

The Carvers must escape before their terrorist captors attack Washington.

Flight Into Terror

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CHAPTER I

The Letter

Andy Carver had flown almost a thousand miles from his mountain home near Denver to Captain's Cove on the Florida Gulf coast. He had been invited to his older cousin Dave's home to spend part of his fall vacation. The two boys had alternated visits for several years during school breaks, holidays and summer vacations. Since Dave had spent last several weeks in the Colorado mountains with Andy, it was now Andy's turn to enjoy the warmth of the Florida beaches. He was leaning over the engine of the dune buggy that shared the triple garage with Aunt Katie's station wagon and Uncle John's convertible, and was tinkering impatiently with the carburetor linkage. Andy straightened up and stretched his cramped back muscles as he wiped his hands on a cleaning rag. The pungent smell of gasoline was making him dizzy so he stepped to the open door to catch a breath of fresh air. Squinting in the bright sunlight at his watch, he wondered why Dave was taking so long to go to the mailbox and back.

Andy replaced the air cleaner on the buggy that he and Dave, who was also a Carver, had built over the last two years. It

had come a long way from having been the old rusted out Volkswagen that Dave's uncle had given to him for his fifteenth birthday. They had named it *SandWitch*—an appropriate title, given that its territory was the sandy beach filled with mountainous dunes, and that the buggy's howling engine could sound as intimidating as the cry of a midnight broom rider. The teenagers had already enjoyed many happy hours exploring the beach and surrounding areas in their finely tuned chariot.

Andy thought he heard a footstep. "Dave?" he called. No answer. Probably just a small animal scurrying among the palm fronds that lay scattered around. Shrugging, he turned back to working on the engine. Under normal conditions, the dune buggy would be parked in the lean-to behind the Carver boathouse, but an awesomely different mode of transportation now occupied that space. The newcomer was part of the cousins' ultimate dream. The next step on the road to that dream becoming reality involved the delivery of a very special letter—one that the boys hoped would arrive in today's mail.

Finally, Dave huffed and puffed his way into the garage, pretending to be breathless from an all-out sprint from the mailbox. He bent over, hands on his knees gasping for a second wind.

"Come on, Dave. You can take time to breathe later. Open the letter," Andy urged, pointing to the envelope trapped between his cousin's hand and knee.

"You...you're—you're one heartless rascal," his cousin gasped in theatrical tones. "This document is addressed

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exclusively to me.” He waved it over his head. “It could very well be the ten million dollar prize I won for licking and sticking the most magazine stamps. Even today, my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth from all the glue.” He dangled the envelope tantalizingly close to Andy’s face.

Andy snorted. “Yeah, like your tongue ever stays still long enough. Give it to me. I’ll open it.”

Dave snatched the envelope out of Andy’s reach and held it behind his back. “No, no. Be cool cousin. A watched pot never boils—haste makes waste—patience is a virtue....”

The stream of proverbs ended as Andy wrestled him to the ground and captured the elusive letter. “A bird in hand is worth two in the bush,” the younger Carver crowed triumphantly. He deftly inserted a finger under the flap, zipped it open, and handed it back with a flourish.

Dave took a deep breath, crossed his fingers and withdrew the paper. He quickly scanned the one page message and punched the air with a clenched fist. “Yes! This is it—we passed our certification. We’re go for lift off!” The two young men danced around the *SandWitch*, whooping like warriors.

Dave’s father, John, came out on the patio to discover the source of the rowdy celebration. “Hey. What’s going on with you wild men? You look and sound like you’re on a bed of hot coals.”

“Dad! We’re certified. It’s the letter we’ve waited for. We can begin our real tests.”

“After all these months, Uncle John,” said Andy, “our dream’s come true.”

Mr. Carver crossed the yard and followed the boys as they raced to the lean-to, flung open the gate and pulled the canvas cover off their most prized possession. The three of them rolled it out into the morning light. The gleaming white skin reflected the brilliant sun onto the lean-to, the boathouse, and three happy faces. Dave and Andy, after months of lessons, had passed their qualifying solos and had won their wings as licensed pilots. Now they had their own home-built airplane and were legally able to fly it. On each side of the graceful aircraft’s fuselage was a triple blue stripe, which trailed out behind a fierce bald eagle in flight. On the instrument filled dash, below the call-sign plaque, was an engraved label with the cousins’ name for their creation, *Eagle*.

“Hard to believe that you two started out with a half-dozen crates of sheet metal, bolts, wheels, and stuff I can’t even name, and ended up with a real airplane. Most boys your age are usually satisfied with balsa wood models,” said John, his eyes reflecting pride in his son’s and nephew’s accomplishment.”

Dave threw his arm around Andy’s shoulder. “That’s because we have parents who helped us to reach higher than most boys.”

Andy chimed in. “My dad told me that I could be whatever I wanted to be if I believed in myself, organized my life, and worked hard to reach that goal. That’s how he started his own software company while he was still in college.”

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John chuckled. “Yes, Martin never let’s me forget the fact that he had his own business while I was still studying how to run one.”

“Bet he never mentions how he envies you every time he sees you anchoring the news on television, does he?” said Andy. “Mom and I do, though. He always says, ‘There’s John again. Thousands of people see him every day, and none of them are aware that he has a much better looking brother tucked away in a little old office in the mountains.’”

