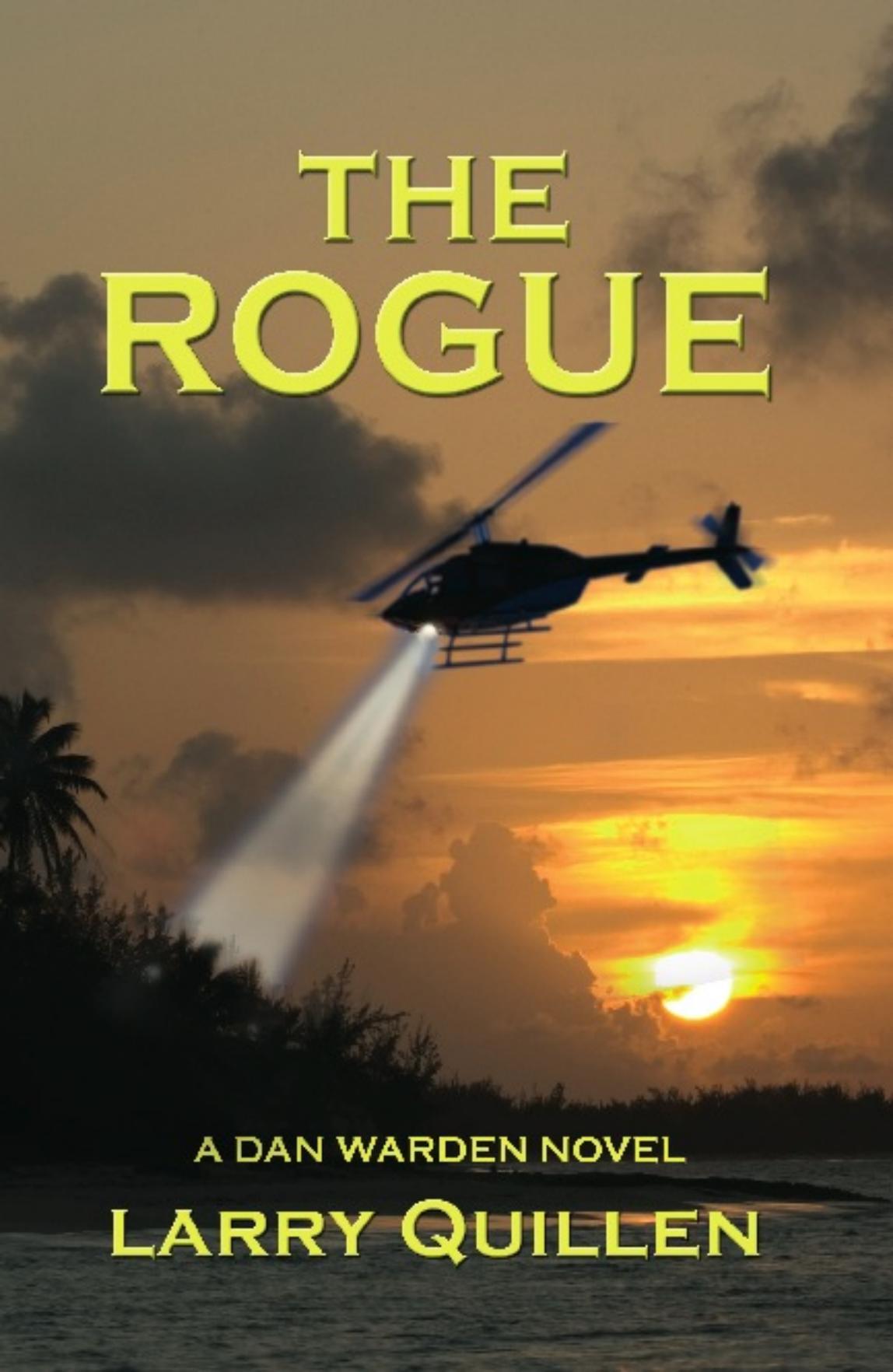
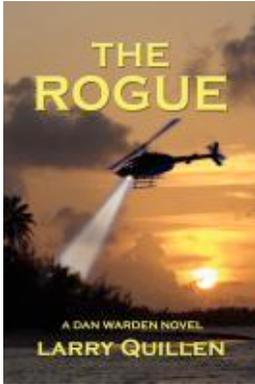


THE ROGUE

A dramatic scene featuring a helicopter in flight against a sunset sky. The helicopter is silhouetted against the bright orange and yellow light of the setting sun. Its searchlight is turned on, casting a powerful beam of light downwards. The background is filled with dark, heavy clouds, and the foreground shows the dark silhouette of a coastline with palm trees and a body of water.

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LARRY QUILLEN



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The Rogue

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Fiction by Larry Quillen

THE ROGUE
DIGGER
JENNY CAY

1

Friday, Labor Day Weekend

CAPTAIN DAN WARDEN of the Chickasaw County, Alabama, Sheriff's Department, reached up and flicked away a rivulet of sweat trickling down the side of his camouflaged face as he listened to the night sounds in the hot, humid woods around him. Crickets, cicadas, tree frogs, a confused rooster somewhere in the distance—and a horde of mosquitoes—had made their presence known to him.

Dan was wearing dark blue coveralls with "SHERIFF" spelled out in large yellow letters on the back, "CCSD" on the front right, and a badge embossed on the left. Underneath his coveralls, he was wearing a ballistic vest. Everything he had on, down to and including his underwear, was soaked with sweat. There were three other Chickasaw County deputies in the woods with him tonight, along with two meth investigators from the Alabama Bureau of Investigation, and six special agents from the US Drug Enforcement Administration. All of them were similarly dressed and just as sweaty.

Everyone was waiting for the officer in charge, DEA Special Agent Callas, to give the signal to advance on a single-wide mobile home that had become the target of a multiagency drug raid after an undercover deputy sheriff had purchased crystal methamphetamine there on three occasions. Known as ice, the drug had a higher purity level than powdered meth, making it more desirable for its longer-lasting highs and more intense psychological effects.

* * *

TWO WEEKS EARLIER, after the Chickasaw County sheriff had requested DEA assistance in dealing with the meth lab,

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Agent Callas had met with Sheriff Thomas and explained the purpose of a DEA Mobile Enforcement Team. “The MET Program is a cooperative program with state and local law enforcement officials like you, conceived in response to the problem of drug-related violent crime in towns and cities across the nation,” he said.

“This is the first big operation we’ve found in Chickasaw County,” Sheriff Thomas said, then turned to Lieutenant Houser, one of the Alabama state troopers present. “How bad is it anywhere else in Alabama?”

“Sheriff, methamphetamine is the number one drug threat in Alabama. That’s how bad it is. The processing required to make meth is easier and more accessible than ever. The most common ingredients are over-the-counter cold and asthma medications containing ephedrine or pseudoephedrine, along with red phosphorous, hydrochloric acid, drain cleaner, battery acid, lye, Coleman lantern fuel, and antifreeze.” Houser paused, looked about the room, then added, “But, there are literally thousands of meth recipes and information on how to make it posted on the Internet. Some of the recipes might call for alcohol, ether, benzene, paint thinner, Freon, acetone, or chloroform, as well as several other highly volatile chemicals.

“An investment of a few hundred dollars in common, everyday chemicals and over-the-counter medications can produce methamphetamine worth thousands of dollars. Meth labs known as ‘mom and pop’ labs are found just about anywhere these days. We find them in rural, city, and suburban residences, barns, and garages, as well as in back rooms of businesses, apartments, hotel and motel rooms, storage facilities, and vacant buildings. I’ve seen a working meth lab in the trunk of a car. It had a rocket about three feet long rigged to it. I think the idea was, if we got to him, he would light the rocket and all the evidence would take off to the moon or somewhere.”

All the officers in the room looked at each other, shaking their heads, knowing how volatile some of the chemicals were that were used in making methamphetamine.

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Lieutenant Houser continued. "The good news is, there has been a substantial reduction in meth labs within the state as a result of restricting the sale of anything with pseudoephedrine in it. Meth sales, however, are still a significant threat because of the volume coming into the state from outside, primarily Mexico, through Texas and distribution points in Atlanta. The meth previously produced in the 'mom and pop' labs in Alabama has been replaced by a more pure form of the drug, called 'ice.' When we learned that your deputy had purchased ice at this meth lab, we became very interested in shutting it down, so we asked to be invited to the party and suggested that you also ask the DEA to give us a hand."

"I want to catch every one of them and shut it down for good," Sheriff Thomas said, then pointed to Dan. "This is Captain Dan Warden. He's my chief investigator. He and his department will give you all the assistance we can on this."

"Thank you, sir," Dan said, looking at his boss. Then he turned and pointed to a scruffy-looking, unshaven redneck in dirty work clothes sitting in the back of the room. "To kick things off, I'd like for Deputy Truet to come up front and give us a rundown on what we can expect out there."

Deputy Truet arose and walked to the front of the room. He explained that he worked for Dan, primarily on vice and narcotics cases. He had discovered the meth lab while working undercover on a marijuana case a few weeks ago. Initially, he had gone to the meth lab with another man. The man, who was known to the meth cooks, didn't know Truet was a deputy sheriff. A few days later, Truet had returned alone and was able to make a buy. He had made two more buys since then. The meth had been bagged, tagged, and was now in the evidence room at the Chickasaw County Sheriff's Office.

