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Netten

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# **NETTEN**

**By**

**Steven A. Hart**

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## I. Going Home

"Everything going okay?" Sol asked.

"It'll be close," Stevon answered with frustration. "Wilson left sooner than expected and Bill may not catch him because of having to refuel his jet."

Sol glared at Stevon and hissed, "Goddammit! We've missed him too many times already! I want him out of the picture!"

Stevon stared at his computer's monitor. "We're doing our best, Sol."

"This is stupid!" Sol all but hollered.

"I know," Stevon whined, "but I told you we shouldn't have sent Bill to Washington."

"Damn, damn, damn!" Sol's fist slammed on the desk with each expletive.

Stevon cringed, expecting the next blows to be on his head. Instead, Sol stomped out of the room.

*Dammit, Sol, Stevon thought, I don't want the Alliance either, but killing Wilson now would be senseless. It'll only slow them down, not stop what they've started.*

He shook his head and quickly typed the words *Do your best!* The message was scrambled, then sent to several other computers, including one in Bill's jet.

Stevon sat back to stare at the closed door to Sol's office. He then smirked while thinking about all the things he'd done, getting ready for a long needed vacation.

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I had made a lot of flights between Alpha and Tucson in my Cessna during the last few months, but today's wasn't typical. My day started in Washington, DC where I had boarded a commercial flight going to Tucson. After arriving I was supposed to fly recruits to Alpha. This didn't happen. OWL screwed up their schedule and the recruits weren't ready. I was glad. I was anxious to get the good news I had to friends at Alpha and no recruits allowed me to get away early. However, when nearing Alpha, Carl told me about another plane in the area.

"Are we on a secure channel?" I asked.

"I think so, Jer, but who knows anymore," he replied.

"I understand," I said. "I'll see you in a few." Hopefully, the other plane was only someone flying lower than normal while on their way to places north.

Assuming this, I continued northward, too. According to what Carl said, the plane should go by on my left a hundred or so feet below.

"Jer!" Carl hollered.

I'm not sure if he said anything else. I had just then looked back to where the other plane should have been, saw a jet not much larger than my Cessna headed toward me, and got too busy for listening.

Adrenaline and instincts are often wonderful things. Without these the jet might have flown through my plane's tail section, killing me and maybe even the other pilot. Instincts told me what needed done to keep this from happening and my plane would probably need some minor repairs because of the adrenaline forces used when reacting to instincts.

I slammed my plane's throttle knob against its instrument panel and yanked its wheel back against my chest. The resulting G-forces made me half dizzy. I didn't care. I wanted away from the idiot trying to kill me.

My plane was upside down and starting downward in a loop when I yanked its throttle back out. This shortened the plane's loop enough that it didn't take long for me to get the jet in sight again. It was at least a half mile away, with exhaust fumes boiling from its engines and banking hard left when my plane's throttle was again wide open. I didn't know the jet pilot's intentions at this point, but my plane was more maneuverable than his and I was going to do everything possible to stay behind the Kamikaze son-of-a-bitch.

We played cat and mouse for what seemed like an hour. My only problem was the jet being faster than my plane. It had two engines. But I had a second advantage, too. Every time the jet disappeared in the distance or in the clouds, Carl kept me informed about its location and direction.

The game we played finally ended after the jet dropped out of a cloud one time with me on its tail. It twisted and turned for a minute or so, probably because its pilot was looking for me. But then thicker fumes boiled from its engines and it dove toward the ground. I slowed some and turned my plane to watch. Almost every instrument in the jet had to be red lined when it started to pull up, and seconds later it streaked up through the clouds about a mile south of me.

"Jesus," Carl said, "that was quite a show."

"Maybe from where you are," I answered. "It was scary up here. Is he gone?"

"He's still going toward Tucson on my screen."

"Good. Thanks for your help. I think I'll wander around up here for awhile. Let me know if the bastard comes back."

"No problem."

NETTEN

I trimmed the plane to fly a wide circle around Alpha and settled back. The jet pilot had to be part of SO and I wanted time to think about their seemingly endless violence and the rest of my new lifestyle.