That brought a round of laughter as the three moved *Eagle* into an open area for an engine run-up test. The unattached wings remained carefully wrapped in the lean-to, but in every other way, the speedy side-by-side two-seater aircraft looked ready to chase the clouds. To achieve this moment, the two boys had worked at many jobs and had saved up their money. Their bank accounts had been fattened with rewards won by helping the police in several states solve a number of baffling crimes.

One case had involved unraveling a five-year-old armored car robbery, and another had pitted them against an international art theft ring headed up by a former priest. In both instances, they had faced life-threatening dangers that had challenged them to their limits. The boys’ parents had argued that the rewards were not worth the risks that Dave and Andy had taken—but the look on David and Andy's faces today overshadowed those earlier objections.

The sun was already warming up the shiny metal skin as they reached a level spot and turned the aircraft in to the wind.

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Eagle was built from a kit and classified as experimental since it had been less than fifty percent complete out of the box. As such, it didn't have to be certified like commercially built airplane. Dave and Andy had invested over three thousand hours in the assembly, and their craft looked as professionally finished as any factory-built airplane.

Mr. Carver, Channel Seven's television news anchorman, had produced a running feature story on his son and nephew's project. His wife, Katie, the tape editor at the television station, fleshed out the story with clips from pioneer flight days and footage shot during the *Eagle's* construction. Dave and Andy had been deluged with calls and letters offering advice and help. The cousins took advantage of what was useful and were careful to thank all who responded to the story.

One great surprise that came from the television exposure was a phone call from a man who had built a similar plane a few years earlier. "I saw your story on the tube," he began. "I sold my own airplane, but I still have the trailer used to transport it back and forth to the airport. Like your plane, mine had removable wings. It only took a helper and me fifteen minutes to detach them, and store them in the padded compartments on each side of the trailer. Then we'd wheel the fuselage into the main compartment, strap it down, and my airplane was ready to be hauled down the highway to my garage."

Dave listened patiently as the man spoke. When the caller paused, Dave asked, "Are you saying you're interested in selling the trailer?"

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“Certainly not, young man. I want to give it to you. If it needs any modification to fit your plane, I’ll help you do the work. Even the tires are good because I’ve had it jacked up off the ground since I sold my own plane,” explained the generous caller.

Dave was overwhelmed by the man’s offer. “Andy and I don’t know how to thank you. Why did you get rid of your airplane?” he asked.

The man laughed. “Don’t worry about the thanks. I’m glad it won’t go to waste. I sold my homebuilt because I’m getting too old to drive, let alone fly. Ah—how I envy you boys. I only wish I’d started flying back when I was your age. You must only be about twenty years old?”

Dave laughed. “I wish. No, I’m seventeen—almost eighteen. My cousin, Andy, is sixteen.”

“Even better. Flying as a teenager would’ve kept me younger longer. Good luck, fellows. I’ll mail you a title for licensing the trailer, and you can drop by and haul it home any time you like.”

He left his name, address and phone number, and then hung up.

Like their benefactor, the Carvers had constructed a low-wing “tail-dragger” model, rather than a tricycle type. It was built for speed, and the small tail wheel and the non-retractable main landing gear added very little drag and reduced the overall weight of the craft. Because of their heroic deeds and the television feature, donations poured in from other admirers. These came in

the form of radios, seats, a professional paint job, and even an oxygen system.

The most unique gift, however, had come from a truly unexpected source. Andy patted the silver and blue spinner on the propeller. “Who would have guessed that someone we helped send to jail would have given us such a present?”

Dave joined him at the nose of the *Eagle* and nodded. “I still can’t get over it myself. Every time we fly I’ll be reminded of how Mr. Ritter made it possible for us to be up there among the birds.” He flung out his arms in imitation of wings and turned his face upward toward the cloudless sky. The soft breeze blowing across the canal that connected to the Gulf cooled Dave’s face and fingered his blonde hair, adding to the sensation of flying.

The summer before, the cousins had helped to break up an international art theft ring. In the process of escaping they had saved one of the gang members from being buried alive when his former comrades had set explosive charges to seal off the ancient gold mine used as a hideout. The man, nicknamed Cowboy, was the pilot who flew the gang’s Lear jet filled with stolen art out of the country and returned with briefcases of money from unscrupulous buyers. Ritter had constructed several of his own home-builts. Partly in gratitude for having his life spared, and perhaps a bit on the side of guilt for his treatment of Dave and Andy as prisoners, he gave them a very special gift.

Knowing that he would be imprisoned for a long time, Cowboy asked that the Carvers visit him in the recovery room at

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the hospital. There they discovered that the leg of their one-time foe had been amputated due to a severe infection that had progressed during the time the boys were under his watchful eye. “It’s obvious that I’ll never fly again, even if I finally get out of prison,” Cowboy had told them. As they were ready to leave, he handed the boys a scrap paper with several lines of writing. Neither would forget the words that their former tormentor said to them.

“This is the name and address of my uncle,” he had explained. “I’ve called him and he’ll be expecting you. In his garage is a brand-new Lycoming one-eighty engine that I had planned to install in my next airplane. It’s big enough to power your two-seater, and I want you kids to have it. I’ll feel better knowing it’s in the hands of guys that will appreciate it and treat it right. Good luck—I really mean it.” Dave and Andy left the room with very mixed emotions, but with a growing sense of excitement.