"It's like this," Deputy Truet said. "They've got two mercury vapor lights on tall poles, one at either end of the mobile home, that make the whole area around the place about as bright as day. On top of that, they've cleared the area around the trailer. There's nothing but weeds and tree stumps within a hundred feet of the trailer. I didn't see any surveillance

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cameras or motion detectors outside, but they've got this big pit bull on a long chain in the front yard. He starts barking and growling long before anybody gets anywhere near the place.

"What you have to do is flash your headlights twice when you get near the place, then drive around to the front doorsteps. You don't get out, though. That damn pit bull is right there, ready to rip your leg off if you do. What you have to do is show yourself so they can see your face from the little window in the front door. I've been there four times and I've seen two men, both white, both in their late twenties. One is about six feet, one-eighty, brown eyes, dark hair, long in the back and long sideburns. The other one is about five-ten, one-fifty, curly blond hair, blue eyes, and acne scars.

"If they recognize you, one of them will come out with a weapon in his hands and a bag of meth in his shirt. You make the buy sitting in your vehicle, then get the hell out of there."

During the discussion that followed, Dan mentioned that he had his pilot's license and offered to fly Special Agent Callas and a photographer over the site to do an aerial reconnaissance. The DEA agent had readily accepted. The pictures they had taken that day showed several empty antifreeze cans, Coleman fuel cans, and red-dyed coffee filters in the garbage and trash piles behind the mobile home. They also saw a Ford Explorer and a Dodge pickup parked behind the mobile home. Using the pictures, along with a county survey map and a Google Earth satellite view, the officers determined how many men they would need and made assignments for each man.

From their planning sessions, Dan understood that his job, and those of his men, was to provide a local law enforcement presence to the raid and to act as backup to the DEA agents if necessary, which meant his team wasn't expected to be involved in the assault on the meth lab. The two ABI investigators were there for the same reason and had similar assignments.

* * *

FOR THE RAID TONIGHT, the DEA agents were dressed in

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black boots, and uniforms with the word "POLICE" in large letters on the back, "DEA" on the front right, and a badge embossed on the front left. They were wearing helmets and body armor, and were carrying sidearms and AR-15 assault rifles. Dan and his men were also carrying sidearms and automatic weapons, but didn't expect to use them. The DEA agents had been trained to perform coordinated attacks on meth labs. His men hadn't.

Two deputies had been assigned to posts near the end of the dirt road where it intersected a two-lane county road. Their job was to note the license plates of vehicles on the dirt road, but not to stop them. They had bigger fish to catch tonight.

In the moonlight filtering through the trees, the DEA agent a few yards in front of Dan turned, looked at him, then pointed toward the brightly lit mobile home. Dan nodded. Callas had radioed the agent that they were ready to advance to their assault positions. There was a three-quarter moon high overhead that provided enough light for them to see where they were going as Dan and the agent slowly crept through the darkness, weaving their way through the trees, now thankful for the soggy leaves they had silently cursed while lying on them.

After a few moments, the DEA agent raised his hand, then dropped to one knee. Dan did the same. They were less than a hundred yards from the mobile home, close enough for Dan to smell the faint odor of fingernail polish remover. He knew it was acetone, one of the chemicals used in some meth recipes. They were definitely cooking in there tonight, but the lawmen were as close as they were going to get until they did something about the pit bull they had heard barking and growling every time a vehicle approached the mobile home. Even now, although the officers were well away from the animal, sometimes the dog would suddenly stop and gaze into the woods, his snout raised, testing the faint scent in the air.

The assault team continued to watch vehicles ranging from old, worn-out pickups to new BMWs approach the meth lab, blink their headlights twice, make their buys, and drive away.

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There was a break in the traffic for about five minutes; then another old pickup truck, this one with a burned-out left headlight, slowly approached the mobile home. All the officers tensed. It was the one they had been waiting for.

2

DEPUTY TRUET, wearing old work clothes, a soiled, dark-green John Deere baseball cap, and a three-day beard, was in his dad's pickup truck with his elbow hanging out the open window. The truck was old enough for a vintage tag, but it had more rust than paint on it these days so his dad hadn't bothered to apply for one.

Earlier in the day, Truet had disconnected the wiring to the left headlight as planned. Long before he got near the mobile home, he could hear the deep-throated barking of the pit bull. He blinked his headlight twice, then pulled into the dirt yard and circled until the driver's side window was directly across from the front door. The dog, snarling and growling, tried to leap up into the open window. The chain held him back, but it didn't keep him from trying again.

When Truet saw someone looking at him from the small glass insert in the door, he stuck his head out the side window and waved with his left hand while holding his pistol between his legs with his right. He grinned as he felt the rush of adrenaline. This was what it was all about: playing deadly games with the bad guys. Other men got the same kind of rush doing drugs or running around on their wives. Truet did neither. This was way more exciting.

A man opened the door and stepped out onto the small porch, holding a shotgun with his finger on the trigger. He yelled at the pit bull. The dog stopped trying to eat the pickup, walked over to the front tire, hiked his leg, urinated on it, then wandered back to his water dish. "Both hands," the man demanded.

Truet slowly reached into his shirt pocket with his right

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hand, pulled out some folded, well-used bills, then rested both wrists on the edge of the open window. The bills had been photographed, the serial numbers recorded, and the bills marked with ink that would show "CCSD" under ultraviolet light.

"You getting to be a regular," the man said, as he looked around, his finger on the shotgun trigger.

"Hey, man. I got a three-day weekend coming up and I got some hot stuff waiting for me. I need something to put her in the mood, you know what I mean?"

With the shotgun in the crook of his arm, the man took the money out of the deputy's hand, counted it, then reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out a small plastic bag with a few clear chunky crystals in it, and tossed it to the deputy. "You got a headlight out. Better not let them stop you with that shit on you."

"Thanks, man. I appreciate it," Truet called out as the man walked back up the steps with his shotgun, stopped on the landing, and waited for Truet to leave. Truet stuck a cigarette in his mouth, then tried to light it with a butane lighter that he knew was empty. It sparked, but didn't light. "Hey, man! Got a light?"

"What the hell do you think I am? Your waiter or something?"

"No, man. My lighter won't work and the one in my truck's gone, too. Got to have my nicotine fix, you know what I mean?" Truet said and tried once again to light his cigarette.

"Get your ass out of here!" the man snarled, then went inside and slammed the door.

"Yes, sir, I will do that," Truet said quietly as he put the truck in gear. As the truck slowly moved forward, he reached inside the paper bag next to him and grabbed a baseball-sized lump of raw hamburger. He transferred the meat to his left hand, then allowed his arm to drop down outside the truck door.

He stopped again, within range of the pit bull, and leaned his head out the window. As the growling dog trotted toward him, Truet tried to light his cigarette once more with the

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empty lighter while looking at the front door. Clear. As the dog took aim for his dangling arm, Truet dropped the meat, retracted his arm, and slowly drove away. When he looked in his rearview mirror and saw the dog eating the meat, he broke into a wide grin. The drug in the meat wouldn't kill the dog, but after about five minutes, it would put him down for a couple of hours. That would be all the time they would need.

Deputy Truet drove the old pickup truck out to the end of the dirt road and stopped on the one-lane culvert across the roadside ditch. He turned off his engine, raised the hood, pulled the distributor cap off, grabbed the rotor, stuck it in his pocket, then put the distributor cap back on, leaving the pickup hood up. If anyone else wanted to buy meth here tonight, they wouldn't be able to get past Truet until he figured out why the engine of his old truck had died and wouldn't start again. Deputy Truet turned on his radio, said, "Post three, ready," then heard someone key a microphone twice in response.

3

THOSE LAWMEN WITH A VIEW of the front yard watched the dog eat the hamburger, walk over and drink some water, then slowly wander about, obviously disoriented. After another minute or so, he slowly staggered underneath the mobile home and remained there.

After waiting fifteen minutes for the dog to reappear, Dan could see the DEA agents flashing silent hand signals to one another in the moonlit woods. The raid was about to begin.

Dan knew the plan was to send one agent at a time to the building until there were three agents on the front and three more on the back; then the two groups of agents would approach both doors simultaneously. On Agent Callas's signal, the lead agents at both doors would simultaneously yell, "Police! Open up!" and immediately use a ram to destroy the locks on the flimsy mobile home doors. Once the doors were open, the six agents would rush in with their AR-15s and take all the occupants into custody. The plan had worked many times before. There was no reason to expect that it would not work this time.

The agent in front of Dan knelt on the damp leaves, leaned his weapon against a tree, took his helmet off, then opened a black nylon bag and took out a full-face gas mask. He pulled the straps over the back of his head, fitted the mask against his face, tightened the straps, then put his helmet back on and grabbed his weapon. Looking like an outer-space monster in a science fiction movie, the black-clad DEA agent turned to Dan and, with hand signals, told him he was going in.

Dan knew the gas mask was uncomfortable to wear on a hot night like tonight, which was why the DEA agent had

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waited until now to put it on, but it was essential that he wear it. There were chemicals in the meth lab that could damage his eyes and lungs if he were exposed to them too long. Acetone, chloroform, iodine vapors, white phosphorus, anhydrous ammonia, hydrogen chloride, muriatic acid, hydrogen iodide, ether, and vapors from the methamphetamine itself might be present. Any of them were bad enough, but if the cook allowed his red phosphorus to overheat, it would create phosphine gas, which was highly toxic to inhale, and readily exploded if not vented properly.

