be as low as we are."

"Two hundred and a quarter, last hour," Pidge informed me. "Icing in the clouds."

"So, this is not happening," I said again, making it sound more like a command. I had been Earl's chief pilot before the FAA suspended my license. I still carried some authority.

Rosemary II issued one of her motherly sighs.

"There's a little girl," she said. And like the cold, heartless sonofabitch I can be, I thought *of course, it had to be a little girl*. "She has a blood disease. She was supposed to be treated two days ago, but she couldn't travel. She's taken a turn. Now it's a matter of life—"

"Don't say life or death," I warned Rosemary II. "Not when pilots have to make a go or no-go decision."

"Oh, that decision's already been made," Pidge said.

"What do you mean?"

Both women looked at me, leaving the question hanging. Rosemary II finally answered.

"Earl set up the flight for this morning, but the fog cancelled it. They decided to transport her by ambulance."

"Sounds like the right idea to me," I said.

"Twenty minutes ago, they called Earl, and Earl called Andy, and now they're coming here," Rosemary II said.

"Wait. What?"

"They called Earl because they got as far as Essex County, but there's a huge pile-up and the highway is closed. They thought maybe a helicopter could meet them on the highway and make the rest of the trip. But of course, that's impossible. So, Earl called Andy and got her to go out to the highway and find them and bring them here."

"Why here?" I didn't like where this was going.



“Because Earl told them I’d fucking fly them to Marshfield,” Pidge said. Pidge drops F-bombs on everything, but even so, I knew from her tone she didn’t like the idea. Not one bit.

“You can’t. This is very bad shit.”

“I can,” she said, matter-of-factly. “I agree with you. It’s very bad shit. But I can. And you know I can.”

“Where’s Earl?” If he was orchestrating all this, I wanted to speak to him.

“Once it looked like the flight wouldn’t go, he hopped in his car and drove to Milwaukee. I think he planned on driving the family to Marshfield himself, but the girl is so bad off they need an ambulance and an attending nurse.”

“Jesus,” I said. “Does he know this family?”

Rosemary II gave me a look meant to shame me. “It’s Christmas, Will. Everybody knows everybody.”

“What about a detour? Can’t they get around the pile-up?”

“It’s Christmas, Will,” Pidge said, piling on. “Granny and all the fucking uncles are taking the detour. It’s a knot. That’s why Earl called Andy for a police escort.”

I turned to Pidge.

“You know the rules, Pidge. Angel Flight or not, the pilot cannot allow the need to infect his judgment.”

“*Her* judgment, dumbass,” she punched at my shoulder. “Yeah, I know the fucking rules.”

*But you’re doing this anyway,* I thought. *This is not good.*

Pidge busied herself with her flight kit, but it was a ploy. The way she had everything organized told me she had already filed a flight plan and finished the preflight.

“How much gas are you taking?” I asked.

“All of it,” she said.

“Well,” I said grimly. “You will need it. Because when you can’t get into Marshfield, you may have to fly to Nebraska to find a place to land.”

\* \* \* \* \*

I didn’t want anything to do with this.

My holiday delivery had been made. My work here was done. I didn't want to be around to see this emergency unfold. A big part of me feared Pidge was about to do something monumentally stupid.

I decided to finish my coffee and get out of the way.

Just as soon as I helped Pidge load her things in the plane.

"What are you doing?" she asked when I joined her on the walk to the ramp.

"Helping you load up."

"Then why am I fucking carrying all this shit?"

"Because you're pilot-in-command of this dumbass idea."

We walked to the airplane without continuing the conversation. Shining and damp, the Mojave sat on the ramp looking the way all airplanes look to me—like a glorious creature restrained. Like its landing gear and wheels represented chains locking her sleek body to the earth.

Pidge pulled down the door which served as a stair and climbed in. I waited on the ramp. While she thumped through the cabin toward the cockpit, I pressed my hand against the aluminum skin of the airplane. I closed my eyes and tried to feel something meaningful while my hand traded heat for cold with the airplane. I tried to feel the future—as if a touch could join me to this flying machine and tell me everything would be okay. Or tell me it would not.

I strained to hear machine whispers. I searched the insides of my eyelids for a vision of wheels touching down on damp pavement after a challenging but safe flight. The airplane protected its mysteries and revealed no prescient secrets to me. I broke the bonding touch, leaving the question unanswered.

I was about to take up the weather argument with Pidge when the distant sound of sirens cut through the fog. I recognized the warble of an Essex PD cruiser, but it harmonized with off-key notes from a second unit. Both grew louder, and the fog on the other side of the hangar soon throbbed with flashing heartbeats of blue and red.

The sirens abruptly stopped, and the lights grew brighter, eventually rounding the buildings. Andy nosed her cruiser up against the hangar. A large, square rescue squad ambulance pulled up behind the airplane.

An EMT hopped out and hurried to the back of the unit. The driver,

another EMT, rounded the front fender and walked toward me. Andy came up close behind him.

“Are you the pilot?” the driver asked.

I thumbed toward the cabin and said, “She is. In the cockpit.”

The driver glanced back at his unit, at the drama unfolding behind the rear doors. Then he leaned toward the aircraft door to look for Pidge.

“She’s not really going to do this, is she?”

“She won’t do anything unsafe, if that’s your question,” I answered a bit defensively. Andy correctly read my tone as unhappy and bounced a worried look in my direction.

The first EMT hustled up with a heavy case in hand. “This goes in the cabin with the kid.”

“How much does it weigh?” I asked.

“About seventy pounds,” he said. He strained against the weight. I leaned into it and grabbed one side of the case. Together we heaved it up into the cabin.

“I got it,” I said, and I pushed it behind the last seat. I automatically estimated its effect on the aircraft weight and balance, considering that Pidge had loaded full fuel. The calculation grew more critical when the co-driver produced two more heavy, hardshell cases. I helped load them. I leaned in the cabin and called up to Pidge to give her the numbers for a revised weight-and-balance estimate.

By the time I stepped back onto the ramp, both EMTs had gone to the rear of the ambulance. I watched them help a nurse pull a gurney with folding legs from the back of the unit. An IV bag hung above the figure on the gurney.

So small.

The child had been wrapped in blankets for protection against the cold. She lay almost entirely hidden. Even with the blanket bulk, she looked tiny. A lock of brown hair peeked from her wrap. Someone, a civilian, a woman with worry etched deep in her skin, hurried to tuck the blankets around the child and over her face as the gurney rolled.

Andy looked at me with pain shading her green eyes.

“Oh, this is not good,” I muttered to the only person listening. Me.

The cluster of attendants rolled the gurney up to the Mojave.

“That won’t fit,” I said of the stretcher on wheels. People think all

airplanes have the interior dimensions of an airliner. “She’ll have to be carried up and she’ll have to be in a seat. We can recline it, but she’ll have to be strapped in.”

After a split second of hesitation, they set about untangling the child. The nurse detached the IV bag and readied herself to carry it alongside the girl. The EMTs rearranged the blankets, then slid their hands under the girl and effortlessly lifted her. One tucked the girl’s head against the other’s shoulder to ensure she would not be bumped against the door frame.

“Take the back seat on the left,” I instructed them. I hurried up into the cabin ahead of them and positioned myself in the seat across the aisle.

The EMT carried the child up the steps embedded in the door. Hunched over, he squeezed into the cabin and swung her into the seat. I leaned over and grabbed the seatback mechanism, reclining it two notches. Any farther and it would interfere with the door.

The nurse entered the cabin with the IV bag. She looked around for somewhere to hang it. The smooth moldings in the cabin roof offered no anchor points.