That engine, now proudly mounted on the front of their craft, sported a metal sixty-eight inch fixed propeller. With a cruising speed of one hundred eighty-six mph at eight thousand feet, *Eagle* had a range of nearly six-hundred fifty miles with a full load of fuel, two passengers, and eighty pounds of baggage. With oxygen, it could top ten thousand feet. *Eagle* was as fast as she was beautiful, and she really was Dave and Andy’s dream come true.

Andy secured the main gear with homemade wheel chocks and checked the area for clearance. Moving to the front of the

aircraft, he signaled for Dave to start the engine, then anxiously watched for any problems that might develop.

Inside the closed cockpit, rapidly heating up from the direct rays of the sun overhead, Dave went through his now familiar starting routine. He twisted the primer handle, pumped it twice, and then locked it with a turn to the right. He took a deep breath and switched on the ignition, then the carburetor heat, set the throttle, and engaged the starter.

Slowly—sluggishly at first—the prop began to turn. A cough, accompanied by several bursts of white smoke, and then the engine caught and rumbled to life. Dave adjusted the throttle while observing the engine gauges and smiled as the Lycoming's revolutions smoothed out. Giving it a few minutes to warm up, he instinctively pressed harder on the brakes and opened the throttle to the maximum safe speed. The roar of the engine and prop wash filled him with incredible excitement. The airframe shuttered as the rpms climbed, and the wheels struggled valiantly to break over the barrier chocks that held them back.

He held the revolutions just below red line long enough for Andy and his father to check for oil leaks or any other sign of trouble. While he awaited their signal to shut down, he tested the aileron and elevator controls. He could feel the effect of the hurricane rush of air against the control surfaces. *Eagle* wanted to fly—*he* wanted to fly.

Andy drew a finger across his throat, and Dave throttled back to idle a few moments, then switched off the ignition. He

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went through the shutdown procedure, opened the cockpit and climbed out—a huge grin spread across his face.

“Tomorrow, we’ll haul *Eagle* to the airport for her first test flight,” he announced. Dave and Andy’s hard work and their not-too-patient waiting was about to pay off. All of their flying lessons had been in someone else’s airplane. Now they would ride the wind on wings that belonged to them. It couldn’t get any better than that.

But it could get worse—much worse!

CHAPTER II

Danger By The Barrel

“Ouch!” exclaimed Dave after the wrench he was using to install the hitch on the dune buggy slipped and bruised his knuckles.

“I thought you were the mechanical genius of the two of us,” chided Andy.

Dave blew on his aching hand. “Well, I notice when there’s any physical work to be done, it’s never your knuckles that get beat up.”

“Tsk, Tsk. Why must all of you working stiffs be so jealous of us who are blessed with more brains than brawn?”

A hand snaked out, grabbed Andy’s ankle and pulled him to the ground. Over and over the cousins rolled in the grass in a good natured tumble that is often a part of growing up from boy to man. Laughing and wrestling until exhausted, they separated and lay spread-eagled on their backs looking up at a tiny single-engine airplane that droned overhead.

“Look up there,” said David, his voice hushed. “For centuries men have looked up to watch birds flying and dreamed of what it would be like to look down from the clouds and to travel so effortlessly from place to place. You and I were the

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lucky ones to be born when that dream came true. And now, that'll be us up there very soon,"

"It will if that shoddy job of installing the hitch holds out, and if you quit laying down on the job so we can go after the trailer," retorted Andy.

Dave scrambled to his feet as Andy jumped up and began running. Taller and faster, Dave caught up and wrapped his arm around his cousin's head giving him one of his famous Dutch rubs—mussing up the brunette locks that Andy prized so highly.

They raced back to *SandWitch*, and, fifteen minutes later, hitch firmly in place, were roaring down the road to pick up the trailer from the welding shop. Only a few small alterations had been needed to accommodate *Eagle*. They stopped by the Meet and Eat Drive-In for a burger and shake and ate on the way back to the house.

By early afternoon, they had transported the airplane to the airport, had attached the wings and connected all of the cables and linkages. Andy lifted the heavy fuel can from the bracket on the trailer, and added its five gallons to the body tank.

Dave cycled *Eagle* through the starting routine, stabbing his fist into the air when the healthy rumble of the Lycoming reverberated off the nearby steel building. and then taxied around the apron to the fueling pumps and topped off the wing and body tanks. After they were satisfied that everything checked out, Dave lined up on the runway. His heart was racing and he puffed several times to control his breathing.

“I’m ready if you are,” said Andy, his eyes bright with anticipation.

“This is it,” said Dave, reaching for the microphone. “Tower, Experimental Seven-Four-Niner-Five ready for take-off, runway Eighteen Right. Request remain in the pattern for touch and go’s.”

“Ex-Seven-Four-Niner-Five, roger. Altimeter is one-Niner-Two. Wind, Two-Three-Five at 5. Cleared for take-off, runway One-Eight right. Maintain runway heading. Climb and maintain 1500. Right pattern entry. Cleared for touch and go’s. Contact Tower on crosswind.”

“Roger, tower. And thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Seven-Four-Niner-Five. We know this is your aircraft’s first test flight. Good luck to you and Eagle.”

Dave took another deep breath and reached for the throttle. As the familiar idling purr of the Lycoming burst into a crescendo of power, he released the brakes and the boys felt the thrill of acceleration. The tiny thumps of the wheels crossing the expansion cracks in the runway came closer together as *Eagle* gained the speed needed to change from wheels to wings. Moments later Dave and Andy were airborne and circling for the first of several take-off and landing exercises.