Dan watched the man in black slide from tree to tree until he was at the edge of the clearing. He paused momentarily; then, with his weapon ready, he crouched low and ran for the mobile home in the brightness of the mercury vapor security lights. When he reached the building, he pressed himself against the side near the stairs leading up to the small porch and aimed his weapon at the doorway. No one moved for several seconds, waiting to see if anyone inside had seen him. Dan knew the same tactics were being conducted on the back side of the mobile home at the same time.

The next agent rose from the damp leaves and began darting from tree to tree toward the mobile home. He was almost ready to break out of the trees when the front door opened. He quickly dropped to the ground and froze. The agent already at the mobile home quickly crawled into the darkness underneath. After he had been there for a few seconds, his eyes adjusted to the darkness enough to allow him to see his surroundings. There, not three feet away from his face, was the scarred face of the sleeping pit bull.

As the agents and deputies in the woods watched, an obese young woman came out of the mobile home carrying a small child in one arm and cigarettes and a lighter in the other. She put the toddler down on the bare dirt, then sat on the steps and lit a cigarette. No one smoked inside a meth lab where a witch's brew of caustic chemicals was being mixed that could, and did, explode in the presence of a spark or flame.

Dan stared at the scene, unbelieving. No one knew about the woman and child. Deputy Truet hadn't seen them on his

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previous visits, and there was nothing in the aerial reconnaissance photos to alert the officers. He shook his head. He didn't want to be part of a drug raid that risked the life of a small child, and he was pretty sure none of the other officers did either. There had to be another way, at another time.

The lawmen waited, and watched, as the obese woman smoked her cigarette while the young boy amused himself by playing in the dirt. When she finished her cigarette, the woman ground it out on the step, then flicked it out into the dirt yard. "Come on, let's go! Bedtime!" she called out to the boy.

"Where doggie?" the boy called out.

"I don't know where the doggie is, honey," the woman said, then looked around for him. She stepped down to the ground and then followed the long chain to where it disappeared under the trailer. "He's taking a nap. It's nap time for you, too. Come on, let's go."

The lawmen watched and waited as the woman picked up the child and carried him back inside, all of them wondering if she had seen the black-clad DEA agent in the darkness underneath the building. If she had, she would give the alarm once she was safely inside again.

Five minutes passed with no sign of activity within the building. It was now up to Agent Callas. He was in charge; it was his call. Dan watched and waited from a distance, wondering what Callas would decide. Then he saw the agent under the trailer slowly emerge and position himself near the steps again, his assault rifle at the ready. Dan's eyes grew wide. They were going through with the raid! Then he saw the second agent slowly rise from the edge of the clearing and run toward the building in the bright glare of the mercury vapor lights. He was about halfway across the clearing when all hell broke loose.

A sound louder than thunder filled the air as one end of the mobile home disintegrated. Exploding chemicals boiled out of the shattered structure and filled the air with fire, smoke, and noxious fumes. The DEA agents close to the mobile home were thrown to the ground, unconscious, their helmets and gas

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masks torn off by the blast.

Dan got up and was about to run to assist them when he realized it was probably a phosphine gas explosion. The deadly phosphine vapor, in combination with vapor from other caustic chemicals, would be in the air anywhere near the shattered structure being consumed by the fire within. Dan clenched his jaws in anger because he couldn't do anything to help. He would only add himself to the casualty list if he got involved. The six DEA agents were the only ones with gas masks tonight because no one thought anyone else might need one. When he saw a third DEA agent running toward the conflagration wearing his mask, Dan knew he had other things to do.

Just then, the door opened and the obese young woman came running out screaming, totally engulfed in flames. She ran across the small porch, stumbled down the stairs and fell onto the ground. The agent who had come to help his comrades now turned to her and beat out the flames with his gloved hands while rolling her over on the ground. When the flames were out, he turned back to help his downed comrades, while the woman continued to scream.

Dan's first call was to the sheriff's office dispatcher. He advised the woman of the situation and asked her to send ambulances to their location, but no closer than a hundred yards from the house because toxic gas was present.

Next, he called Deputy Truet and told him to get his pickup out of the way. There would be ambulances coming in.

Next, he called the local volunteer fire department and told them the situation and asked them to keep the fire from spreading into the woods, but not to get anywhere near the mobile home. "Bring your tanker and your Scott Air-Paks. You're going to need them. There's toxic gas everywhere, probably phosphine."

Next, he called his boss, Sheriff Thomas, and told him what had happened. The sheriff said he'd be right out.

Next, he called Helleston Memorial, identified himself, and told them that a woman with possible third-degree burns, and four police officers with possible concussions and eye and

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lung chemical burns would be at the emergency room within fifteen minutes.

As Dan was about to make his next call, one of his investigators, Lieutenant Jason Rampart, hurried past him.

“Jason! Where’re you going?”

Jason stopped. “I’ve got to get in there. I’ve got to find that kid.”

“Not like that, man! There’s phosphine gas everywhere.”

“I got to save the kid, man!” Jason cried.

Dan understood. After a lot of difficulty, Jason and his wife were now the parents of their first child, a boy. “Jason! Get a mask! You’re going to burn your lungs if you don’t. What’re you going to tell your own boy if you can’t breathe well enough to play with him?”

“Aw, Jesus, he’s just a baby,” Jason moaned with his head down. “Just a baby, man.” He watched the burning mobile home for a moment, then turned and said, “Sometimes this job really stinks, you know what I mean?”

Dan watched Jason slowly walk back into the woods. “I know what you mean,” Dan said quietly, then turned to watch the third DEA agent shake out the dirt and replace the gas masks on the downed agents while the woman continued to scream in agony.

Suddenly, Dan started coughing as his eyes began to sting. The noxious fumes from the meth chemicals were spreading into the woods. He got up and hurried toward the county road. Jason was right. Sometimes the job really did stink. He had to get away from it for a few days. Somewhere. Anywhere.

4

ON A WARM SEPTEMBER MORNING nine days after the meth lab explosion, Dan attended church, then joined the after-church crowd at the Cracker Barrel. Back home, he opened the Sunday edition of the Huntsville newspaper and noted that any mention of the meth lab explosion and its aftermath had finally moved off the front page.

The headline news this Sunday was about a politician who had done something both immoral and illegal and had gotten caught doing it. Politics was pretty boring stuff to Dan, but there was a story below the fold about the active tropical storm season that caught his eye. Hurricanes and tropical storms rarely had any impact on North Alabama other than bringing much needed rain, but Dan had spent several weeks in the Bahamas a couple of years ago and still had good memories of those days. Unlike most Americans, it was the storms' tracks through the Bahamas that interested him.

When he turned to an inside page where the story continued, Dan found an in-depth report on the storms in the Caribbean this season. So far, the Bahamas had escaped with three near misses. Dan shook his head. In hurricanes, residents of those low-lying islands had no place to run to and no place to hide.

Dan looked at the clock and sighed. It was going to be a long boring day with nothing to do and nowhere to go. He watched the storm hype on The Weather Channel for a few more minutes. Their best guess was that the latest hurricane was going to enter the Gulf of Mexico, but where it would hit was anyone's guess, anywhere from southern Mexico to the peninsula of Florida. He turned it off, knowing there was

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nothing else on he was interested in watching. Maybe later he would watch a baseball game, if he was in the mood. With nothing else to do and nowhere to go, he cranked his recliner backwards and was soon asleep.

* * *

DAN AWOKE FROM A FITFUL SLEEP, interrupting a dream. He couldn't remember the dream, but it had left him with a vaguely uneasy feeling. He knew he was still having trouble dealing with the memory of the burning meth lab, knowing there were people dying in there, and knowing he couldn't do anything but watch. Maybe that was what the dream was about. Jason was right. "Sometimes this job really does stink," Dan said quietly.

He looked at his watch. Almost five o'clock. Close enough. He pushed himself out of the recliner and went into the kitchen where he found his bottle of Jack Daniel's. He knew most men in Chickasaw County, Alabama, didn't drink whiskey on Sunday afternoon, but most men weren't Dan Warden. He nodded. "What I need is to get away for a while." He frowned. Where would he go, and what would he do, that would give him more pleasure, or at least be less intolerable, than his current situation?

His ex-wife, May, and his ex-kids, Bart and Bobby, were living in Reston, Virginia, with his sometimes good friend, Army Colonel John Palmer. May and John had gotten married earlier in the spring. They had invited him to the wedding, but he was pretty sure they didn't expect him to show up. He hadn't disappointed them.

He had some very pleasant memories of Ann Brenner during her prolonged stay as his houseguest. She was a woman with second sight who had helped him find a serial killer, but one evening he had come home and found her gone, with a note telling him she had seen a very traumatic vision involving the two of them. He had called her in Massachusetts and, after several minutes, was able to get her to tell him what she had seen. "We were in a small boat, a lifeboat, I think. There were just the two of us, out in the ocean. You fell overboard. You tried to swim back to me but you couldn't. You

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just kept getting farther and farther away from me until you disappeared into the mist. I think you died, Dan. I don't want to be there when that happens."

Dan had told her he was an excellent swimmer, had been taught a few things about water survival while he was in the Army, and had no intention of going on a sea cruise or anything else that would cause him to be in a lifeboat. When that didn't work, he tried to talk her into letting him come up and talk to her about it, but she was afraid to take the responsibility. Dan shook his head as he stared at the black TV screen. That was really what she had said, that she didn't want to take the responsibility for his death.

Dan looked at the amber liquid in his glass and recalled how a woman named Jenny Smart liked "her friend." He wondered if she still did. Suddenly, Dan broke out into a broad grin. Somebody with Jenny's smart-ass, in-your-face, I-can-do-anything attitude was exactly what he needed to get himself out of the doldrums! Still smiling, he frowned, wondering how he would go about finding her. He had no idea where she was, and accessing official law enforcement sources for personal use was illegal.