“Andy!” I called out. “Go get a wire coat hanger from Rosemary II!”

A minute later Andy handed a coat hanger through the open cabin door. The nurse passed it to me. I did a little bending, then jammed it into the plastic molding above the seat. The nurse fixed the IV bag in place, then set about unpacking portable monitors from the hardshell cases. She meticulously unwound leads and made connections. After several minutes, two of the complex devices beeped and filled their screens with data.

After ensuring that the IV tubes were not pinched or obstructed, the nurse backed out of the cabin to let the co-driver and me out. The mother barely allowed us to clear before she hurried up into the cabin to be with her daughter.

I touched the nurse on the sleeve and beckoned her toward the tail of the airplane.

“This looks bad,” I said in the lowest possible voice. It was a question. The expression on the nurse’s face telegraphed her answer.

“She should have been at the clinic three days ago,” she said. “Her

condition has become...aggressive. We agreed to drive her but to be honest, especially in this fog..." she shook her head. "Can the pilot really get us there?"

I looked at the mist floating all around us. "If it's like this in Marshfield, no. And she can't bring you back here. She's going to have to fly on to find someplace above minimums to land. This is a very bad idea."

"This is the only idea," the nurse said. "I hate to put it that way. I know how these things work. If I were you, I wouldn't make the flight."

"And what's her outcome if we call it off?"

"I refuse to answer that."

"Okay."

I gave her a pat on the shoulder, and she hurried back to the stairs to take her place in the cabin. I backed away with Andy.

Pidge appeared in the cabin doorway. She reached down for the straps on the door.

"Wait!" I called out. I turned to Andy.

Her eyes told me she saw this coming.

"I guess this proves I'll do anything to avoid the big dinner tonight," I said.

She put her hands on either side of my face and planted a kiss.

"I know."

I broke away from wanting another kiss and hurried to the cabin door.

"You're going to need a hand," I told Pidge. I expected a smart-ass reply, but she simply nodded, then worked her way up to the pilot's seat.

I hunched my way into the cabin and took a knee beside the mother, who sat directly across the aisle from the child. The nurse had taken the seat behind the pilot's seat, facing aft toward her patient.

I put a hand on the mother's arm.

"Ma'am," I said. "You need her to arrive in Marshfield quickly and safely."

She nodded at me. Her eyes were wet.

"That pilot up front may not look like it, but she's the best there is. But this flight is going to be tough, and as good as she is, she's going to need help. We also need all the fuel we can carry. We're loaded up and we're going to pick up ice. You have a tough choice. You can go along,

which means I have to get off. Or I can take the co-pilot's seat and increase the chances of getting her there. But if I do that, it has to be without you. Because we can't both go. We'll be overloaded."

It was a flat-out lie.

The woman's face quivered and wrinkled. Tears spilled. "But—but she's my—*she's my baby!*"

I took her hand. She had more to say but couldn't get the words out. She knew the potential dark side of this decision, of leaving her child. I knew it, too. I knew I might be stealing a mother from her child's final moments. But I also knew there was little chance we were going to land this flight in Marshfield.

"Let us do this for her. Like she was our own," I said.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pidge ignited the right engine while I secured the door. On the way back up the aisle I gave the nurse a reassuring nod, entirely false. By the time I strapped in the co-pilot's seat, Pidge had the left engine running. She let the Mojave roll at once. We wheeled around on the ramp and rolled for a departure on Runway 13. As we taxied, I saw Andy standing beside her cruiser, holding the mother by the shoulder as the woman shook, sobbing.

I gave Andy an apologetic thumbs-up while working the radios to copy our IFR clearance. ATC cleared us direct and added the latest weather from Marshfield, as if to make a point. I read back their instructions and received an immediate release, with a request to report airborne on Center frequency.

You can know an airport intimately, but when low visibility steals your orientation, even the most familiar taxiways and runways become alien environments. Pidge and I strained to see the yellow taxi line that took us toward the runway. At the Hold Short line, I worked through the pre-takeoff checklist while Pidge performed each check. During the run-up, she took an extra minute to listen to the engines with her eyes closed.

"Zero-zero takeoff," I said through the intercom. We'd been through this before, recently, in a snowstorm, but this time our roles were reversed. This time Pidge sat in the command seat. She would fix her

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attention on the instruments while I maintained a visual orientation to the runway, holding us on the centerline with the rudder pedals until I called for her to rotate.

We finished the pre-takeoff checklist. Pidge back-taxed into position on the runway. I made the departure announcement over the silent radio frequency for Essex County. Pidge lined us up and slowly worked the throttles forward while holding the brakes. The engines sang. The airframe shuddered. When the manifold pressure reached twenty inches, she let the brakes go and pushed the throttles to the stops. The Mojave surged forward.

We both held the control yoke. I firmly worked the pedals, guiding the nosewheel down the runway centerline.

“Power check,” Pidge called out.

“Suction,” Pidge called out.

I fixed my eyes on the runway ahead. I barely saw the white lines below the nose as we raced forward into the blinding mist.

“Airspeed’s alive,” Pidge called out.

The runway lights ticked past us, ever faster. I watched the needle swing on the airspeed indicator.

“Rotate!” I called, giving us an extra five knots for comfort.

Pidge pulled the yoke and the Mojave leaped free of the runway. My world, the world over the nose, went white. Pidge glued her eyes to the instruments.

“Blue line. Gear up,” she said. I pulled the handle and monitored until the light said all three wheels were tucked in.

“Positive rate,” I reported as the airspeed indicator needle marked our climb speed.

I switched to the air traffic control frequency. “Chicago Center, Angel Flight One One Kilo with you, climbing to six thousand.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The cruise portion of the flight unfolded uneventfully. It may have been the Angel Flight call sign, or it may have been the utter absence of other aircraft on the frequency, but we seemed to get priority treatment

from air traffic control. Direct routing put us close to Marshfield in less than an hour, far faster than an ambulance.

Not fast enough.

Just as we began our descent, the nurse touched my shoulder. I turned around and she met my eyes with a dark expression.

“She’s not doing well. Not at all. How much longer?”

Pidge had accepted vectors for an instrument approach into Marshfield. We chose runway 16, which is fifteen hundred feet longer than the only other option. The best instrument approach into Marshfield could only lower us to within 400 feet of the ground. I didn’t think the visibility in any direction was much more than 400 feet. On top of everything, we were accumulating ice. The surface temperature at Marshfield hovered above freezing, putting the freezing level just above the ground. If we were lucky, we might shed ice once we reached minimum descent altitude, but we’d be collecting it throughout the approach.

I looked back at the nurse. She didn’t have headphones on, so I pulled mine off to avoid shouting over the intercom into Pidge’s ears.

“Close. Another ten minutes,” I said. She shook her head as if that might not do. I found myself trying hard not to look at the bundle wrapped up in the rear seat. As the nurse drew a deep breath and started to turn away, I caught her arm. “That’s if we break out. It doesn’t look good.”

“Then what?”

“We try again,” I said. “But it means picking up a lot of ice. We can’t keep trying indefinitely.”

She let it sink in.

“It might not matter,” she said. She delivered a pointed look, then turned back to her charge.

I put the headphones back on.

“What’s the story?” Pidge asked.

“Not your concern,” I said.

“Fuck that,” Pidge answered. “I’m taking us down to two hundred. Fourteen forty MSL.”

Instrument pilots flying a blind approach follow strict procedures. The ironclad rule is to descend to the prescribed altitude. If you do not see the runway environment or find yourself in a position from which



*DIVISIBLE MAN - ENGINE OUT & OTHER SHORT FLIGHTS*

you can land safely, you execute the missed approach procedure. You don't descend one inch below the prescribed Minimums. Period. No other option exists.

