

THE MOUNTAIN BETWEEN US

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THE MOUNTAIN BETWEEN US

PRELUDE

Hey . . .

I'm not sure what time it is. This thing should record that. I woke a few minutes ago. It's still dark. I don't know how long I was out.

The snow is spilling in through the windshield. It's frozen across my face. Hard to blink. Feels like dried paint on my cheeks. It just doesn't taste like dried paint.

I'm shivering . . . and it feels like somebody is sitting on my chest. Can't catch my breath. Maybe broke two or three ribs. Might have a collapsed lung.

The wind up here is steady, leaning against the tail of the fuselage . . . or what's left of it. Something above me, maybe a branch, is slapping the Plexiglas. Sounds like fingernails on a chalkboard. And more cold air is coming in behind me. Where the tail used to be.

I can smell gas. I guess both wings were still pretty full of fuel. I feel like I want to throw up.

A hand is wrapped around mine. The fingers are cold and callused. There's a wedding band, worn thin around the edges. That's Grover.

He was dead before we hit the treetops. I'll never understand how he landed this thing without killing me, too.

When we took off, the ground temperature was in the single digits. Not sure what it is now. Feels colder. Our elevation should be around

11,500. Give or take. We couldn't have fallen more than five hundred feet when Grover dipped the wing. The control panel sits dark, unlit. Dusted in white. Every few minutes the GPS on the dash will flicker, then go black again.

There was a dog here somewhere. All teeth and muscle. Real short hair. About the size of a bread box. Makes angry gurgling sounds when he breathes. Looks like he's jacked up on speed. Wait . . .

"Hey, boy . . . Wait . . . no. Not there. Okay, lick, but don't jump. What's your name? You scared? Yeah . . . me too."

I can't remember his name.

I'm back . . . was I gone long? There's a dog here. Buried between my coat and armpit.

Did I already tell you about him? I can't remember his name.

He's shivering, and the skin around his eyes is quivering. Whenever the wind howls, he jumps up and growls at it.

The memory's foggy. Grover and I were talking, he was flying, maybe banking right, the dash flashed a buffet of blue and green lights, a carpet of black stretched out below us, not a lightbulb for sixty miles in any direction, and . . . there was a woman. Trying to get home to her fiancé and a rehearsal dinner. I'll look.

. . . I found her. Unconscious. Elevated pulse. Eyes are swollen shut. Pupils are dilated. Probably a concussion. Several lacerations across her face. A few will need stitches. Right shoulder is dislocated and left femur is broken. It didn't break the skin, but her leg is angling out and her pant leg is tight. I need to set it . . . once I catch my breath.

. . . It's getting colder. I guess the storm finally caught us. If I don't get us wrapped in something we'll freeze to death before daylight. I'll have to set that leg in the morning.

Rachel . . . I don't know how much time we have, don't know if we'll make it out . . . but . . . I take it all back. I was wrong. I was angry. I never should've said it. You were thinking about us. Not you. I can see that now.

You're right. Right all along. There's always a chance.

Always.

CHAPTER ONE

SALT LAKE CITY AIRPORT
TWELVE HOURS EARLIER

The view was ugly. Gray, dreary, January dragging on. On the TV screen behind me, some guy sitting in a studio in New York used the words “socked in.” I pressed my forehead to the glass. On the tarmac, guys in yellow suits drove trains of luggage that snaked around the planes, leaving snow flurries swirling in their exhaust. Next to me, a tired pilot sat on his flight-weathered leather case, hat in his hand—hoping for a last chance hop home and a night in his own bed.

To the west, clouds covered the runway; visibility near zero, but given the wind, it came and went. Windows of hope. The Salt Lake City airport is surrounded by mountains. Eastward, snowcapped mountains rose above the clouds. Mountains have long been an attraction for me. For a moment, I wondered what was on the other side.

My flight was scheduled to depart at 6:07 p.m., but given delays was starting to look like the red-eye. If at all. Annoyed by the flashing DELAYED sign, I moved to a corner on the floor, against a far wall. I spread patient files across my lap and began dictating my reports, diagnoses, and prescriptions into a digital

recorder. Folks I'd seen the week before I left. While I treated adults too, most of the files on my lap belonged to kids. Years ago Rachel, my wife, convinced me to focus on sports medicine in kids. She was right. I hated seeing them limp in, but loved watching them run out.