Some time later I focused my attention outside and thought, *Wow. Look at that sky.*

I don't think there's anything to surpass the splendor of an Arizona sunset. The one seen that day was the best I'd seen in a long time. The sun's brilliant hues, filtering through and reflecting off of clouds were framed by the jagged silhouettes of mountains below and black emptiness above, and seemed to linger for fear of never coming again. But I doubted it was fear that created this magnificent holocaust. I saw it as anger. Like me, Mother Nature seemed mad. My anger was from the other pilot's foolishness and probably wouldn't go away for a long time. However, although Hers had to be because today was almost gone, the sun would soon disappear over the horizon, spreading darkness everywhere. This notion made my thoughts sentimental.

I was thirty-one and my life had been pretty good, even though my father had died when I was only ten. He was repairing some heavy equipment when it fell on him. He didn't suffer long, but his life ended too early. Because of this, I learned responsibility sooner than most. My mother, Nina, and I took over dad's business until it could be sold. Since this didn't happen until I was in high school, I spent a lot of long days keeping up with school work and doing my best to keep the business profitable. No matter what, proceeds from selling the business got me a plane, and mom's never ending patience and her perpetual smile always made my life a lot easier.

*Your son, Jerry Wilson, loves you mom, I thought, and...*

"Sixty-eight-Yankee. This is Alpha One, over," blared the radio. It was Carl again.

"Nuts!" I said to myself.

The best words to describe Carl's personality are "hard" and "headed." He's in charge of security at Alpha and, for sure, if I ignore him, he'll get persistent. Answer his call and he'll be insistent. I couldn't win. At least not today.

"Jer, wake up! Over." Carl was becoming persistent.

"What's up? Over."

"It's almost dark. Get your butt down here. I'll meet you in the hanger. Alpha One out."

To the unknowing, Alpha's landing strip can't be seen from overhead. Its flat surface was disguised, making it look like the surrounding desert. The only visible man-make structure nearby is an old rundown shack,

*Steven A. Hart*

seemingly left undisturbed since the late nineteenth century. The terrain in all directions is typical of central Arizona's wilderness, mountainous and rugged. An area where prospectors have spent years searching for fortunes, found little, or rarely got out to spend their discoveries. A few Mesquite and Scrub Oak trees are scattered about, but the landscape is mostly cactus and rocks. About a mile southwest is the only oasis within a hundred miles. Aerial maps call it Hidden Lake. It doesn't appear on many others. The lake is about a half a mile long and a quarter of a mile wide, fed by a rare spring at its northern end, and separated from Alpha by a high rocky ridge.

As if by signal, darkness spreads across this unforgiving place and stars appear in the heavens while I get the plane ready for landing on Alpha's short and narrow runway.

A warning light atop the plane's instrument panel soon turns green. A red light would indicate other air traffic in the area or a problem at Alpha, and I'd have flown away like I did earlier. Instead, I flip switches to turn on the plane's landing light and those on the landing strip ahead.

When the plane settles on the runway, all lights go out except where the mountain ahead opens. Even before my plane stops rolling the mountain closes and I'm safe inside the place I now call home. I turn the plane around, switch off the engine and crawl out. Carl is waiting.

"Any idea who the pilot was?" he asks.

"No, and the plane didn't have any numbers."

"Damn, I thought we had the leak fixed."

"Yeah, I know. Our bad guy list is getting longer, but we need to find Sol." I pause as we get on Alpha's lift, then say, "Man, if anyone had told me nine months ago what I'd be doing these days, I'd have told them they were nuts!"

"Yeah, I have the same feelings, but you should know them better."

Carl was right. He was recruited by me and everything that's happened since I first made contact with the New World back in 1995 flashes through my mind.