He hadn't seen or heard from Jenny since he had left her in the care of the DEA in a Nassau hospital over two years ago. She hadn't contacted him since, and he hadn't tried to contact her, knowing she needed some time to recover, both physically and emotionally, from the trauma she had suffered down there. When they had parted, she had told him she might go back to her cabin in the Adirondacks, or maybe visit a friend in Alaska for a while. He had no way of knowing if she was at either place, or somewhere else.

Dan frowned. Even if he could find her, they would be strangers when they met. He had changed since she had last seen him looking like a homeless beach bum in the Caribbean. He was sure she had moved on as well. What would they have to talk about? Then Dan's eyes lit up. Jenny had been a pilot for most of her life. As of last spring, he was a pilot as well, and Jenny didn't know that! At least they would have something in common to talk about. First things first. He

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needed to find her.

Dan began by turning on his computer and going to the online White Pages and entering Jenny Smart, New York. He got five hits on variations of Jenny Smart. None of the addresses were anywhere near Jenny's cottage near Lake Pleasant in the Adirondacks.

His next try was a call to Mr. Brandford, the caretaker at Deer Lake in the Adirondacks where Jenny had a cottage a couple of years ago. When Dan told him his name and mentioned that his former wife and kids had spent some time with John Palmer at his cottage last summer, Mr. Brandford said he remembered them. With the introduction over, Dan asked him if Jenny Smart still owned a cottage at the lake.

"Yes, she does, Mr. Warden."

"Uh, I need to get in contact with her. Do you have a number for her?"

"I do, but she told me not to call her unless her cabin was on fire and under no circumstances was I to give it to anyone else for any reason."

Dan smiled and nodded. That sounded like the Jenny Smart he once knew. "I understand."

"I'm sorry. I wish I could help you."

"How about an area code? Could you do that for me?"

"Well, I suppose I could. It's not like I was giving you her phone number, is it?"

"No, sir."

"Hold on a minute. Let me see here. Oh, here it is. The area code is 907, Mr. Warden."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate the information," Dan said and hung up. He soon learned the entire state of Alaska was area code 907.

He tried the White Pages again, this time looking for her in Alaska. He got one hit: "J. Smart, Wasilla, AK, 907-555-4353." Dan knew that, with only an initial, it was probably a woman. The "J" could stand for Jenny. It was worth a shot. He entered the number on his phone and waited while it rang on the other end.

"Hello?" a woman's voice answered.

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“Uh, hi, is this Jenny?”

“No, this is Janette. Who’s this?”

“I’m Dan Warden, calling from Alabama. I’m looking for a friend of mine up there, Jenny Smart. I was hoping this was her number. I guess not. Sorry.”

“That’s all right. Uh, where does your friend live up here?”

“I’m not sure. She’s a pilot, so I’m pretty sure she’s flying up there somewhere, if she’s up there.”

“Mister, we use airplanes up here like you people use cars down there. Everybody flies up here.”

“So I’ve heard. Well, thanks anyway,” Dan said.

“If she’s flying for one of the charter services, you might try down at Anchorage. Half the state’s population lives around there and most of the charter services operate out of there.”

“I’ll do that. Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome. Uh, are you married?”

Dan wrinkled his brow. What was the world coming to, a strange woman asking him such a personal question, or did it have something to do with Alaska? “Uh, no, I’m not.”

“Well, if you happen to come up this way sometime, give me a call. Wasilla is only forty miles north of Anchorage.”

“Thanks. I’ll do that,” Dan said.

“I’m a good friend of Sarah Palin. She was the mayor of Wasilla, you know.”

“Uh, yes, I heard that,” Dan said, smiling. He was willing to bet half the citizens of Wasilla would now claim to be personal friends of Sarah Palin.

“If you come up this way, stop by and I’ll introduce you to her if she’s in town.”

“I’ll keep it in mind. Bye.” Dan quickly disconnected the conversation before the woman had a chance to extend it, then, shaking his head and grinning, crossed the number off his pad. So, if Jenny really was in Alaska, her land-line phone was unlisted, if she had one, and cell phone numbers didn’t show up on the White Pages. What next?

Dan’s next move was to do a Google search for Alaskan air charter companies. He found several, jotted down their phone numbers, and began calling them. He decided to start with the

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ones in Anchorage, then move on to Fairbanks and elsewhere if he had to.

When he called Golden's Flying Service in Anchorage and asked for Jenny Smart, they told him she worked for Northstar. With a rush of excitement, Dan glanced down his list of numbers and saw one for Northstar Tours. Dan thanked the man and hung up. Dan circled the Northstar number, then went back online and looked at the website for Northstar again. Like the other Alaskan charter services, Northstar advertised that it would take fishermen to where the fishing was best, hunters to where the hunting was best, and tourists to where the glaciers were the biggest. It looked like the kind of thing Jenny would enjoy doing with her flying skills. There was one way to find out. He looked at the clock. Almost five-thirty, Central Daylight Time. That meant it was close to two-thirty in Anchorage. There probably wouldn't be anyone in the Northstar office on Sunday afternoon, but it was worth a shot he decided, and then entered the number.

"Northstar! Chuck Ryder here," a male voice answered.

"Uh, this is Dan Warden calling from Alabama. Is Jenny Smart there?"

"Jenny's down the peninsula. What can I do for you?"

Dan felt a rush of excitement. He had found her. "Oh, uh, will you tell her Dan Warden called. I'm a friend of hers. We knew each other in the Bahamas a couple of years ago."

"Oh, yeah? She told me a friend of hers kicked some serious ass down there. Was that you?"

"All lies, Chuck," Dan said, then heard the man chuckle.

"She'll be back around five, Dan. Give me your number and I'll have her call you when she gets in."

"Thanks, Chuck. I'd appreciate it," Dan said, then gave Chuck his cell phone number. After they'd said their goodbyes, Dan disconnected the call, feeling elated. How about that? He had found her! Jenny was an Alaskan bush pilot. He glanced at the clock. It would be eight o'clock or later when she called. Dan smiled in anticipation of the call; then the smile quickly disappeared as a thought came to him.

She might not call.

5

ON AN OVERCAST SUNDAY AFTERNOON in Alaska, with Kvichak Bay on the horizon to the west, Jenny Smart reduced power and aligned her airplane with King Salmon Creek. Just ahead of her, the meandering waterway was wide enough, straight enough, and deep enough for her to land a Cessna C208 Caravan Amphibian. Her objective was a small cabin on the north side of the stream where four fishermen and their guide were waiting for her to take them back to civilization after a week of late-season fishing in the southern Alaskan wilderness.

Jenny unconsciously tensed as she watched her altimeter slowly turn counterclockwise, passing through two hundred feet. The elevation of King Salmon Creek at this point had been about fifty feet above sea level when she dropped the men off a week ago. It hadn't rained a lot since, so she thought it would still be about the same level. Unlike most Alaskan bush pilots who made a habit of landing on rivers, lakes, gravel bars, and glaciers, today she knew what her altimeter would read when she touched down. Tomorrow, on some other lake or stream, she might not. Her charts would give her a good guess, but that was about it. It came with the territory.

Jenny checked once more to make sure her wheels were up. Landing an amphibious airplane on water with its wheels extending out of its big pontoons would cause the airplane to execute an exciting maneuver known as an "end-over." With the wheels digging into the water like brakes, the airplane would flip over, creating a deadly situation for the pilot and passengers who were suddenly suspended from their seat belts, upside down, underwater.

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With the cabin in sight, but still a quarter mile away, she felt her pontoons hit the water. She applied power to keep her speed up and headed for the cabin. When she was close, she reduced power to idle and allowed the airplane to drift toward the gravel bar until the metallic sound of her pontoons scraping gravel brought her to a stop. She glanced at her clock. Two-thirty. Right on schedule.

Dennis Morgan, the guide, tethered the airplane to a nearby bush while Jenny finished her shutdown procedure. After contacting the Kenai Flight Service Station to close her flight plan and get a weather update, she climbed out of the airplane onto a pontoon, then jumped onto the gravel bar. Wearing backcountry boots, warm slacks, and a leather bomber-type jacket opened to show a silk blouse underneath, she called out, "Hey there! Ready to head back to civilization?"

"Thank God, you're here!" the redheaded one lamented as he rushed up to her with a look of anguish. "The most awful thing happened this morning."

"What?" Jenny asked, truly concerned. Her first thought was that someone had been attacked by a bear. When she had dropped these men off last week, they seemed to be four fun-loving old friends who were looking forward to getting away from their jobs and families for a few days to do some serious beer drinking and Alaskan fly-fishing. "What happened?"

"We ran out of beer! It's all gone. Nothing but empties left."

"Ah, you guys," Jenny said, shaking her head with a feigned look of disapproval as all the men had a good laugh at her expense. "So, how was the fishing?" All four men started at once, telling her how great it was, how many they caught and how big they were.

"You got pictures to prove it, I hope," she said, knowing they had released everything they caught except what Dennis put in the pan at night. All of them assured her they did.

"It's like this, Jenny," one of the men said. "We fished from daylight until dark every day. We caught so many rainbows that we lost count. Anything less than twelve inches was nothing to get excited about. Sixteen to eighteen inches wasn't that unusual. God those were beautiful fish! And they fought!