For the next ten days, the cousins took turns running their airplane through countless tests and inspections. Every part had to function perfectly in preparation for the trip they had planned for months. Now, on the last day of testing, they knew that their sleek craft had proved itself to be fast, safe and dependable.

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Dave was at the controls as the *Eagle* lined up for landing. The morning had begun with scattered clouds and the barometer was continuing to fall. Small drops of rain splattered against the windscreen, and sudden gusts of wind toyed with the wings and tail keeping Dave's hands and feet busy steadying the plane.

The sky became increasingly stormy and threatening as they made their last touchdown. They carefully tied *Eagle* down and covered the aircraft with a tarp to protect the Perspex cockpit. Weather for the next morning was not promising either, so they decided to spend the time at Dave's house planning their upcoming cross country test flight. With four refueling stops, they planned to fly northeast along the coast to Washington, D.C. and back. Neither had visited the nation's Capital, and it was a goal that they could now accomplish by the fulfillment of another—building and flying their own plane.

Interstate 95 was an almost direct route that they could follow under VFR. Visual Flight Rules were permissible when weather permitted and visibility permitted the pilot to see and avoid other aircraft. The distance was about one thousand miles. Flight time would be a little over seven hours, counting ground time needed to refuel and visit restrooms. They would eat breakfast at home with Dave's parents and snack on sandwiches and cold drinks during the flight. If all went according to plan, they would enjoy supper at six o'clock near the White House.

Dave's father suggested they take one of his station's smaller cameras to document the journey. "It'll make a great follow-up to the earlier story we did on your building of the

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Eagle. I know the viewers will be interested in seeing the finished airplane, and then be able to travel by video with you to the Capital.”

Andy was excited at the prospect. “I can be the official camerama...sorry...official videographer for the piece,” he corrected, remembering how Dave insisted that he use the modern terminology. “Dave will be doing most of the flying, and I can handle the camera. May we go to the TV studio today and check one out?”

“Sure. Finish up your plans and meet me at the station around three o’clock. That way we’ll have a few minutes to speak with the assignment editor before the evening news rush hits. I’ll give engineering a call now to put some equipment together for you.” Mr. Carver left for his study and the boys huddled over their maps.

In the Channel Seven newsroom, Assignment Editor Tom Kirk, rocked back in his chair, wearily massaging his forehead while cradling the phone between his ear and shoulder.

“Yeah...yeah...uh-hmm. And how do you spell it?” he mumbled, taking notes with his free hand. “That’s all you can make out? Okay. Make sure you report it to the police. We’ll try to get someone up there in the morning to have a look. No, sir. I’m sorry, but we don’t have anyone free at this time...sure, don’t mention it. That’s what we’re here for.”

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“What was that all about?” asked Ben Markham, a long-time news writer, as he tossed a story into the in-basket on Tom’s cluttered desk.

“Oh, that? That’s the second call that came in from the North Beach area about some barrels that washed ashore. They’re apparently filled with some kind of chemical and look to the callers as if they’ve been in the water a long time. Might have even been leaking.”

“Anyone have a idea what was in them?” asked the writer.

Tom glanced at his note pad. “The last caller spelled part of it for me. It was...T-R-I-C-H-L-O-R-O...something-something-something. That’s all he could read. Any ideas?”

“Sounds like trichloroethylene. Nasty stuff to be floating around the beach.”

“What is it used for?” asked Tom.

“Lottsa things. Dry-cleaning, solvent for cleaning grease off metal parts—I think it’s even found in air conditioning or refrigerator compressors. Whatever, it’s *really* nasty stuff if it gets loose. Maybe we should get someone up there today.”

“If you’re right, I agree. Wonder where the barrels came from and how long they’ve been in the water.” said Tom.

“There are more important questions. How much more is floating around there? And, are they indeed leaking?” added Ben. “If I were you, I’d get a crew on the road or in the chopper now, and check in with the police myself. This could turn into a major story. Seven News could have the jump on everyone.”

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“Good idea, Ben. With your knowledge of this chemical, you’re the logical choice. Head up to the roof pad and I’ll scramble the pilot and a cameraman. Plan to do an on-scene feed to the station if the story warrants. An actuality during the six o’clock would be a real scoop.”

Ben grinned as he rushed to pick up his reporter’s notebook. He was even happier to get a ride on the chopper. This would make only the third time he’d been up in one. It wasn’t often they let him get away from his desk let alone do a standup story, a real actuality with “Channel 7’s Ben Markham.” He liked the sound of that. No one could compose a better story, so they always gave him the job of writing or rewriting the leads.

Minutes later, the three men were strapped in. The NewsBird lifted off and headed west to the beach. Less than twenty minutes later, they were hovering over an area of the beach cordoned off by yellow police tape. Several barrels lay in the center of the rectangle, and a number of uniformed men and civilians milled around them.

“Better have the station call John Carver. He may have a slant on the story that he’ll want to use. The co-ops can do the back research to see if there’s any historic connection with the spills in this area,” said Ben to the chopper pilot over the intercom.

“Roger. I’ll radio in right after we land,” came the acknowledgment.

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“That about does it for our trip,” said Andy, as he began printing out the itinerary laid out on Dave’s computer screen. “We have maps, alternate field charts, a checklist for the plane and for our food and luggage that we’ll be taking with us. All we have to do is pick up the camera equipment from your dad’s station.”

Dave looked up from his charts while tapping a pencil on his teeth. He had a habit of doing that whenever he was concentrating on something. It always annoyed Andy who believed that was the main reason why he did it.