Except the very dangerous practice of busting Minimums. Pidge just announced her intention to do exactly that, cutting our safety margin in half.

"I'll put us there. Needles crossed. You find our way out of this fucking muck," Pidge added.

"Affirmative."

\* \* \* \* \*

We tracked inbound on the approach course. The one blessing hidden in this mass of stagnant, cold, wet air was an absence of turbulence. Except for the steady song of the engines, we might have been sitting in someone's living room. The Mojave rode through the air like a skater on glass.

I called out the final approach fix and dropped the landing gear. Pidge configured for the descent, adjusting speed, trim and attitude. The moving map display showed us dead center on course. The crossed needles on the navigation instruments told us we were aligned precisely on the glide path. Shades of darkness in the fog indicated the day had grown old.

"Five hundred above Minimums," I called out to Pidge.

Her hands moved the controls microscopically.

"Four hundred above Minimums."

Nothing but white in every direction.

"Three hundred."

Airspeed nailed.

"Two hundred. Final gear check. Three green."

"One hundred."

Steady. On course. Needles perfectly crossed.

"Minimums."

My eyes darted between the windshield and the altimeter.

"Minus one hundred."

Nothing. Nothing but white. Not even the hint of a light.

“Minus two hundred!”

“Anything?” Pidge demanded. I felt her flinch on the yoke to arrest the descent.

“Nothing! Missed approach!”

She powered up slightly but held the altitude for a second. Any other time, I would have criticized her. Instead, I grabbed the extra second and frantically searched ahead and directly below. For an instant, I thought I saw a runway light. Then another. But it did us no good.

Pidge went to full throttle for the Missed Approach climb. I retracted the gear and called out the speed. I contacted Minneapolis Center and reported the bad news. They asked our intentions. I said we would try again.

“She’s starting to handle like a pig,” Pidge said. I glanced at the ice building on our windshield frame and on the wings. Pidge hit the deicing boots. Pieces flew into the slipstream, but not all of them.

“One more and we’re done,” I said. “We stay down here too long, and we won’t be able to climb out of it.” I double-checked to ensure that the prop and windshield de-icing systems remained on.

I glanced back at the cabin. The nurse had unstrapped and now knelt in the aisle beside the child. She had the seat fully reclined and leaned over her patient, working frantically with what I took for a syringe. She must have felt my gaze, because she turned to me and shook her head sharply.

Center called. “One One Kilo, we have a request from Marshfield for you to contact them on CTAF. Frequency change approved. Report back on.”

I acknowledged and switched over to the Marshfield frequency.

“Marshfield Unicom, Mojave One One Kilo.”

“One One Kilo, this is Marshfield. We heard you go over. You need to know, we’re down to zero-zero. Repeat. Down to zero-zero.”

My heart sank.

“Roger, Marshfield. Thanks.”

“Will,” Pidge spoke in my head, the way headphones do.

I turned in my seat and looked at Pidge. She looked at me.

“We’re not going to get this thing down,” she said.

I said nothing.

“I’m willing to try,” Pidge said. “But I can tell you how it’s going to go.”

“Affirmative.”

I fought the urge to look at the bundle in the back.

I didn’t know this child. I didn’t know her story, her illness, her family. I didn’t know what she wanted for Christmas except maybe just to wake up on Christmas morning. What I really needed to know, however, was if that was *just too God damned much to ask?* Just to wake up one more day? Just to wake up on Christmas morning?

I surrendered to the urge and looked back, but I couldn’t see the girl. The nurse had flipped up the seat armrest and worked herself into a position in the aisle, so she could hold the child in her arms. She had nothing else to give her but the touch of another human.

*It’s Christmas, Will. Everybody knows everybody.*

“Pidge, level off. Right here. Hold eighteen hundred!” I commanded.

Pidge didn’t question. She had configured for a climb back to three thousand, but she cut the power and leveled the aircraft at one-thousand-eight-hundred feet.

I grabbed the iPad from the flight bag.

“Where’s the Marshfield clinic? The pediatric hospital?”

“The fuck should I know!”

I worked the iPad, stabbed at the screen, did a quick search on the non-aviation map page and found the prestigious and utterly useless—to us at this moment—clinic. I memorized the location and switched over to the ForeFlight navigation application. In a moment, switching to aerial view, I located and marked the building. Then I backed out to see where we were in relation to the clinic.

On the screen, the small airplane icon tracked northwest. Pidge had reversed our course for another attempt at the approach. The clinic, located near the center of town, lay ahead and to our left beneath the blanket of fog, almost directly under the approach course for runway 23.

“Pidge line up for the RNAV Two Three. Stay at this altitude. We’ve got towers all over hell here, but the highest is seventeen-oh-nine. Don’t go below eighteen hundred.”

I unstrapped.

“Sure. Ninety feet. No problem. What the fuck are you doing?”

I paused. She looked sharply at me.

“I’m going to take the kid and bail out.”

Pidge gave me as much blank stare as she could afford while throwing her attention between me and the instrument panel.

“Oh,” she said. “I was afraid you were going to do something fucking stupid.”

I levered my way out of the cockpit, taking my headphones and the iPad with me. To get around the nurse, still occupying the thin aisle, I had to climb over the seat opposite the girl. I positioned myself at the rear of the cabin and hooked up the intercom again.

“Pidge hold the reciprocal course for the RNAV Two Three Approach. I’ll call out when you should turn inbound.”

“Got it.”

I pulled off the headset and laid it aside. By now the nurse was looking at me, so I gestured for her to come close.

“How is she?” I asked, speaking up over the engines.

She shook her head. “She doesn’t have long. Can we get down?”

Now I shook my head. She clutched her lips together, fighting tears. I waved them away.

“Listen to me,” I said, taking her shoulders in my hands. “Do you believe in Christmas miracles?”

Her eyes grew wetter. She gave a helpless shrug.

“I’m going to do something you will find impossible to believe. I don’t have time to explain it, but it may help her make it. I may be able to get her down there. Are you willing?”

She nodded emphatically.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Christie,” she said.

“Christie, I’m Will. There’s only one catch to this. But it’s a deal-breaker. You can’t tell anyone what happens here tonight. No matter who it is, no matter how they ask. You can’t tell anyone what you’re about to see. Ever. Can you do that?”

I think she thought we were about to do something as prosaic as breaking a regulation because she nodded quickly.

“No, I’m serious. This is going to shake you up. You have to promise me, swear to me, on the life of this child!”

“I swear!” she said quickly. “Anything we can do to get her there, please.”

“Okay. I’m going to show you something now. You won’t believe it.”

I made sure I had her eyes locked on me.

*Fwoomp!* I vanished.

It gave her a jolt, a small one. She blinked.

“You can’t see me,” I told her. “But I’m still here.”

*Fwoomp!* Reappearing startled her, and now it sank in. Her eyes went wide.

“Listen to me!” I took her shoulders again before she became absorbed in a tangle of impossible thoughts. “I can do that. And I can also fly. Like freakin’ Tinkerbell. Don’t ask how. I can fly, and I want to take that girl with me and jump out of this perfectly good airplane right over the clinic and deliver her. It’s the only way we can get her down. There’s no way to land the plane.”

Her mouth worked open and closed. Nothing came out.

“You have to swear to me, you will never tell anyone what happens here. Swear to me!” I gently shook her shoulders. “On the life of this child!”

“Uh! I swear! How—?”