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God how they fought! My shoulders are aching and my arms are about to fall off, but it was, without a doubt, the greatest week of my life.”

When the other men concurred, Jenny asked, “So, when’s your flight back to the lower forty-eight?”

“Seven o’clock.”

Jenny glanced at her watch. By the time they got packed it would be three o’clock. By the time they made the two hundred and fifty mile flight back to Anchorage, it would be five o’clock. Time to go. The Homeland Security folks liked to let everyone know they were in charge these days by treating everyone flying on a commercial airline as a suspected terrorist. It would take at least two hours for these four men to jump through their hoops. They would be cutting it close. She turned to Dennis. “We ready to go?”

“All ready, Jenny.”

Jenny climbed back into the airplane and worked her way to the rear. The airplane she was flying, a Cessna Caravan, could seat up to fourteen people, but she had removed all the seats in the rear half of the airplane for this charter group because they had so much gear. It was why she had brought the large aircraft. For most floatplane charters, Northstar had a much smaller three-passenger Cessna 206 floatplane that was much more economical to fly with Anchorage sky-high fuel prices.

“All right, guys, pass it up to me,” Jenny called out, then began to stow all the bags and boxes that the men had stacked on the gravel bar. There were several bags full of trash that were going back with them as well. Not a single beer can or plastic wrapper had been left behind. It was her kind of charter.

When everything and everyone was aboard, Dennis in his waders untied the mooring line, pushed the nose of the airplane toward open water, then climbed on a pontoon and into the airplane. When everyone was seated and buckled in, Jenny went through her preflight checklist, including a mandatory passenger briefing.

Just before she began her run, she picked up her satellite

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phone and noticed that there was a message from her boss, Chuck Ryder. When she played the message, she heard, “Jenny, I think the man you were expecting is here.” That was the total message, with no explanation as to who the man was or why he was there.

Jenny frowned in confusion. She wasn’t expecting anyone. This was her last charter of the day. Once she was back in Anchorage, she had a date with her friend in a bottle, Jack Daniel’s, and had no intention of keeping him waiting. In a city of three hundred thousand—half the entire state’s total population—her friend would be waiting for her in one of the two hundred and fifty bars and package stores in the city. Many Alaskans were serious drinkers. She knew she was one of them.

She called Chuck to find out more, but all she got was the request to leave a message. She disconnected the call without leaving a message. “Damn you, answer the damn phone,” she muttered softly, then got busy with the airplane.

One of the fishermen seated behind her leaned forward. “Is there a problem?”

“Nah, my boss likes to jerk my chain sometimes, just to let me know he’s the boss.”

“Sounds like my boss,” the man said.

Jenny shrugged. “He’s all right, most of the time.” She grinned. “I get my licks in, too. It evens out. I’ll try again in a few minutes and ask him to call a taxi for you guys.”

The fisherman offered Jenny several bills, folded in half. The top one was a fifty. “Uh, here’s a little something from all of us.”

“Thank you!” Jenny said, then smiled as she turned and held up the money for the rest to see. “Thanks, guys! I appreciate this.” After all the men thanked her in return, she stuffed the folded bills in an inside pocket of her jacket.

She got tipped most of the time, some good ones, some cheapskates. It usually depended on how much fun they had. These men seemed to have had a great time. She was glad they did. The cost of the cabin rental, her charters, Dennis’s time, the cost of all the gear and food, and the cost of their

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flights to and from Alaska would have cost each man several thousand dollars. She checked her instruments once more, then turned her head. "Next stop, Lake Hood, everyone."

Jenny looked outside her windows and checked the sky for other aircraft; then she checked the stream for boats, fishermen, and bears, saw none, and pushed the throttle forward. Soon they were in the air, on their way to Northstar's home base in Anchorage.

During the flight, Jenny stayed busy checking her instruments and the sky around her, getting weather updates, and making position reports to Anchorage Air Traffic Control to let them know she was on track with her flight plan.

Like most bush pilots, Jenny had learned that her job could be a very lonely one. On most of her charters, she was the only person in the airplane either going or returning. As the flight continued, Jenny chatted with other pilots flying in her area, either to get weather conditions or just to pass the time of day with those she knew. She tried to call Chuck from time to time as well, but got no response.

6

A HALF HOUR OUT of Anchorage, Jenny's concentration was interrupted by one of the passengers calling out, "Hey there! Mind if I join you?"

Jenny looked back and saw the one called Brad grinning at her. "Sure, come on up, have a seat," she said, offering the copilot's seat to him. "Just don't touch the controls."

"Got it," Brad said, then extended his hand. "I'm Brad Barker, and you're Smart, right?"

"I try to be," Jenny said, shaking the man's hand. She had long since tired of the wordplay with her last name. She had been born Catherine King, but the DEA had given her a new name when she agreed to enter their witness protection program after testifying against her boyfriend, a Miami drug lord. If she hadn't testified, she would have spent the next twenty years in prison and would have never been allowed to fly again. The thought of being incarcerated for twenty years was bad enough, but not being allowed to fly after she got out would have been worse. So much had happened to her since then. She wondered if the name wasn't someone's idea of a cruel joke.

Jenny watched the big man climb into the copilot's seat and buckle up. He looked to be in his late forties, gray sidewalls, close to six-six, and over two-fifty. She had hit the big four-oh this year, so she wasn't much younger than this man, but she was a foot shorter and weighed half as much. "Good time, huh?"

"The best," Brad declared. "We've already got Dennis booked for next year, how about you? You want to join us again?"

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“Sure. You’ve got my card. Just give me a call a month or so ahead to get on my schedule.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that,” Brad said. He turned and glanced back at the other men, then leaned forward. “Say, I was wondering, uh, suppose I came up a couple of days early next year, do you think you could get me on your schedule for a few drinks, maybe dinner somewhere?”

Jenny glanced at the wedding band on the man’s left hand, then looked out her windshield, smiling. Another married customer was hitting on her. It came with the territory. She turned and looked at Brad. Having dinner with a married man away from home and family didn’t bother her. That was harmless enough. What did bother her was that he would probably expect more than dinner. She knew that wasn’t going to happen. She hadn’t been to bed with a man since she had left the Bahamas two years ago. Her body had recovered from what they had done to her down there, but inside her head, the pain was still there. That was beginning to worry her. She had tried talking to a psychologist about it, but decided he had more head problems than she did. Looking at Brad, still smiling, she gave him her standard reply, “Sorry, you’re not my type.”

“What is your type?”

Ignoring his question, Jenny asked, “Where do you work, Brad?”

“The Big Apple.”

Jenny swept her arm about, motioning to the snow-peaked mountains close to their flight path. “Look around you, Brad. This is my office. This is where I work. Why would anyone want to work in that rat-infested sewer when they could be here?”

Brad frowned, then chuckled. “It’s where the job is, Jenny. It’s where I make the big bucks so I can come here once a year and listen to you tell me how lucky you are and what a pile of shit my life is.”

Jenny held up her hand. “Hey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it that way. No offense.”

Brad shook his head. “No offense taken. You really are

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lucky, and my life really is a pile of shit, but once a year I can afford to leave that sewer and come up here where I can breathe some of the last clean air on earth and live the kind of life I always imagined I wanted to.”

With a wry smile, Jenny turned to Brad. “Just dinner, right?”

Brad held up both hands. “Absolutely.”

“You’re going to be disappointed if you expect more.”

“I’ll be happy with what I can get.”

Jenny scanned her instruments, then looked out her windshield. Wouldn’t it be nice if everyone would be happy with that? She didn’t think anybody could be, not even herself. Jenny frowned. What would it take to make her happy? Then she smiled, knowing the answer. Alaska was nice. The scenery was beautiful and the money was great, but there was really only one place where she wanted to be: down in the Caribbean, on her own special island she called Jenny Cay.

More than anything, she wanted to be back on that tiny island, living life the way she wanted to live it. The hurricanes had been doing a number on the Caribbean this year, but she could put up with a few weeks of tropical storms and hurricanes better than she could put up with another six months of winter. It was September and it had already been snowing in northern Alaska.

“So, is this what you do?” Brad asked, motioning to the vista around them. “Taking fishermen down the peninsula?”

Jenny shook her head. “I fly anything and anybody anywhere they want to go as long as I can fit it into one of our airplanes and get in the air with it. This state is so big, even if we did have good roads, which we don’t, it would take forever to get anywhere. Juneau is the state capital, but you can’t get down there from anywhere else in Alaska except by boat or air.”

“I didn’t know that,” Brad said.

Jenny motioned toward the rear of the airplane. “This is the biggest airplane we have. We use it when I have a lot of cargo, like I do today, but sometimes I’ll put all the seats in and go

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down and pick up a load of cruisers from Seward. The harbor at Anchorage isn't deep enough for cruise ships, so they have to make port at Seward. That long ride to Anchorage can be a rude introduction to Alaska for the cruisers from the lower forty-eight."

"Have you ever landed on a glacier?"

"Sure, but not with this airplane. This one is strictly for open water and smooth runways. We have two smaller airplanes that we use most of the time. One is a floatplane; the other is a Cessna taildragger that belongs to me. We put wheels on it in the summer and skis on it in the winter."

"Sounds like people in Alaska use airplanes like everyone else uses a car."

"Pretty much."

"You people probably have your share of aircraft accidents, flying in all sorts of conditions and landing in all sorts of places."

"More than you hear about down in the lower forty-eight, that's for sure. That's why we're required, by state law, to carry food to last us and all our passengers for a week."

"A week!"