“Hey, Dave. Knock off the dental Morse Code and say what’s on your mind. Okay?”

The older Carver grinned and tapped out the rhythm to “Shave and a haircut...two bits,” before laying down the pencil. “Touchy, touchy. Actually, I was thinking that we should take several more checkout flights before heading to Washington.

“Tomorrow is supposed to be really good flying weather. We can do some touch and go routines and then fly along the beach while we check out the *Eagle*. There’s light rain forecast in two days. We might want to try some marginal-condition flying during that time to make sure we can handle a sudden case of bad weather.”

“Good idea,” agreed his companion. “We got jostled the other day when that storm blew in and I thought you handled it well. However, flying and landing in rain may take a bit more practice.” He joined Dave and they huddled over the local map, tracing out several flight plans. They would be flying near the

approach to the main airport and would need to file for clearance before entering that high traffic area.

“Cookies and milk,” announced Mrs. Carver as she elbowed her way into the bedroom. Neither of the boys looked up. “Of course I could take them back if no one wants them,” she continued, turning towards the door.

“Aunt Katie,” said Andy in a hurt tone. “How could you doubt for a minute that we would not trade anything in the world for one of your fabulous home-made cookies. We were merely holding our enthusiasm in check to keep you from seeing us as the greedy and voracious cookie crunchers that we are.”

Katie laughed and returned to the table with her tray. “Trade anything, hm? I’ve always wanted my very own airplane, and...”

“Aw, Mom. You know it’d take a team of horses to get you near our plane, let alone inside it,” said Dave with a chuckle.

“Well, you’re right about that,” agreed his mother. “It’s all I can do to think of the two of you flying to Washington in something that you built with no prior experience.”

“What about the *SandWitch*?” argued Andy. “Dave and I built that with our own two little hands, and you think it’s pretty neat.”

“Don’t think I’m not a bundle of nerves when you two are out and about on that dune buggy, but at least it’s on the ground. The *Eagle* travels much faster and higher and is certainly not very forgiving if something goes wrong. Okay. I know you two think I’m being foolish, and maybe I am. Lord knows how long

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and how hard you've worked to make your dream come true. *Eagle* has been certified. You and Andy have passed your flying lessons and soloed with high marks." She picked up one of her own cookies and took a small bite.

"I guess it's difficult to realize that you really are young men and are ready to start living your own lives. Perhaps I'm even a little envious because of the adventures that you've already had. Here, eat your cookies and drink up the milk. I've got to finish cleaning up the breakfast dishes."

Katie hurried from the room to hide the very real concern that was stealing across her face. Maybe it was only foolish worry, or maybe it was intuition that left her more than a little uncomfortable. She wondered if her parents had had the same misgivings over her first date, or whenever she had borrowed their car, or when she had left for college. Life's a cycle, she concluded, and what goes around, comes around. She gave a helpless little shrug and entered her own refuge, the cheery Carver kitchen.

"Look, down there," came the videographer's voice over the helicopter's headset. He indicated the cluster of vehicles parked on the hard-packed sand above the tide line. "That's the spot where the barrels came ashore."

Ben nodded and pointed to a parking lot near by. The chopper pilot eased back on the controls and circled so they could approach well away from the investigating team. Sand swirling

around in the rotor downdraft could create havoc on people and paint jobs alike.

Before the engine could spool down and the blades come to a full stop, Ben and his videographer were out of the door and on the run to the yellow police tape. They were stopped by a patrolman, but allowed to pass after showing their press cards. Sheriff Charles Murray, Chuck to his friends, turned to greet them as they approached.

“Hi, Chuck.” said Ben, extending his hand. “What’s it looking like to you?”

The sheriff shook the reporter’s hand in a warm greeting. “Since when have they let you back on the street, Ben?”

“You know how it is...when the big story breaks, they send the ‘A’ team.”

“That so? Must mean there’s a biggie somewhere else that tied the A’s up and you’re all they had left.”

Ben gave Chuck a good-natured jab in the arm and laughed. “Seriously, it costs big bucks to have the NewsBird sitting out here in the Boondocks, so how about giving a poor reporter a break and tell me what’s happening. I’d like to roll camera and record an actuality with you.”

Chuck nodded and waited until the video camera was rolling, and for Ben to put a verbal slate on the tape. The videographer pointed. Ben tapped the microphone for a test. “Take one—Chemical spill on North Beach. Interview with Sheriff Charles Murray on the scene. Three-two-one....”

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He looked into the lens. “Here in North Beach, there is an area surrounded by yellow police tape, as investigators check out several large barrels that possibly contain dangerous chemicals. They washed ashore here this morning, and it has been determined that some of the containers may have been leaking. Sheriff Charles Murray is in charge of the investigation.”

The camera zoomed out as he turned to the Sheriff and held the microphone between them. “What have your investigators learned about the size and makeup of the chemical spill so far, Sheriff Murray?”

“All we know,” began the Sheriff, “is that two barrels apparently containing trichloroethylene, were reported washed up here earlier, and now we have two more. The last two appear intact, but the first two have been leaking for some time. My best guess is that they either fell off a passing barge, came from a sinking ship, or someone’s illegally dumping the stuff. The lab boys are checking out the contents, and if they find that the chemical, a very toxic heavy-duty cleaner, has already been used, then the last guess about illegal dumping is probably true.”