“Secret government experiment gone bad,” I said quickly. “This is going to work. Get her ready! Go!” I shook her shoulders again and she snapped out of her gawking. She turned quickly and busied herself with the patient.

I put on the headset.

“Pidge!”

“Right here.”

“Turn us inbound. Line up on the Two Three approach course.”

“Roger that. Are you seriously fucking doing this?”

“Slow us down, as slow as you can. And if you can throttle back the left engine, that will help. I’m going to open the door and that’s going to create some serious yaw. Be ready. When I say so, I want you to cut the left engine for a count of five. Don’t try to hold altitude. After I go out, power up and take it up a few thousand and put it on autopilot—slow but not too slow. You’ll have to come back here and close the door. Get the nurse to sit up front for balance or you’ll be way out of C.G.”

“Fuck!”

I pulled up the iPad and checked the track. Pidge had gone about ten miles northeast of Marshfield. The tiny airplane icon turned to intercept the inbound course for the RNAV 23 approach. I wondered what in the world ATC was thinking of all this. Probably getting ready to call us a crash. I had no doubt they were already pitching altitude warnings at Pidge.

Christie gestured at me to indicate that the safety belts around the girl had been released. She removed the IV connection and disconnected the myriad electronic leads, setting off monitor warnings. She moved out of the aisle. I took her place.

I collected my first close look at our passenger.

“Jesus Christ,” I said aloud.

The girl seemed impossibly small. I couldn’t guess her age. She seemed smaller than Lydia’s five-year-old. But this girl had older-girl features. Her face wore thin, almost translucent skin. Her closed eyes lay slightly sunken, and her forehead ran high. She seemed to glow in serene defiance of whatever ruthless killer she carried in her body. I felt a stab in the heart, seeing this beautiful child in such a state. I couldn’t tell whether she slept peacefully or had simply begun to let go of life.

I tore my gaze away and checked the map. Pidge had aligned us with the RNAV 23 inbound approach course. We were just five miles from the center of town where my waypoint marked the clinic.

“Slow us down, Pidge. I’m opening the door.”

I felt the change in pitch. The engine song changed. A vibration shuddered through the airframe as Pidge lowered the flaps. I felt the asymmetrical thrust and Pidge’s counter pressure on the rudder as she reduced power on the left engine. The unsynchronized props sent a throbbing vibration through the airframe.

I scrambled back to the door and released the interior latch.

A door opening in flight is an emergency, but not a fatal emergency. Pilots tend to make door-release incidents fatal by failing to fly the airplane first and dealing with the door second. I knew of doors for this type of aircraft that had come open, and in one case of a small boy who had nearly fallen out. The airplane would continue to fly—at low speed,

with skewed thrust, and burdened by ice on the wings—as long as Pidge maintained her deft touch.

Any pilot other than Pidge and I would have had doubts.

I threw the latch. The door blew open. It nearly pulled me out. I grabbed the door frame. The wind roared in the cabin, blinding and cold.

Christie's expression turned to horror. She had to be rethinking this. Someone was about to jump out of the airplane with her little patient and this mad act did not hold up to scrutiny in her logical mind.

I scrambled back up the aisle and looked directly at her.

"I can do this!" I shouted at her. I forgot about the intercom.

"Jesus, Will! Not in my ears!" Pidge scolded me. "Holding Vmc plus five. If you're going to do it, fucking do it!"

Christie nodded at me, clutching the seat's armrests.

I glanced at the iPad. Three miles.

I knelt beside the girl and slid my arms under her body. When I lifted, I nearly threw her. She had no body weight. I folded the blanket around her and felt extra hands helping. Christie leaned forward and tucked the blanket tightly in place as I positioned the child against my shoulder.

I gave her an appreciative nod. She sat back in her seat, put her hand across her mouth and began to cry.

Not much I could do about that.

The iPad indicated less than two miles to go.

"Five degrees left, Pidge."

Pidge didn't answer over the intercom, but I felt the airplane yaw.

I edged my way back to where the door hung open. The white fog had gone dark. Night seeped into the endless mist. Wind screamed past the cabin door at over a hundred miles per hour.

I held the girl tightly against my shoulder with my left arm. I took one last look at the iPad, at the aerial imagery showing the location of the pediatric hospital. I noted the large space identified as a cemetery across the street from my destination. That space would be an unlighted void among the city lights. It was the best available beacon, since I couldn't take the iPad with me. If I made the tablet vanish with me, I couldn't see it. If I made it reappear, it would have weight, and that weight would take us down at terminal velocity. Either way, it was useless to me.

I set the device on the rear right-side seat.

A low glow seeped into the cabin from below. The city lights of Marshfield radiated up through the fog.

“In ten seconds cut the left engine, Pidge! Then I’m out. Good luck!”

“Merry fucking Christmas!”

I threw off the headset, turned and dropped on my butt. I scooted toward the door with my legs out. The instant I extended my feet out the door the hundred-mile-per-hour wind pressure tried to tear them away.

My plan had been to vanish and fly out the door, but I couldn’t hold the child and pull myself with my hands. In any case, the moment I vanished, wind blowing into the cabin would have pushed me against the opposite side of the airframe. Weightless, I’d never get out the door.

I would have to jump first, then vanish.

I suddenly realized I needed one more thing and almost blew the whole operation by nearly forgetting it.

I fixed a right-handed grip on the girl. Her legs dangled on either side of my thighs. With my left, I groped in my jacket for a FLOP unit. One-handed, I struggled to fix the propeller in place. In the gale-force wind I nearly fumbled the whole works out the door. This was not a well-thought-out plan.

*Snap!* The prop seated itself. I tested the power. It worked.

I glanced back at the iPad on the seat cushion.

Over the target. Pidge cut the left engine. The slipstream weakened.

*Shit!*

I heaved myself out the door, clutching the tiny child against my chest as the force of the wind tore us away from the airplane.

*FWOOOMP!* I put all I had into snapping *the other thing* around us.

Things happened fast.

The initial blast of wind roared like an angry sky creature and ripped us away from the door. Almost instantly, the gale died to nearly nothing, as if the beast lost its breath.

The Mojave engines thundered as Pidge restored the power to climb away.

We fell into a featureless gray void. I slid the FLOP power control to full forward thrust and held it opposite the wind generated by our fall. The FLOP sang its angry wasp song and arrested our descent. When the relative wind dropped to nothing, I eased the power to neutral. We



floated in silence, wrapped in the cool sensation that comes with disappearing. Mist encircled us, but I had no problem with orientation. The Marshfield city lights radiated up from below. Dark night sky hung above us.

I angled my wrist and gently powered up the FLOP. A breeze stroked us as we descended into the glowing mist.

Streetlights emerged from the fog below like luminous bugs floating to the top of a creamy liquid. Bright Christmas lights added color to the fog, like sprinkles melted into white pastry frosting. Icicle lights traced the outlines of houses. Holiday lights turned trees into beacons.

Ahead and to my right, a dark patch nestled in the surrounding light. I aimed the power unit toward that darkness, the cemetery across from the clinic. Shapes and structures took form through the fog. Residential homes gave way to a campus of large buildings. I'd never seen the Pediatric Hospital wing of the expansive Marshfield clinic but felt reasonably certain I was on target.

We crossed a parking lot. Evenly spaced lamps all around us cast down cones of lighted mist, creating a magical misty forest of transparent Christmas trees. I felt the girl move. Her small arms around my neck applied a weak but steady embrace. Her head rose from my shoulder. She looked around. I wondered if somehow her vanished and weightless state gave her strength.

I aimed for what looked like an emergency entrance.