I had some more work to do, and the battery indicator on my digital recorder was flashing red, so I walked to the store in the terminal and found I could buy two AA batteries for four dollars or twelve for seven. I gave the lady seven dollars, replaced the batteries in my recorder, and slid the other ten into my backpack.

I had just returned from a medical conference in Colorado Springs where I had been invited to join a panel on "The Intersection of Pediatric Orthopedics and Emergency Medicine." We covered ER procedures and the differing bedside manners needed to treat fearful kids. The venue was beautiful, the conference satisfied several of my continuing ed requirements, and most importantly, it gave me an excuse to spend four days climbing the Collegiate Peaks near Buena Vista, Colorado. In truth, it was a business trip that satisfied my hiking addiction. Many doctors buy Porsches and big homes and pay for country club memberships they seldom use. I take long runs on the beach and climb mountains when I can get to them.

I'd been gone a week.

My return trip took me from Colorado Springs to Salt Lake for the direct flight home. Airline travel never ceases to amaze me; flying west to end up east. The crowd in the airport had thinned. Most folks were home by this time on a Sunday. Those still in the airport were either at their gate, waiting, or at the bar, hovering over a beer and a basket of nachos or hot wings.

Her walk caught my attention. Long, slender legs; purposeful gait, yet graceful and rhythmic. Comfortable, and confident, in her own skin. She was maybe five foot nine or ten, dark-haired,

and attractive, but not too concerned about it. Maybe thirty. Her hair was short. Think Winona Ryder in *Girl, Interrupted*. Or Julia Ormond in Harrison Ford's remake of *Sabrina*. Not a lot of fuss, yet you could find the same style up and down Manhattan with girls who'd paid a lot of money to look like that. My bet was that she had paid very little. Or she could have paid a lot to make it look like she paid a little.

She walked up, eyed the crowd across the terminal, and then chose a spot ten or fifteen feet away on the floor. I watched her out of the corner of my eye. Dark pantsuit, a leather attaché, and one carry-on. Looked like she was returning from a business overnight. She set down her bags, tied on a pair of Nike running shoes, then, eyeing the terminal, sat on the floor and stretched. Based on the fact that not only her head, but also her chest and stomach could touch her thigh and the floor between her legs, I surmised that she had done that before. Her legs were muscular, like an aerobics instructor's. After she stretched a few minutes, she pulled several yellow legal pads from her attaché, flipped through pages of handwritten notes, and started typing on her laptop. Her fingers moved at the speed of hummingbird wings.

After a few minutes, her laptop beeped. She frowned, stuck her pencil between her teeth, and began eyeballing the wall for an outlet. I was using half. She was holding the swinging end of her laptop's power cord.

"Mind if I share?"

"Sure."

She plugged in and then sat cross-legged with the computer on the floor, surrounded by her legal pads. I continued with my files.

"Follow-up orthopedics consultation dated . . ." I studied my calendar, trying to resurrect the date. "January 23. This is Dr. Ben Payne. Patient's name is Rebecca Peterson, identifying

data follows. Date of birth, 7-6-95, medical record number BMC2453, Caucasian female, star right wing on her soccer team, leading scorer in Florida, highly recruited by teams around the country, at last count she had fourteen Division I offers; surgery three weeks ago, post op was normal, presenting no complications, followed by aggressive physical therapy; presents full range of motion, bend test 127 degrees, strength test shows marked improvement, as does agility. She's good as new, or in her words, better. Rebecca reports movement is pain free, and she is free to resume all activities . . . except skateboarding. She is to stay off the skateboard until she's at least thirty-five."

I turned to the next file. "Initial orthopedics consultation dated January 23. This is Dr. Ben Payne."

I say the same thing each time because in the electronic world in which we live, each recording is separate and, if lost, needs to be identified.

"Patient's name is Rasheed Smith, identifying data follows. Date of birth, 2-19-79, medical record number BMC17437, black male, starting defensive back for the Jacksonville Jaguars and one of the fastest human beings I've ever been around. MRI confirms no tear in the ACL or MCL, recommend aggressive physical therapy and that he stay off the YMCA basketball court until he's finished playing professional football. Range of motion is limited due to pain and tenderness, which should subside given therapy during the off-season. Can resume limited strength and speed training with cessation in pain. Schedule two-week follow-up and call the YMCA and tell them to revoke his membership."