“What makes you say that?” asked Ben. “Isn’t it possible that if the cleaner had been used, that it could have *accidentally* been lost overboard from a barge during a storm, or maybe even from a boat that sank?”

“Doesn’t matter. There’s no legal place along the coast to dispose of the waste. All the dumps are reached by truck or train. No, whoever dumped—or lost—these ticking time bombs did so outside of the law, and we’ll find them.”

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“No idea how many more will come ashore, or what damage has already been done?” probed Ben.

“Not yet, but you can be sure the public will know when something comes up.”

Ben turned back to the camera as it zoomed in for a close up. “Channel Seven, the first news team on the scene of this spill, will keep you informed of any further information on the mysterious barrels. From North Beach, I’m Ben Markham.”

Sheriff Murray shook hands with Ben and rejoined his team.

The videographer shot cover footage, including a close-up of one barrel with a thin stream of dark gray liquid trickling down the side and soaking into the sand. They wrapped up the shoot with footage of Ben speaking with several others of the team before delivering his summary and sign off. Moments later, they were airborne back to the station.

The phone rang in the Carver study, and John dragged himself up and out of the soft recliner, his customary haven of relaxation before facing the fast pace of the TV news scene. “John Carver, here,” he spoke into the phone.

“John, it’s Tom Kirk at the desk. Earlier today, the lead story looked like it would be a national item on a probable car bomb. Local police in Virginia found a rental car illegally parked near the old abandoned treasury building and had it towed away. When the rental agency reclaimed it and was getting ready to clean out the trunk, they found a small quantity of plastic

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explosives and a triggering device. None of it was hooked up, but the FBI believes it would've been if it hadn't been found in time." Tom paused expectantly.

"Okay, I'll bite," said John. "You said it looked like that would be the lead. That means you've got something bigger, right?"

"Right. We have a local breaking story on the possible illegal transporting of dangerous chemicals offshore at North Beach. Several barrels washed ashore, and there seems to be leakage. I've got one of our co-ops checking the files to see what she can find on back incidents of a similar nature. It might be nothing big, but Ben went up in the NewsBird and sighted more barrels. He has no idea how many are floating a few hundred yards off the beach. Does that sound like a lead? If so, any special angles you want us to pursue?"

John picked up the phone and walked toward the window. In the distance, he could see the blue-green of the ocean stretching away from the rolling line of white sand dunes that formed a backstop for the beach. A large tanker moved slowly across the horizon like the pull-tab on a zipper that fastened sea to a cloudless azure sky. How could people be so careless and unthinking as to litter and pollute this good earth?

"John, you still there?" interrupted Tom on the phone.

"Umm? Oh, Tom—sorry. I guess that could be the lead, but it really depends on several things," said John. "First, keep a sharp eye on the car bomb story and see if it develops into anything major. In the meantime, find out just how dangerous

this spill is. Regardless of the outcome, we can use it with a public warning blurb. Next, find out who the big solvent users are in this area, and then line up a couple of interviews on how the new and used chemicals are being handled. If there *are* more than a couple of barrels, then this is no corner garage dumping or accidental loss of containers.

“I’ll be in soon and, by the way, I’d might want to sign out a camcorder for my son and my nephew. If you’ll remember, we did the story on the plane they were building. It’s finished and they could shoot footage during their flight testing. It’ll make a good follow-up sidebar. Okay?”

“You bet, John. I’ll have the gear ready for you to sign out. Even though the boys have used it before, I’ll need to have them go through a check out with one of the engineers.”

“Understand. They’ll be coming in with me this afternoon. Their plans are to make several flights in the next few days, after this weather clears up. See you in about forty minutes.”

John hung up the phone and headed for his son’s room.

Dave was refolding the charts when his father peeked around the door.

“Hi, Dad. We’ll be ready to go when you are. I’ll take the *SandWitch* so we can come back early and finish our plans. Andy and I are going to fly a couple of legs up and down the beach tomorrow morning to test out all of our systems. The sooner we know everything is in good working order, the sooner we can head for Washington.”

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“Speaking of the beach, the lead story is about a chemical spill north of here. You might be flying right over the scene of the investigation. Keep an eye out for any barrels floating off shore.”

“Will do,” said Dave, “but I guarantee, the main focus of tomorrow will be on flying the *Eagle*, not on bobbing for barrels. That will be the furthest thing from our minds.”

For that instant, he was absolutely correct.

Then the phone rang again.

CHAPTER III

The Body

John stared at the words on his note pad as he returned the desk phone to its cradle. The chemical spill had definitely moved to the lead spot on tonight's newscast. In addition to the seven barrels now located on or near the shore, the police reported that a floater—a dead body—had just been recovered from the water. The man, dressed in filthy jeans and tee shirt, had died from a massive head wound. His body appeared to have been in the water several days. According to the phone call from Tom Kirk, the dead man's clothes had been snagged on some kind of fiberglass box, perhaps the engine housing from a small ship.

Unfortunately, The NewsBird, after returning with Ben, had been grounded with a leaking fuel line and could not be back in the air for several hours. They would have to do the update on the body with the footage that was already 'in the can.'

"What's wrong, Dad?" asked Dave who was standing at the study door.

His father recounted the call he had received from his editor.

"Hey! What's up?" came the cheerful greeting from Andy as he burst into the room. He was still caught up in the

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excitement of their upcoming trip. His follow-up remarks were cut off in mid-thought by the solemn look on his uncle's face. John repeated the information that he had just given to Dave.