I eased us onto the concrete outside broad glass doors. A final pulse of the FLOP stabilized and stopped us. In the distance, I heard the airplane high above the fog. Engine song faded into the silent night.

*Fwoomp!* Gravity reacquired us. I settled onto my feet.

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

“Are you an angel?” she asked.

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

ANGEL FLIGHT

February 23, 2018



**A SNOWBALL'S CHANCE**

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## A SNOWBALL'S CHANCE

“**Y**ou don’t have a snowball’s chance in hell.”

Matt Lindor picked up his martini and tipped it toward the woman catching every male eye in the bar. She moved on long legs, high heels, and a form of physics no scientist could ever quantify or explain. She paid no attention to the eyes chasing her, navigating effortlessly through the minglers in a cocoon of self-confidence. Midway down the bar she slid smoothly onto a stool and brought her forearms to rest on the mahogany. An attentive bartender quickly accepted both her order and her smile.

“Watch and learn,” I said. I slugged down what remained of my Corona and pushed away the empty with its ship-in-a-bottle lime wedge.

“Hang on!” Matt pulled out his phone. “This is so I can call the fire department when you crash and burn.”

I slid off the stool and gave myself a quick preflight inspection in the bar mirror. Leather jacket. White shirt. Slim blue-black tie with a Hap Arnold Air Corps pin. Pilot sunglasses tucked in my shirt pocket. Slipping them on in the dark bar might be a bit much, but I had it going on. My pilot thing.

“Better take off that wedding ring,” Matt said.

I shook my head. “A woman like that...she thinks she can knock any man’s wife off the board.”

“Not happening.”

I checked the competition. A few other men around the room, the ones not with a woman (and a few with) assessed her, gauging their chances. I dismissed each in turn. None of them had a pair of Ray Bans in their pocket or a pilot’s license in their wallet.

“Tell you what, let’s make this interesting, Matt,” I leaned on the bar. “I make it through one drink with her and you buy me dinner tonight. I get her up to my room and you let me in on whatever it is you’re doing here.”

The bro-friendly grin on his face remained in place but the light behind it faded.

Matt Lindor, ten years my senior, had insisted on scheduling me as pilot for the charter flight he hired from Essex County Air Services. Twice before, I had flown him from Essex to Chicago’s Midway Airport. A little shorter than me, he moved like a man made of tightly wound wire. He had handsome features, perfectly cropped black hair, enough tan to tell me that he didn’t spend his winters in Wisconsin, and he wore his bank balance on his wrist and around his neck. Quick with a joke and a smile, he warmed up to me from the start. On the first trip, he had me wait in the pilot’s lounge at Signature Aviation. On the second trip, he invited me along for the cab ride and had me wait in the bar at the Four Seasons Hotel, then bought dinner after he conducted his business. This time, he told me to pack an overnight bag. He implied he was closing a big deal and suggested we might make a night of it. Buddies, out on the town in The Windy City. Ladies beware.

The few times I inquired about his business in Chicago, he brushed the questions off. Consulting. Engineering. Something to do with his tool and die business. He shifted the subject to his many successes in life. As for the hard-shell cases he loaded into the cabin, he simply referred to them as “instruments.”

He stared at me. His expression suggested I had overstepped.

“Now, why would I do that, Will? Are you suddenly an engineer?”

I dropped my eyes long enough to make sure he knew he was the alpha dog here, then came back up to meet his gaze.

“You’ve been hinting that these trips are the start of something big. That you might need a lot more air travel if things go well. Do I look like a guy who wants to play taxi driver for Earl Jackson for the rest of my life? I already told you the airlines will never take me because I don’t have a college degree. And who wants to drive a glorified bus anyway?”

Matt maintained the cold stare.

“C’mon man, give me a chance. I’m a quick study. If you’re expanding your business, private flight is the way to go. No check-in hassles. No security bullshit. *No TSA inspections.*”

“Well, don’t you have a big brass pair?”

“Just asking for the interview, that’s all. I hook up with that babe down the bar and you give me that shot. I can talk my way in and out of just about anything.”

He mulled it over for a five-count, suggesting my forward proposition pushed his limits. It didn’t matter. I had him on the hook. He drew slowly from his martini. He struck a pose, jaw jutting, grin spreading.

“You hook up with her and I’ll give you that shot. Get her to hook up with me and you’re hired!” He laughed.

I forced a laugh along with him. He punched my shoulder and I pushed away from the bar.

It was a long walk, all of ten paces. I’m a married man and a few years out of practice, and it felt like climbing gallows steps. Men around the bar watched me make my move, ready to snicker when the trap door dropped.

The bartender delivered a martini glass filled with sparking crimson just as I arrived.

“Any chance you would let me pay for that?” I slid between her and the stool beside her and propped an elbow on the bar.

“Do I look like I can’t afford it?” With scarcely a glance my way, she lifted the drink—I guessed Cosmopolitan—and sipped. I felt the first anti-aircraft hit go into my left engine.

“Honestly? You look like a woman who would never have to pay for a drink in her life.”

“Really? That’s your line? Suggesting I’m some sort of bar fly?” She blew the left engine right off the wing. She looked me up and down. In her smooth appraisal I saw strength and a dagger-sharp awareness that a

potential suitor would ignore at his peril. “Are you on your way to a costume party?”

“I’m a pilot. Want me to put on my sunglasses? They’re Ray Ban Aviators.” I patted my shirt pocket.

She doled out a thin hint of smile. Then she said, “Show me your wrist.”

I held up my hand.

“The other one. Let me see your watch.”

I pulled back the leather cuff of my flight jacket. She studied my wristwatch. “Do you have enough dials and numbers? You can’t tell me you actually use all of that.”

“I can calculate density altitude, convert knots to miles per hour, and tell you how much fuel we need. And no, I never use it. It’s completely impractical. Any pilot will tell you that.”

“It looks like something you received for credit card reward points.”

“Good eye.”

I felt the rapport warming up.

“Well,” she said, turning to me and putting her hand on my forearm; her touch ignited a thrill in me, “mister pilot with the free watch, why don’t you go back down the bar and ask your friend with the Rolex to come over here and pay for my drink?” She gave me a warm, friendly not-if-you-were-the-last-man-on-Earth smile and then tipped a gesture toward Matt, who watched this unfolding disaster from behind a smug expression.

“This is what I get for being out of practice,” I muttered. Her smile nearly broadened, but she tightened the corners of her mouth to fight it off. Dimples appeared. I reluctantly backed away from the bar. I could almost hear jeers from the men watching my retreat.

Matt laughed out loud when I sat down beside him and relayed the message. He stood up, downed the last of his drink, then peeled three twenties off a wad of cash and dropped them on the bar.

“I told you, Will,” he said, clapping a hand on my shoulder. “See you in the morning!”

Matt’s bar cash left room for one more drink. Pride didn’t outweigh a second Corona. I helped myself. I watched him slide onto the stool beside her and after a few minutes they were chatting amiably. She

repeated the watch routine, casting me a final pitying glance after admiring his Rolex, then warmed up to Matt's conversational repartee and obviously superior financial standing.

I didn't stay beyond the last drops of the second beer. By now he had her laughing and most of the witnesses to my flaming wreck had moved on. I slipped away in the opposite direction. I knew Matt's schedule. He told me dinner would be delayed because his clients were due at the hotel for a meeting a seven PM. I left him chatting up the woman at the bar at six-forty. The timing gave him a choice—either persuade her to wait while he conducted his business or invite her along. Matt didn't strike me as a man who would risk leaving a woman like that alone in a bar.