I slid the files into my backpack and noticed she was laughing.

"You a doctor?"

"Surgeon." I held up the manila folders. "Last week's patients."

“You really get to know your patients, don’t you?” She shrugged.
“Sorry, I couldn’t help but overhear.”

I nodded. “Something my wife taught me.”

“Which is?”

“That people are more than the sum of their blood pressure plus their pulse divided by their body mass index.”

She laughed again. “You’re my kind of doctor.”

I nodded at her pads. “And you?”

“Columnist.” She waved her hand across the papers in front of her. “I write for several different women’s magazines.”

“What kind of topics do you cover?”

“Fashion, trends, a lot of humor or satire, some relationships, but I’m not Jane Doe and I don’t do gossip.”

“I can’t write my way out of a wet paper bag. How many will you write in a year?”

She weighed her head side to side. “Forty, maybe fifty.” She glanced at my recorder. “Most doctors I know loathe those things.”

I turned it in my hand. “I’m seldom without it.”

“Like an albatross?”

I laughed. “Something like that.”

“Take much getting used to?”

“It’s grown on me. Now I couldn’t live without it.”

“Sounds like a story here.”

“Rachel . . . my wife, gave it to me. I was driving the moving truck to Jacksonville. Moving our life back home. Joining the staff at the hospital. She was afraid of the schedule. Of finding herself on the couch, a doctor’s widow, a gallon of Häagen-Dazs and the Lifeway channel. This . . . was a way to hear the sound of each other’s voice, to be together, to not miss the little things . . . between surgery, making rounds, and the sound of my beeper at two a.m. She’d keep it a day or so, speak her

mind . . . or heart, then pass the baton. I'd keep it a day or two, or maybe three, and pass it back."

"Wouldn't a cell phone do the same thing?"

I shrugged. "It's different. Try it sometime and you'll see what I mean."

"How long you been married?"

"We married . . . fifteen years ago this week." I glanced at her hand. A single diamond decorated her left hand. Absent was the wedding band. "You got one coming up?"

She couldn't control the smile. "I'm trying to get home for my rehearsal dinner party tomorrow night."

"Congratulations."

She shook her head and smiled, staring out across the crowd. "I have a million things to do, and yet here I am making notes on a story about a flash-in-the-pan fashion I don't even like."

I nodded. "You're probably a good writer."

A shrug. "They keep me around. I've heard that there are people who buy these magazines just to read my column, though I've never met them." Her charm was magnetic. She asked, "Jacksonville still home?"

"Yep. And you?"

"Atlanta." She handed me her card. *ASHLEY KNOX*.

"Ashley."

"To everyone but my dad, who calls me Asher. He wanted a boy, was mad at my mom when I appeared with the wrong equipment, or lack thereof, so he changed the ending. Instead of ballet and softball he took me to tae kwon do."

"Let me guess . . . you're one of those crazy people who can kick stuff off the top of other people's heads."

She nodded.

"That would explain the stretching and chest to the floor thing."

She nodded again, like she didn't need to impress me.

"What degree?"

She held up three fingers.

"I worked on a guy a few weeks ago, put a few rods and screws in his shin."

"How'd he do it?"

"Kicked his opponent, who blocked it with an elbow. The shin kept going. Sort of folded it the wrong way."

"I've seen that before."

"You say that like you've been cut on."

"I competed a lot in my teens and early twenties. National championships. Several countries. I broke my fair share of bones and joints. There was a time when my orthopedist in Atlanta was on speed dial. So is this trip work, play, or both?"

"I'm returning from a medical conference, where I sat on a panel, and . . ." I smiled. "Got in some climbing on the side."

"Climbing?"

"Mountains."

"Is that what you do when you're not cutting on people?"

I laughed. "I have two hobbies. Running is one . . . it's how I met Rachel. Started in high school. Tough habit to break. When we moved back home we bought a condo on the beach so we could chase the tide in and out. The second is climbing mountains, something we started while attending medical school in Denver. Well, I attended, she kept me sane. Anyway, there are fifty-four peaks in Colorado higher than 14,000 feet. Locals call them 'fourteeners.' There's an unofficial club of folks who have climbed them all. We started checking them off in medical school."

"How many have you climbed?"