"Why can't we fly up there and shoot some footage? If Channel Seven would send someone to meet us at the airport with a camera we could fly there and land at North Beach Municipal. The station could have a taxi waiting to take us to the scene," suggested Dave's cousin.

"That's a great idea! We can do it, Dad. *Eagle* is tied down at the airport and we were planning a test hop up that way anyhow."

"That was for tomorrow, you said. The weather doesn't look good for flying a small plane today," argued John.

"Andy and I have both flown in marginal weather during our flying lessons—cloudier conditions than this. Besides, there are three landing strips between here and North Beach if we have to set down. Please, Dad. You know we'll be careful, and you really need the pictures for the six o'clock. I've done several standup features for the news and I can interview the Sheriff while Andy handles the camera. You could call the Sheriff and let him know we're on the way."

Reluctantly, John nodded and reached for the phone. Moments later, Dave and Andy were in the *SandWitch* and on the way to the airport.

Sheriff Murray squatted by the body that lay face down in the sand. "Whatever hit him on the head was something larger

than a club or bat. The damage covers almost two-thirds of his skull. Looks like death was caused by a single blow.”

The coroner nodded slowly. “Yep. I’d almost guess it was an accident—a fall, maybe. Either that or something fell on him. If you’re done with the body, I need to transport it to town.”

“Sure, Les. Oh, listen. If you could stick around for a little while longer, there are two more fellows from Channel Seven coming out to get footage on the floater. They’ll want to talk to you. I’ll check in with you again after the autopsy.”

“Think the body’s tied in with the barrels?” asked Les, as the man was being zipped into a bag for loading into the van.

“Could be, but who knows? The current picks up stuff all along the coast line and it has to come to shore somewhere. Anything’s possible. Have the lab check his clothes and hands for traces of the chemical that’s in the barrels. That, in itself, won’t prove a tie-in, since he was found floating in contaminated water, but—if the chemical is ground into the dirt on his hands, it could indicate that he had handled the barrels.”

Dave finished running over the pre-flight checklist while Andy recorded test footage on the camcorder that had been dropped off moments ago by one of Seven’s drivers. Andy had used this same type of equipment during an earlier adventure on Sea Gate Island, and had needed very little coaching to get back up to speed on its operation.

“Get aboard, Andy. We need to make this a fast trip if we want to make the early news and beat any heavier weather.”

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Safely buckled into his seat, Andy reached up and pulled the hinged canopy down and locked it into place. The view from the side-by-side cockpit was almost unlimited from any angle, and there was just enough room enough to aim the camcorder.

Dave cranked the starter and the Lycoming chuffed into life, then settled into a throaty rumble. He checked the radio frequencies, altimeter, compass, magnetos—all of the vitals that would keep this metallic wonder aloft and on course. Satisfied, he advanced the throttle and released the brakes. With an eagerness that almost matched its human creators, *Eagle* picked up ground speed as it rolled onto the runway. Dave lined up the nose with the centerline and checked his rudder, ailerons, elevators, and flaps one more time, and then applied the brakes.

Both he and Andy had nearly fifty hours of flying in their logbooks, and each had won his license after flawless solos. Nevertheless, there is always a sense of the unknown when a pilot is about to entrust his and his passenger's lives to an airplane. The feeling is even more intense when the craft is a newly constructed home-built. *Eagle* had passed all of the tests but one—an extended flight with two on board.

Dave's mouth was dry, and his legs ached from the pressure he was applying to the brakes. He wiped his right hand on his pants, took a firm grip on the yoke and grinned at his cousin. Perspiration streamed down his temple in a small rivulet. He swiped at it with his sleeve. Andy cinched his seat belt a little tighter and watched the tachometer climb as his cousin opened

the throttle. Dave adjusted his feet on the rudder pedals, released the brakes, and *Eagle* began to roll.

The rapid acceleration was an exhilarating rush to the young men as their flying machine seemed to come alive. The distant thumping sounds caused by the main wheels crossing the seams in the runway increased in tempo as they approached take-off speed. Now it seemed to Dave to be a continuous rumble. The young pilot glanced at his airspeed and gently pulled back on the yoke. The rumble ceased and the ground fell away as they climbed toward the low layer of clouds hanging above the field.

“We’re flying! We’re flying!” shouted Andy above the roar of the engine.

Dave grabbed the headset away from his ears.

“Sorry, Dave. Forgot about the intercom,” said a red-faced Andy.

“Okay. I’m as turned on as you are, but spare the eardrums. Get the flaps, will you?”

Andy promptly adjusted the flaps for level flight and reached back for his camcorder. “I’ll run off some establishing footage before we get there. That way we can be ready for a quick turnaround,” he said. Fitting his eye to the viewfinder, he aimed through the spinning propeller at the lighthouse on the distant finger of land jutting into the Gulf.

Instinctively, Dave pressed the left rudder pedal to swing the *Eagle*’s nose counter clockwise, giving Andy a smooth pan back along the finger to the main land without moving his camera.

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“Hey, that worked great,” said Andy. “I don’t have a lot of room to move the camera around in here, and that maneuver was a perfect pan of the scene. When I need it again, I’ll ask for pan left or pan right.”

“Roger,” acknowledged Dave as he straightened their aircraft back into a parallel course with the beach. Andy was already viewing the replay on the tiny color LCD monitor that hinged out from the side of the camera. Satisfied, he switched the power to standby and studied the ocean below.