I took the elevator to the sixth floor and strolled past my room. I continued down the hall and stopped at the last door on the left. A glance at my overachieving watch told me I had a few minutes to wait. I checked for security cameras adjacent to the expensive Lakeview Suite Matt had booked. I found none. All clear.

*Fwoomp!*

I vanished. Gravity released me. I considered floating up to the ceiling to ensure no one would run into me, but traffic at the end of the hall was unlikely. I fixed an anchor grip on the brushed gold door handle of the suite across from Matt's, gambling that no one would suddenly emerge. If they did, I could easily push off to clear the space in front of the door.

When the elevator chimed, Matt, the woman and two men stepped out of the sixth-floor alcove. The men looked like a mismatched pair of investment bankers. One was tall and overweight, with too much belly pushing his white shirt over the belt of his suit pants. The other was short, bone thin and nervous-looking. Both were well-dressed and well-heeled. Matt led with the woman beside him. If they were wary of him bringing a guest, they paid off their concerns with long looks at her legs as she walked ahead of them. I kindled an immediate dislike for all of them.

At the door, Matt stroked his key card in the lock, opened the door and stepped in, waving the entourage in after him. The woman suddenly created a log jam when she put one hand to her right ear and stopped in the doorway.

“My earring!” She patted her ear, then spun around searching the floor. “I dropped my earring!”

Matt’s guests half-heartedly checked the carpet at their feet, then moved past Matt into the suite. She hurried into the hallway, searching.

“I found it!” she announced. She stepped to the far side of the hall and plucked something from the floor. I used the opportunity to slip through the door that Matt held open. She took her time to work the earring back into place while he held the door. Satisfied with her effort, she tossed Matt a smile and rejoined the group. Matt closed the door behind us.

I maneuvered ahead of them, through a short entry, into a broad sitting room with a high-priced view of Lake Michigan, at least in daylight.

“I’ve got a little plumbing supply business to conduct,” he told her. “Very boring. Why don’t you wait for me in the other room.”

She glanced through the door he indicated. A bedroom.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” she told him. “You go ahead with your business. I’ll see what the minibar has to offer.”

She stepped past Matt, not waiting for his answer. He shifted his posture and moved his free left hand to pat her backside. She saw it coming and locked a withering look on him. He froze. For a moment I thought she might give him a fist to the face. Instead, she forced a disarming smile. He stayed his hand and bowed politely. She nodded acceptance of his better judgment and moved toward the miniature fridge located behind a small bar.

“A drink, gentlemen?” Matt offered.

“From a fuckin’ minibar?” The small man dismissed the idea. “Let’s get this done.”

Matt lifted one of the hardshell cases off the floor and laid it on a low glass coffee table. He snapped the latches and split the case open like a book, laying both halves on the glass. Playing the proud salesman, Matt stepped aside to let his customers examine the contents of the case. From where I floated at the periphery of the room, I couldn’t see around the big man, who leaned over the open case.

“Fifteen units as ordered,” Matt said. He tapped the second case at his feet with his shoe. “Fifteen more in here. Ten of each sample you



saw last time.” He lifted the second case and handed it to the small man.

The big man lifted a black tube and examined it. After a moment he pushed the tube back into place and tapped his fingers across the rows of similar tubes held by the foam lining of the case. Satisfied with the count, he nodded at his companion who reached into his breast pocket and pulled out an envelope. The small man handed the envelope to Matt, who cracked it open and fanned through what I assumed to be cash.

At that moment, the woman closed the minibar door and walked over to the table inserting herself into Matt’s presentation.

Matt’s expression darkened. “Hey! Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” she replied airily. She picked up one of the slim black tubes in the case. “Nice suppressors! Baffle stack design—no. From the weight, I’d say monocoire. User serviceable. Looks like they’re all nine mil.” She lifted a smaller tube out of the case. It had a threaded end, which she twisted into the larger tube. “This one—let me see—I’d say Kimber 1911. Machining the barrel, too—good way to make it untraceable.”

Matt stood in mid-count with his mouth hanging open.

“What the fuck, Lindor!” The big man took a step back.

The woman put down the first set of tubes and picked up a second. She examined them appreciatively. “Glock 26! What a coincidence!”

She snapped open the small purse she carried and stabbed her hand in. She extracted her hand with her slender fingers wrapped around the grip of a black handgun.

“I happen to have one of those right here!” she exclaimed with a smile. She lifted the handgun and pointed it in the general direction of the three men in the room.

The smile evaporated. The undercurrent of intensity that Matt opted to ignore at the bar now surfaced, transforming her.

*Your mistake, buddy,* I thought.

Acting on either instinct or idiocy, the big man brought his right hand up to reach into his coat. The woman reacted instantly, shifting her aim.

“If that hand disappears, so does your face.” Her icy tone cut the air between them. He stopped.

“Who the fuck *are* you?” Matt demanded.

“I’m sorry. Did I forget to introduce myself? Detective Andrea Stewart, City of Essex Police Department.” Andy used her free hand to pull her badge from a pocket in her shoulder strap handbag.

Matt’s face went white. The big man turned on him. “You brought a fucking cop up here?”

“Miss,” the small man said with a dismissive tone that I thought might get him killed, “I don’t know who you think you are or where the City of Essex is, but last time I checked, this is Chicago.” He reached out and snatched the envelope from Matt’s fingers. “Furthermore, we just met this fellow and were under the impression he wanted to discuss an investment opportunity. Since you have no jurisdiction here, my friend and I are leaving.”

“You’re right about the jurisdiction. That would be a problem if I cared. But it’s not a problem for my friends from the Chicago Police Department and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms who are about to take you into custody.”

The small man lowered the case to the carpet. He moved away from it, as if distance might reduce incrimination. His move put the big man between him and Andy. As he slid sideways his right hand swung behind his back and lifted his coat tail. He closed his fingers around the grip of a gun holstered at the small of his back.

I pushed off the wall and shot across the short space between us. My outstretched hands made contact simultaneously. I closed one hand around his wrist. He struggled to pull his arm away. I planted my feet on the floor and lifted, forcing his wrist up the line of his spine. With the same motion, I twisted, counter-rotating his wrist and the gun. I heard a muted snap from his index finger, caught in the trigger guard. He cried out and doubled over. The gun slid free of his grip.

I grabbed the weapon and tossed it across the table to a sofa behind Andy. She scarcely gave it a glance, holding her Glock on the big man, who shifted a confused expression between the gun on the sofa cushion and his gasping bent-over companion.

“What the fuck!”

Matt stared at the scene wide-eyed.

I gave the wrist one more twist and felt something give. The small man released a girlish squeal and I let him go. Despite his pain, he spun

around, searching for his attacker. Seeing none he fixed a rabid look on Matt, who put his hands up. “That wasn’t me, man!”

I tapped my toes on the floor and floated to the suite’s high ceiling. Gently pushing off a fire suppression nozzle, I maneuvered back down again and grabbed the corner of the suite’s small dining table, ready to assist Andy if she needed me.

“Why don’t you all take a step back,” Andy suggested. “Hands where I can see them, please.”

All three complied. The small man had to work at it, but managed to get both hands to chest height, cradling his right wrist in his left hand. The blood drained from his face and his skin glistened with sweat. He divided searing glances between Lindor and Andy.

The suite’s door lock snapped. The door flew open. Men in dark tactical gear with weapons up hurried through the doorway. I maneuvered to stay out of the traffic flow. One of the tactical officers wedged the door open.

A distinguished senior officer in a gray suit strolled in wearing an expression of placid pleasure.

“Oooh! Look at all that!” Assistant Chief David Schultz said grandly, spotting the open case. “Illegal suppressors. And so many of them!”