## II – Lost in the desert

Carl and I had gone to the same high school, but we didn't become friends until after graduating. This got started while I was tying down my plane after suffering through the last check-ride needed for getting a pilot's license. After some typical "how you been" small talk, Carl told me he had a business for delivering supplies to people in remote areas of Arizona and was looking for a second pilot, one with a plane. Carl's offer sounded like fun, but I had an okay job and wasn't ready for a change.

"I talked with your instructor," Carl said as we walked from my plane toward the airport's cafeteria. "It seems that congratulations are in order."

"Thanks," I replied, "but I don't think I'm ready for the kind of flying you need."

"Maybe not," he said, "but what about weekends? You'll probably be out here getting more flying hours under your belt. According to what the instructor told me about your flying abilities, my guess is that you could start getting paid for this after only a couple weekends of practice."

"Sounds tempting," I answered. It would help cover plane costs.

I spent most of the rest of that day listening to Carl explain how supply drops are made and looking at his base of operations, an older two-plane hanger. I also met his other pilot, Jeff Smith. Jeff was our age, but his long scraggly hair and the clothes he wore didn't present a pretty picture. Oh well, I don't judge people when first meeting them and didn't plan on starting with Jeff.

"Don't go by looks," Carl said later about Jeff. "He's a good pilot. Still, I may have to make him a partner one day to get him showing up for work every day."

I spent a lot of time with Carl after this, weekends and otherwise, but it took almost four years for him to talk me into quitting my other job. He hadn't made Jeff a partner, but Jeff still flew for him, and so did a couple of others. Anyway, Carl offered me a full partnership, and my only investments would be me and my Cessna 210. I had probably had too much beer to be sensible that evening and accepted.

The partnership was good for everyone involved. I enjoyed the new freedom of flying almost every day, Carl enjoyed the freedom of being able to round up new customers for making the business more profitable, and Jeff's work habits had improved enough that we were able to expand our client base into bordering states without needing other pilots too often.

Then one memorable Tuesday nine months ago Jeff returned from a flight to New Mexico. He told me a storm was building south of where I



*Steven A. Hart*

was going and to be careful. I went in the hanger office to check with Carl. He said that weather reports only mentioned isolated thunder storms. So, we loaded a bundle of supplies in my plane and I soon took off to deliver the package about 150 miles north and east of Tucson.

Not long after getting in the air I saw the storm Jeff had mentioned. He was right. It was widespread and did look potentially nasty. However, I didn't look forward to spending the night in Phoenix or getting back to Tucson after dark. If I could get through the storm going north and fly around it on the flight home, neither would happen. So, 30 minutes later I flew into the storm.

When flying through bad weather I usually do this low and fast. This sometimes makes landmarks difficult to identify, but I enjoy the challenge of always knowing my location. Our customers want their supplies on time, no matter what the weather, so I've burned the routes I fly into my brain.

What surprised me that day was how fast the storm increased its violence. It looked to be a real test. I streaked through the narrow space between clouds and mountains and my plane was tossed about more and more. After a few minutes of wondering which wind gust would tear off the plane's wings, I decided it was time to turn tail and go home. I had been wrong to fly through the storm. The hunters wouldn't be happy, but their supplies would wait until tomorrow.

I rammed the plane's pitch and throttle control knobs forward, the tachometer almost red-lined, and I pulled back on the wheel. At the same time I banked the plane left to fly away from that miserable storm.

I wasn't ready for what happened next. Prepared, but not ready.

Turning had put me in what looked like the eye of a hurricane. Clouds boiled around me but not above. And the buffeting had stopped. One second the wind was trying to rip off my seat belt, the next the air was smooth as glass. But damn. At the same time, the plane's engine quit!

I immediately righted the plane and hit the starter button.

Nothing!

*Shit*, I thought, *Where can I land this thing?*

I looked at the rocky landscape ahead. The pickings were slim, but a surge of hope came when I saw an old shack off in the distance and remembered a lake over the ridge to its left. Setting the plane down in water would give me a better chance of survival. The ridge's top was hidden by clouds, but just maybe, the plane had enough speed to glide over it. I gently banked left, not wanting to lose much altitude, and said a prayer.