“We’re cruising at one-seventy. At this rate, we should be coming up on the North Beach strip in about ten minutes,” reported Dave. “The tower’s already cleared us to land, and there’s a taxi waiting at the terminal to take us to the beach.”

Dave’s timing was on the nose. Minutes later, he lowered the flaps and switched on the carburetor heat in preparation for landing. The field wasn’t equipped for instrument approach, but Dave expertly lined up with the runway, and gently touched down on *Eagle’s* main gear. Closing the throttle while lightly applying the brakes, he allowed himself a satisfied smile at the slight bump of the tail wheel contacting concrete.

Andy glanced at Dave. “Flaps up?”

Dave nodded as they taxied toward the only hangar on the field.

Sheriff Chuck Murray greeted the Carvers as they ducked under the police tape strung around the scattered barrels.

“Hello, Sheriff,” said Dave shaking the officer’s hand. “Did the station let you know we were coming?”

“As a matter of fact, it was your father who passed on the word to me. How is John these days?”

“Doing fine, thanks. It’s been a while since you two have been on the golf course, and Dad keeps saying he needs to set up a tee time with you.”

The Sheriff laughed. “Your dad isn’t telling the whole story. The fact is, he has never been able to beat me yet, and he simply can’t face the truth. Nevertheless, tell him that Chuck Murray will be glad to keep right on collecting the free lunches as long as he wants to be foolish enough to bet me.”

“I’ll tell him. You haven’t met my cousin, Andy Carver. Andy...Sheriff Murray.”

Murray pumped Andy’s hand. “Dave’s dad filled me in on the details of your run-in with the armored car thieves and with the art forgery gang. You boys seem to tread on dangerous ground.”

“Not our fault,” protested Andy. “These things seem to happen to us, and we’re a good enough team to cope with it.”

“Just don’t get too over confident, boys. Anyhow, you’re here on official business. Over there’s where the body washed up. Les Crane, our coroner, waited around to talk to you on camera about the details that we know about so far. He’ll need to leave as soon as possible to do the autopsy.”

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Dave picked up the microphone and signaled to Andy. “I have just a few questions for you before we talk to Mr. Crane,” he told the Sheriff. Murray nodded and straightened his tie.

Andy zoomed in for a medium close-up of Dave standing between two of the barrels that had washed up on the beach. He rolled the tape and then pointed at his cousin for the introduction.

Dave counted down. “Three, two, one—Earlier today, Channel Seven reported that a number of barrels labeled trichloroethylene, a heavy-duty cleaning chemical, had washed up on the North Beach shoreline. Inspection of the barrels showed that some had been damaged and were leaking. The specter of a toxic spill at a popular resort area, raises serious health and tourist impact issues. A short time ago, the situation became even more critical with the discovery of a body floating among the barrels.”

Andy widened the shot to include the Sheriff as Dave began the questioning.

“We’re here with local Sheriff Chuck Murray who is in charge of the investigation. Sheriff Murray, can you fill us in on what you’ve learned so far?”

“We were called to the beach by the manager of a time-share condo. He found one of the barrels on his property and notified us through the 911 phone line. We dispatched a patrol car and the officers found several more barrels along the shore.”

Dave followed up with another question. “How soon afterwards did you discover the body?”

“Our lab boys had been here collecting samples from the leaking barrels for about thirty minutes when the body was spotted floating about one-hundred yards off the beach. We dispatched an officer in a life-guard dinghy to bring it to shore.”

“Was there any identification on the body, Sheriff Murray?”

“You’ll have speak to Les Crane, our Coroner. He’s in charge of that part of the investigation at the moment.”

Dave signaled for Andy to cut, then moved over to where the coroner was dictating into a small tape recorder. “Mr. Crane? Dave Carver for Channel Seven. Thanks for waiting on us. May we speak with you on camera?”

With the body bag lying in the background, Dave questioned the coroner on his findings, which were very sketchy at the moment. To conclude the segment, Andy did a slow pan past the barrels that lay scattered about within the police line. He ended on a steady shot of the barrel closest to the water.

Dave walked into the frame and closed the segment with the questions most likely on everyone’s mind. “What are the dangers posed by the leaking chemicals in these barrels?” He turned to glance out over the Gulf. “Where did they come from—a sinking ship, a collapsed dock, or were they illegally dumped? How many more are drifting around out there?” Dave turned back to the camera. “Those were the unanswered questions that troubled local authorities who were first on the scene. Now, the bigger and more pressing questions to be faced are—who is, or was, the mystery man in the body bag? Was all of this due to an

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accident—or is a homicide involved?” Andy zoomed in to a medium close-up of his cousin for the close.

“Channel Seven will stay on top of this breaking story. I’m Dave Carver at North Beach.”

As Andy stowed the camera equipment in the carry bag, Dave thanked the sheriff and headed for the waiting taxi. Andy fell in step beside him. “Notice the sky lately?” he asked.

Dave nodded. “Storm’s moving in pretty fast. We need to get airborne as soon as possible. It’s already two o’clock.” He unclipped the cell phone from his belt and dialed the control tower to get a weather report and advance clearance.

“At the moment, it looks like the rain will be staying offshore for another hour, but the barometer is still falling and it’s hard to predict with any accuracy. If you plan to make Captain’s Cove this afternoon I’ll clear you for no later than 1500 hours.”

“We appreciate your help, tower. See you around three.”

“Roger. Goodbye.”

The Carvers must escape before their terrorist captors attack Washington.

Flight Into Terror

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