In minutes the tactical officers handcuffed and escorted Matt and his clients from the room.

“Nicely done, Detective Stewart,” Chief Schultz said. “A pleasure working with you again.”

“Thank you, sir,” Andy replied. A faint glow seeped into her light caramel complexion.

“Not at all! Thank *you* for letting us roll up the buyers. I’d say you can go ahead and call your chief and let him know he can serve his Essex warrants.”

I didn’t have a chance to see or hear Andy’s response. A momentary gap in traffic offered the opportunity to slip away. Andy would revel in the chance to seal the arrest with Chief Schultz. His brother Don, a senior officer with the Milwaukee Police Department, fostered an open job offer for my wife. It would not surprise me if Andy came home with a similar offer from Chicago.

I pulled myself toward and through the doorway, hooked my hand on

the jamb and heaved myself upward, into the hall. Over the heads of more arriving officers, including one carrying a video camera, I performed a slow glide away from the crime scene.

My single king-bed room was just five doors down the hall from Matt's suite. Cameras and police traffic in the hallway gave me no chance to drop down and reappear. The elevator alcove wasn't an option. Andy had warned me about video surveillance covering the hallway and the elevator alcove. She told me that once the arrests were made, Chicago PD would secure the suite as well as my room and any evidence therein. She warned me the process might take a while. She refused to estimate how long she might be tied up giving her statement and coordinating with the Essex PD raids on Matt's tool and die company and his home. It had been her investigation in Essex that tipped her to the fact that Lindor was selling illegal handgun silencers in Chicago. I'd like to think I played a role when I told my wife in passing that Essex County Air Services had a new client. Letting Lindor buddy up to me had been her idea, along with the charades in the bar. Backing her play in the room had been my idea.

Gliding down the hallway, I felt no pressing need to reappear.

I drifted past the elevator alcove to the stairwell access door. I checked for police and cameras, then propped myself against the wall and pulled the door open. I slipped out, went over the railing, and lowered myself down the center of the stairwell, six floors to ground level. I found a surveillance camera on the ground floor, another in the hallway outside the stairwell, and more in the lobby. Not until I managed to maneuver into a men's room stall was I able to reappear without some camera catching it. Before leaving the stall, I called Rosemary II and told her to run Matt's credit card ASAP for the cost of the charter flight. When she asked why, I simply said he had elected to extend his stay in Chicago.

Three hours, one cheeseburger and two Coronas later, I sat on a stool in the bar chatting with a lumber salesman from Louisiana. I saw his and the eyes of several other men shift to the entrance before I saw her enter. By the time I caught sight of her, most of the men in the bar were watching.

She threaded through a thinning but still energetic crowd and slid

onto a seat three stools to my left. The bartender moved quickly. I heard him ask for her order.

“Same as before? Something that looks like a Cosmo, but without alcohol?”

“Not this time. A regular Cosmo, with Belvedere, please.”

The lumber salesman hunched a little forward in his seat, giving himself a better view. Like most of the men around us, he studied her with quick glances, most of them stolen through the bar mirror. She paid no attention, lending her green eyes and friendly smile only to the bartender. I leaned toward the lumber salesman and spoke softly.

“I bet you think I have a snowball’s chance in hell with a woman like that.”

He glanced at her, then me. “You got that right.”

I leaned back and took a casual slug of Corona.

“Watch and learn.”

A SNOWBALL’S CHANCE  
November 9, 2018

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

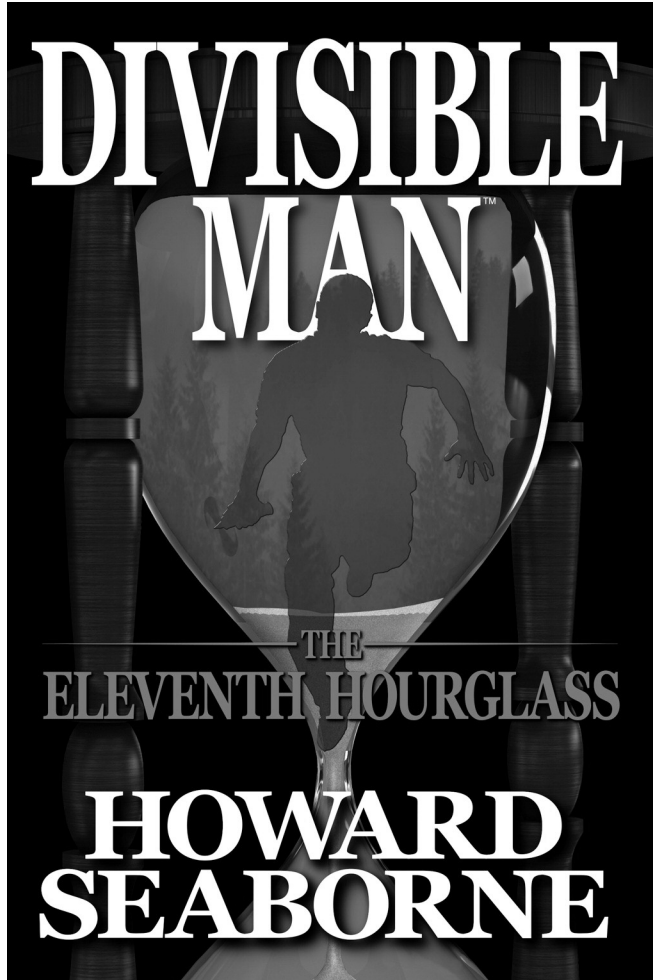


HOWARD SEABORNE is the author of the DIVISIBLE MAN™ series of novels and a collection of short stories featuring the same cast of characters. He began writing novels in spiral notebooks at age ten. He began flying airplanes at age sixteen. He is a former flight instructor and commercial charter pilot 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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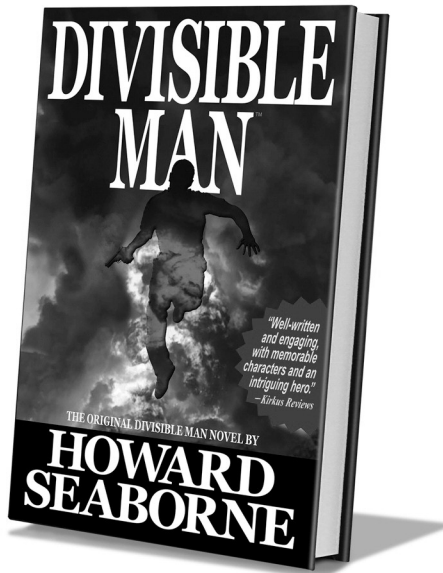
COMING SOON



“Okay...that’s not right.”