Reentering the clouds, I drew a deep breath. Turbulence bounced me around again and clouds blocked my forward view. Looking down I saw the

NETTEN

ridge slipping by through the haze. My prayer had been answered. Not by much, but I had cleared the ridge and I exhaled.

I quickly turned the plane right, pushed its nose down, and said another prayer. When under the clouds I thanked God. Ahead was Hidden Lake.

My first thoughts had been to land wheels-up in the water, but on the lake's far side was a fairly large sandy area. At least it would be a dry place to land, if I could get that far and get stopped before hitting any rocks or...

I pushed down on the lever to lower the plane's landing gear.

Again nothing!

I grabbed a handle between the seats for manually lowering the wheels and frantically cranked.

*I think I can, I think I can!* I thought near panic, and I did. The crank locked just before the rear wheels hit at the lake's waterline. I saw a spray of water in the corner of my eye, but my attention was mostly ahead.

I had the plane's wheel in my lap to help with jamming on the brakes. The plane shuddered and my mind switched into slow motion.

It seemed like the plane had skidded for miles before its nose wheel slammed down. But that probably happened only a second or two after the rear wheels were locked.

About 50 yards short of the trees ahead I guessed the plane wouldn't stop soon enough. I put both feet on the left brake. The plane spun around with the right wing carving a wide arc in the sand, just missing a bunch of rocks. When the plane had turned enough for me to see the dust cloud its locked tires had made, I jammed on both brakes again. The plane groaned loudly and, with a jerk and a bounce, it stopped.

Silence.

I sat still for a long time, taking deep breaths to slow my racing heart.

*Great, I thought, Here I am, miles from the nearest civilization, and in a plane that will probably become a desert relic like the old shack across the ridge.*

Oh well. I was sure the hunters would call Carl to complain in a day or two and he would surely send out the Air Force, Army, National Guard and maybe even the Navy and Coast Guard to look for me. The most positive things about my situation were that I was still alive, the hunters had ordered enough food to feed an army for a week, and the lake would supply all the water I would ever need.

Although spending the next few days in or around the plane would be smartest, I was curious about the shack across the ridge. I couldn't just do nothing while waiting. With nothing electrical working on the plane I doubted I'd be able to do much fixing. So, I was going to explore. And if

*Steven A. Hart*

the shack's roof was still anywhere close to being waterproof, I would feel better waiting for rescue there than in the plane.

After making these decisions I got out to look at the plane. Its tail structure was half covered with tree branches, but it looked undamaged. The rest of the plane looked like it had during my preflight inspection except for all the mud underneath and not having much paint left on one of its wing tips.

I opened the baggage compartment to get out a backpack. I wouldn't need the hunter's supplies yet because the pack contained two bottles of water, enough munchies for a couple of days, a change of clothes, and a pad of paper and a pencil. I used the latter to write a note about where I was going. This went on the plane's seat. I then started toward the nearby ridge and the shack on its other side.

Getting over the ridge wasn't the easy climb I'd thought it would be. The higher I went the worse it got. Near the top I needed both hands to get over some of the wet rocks. After two grueling hours, I stood at the top. Anxious to get down to the shack I only rested a minute, drank some water, then moved on.

Going down was easier and an hour later I was winding around the cactus and rocks in the valley leading up toward the shack. I was a little surprised that the storm's eye hadn't moved, but something else was even stranger. The closer I got to the shack, the stronger a weird prickly sensation filled my body. It felt like a combination of being chilled and being charged with a lot of static electricity. Then my vision got fuzzy and each step became a challenge. I'd almost reached the shack when my world went black.

---

Stevon pushed a button on his desk and a minute later Sol came into his office.

"What?" Sol asked impatiently.

Stevon was studying a message on his computer. He looked at Sol with a smile and said, "Looks like we kept him away, Sol. I have no idea how or why Wilson wasn't smashed to bits in a crash, but he's now outside the shack about as close to dead as anyone can get."

Sol read the messages on Stevon's computer, smiled, then left for parts unknown.

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