"You got it. And, in addition to food, we have to carry an ax or hatchet, a first aid kit, fishing gear, a knife, matches, mosquito netting, and signaling devices like smoke bombs or a Very pistol. During the winter, we're also required to carry a pair of snowshoes, a sleeping bag, and a blanket for everyone on board. Most of us carry tents as well. On top of that, until recently we were also required by law to carry a pistol, revolver, shotgun, or rifle. Most of us still do."

"Bears, huh?"

"No, food. I'm not sure what Chuck has in his emergency box back there on this airplane, but I carry mostly freeze-dried stuff in my Cessna. If I'm down for two weeks I'd like to add some real meat to my diet, so I carry a shotgun for small animals and birds and a forty-four Magnum revolver to use if a moose happens to get close enough. I'd hate to try to kill a bear. He would really get mad if I just wounded him. Even if I were lucky enough to kill him, bear meat doesn't taste all that

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good to me. Moose isn't too bad."

Brad chuckled. "I sure got my fill of fish this week."

"I'll bet you did."

Brad pointed to the clouds ahead of them. "Looks like we're going to get some rain."

"A few showers are around, but nothing serious, not for a few hours anyway according to the latest weather update. Been like that all summer. You guys were lucky to get as much sun as you did."

"How can you fly in clouds without radar?"

"This helps," Jenny said, pointing to her small GPS receiver with its multicolored terrain display screen. "But we try to fly under the clouds. Lots of times the ceiling is so low we can't see the tops of the mountains around us."

"Sounds like fun."

"It can be."

Brad pointed to the altimeter. "We're at twelve thousand five hundred, huh?"

Jenny nodded. "That's the recommended altitude to get us over the mountains between King Salmon and Anchorage. Mount Spurr, just over eleven thousand, is the tallest one anywhere near us, but it's north of our flight path. We'll pass closer to the Redoubt Volcano. It's just over ten thousand. Once we get past it we'll be dropping down pretty fast to get to Lake Hood."

"Too bad there's not a pass to get through the mountains, instead of over them, like we have for automobiles."

"There are natural passes you can use if you really want to," Jenny said. "Instead of flying over them like we're doing, you can fly through them at less than four thousand using Merrill Pass if you've got the balls." Jenny shook her head. "But there are several twists and turns in that pass and the weather changes awfully fast. If you only have a few hundred feet of air under you and all of a sudden you're in a cloud bank and can't see beyond your propeller, your only hope is that you'll survive the crash long enough for someone to rescue you."

"That bad, huh?"

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"There are several aircraft scattered along the Merrill Pass route. Some of the pilots made it out alive; some didn't," Jenny said, then turned her head and yelled over the roar of the engines, "Hey, Dennis!"

"Yeah?"

"Can you take these guys over to Stevens in your pickup? I can't raise Chuck on the radio to call a taxi for them!"

"No, problem, Jenny!"

"Thanks. Buckle up, guys! We're approaching Anchorage." Then she turned to Brad. "You can stay if you want to, but I'm going to be a little busy for a few minutes."

"You got it," Brad said. Then he added, "Thanks. I've always wanted to sit in the cockpit during a landing."

Jenny smiled and nodded as she gazed out her windshield. Something she did every day, as part of her job, was something special to this man. It had been a special thrill to her, too, while taking her first flying lessons as a teenager. She needed to remember that.

* * *

THE LAKE HOOD Seaplane Base was on a mile-long, barbell-shaped lake nestled against the Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport. Open to the public, Lake Hood was the world's busiest seaplane base, handling as many as two hundred flights per day. Docking space consisted of niches dug into the edges of the lake, as well as jetties built out into the lake. During the summer, there might be over three hundred floatplanes parked on and around the lake.

In addition to the floatplanes on the lake, there were another three hundred or so wheeled aircraft parked at the Lake Hood Strip, a gravel runway just north of the lake. Jenny's Cessna 180 was parked there.

At any time of the day, the Anchorage Air Traffic Control Center might have to juggle a Cessna floatplane departing the seaplane base with fishermen on their way down the peninsula, a Piper with wheeled-skis leaving the strip with tourists wanting to land on a Denali glacier, and a Boeing 757 approaching Stevens International with two hundred more tourists on board.

7

JENNY LANDED on Lake Hood and headed for Northstar's docking space on a jetty that was wide enough for an auto road with a row of metal buildings along one side. When she got close, she cut her engines. When the side of a pontoon gently bumped the docking fenders, Dennis jumped out and secured the airplane with lines attached to cleats. "Thanks, Dennis," Jenny called out as she climbed out of the airplane. "Chuck is usually here to do that. I'm going to find out what his problem is. Meanwhile, you guys unload your gear. Leave the box labeled 'Emergency.'"

Leaving Dennis to direct the unloading process, Jenny walked a few yards to a small metal building between other small metal buildings on the jetty. She tried the door. It was open. As she walked in, she called out, "Where in the hell have..." Jenny stopped and gaped at the sight of her boss sprawled out in his desk chair. His arms were dangling by his side, his head was tilted back, and his shirtfront was covered with blood. "Oh, my god," she whispered as she slowly backed out and closed the door.

Trembling, she walked back toward the airplane and motioned for Dennis. When he came over to her, she said, "Get the men out of here as quick as you can. I've got to call nine-one-one."

Dennis frowned. "Chuck?"

Jenny nodded.

"What?"

Jenny shook her head. "Get those men out of here now! They might not make their flight if you don't."

"I'll get my truck."

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The next few minutes were difficult for everyone. Jenny was obviously stressed as she tried to get rid of the fishermen as quickly as she could, and the men didn't understand why she and Dennis had suddenly become curt and businesslike with them. As the men climbed into Dennis's crew cab pickup, their goodbyes to Jenny weren't nearly as jovial as they might have been ten minutes earlier.

Jenny waved to the men with a forced smile, then opened her cell phone and entered 9-1-1. She told the operator who she was, where she was, and what she thought the emergency was. Less than five minutes later, an ambulance, an Anchorage police car, and an unmarked sedan with flashing blue lights in its grill came down the jetty in a big hurry. Jenny recognized the officer in the unmarked car as Anchorage Police Lieutenant Cliff Ervin. He'd asked her for a date a couple of times. She enjoyed his company at social gatherings with others but had turned him down, knowing it would be a frustrating and unsatisfying evening for both of them.

Jenny pointed to the door and waited outside for the officers to start their investigation. Soon, Lieutenant Ervin came out.

"Hello, Jenny."

"Hi, Cliff. Is he dead?"

Cliff nodded. "Someone stabbed him."

"Oh, my god," Jenny said softly.

"Can you tell me anything about it?" the police officer said as he pulled out his pen and note pad.

"He called me while I was down the peninsula picking up Dennis Morgan and four fishermen. I was busy at the time, so he left a message."

"When was that?"

"About three o'clock."

Lt. Ervin glanced at his watch. "What was the message?"

"He said the man I had been expecting had showed up."

"Who was that?"

"I have no idea. I'm done for the day. I'm not expecting anyone else to show up today."

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Cliff frowned. "You've got to think about that, Jenny. It had to be someone that Chuck thought you were expecting."

Jenny frowned and shook her head. "I can't think of anyone. I've got a couple of charters tomorrow, one down to Seward for some cruisers, another to run a couple up to Fairbanks. That's about it."

"All right. We'll start asking anyone on the jetty if anyone saw anything suspicious about, uh, what? Three o'clock?"

Jenny nodded. Then, suddenly, her eyes lit up. "No! I can do better than that!"

"How?"

"Someone broke in about six months ago. Chuck had a security camera set up inside. I'll get the tape and play it for you," Jenny said as she started for the door.

"Jenny, wait!" Cliff called out as he held out his arm toward her.

"What?"

"You can't go in there. It's a crime scene."

"I've got to get the tape for you. The recorder is in a locked closet across from the bathroom."

Cliff shook his head and held out his hand. "Give me the keys, Jenny. I'll get it."

Jenny glared at the man for a moment, then slowly calmed down, knowing he was right. She dug her key ring out of her bag and handed it to the policeman. He left the door ajar when he went back inside. Through the crack, she saw Cliff bring the tape out and mount it in the videotape player underneath the small television in the corner of the office. Cliff wouldn't let her inside, but he had left the door ajar on purpose, to allow her to watch. She appreciated that. With the officers surrounding the television, Jenny couldn't see anything, but she did hear comments from the officers. "Looks like a boning knife, could have bought it anywhere." "What's that? A nine millimeter?" Shortly, Cliff came to the door. "Jenny, do you know what kind of gun Chuck kept in his desk drawer?"

"Yeah, a nine millimeter Beretta."

"Thanks."

"Please? Can I see?" Jenny asked.

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“I don’t think you want to.”

“Yes, I do. Please?”

Cliff paused, then nodded. “Don’t touch anything.”

“Like my fingerprints aren’t already all over this place.”

“But none after, right?”

Jenny walked into the small office when the police officer opened the door. Lt. Ervin called out, “Play it again.”