— *Will Stewart just before impact*

## DIVISIBLE MAN



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

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

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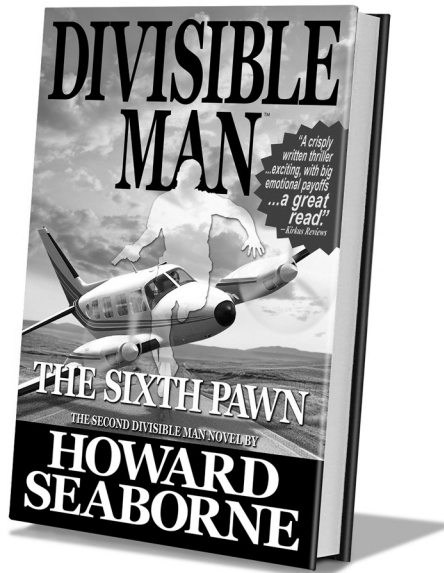
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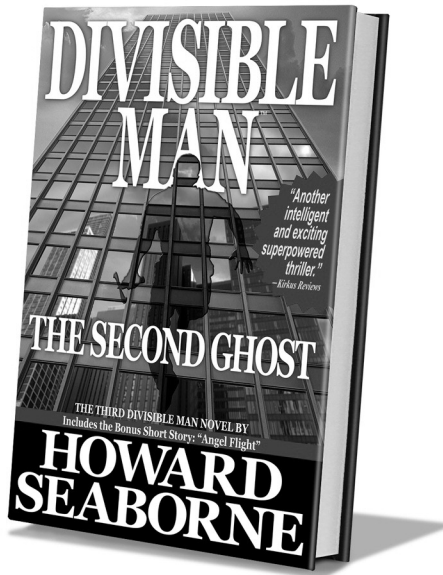
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Tormented by a cyber stalker, Lane Franklin’s best friend turns to suicide. Lane’s frantic call to Will and Andy Stewart launches them on a desperate rescue. When it all goes bad, Will must adapt his extraordinary ability to survive the dangerous high steel and glass of Chicago as Andy and Pidge encounter the edge of disaster. **Includes the short story, “Angel Flight,” a bridge to the fourth DIVISIBLE MAN novel that follows.**

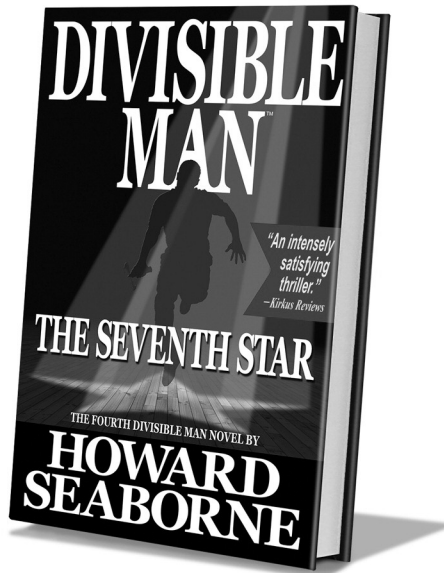
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## DIVISIBLE MAN: THE SEVENTH STAR



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

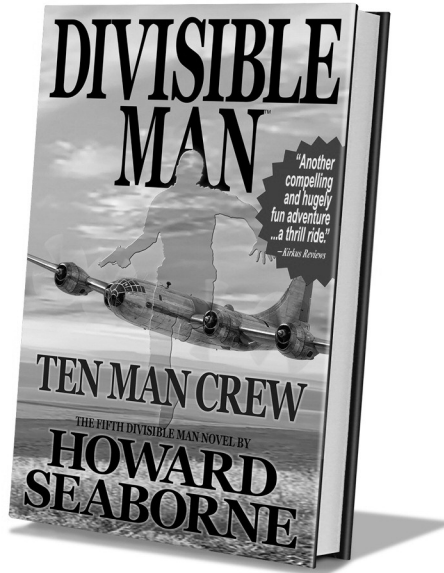
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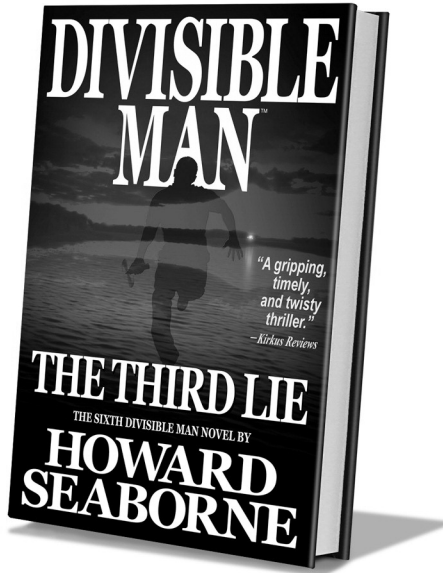
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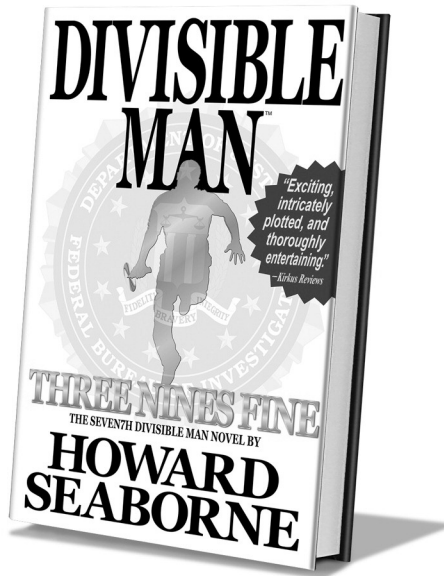
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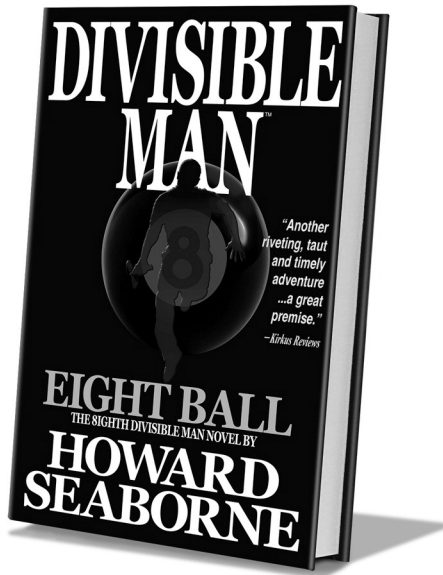
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Will's encounter with a deadly sniper on a serial killing rampage sends him deeper into the FBI's hands with costly consequences for Andy. And when billionaire Spiro Lewko makes an appearance, Will and Andy's future takes a dark turn. The stakes could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

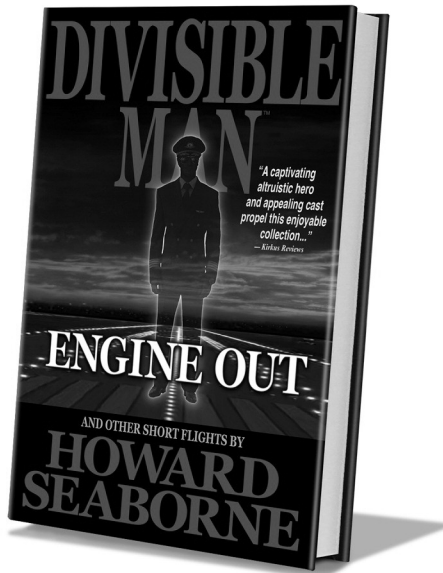
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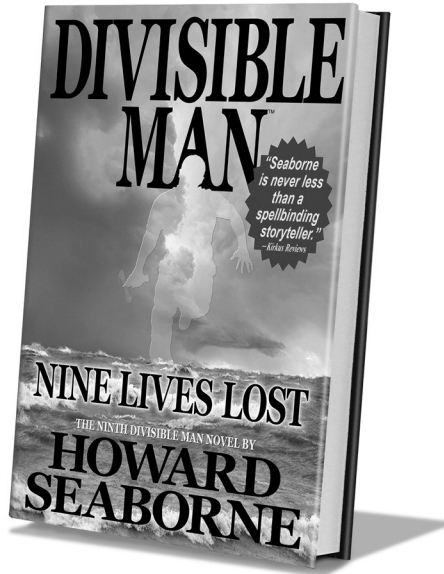
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## DIVISIBLE MAN: NINE LIVES LOST



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

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