Biting her lower lip, Jenny watched the video. To conserve space on the tape, the camera only captured one frame every second, making the video look jerky. She watched a young dark-complected man wearing a dark, heavy parka come into the room and say something. Chuck frowned at the man, shook his head as he said something, then picked up his phone, punched a long series of numbers, then spoke into it while watching the other man. When the dark-complected man pulled a long thin knife out of his jacket, Chuck reached down for a drawer in his desk. “Oh, my god,” Jenny whispered as she watched the visitor plunge the knife into Chuck’s chest, then grab his throat and squeeze hard. When the killer was satisfied that Chuck was dead, he opened the drawer and found the pistol. He checked the clip, put the pistol in his pocket, then pulled the knife out of Chuck’s chest and wiped the blood on the man’s shirt. He paused, looking about the office, then focused on a roll of gray duct tape on Chuck’s desk. He pulled off a long strip of the wide tape, folded it around the knife blade, then put the knife inside his parka. He turned to go, then turned back, picked up the roll of tape, and dropped it into one of the large cargo pockets in his parka. He turned to go once more, then, for an instant, the killer glanced up at the camera.

“Freeze that!” Cliff ordered.

One of the other officers backed up the tape to the point where the killer was looking up at the camera and hit Pause.

“Recognize him, Jenny?”

Chills crawled up Jenny’s neck as she stared hard at the grainy picture of the man’s face. No, she didn’t know him, but she was absolutely sure she knew why he was in Alaska. He had killed Chuck, but was here to kill her.

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Shortly after she had begun working for him, she had told Chuck to let her know if a dark-skinned man with a Caribbean accent came in asking for her. Then she told him why: the man might want to kill her. That was what Chuck was trying to tell her in his message.

Jenny's legs were suddenly so weak that she thought she would fall. After two years, those who wanted her dead had found her again. Jenny slowly shook her head. "No, I've never seen him before in my life."

"You sure?"

"Positive."

"Then, why would he be here, asking for you?"

"I don't have a clue," Jenny said, then turned and walked out of the office. Sometimes a simple lie was better than a complicated truth. To explain why this man was here would require an explanation of her past. That would get very complicated. It might even lead down into a rat hole called Harbor Cay. She shook her head. Anything but that. When she heard footsteps on the gravel, she turned and saw Cliff following her. "What?"

"You got to talk to me, Jenny. While you were watching the video, I was watching you. Either you know him, or you know why he killed Chuck. If I'm going to find the guy, you've got to tell me what you know," Cliff said, then paused, frowning. "He wasn't after Chuck. He's after you...isn't he?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"You want to tell me about it?"

"I'm not sure I can."

"Why not?"

"It's complicated," she said, trying not to lie to the policeman, at the same time, not wanting to tell him anything that would lead to Harbor Cay.

"I'm sure it is," Lt. Ervin said as he frowned at Jenny. "Try anyway."

Trying to end the conversation, Jenny said, "I'm not sure I'm allowed to. I was working for the DEA at the time. You'll have to check with them first."

Frowning at the news, the policeman asked, "Do you have a

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number I can call to verify that?”

“Just call the DEA Nassau station. I haven’t been in contact with anyone down there for a couple of years so that’s the best I can do.”

The unhappy policeman scowled. “I’ll call them. In the meantime, let’s assume your former employers will give you clearance to talk to me about this,” he said, then glared at Jenny. “So, meet me in my office in an hour and you can tell me why that man wants to kill you. All right?”

Jenny glared back at the policeman. “He’s got a two-hour head start on you. Why don’t you start looking for him instead of standing here giving me a hard time?” Jenny turned and pointed to the Stevens terminal building on the other side of the lake. “If I were you, I’d be over there, instead of standing here. It’s possible that his flight hasn’t left yet. As a matter of fact, I think I just might head over that way.”

“Don’t Jenny, leave this to us. We’ve already given his description to TSA and airport security and we’re heading over that way in about two minutes. If he’s still there, we’ll find him.”

“Am I under arrest? Are you telling me I can’t drive over to the airport?”

“You’re free to go, Jenny, but stay out of this. Go home, lock your door, and leave this to me,” Cliff said, then dug a card out of his pocket and offered it to her. “See you in about an hour, all right? I could use your help on this, and you might need mine.”

Jenny took the card and hurried away, her lips drawn tight against her face. “Go home and lock my door, huh? Bullshit on that,” she muttered as she climbed into her SUV. “I know what he looks like. He’s not going to get away if I can help it.”

8

JENNY PARKED in short-term parking. She had a small Glock 27 in the locked glove compartment and thought about taking it with her, but quickly realized that taking a gun into a commercial airport these days was a really bad idea. She got out of her vehicle and hurried into the terminal building with no real plan as to what she would do once she was inside. At the moment, knowing she was doing something to help find the killer instead of cowering behind a locked door was enough of a plan. If she was lucky enough to spot him, she would watch him from a distance until she had a chance to point him out to a policeman. She had no desire to get involved in his capture, but once they had him in custody, it would do her ego a lot of good to be close enough for him to see her smiling at him.

Once inside, she tried to concentrate on dark-complected men, especially those wearing or carrying jackets. There weren't many of them. Most of the African American men in Alaska were airmen stationed up the road at Elmendorf Air Force Base. This crowd was mostly older Caucasians.

She slowly walked about for a few minutes, passing long lines of tourists wearing various layers of clothing in every color of the rainbow. This time of the year, local residents were still walking around in shirtsleeves, but tourists from warmer climates were wearing sweaters and jackets. Jenny nodded. If they were from the Caribbean where the temperature was thirty degrees warmer, they might be wearing cold weather parkas, like the killer was wearing in the video.

As she walked behind a tourist wearing a thick, dark blue parka, she heard someone call her name. She looked up to see

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the four fishermen standing in a check-in line nearby. Brad Barker was waving at her. “Good god,” she said softly. That was just what she needed: someone calling her name while she was looking for a killer who might be looking for her. Bad idea. Time to leave. She gave the fishermen a little wave, then hurried toward the outside door.

* * *

BRAD BARKER SCOWLED as he watched Jenny walk away. What the hell was going on? On the plane, the sexy woman had agreed to have dinner with him, but once they were down, she tried to get rid of all of them as fast as she could without a smile. Now, after he had called out to her, she acted like she didn’t know him. What was that all about? As Brad watched Jenny walk away, he saw a dark-complected man wearing a dark blue parka glancing left, then right, then left again as he followed her. Brad frowned. He had seen men act that way in New York City when they were following a mark they intended to rob at a more convenient place. When Jenny paused at the door, then turned to look back, Brad saw the dark-complected man quickly turn around as well and pull the hood of his parka up over his head. The man waited a few seconds then turned back and hurried after Jenny. “Jesus!” Brad whispered. He had identified Jenny to a stalker. Brad turned to the others and said, “Hold my place, guys. I’ll be right back.”

“Don’t take too long. She’s not worth it.”

Brad waved and hurried out the door, then paused as he watched everyone hurrying to or from their vehicles. When he saw Jenny walking toward short-term parking, with the dark man close behind her, Brad ran after them. He watched Jenny reach her vehicle, open the door, and get in. By then, the man had reached the SUV as well. He opened the left rear door and got in behind Jenny.

Brad paused in back of her vehicle and watched Jenny pass her shoulder bag back to the man in the rear seat. That was all he needed to convince him that Jenny was being robbed. It was his fault. He decided to do something about it.

Brad walked up to the front passenger’s door, tapped on the

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window, then opened the door. Now that it was two against one, Brad expected the robber to bail out with Jenny's bag and hit the pavement running. He didn't. Frowning at the unexpected turn of events, Brad glared at the man. "Get out of here!" he growled, expecting to be obeyed as he usually was by those who worked for him. Instead, he saw the man pointing a gun at him.

"I think it would be better if you came inside," the man said.

The gun startled Brad. It was the kind of thing he might have expected in New York City, but not while he was on vacation in Alaska. Brad looked at Jenny with a knot in his gut. "What do you think?"

"This isn't any of your business, Brad. I think it would be better if you would leave."

Brad looked at the man with the gun. He had about one second to run like hell if he wanted to stay out of whatever this woman was involved in. Why would he do that? He was the one who had called her name in the airport. He was responsible. Besides, at this very moment, his unfaithful wife and her high-priced lawyer were trying to take his kids, his house, and every dime he had ever earned. Why would he run from this, just to get back to that? "Some of the best times I ever had were at parties I crashed," Brad said, then climbed into the passenger's seat and turned to Jenny. "What now?"

"Oh, Brad," Jenny said sadly, shaking her head. "I don't know. Ask him."

Brad turned and glared at the man behind Jenny. Using his best investment banker tone of voice, he said, "Why don't you get out of here and leave us alone before you get into some serious trouble?"

The killer pushed the gun within inches of Brad's face. "Do you want me to kill you now?"

Brad's eyes widened in confusion as he looked into the barrel of the gun. It occurred to him that the man hadn't tried to rob him. Suddenly, he shivered, feeling very cold, then turned his head and stared out the windshield.

"Drive to your airplane with wheels," the killer said.

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Jenny nodded, then headed toward the aircraft parking area next to the Lake Hood Strip, wondering how this man knew she had an airplane parked there.

* * *

A FEW MINUTES LATER, on the other side of Lake Hood, Jenny drove down the wide grassy aisle between two double rows of well-used aircraft from just about every aircraft manufacturer in the world. Halfway down the aisle, Jenny pulled up next to her Cessna 180, then looked at the killer in her rearview mirror. "Now what?"

"You should turn off the engine, then face the door," the killer commanded. When she did, the killer pulled the duct tape out of his jacket pocket and handed it to Brad. "Tape her wrists behind her. Three turns. Then put a piece over her mouth and eyes."

Brad took the roll of gray duct tape. "I've heard this stuff has a thousand and one uses. I've never heard of this one."

As she crossed her hands behind her, Jenny glanced at the clock. Almost six o'clock. She wondered what the man had in mind for them. When Brad finished taping her wrists, she turned around to face him. "Just don't do anything to piss him off. I'm the one he's after, not you."

"Now her mouth and eyes," the killer demanded. "It is late."

Just before he put the tape over Jenny's mouth, Brad leaned forward, gently touched his lips to hers for an instant, then said, "Sorry about this." After putting the tape over Jenny's eyes, Brad turned to the killer. "Now what?"

"Do you see the airplane to your right?" the killer asked, pointing.

Brad turned to look out his side window. When he did, the killer slammed the gun barrel hard against his head. The big man groaned and slumped forward. The killer hurried around to the passenger's door and opened it. By the time Brad regained consciousness, his wrists, mouth, and eyes were taped as well. "Listen to me," the killer said. "Neither of you can see or speak, but I know you can hear me. The two of you will get into the airplane. First the man will get into the back, and then the woman will get into the right front seat, and then

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we will take a little ride. If either of you resists while we board the airplane, I will immediately kill both of you, do you understand?" When he saw them nod, he said, "*Bon!* Now, let's begin."

9

JENNY WAS FUMING. Her airplane was being hijacked, and there was nothing she could do about it. It was bad enough that the killer was stinking up her cockpit with his cheap cologne, but when he buckled her into the copilot's seat, she knew it was going to get a lot worse, and she was right. As soon as she was seated, he had taped her ankles together; then, once he was inside the airplane, he move his hands all over her body, including squeezing her breasts and groping her crotch. She was pretty sure his primary goal was to check for concealed weapons, but the investigation was a lot more intimate than she thought was necessary. Being seated in the copilot's seat also meant that, wherever they were going, she wasn't going to be flying the airplane.

She heard switches being set as he went through his preflight routines; then, after he got a weather update, she heard paper rustling. It was the same sound she made opening her flight charts. They waited several minutes for their turn to take off at the busy aircraft hub, and then they were given departure clearance. With her eyes still taped, Jenny heard the pilot increase the engine's rpm, then felt the airplane rolling down the bumpy gravel runway. Soon, she felt the airplane clear the runway and begin climbing. She had no idea where they were going or even in what direction they were heading.

* * *

FOR WHAT SEEMED like hours, Jenny had tried to guess where they were going, but didn't have a clue. They had made a single turn to the left shortly after takeoff, but after that the aircraft had barely tilted to either side and then only

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momentarily as the killer made minor adjustments to his course. What was also surprising was that, from the loud roar of her engine, she knew he had kept the throttle against the firewall the entire time.

Usually, for the sake of the engine, she would back off on the throttle once she got up to altitude, but apparently this guy was in a hell of a hurry to get somewhere and could care less about the wear and tear it was causing to her engine. She had heard the sound of paper rustling again, and he had called for another weather update, but he had never said anything to her or the fisherman and, without headphones, she couldn't hear the other end of the killer's conversation with Anchorage control.

Suddenly, Jenny felt the killer's fingers clawing at the edge of the tape over her eyes; then he jerked it off quickly to the sound of a muffled cry of pain from her as the tape took some of her eyebrows with it.

The first thing Jenny did was to look about her. She immediately recognized Mount Spurr, rising over eleven thousand feet to her right. That meant they had been on a westward course from Anchorage, had crossed the twenty-mile-wide Cook Inlet, and were now heading into the southern Alaska Range mountains.

She scanned the instruments. The clock showed 6:45. Jenny frowned. They had been in the air for only forty-five minutes. Blindfolded, it had seemed a lot longer than that. The other instruments told her they were in level flight, heading due west at an altitude of four thousand feet at one hundred miles an hour. She looked at Mount Spurr again. Their altitude was not high enough to go over it or any of the other nearby peaks. Instead, they were heading into a wide valley just to the left of Mount Spurr. She wondered why. Then she looked into the back seat and saw the fisherman, Brad, trussed up in duct tape as well, in obvious pain and discomfort. Then she looked at the pilot and glared at him, trying without words to tell him what she would like to do to him given the opportunity.

The killer turned and looked at Jenny with admiration.

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“*Bon!* I can see the fire in your eyes. You are not afraid. *Très bon!* You must be very important for someone to pay me so much money. I am told, ‘Go to Alaska. Find Jenny Smart. Make the woman disappear forever.’” The pilot held up a Sectional Aeronautical Chart and showed it to Jenny. The chart, folded and refolded like an oversized road map, gave pilots valuable information about the terrain and landing facilities. “Before I come here, I study aircraft charts of Alaska very well, and then I come to Alaska. I use small airplanes like this to find the place to make you disappear. I am a very good pilot. I fly airplanes like this many times in South America mountains. Today, I am ready. I go to Northstar to hire you to take me to visit Shamrock Glacier. On the way, I will take control of the airplane and earn my reward.

“That is my plan, but when the man looks at me, I think he knows my plan for you. He warns you, so I must kill him. Now, I must leave Alaska, but it would not be good for me to leave without doing what I am to be paid to do, so I go to the side of the lake and wait for you to come in your airplane. I see you land, I see you talk with the police, and then I see you point to the airport and leave in your SUV. I don’t know your face, but I see how you are dressed from far away. So, I think that if I am lucky, I will find you and still make you disappear forever, so I hurry to the airport. When I get there, there are many people. I look for you, but there are many women dressed like you. Then your friend calls out your name and I know I am very lucky. Now, I can go home and get paid enough to live a very good life.” The killer paused as he pointed to the sun. “But it is very late now. Soon there will be no light, so I must hurry now to do what I had planned to do much earlier on another day.”

Jenny watched the killer guide the airplane into the three-mile-wide valley ahead of them, maintaining four thousand feet. She heard him ask for another weather update, but without headphones she didn’t know what the answer was. She glanced at the clock. It was going to be sundown in a couple of hours. What was he up to?

They flew into the valley beyond Mount Spurr, over twelve-

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mile-long Chakachamna Lake, past the three-mile-wide snout of Shamrock Glacier, then continued to Kenibuna Lake. Once over Kenibuna Lake he veered right and continued onward. Jenny's eyes grew wide. He was going through Merrill Pass. Why would he be going to the western side of these mountains this time of the day? Jenny watched the altimeter remain steady at four thousand feet as the twisting and turning valley floor slowly rose up between mountains rising thousands of feet higher on either side. Jenny slowly shook her head. The pilot was crazy if he planned to cross Merrill Pass at four thousand. He would have less than a thousand feet of air beneath him at the top of the pass. With wind gusts and downdrafts to deal with, a sane pilot would be much higher.

At one point, the killer pointed to the mangled wreckage of a small airplane scattered among the rocks below them. "Many airplanes have crashed here. They were not good pilots," he said, and then turned to Jenny and poked himself in the chest. "I am a very good pilot!"

With her mouth still taped shut, Jenny glared at the man, knowing what he said wasn't accurate. You had to be a good pilot to fly in Alaska, but sometimes having good flying skills wasn't enough to stay alive while flying in these mountains. You also had to be very lucky.

An hour from Lake Hood, Jenny watched the pilot navigate Merrill Pass by banking sharply to the left, fitting the small airplane in the narrow L-shaped slot between two mountains rising several thousand feet on either side of them. Beyond Merrill Pass he reduced power and began descending rapidly. Ten minutes later, they were back down to three thousand feet in a broad valley on the other side of the mountain range. Jenny recognized Two Lakes in the distance as the pilot continued to reduce power and allowed the airplane to descend to two thousand feet.

Once across Two Lakes, he veered to the right and headed down a valley several miles wide with a river meandering through it. The shallow riverbed was about the width of three football fields and filled with water except where crescent-shaped sandbars had formed inside the turns. As Jenny

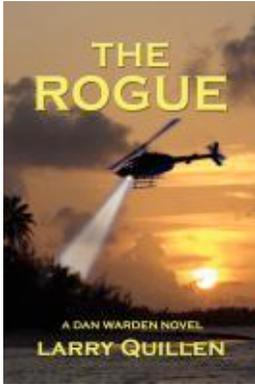
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watched the altimeter of her airplane turn counterclockwise, she glanced at the clock. Almost seven-thirty. It would be sundown in an hour or so, and they were on the wrong side of the Alaska Range. As far as she could remember, there was nothing resembling civilization on the western side of these mountains for three or four hundred miles except for an occasional settlement where a few families huddled together to survive in the Alaskan wilderness.

The killer continued on a southwest course for a few miles, then concentrated on the river ahead as he reduced power and lowered his flaps. Jenny's eyes widened. She knew what was about to happen. He was going to land on one of the thousands of sand and gravel bars created by the meandering stream out here in the middle of nowhere. Jenny puckered the tape on her mouth. If you wanted to get rid of someone forever, leave the body on a gravel bar in a no-man's-land with hungry carnivores nearby.

Jenny nodded. By flying through Merrill Pass at a low altitude, he had stayed under everyone's radar beyond Mount Spurr. If he could get the job done here and get back to Lake Hood Strip without showing up on anyone's radar, he could park her Cessna, walk over to the airport, buy a seat on the next flight heading toward the Caribbean, and no one would ever know what had happened here today. She and the fisherman would simply disappear forever.

As the altimeter needle approached one thousand feet, Jenny watched the killer align the airplane with a gravel bar on the north side of the stream. She nodded again. It looked good, at least fifteen hundred feet long and about two hundred feet wide. She had landed on much shorter gravel bars, sometimes starting her landing on the water, allowing her fat low-pressure tundra tires to ski across the water for a short distance until she reached the bar.



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The Rogue

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