"Twenty. Just added Mt. Princeton. 14,197 feet. It's one of the Collegiate Peaks."

She thought about that a minute. “That’s almost three miles above sea level.”

I nodded. “Close, but not quite.”

“How long does something like that take?”

“Normally a day or less, but conditions this time of year make it a bit”—I shifted my head back and forth—“tougher.”

She laughed. “You need oxygen?”

“No, but acclimating helps.”

“Was it covered in snow and ice?”

“Yes.”

“And was it bitter cold, snowing and blowing like crazy?”

“I’ll bet you’re a good journalist.”

“Well . . . was it?”

“At times.”

“Did you make it up and down without dying?”

I laughed. “Evidently.”

One eyebrow rose above the other. “So, you’re one of those people?”

“What type is that?”

“The ‘man versus wild’ type.”

I shook my head. “Weekend warrior. I’m most at home at sea level.”

She stared up and down the rows of people. “Your wife’s not with you?”

“Not this time.”

My stomach growled. The aroma from the California Pizza Kitchen wafted down the terminal. I stood. “You mind watching my stuff?”

“Sure.”

“Be right back.”

I returned with a Caesar salad and a plate-sized pepperoni pizza just as the loudspeaker cackled.

“Folks, if we can load quickly, we might beat this storm.”

There aren't too many of us, so all zones, all passengers, please board Flight 1672 to Atlanta."

The eight gates around me read *DELAYED*. Frustrated faces populated the seats and walls. A mom and dad ran the length of the terminal hollering over their shoulders at two boys dragging Star Wars suitcases and plastic lightsabers.

I grabbed my pack and my food, and then followed seven other passengers—including Ashley—toward the plane. I found my seat and buckled in, the attendants cross-checked, and we began backing up. It was the fastest load I'd ever seen.

The plane stopped, the pilot got on the intercom: "Folks, we're in line for the deicer, and if we can get them over here, we might beat this storm. By the way, there's plenty of room up front. As a matter of fact, if you're not in first class, it's your own fault. We've got room for everyone."

Everyone moved.

The only remaining seat placed me next to Ashley. She looked up and smiled as she was buckling her belt. "Think we'll get out of here?"

I stared out the window. "Doubtful."

"Pessimist, are you?"

"I'm a doctor. That makes me an optimist with realistic notions."

"Good point."

We sat for thirty minutes while the attendants served us most anything we asked for. I drank spicy tomato juice. Ashley drank Cabernet.

The pilot came on again. His tone did not encourage me. "Folks . . . as you all know, we were trying to beat this storm."

I heard the past tense.

"The controllers in the tower tell us we've got about an hour's window to make it out before the storm closes in. . . ."

Everyone breathed a collective sigh. Maybe there was hope.

“But the ground crew just informed me that one of our two deicing trucks is inoperative. Which means we have one truck attempting to service all the planes on the runway, and ours is the twentieth in line. Long story short, we’re not getting out of here tonight.”

Groans echoed around the plane.

Ashley unbuckled and shook her head. “You got to be kidding me.”

A large man off to my left muttered, “Son of a . . .”

The pilot continued, “Our folks will meet you at the end of the gate. If you’d like a hotel voucher, please see Mark, who’s wearing the red coat and flak jacket. Once you reclaim your baggage, our shuttle will take you to the hotel. Folks, I’m really sorry.”

We walked back into the terminal and watched as each of the DELAYED signs changed to CANCELED.

I spoke for everyone in the terminal. “That’s not good.”

I walked to the counter. The female attendant stood staring at a computer screen, shaking her head. Before I opened my mouth, she turned toward the television, which was tuned to the weather channel. “I’m sorry, there’s nothing I can do.”

Four screens over my shoulder showed a huge green blob moving east southeast from Washington, Oregon, and northern California. The ticker at the bottom of the screen called for snow, ice, single-digit temperatures, and wind chills in the negatives. A couple to my left embraced in a passionate kiss. Smiling. An unscheduled day added to their vacation.

Mark began handing out hotel vouchers and ushering people toward baggage claim. I had one carry-on—a small daypack that doubled as my briefcase—and one checked bag in the belly of the plane. We were all headed to baggage claim whether we liked it or not.

I walked toward the baggage claim and lost Ashley when she stopped at the Natural Snacks store. I found a place near the conveyor belt and looked around. Through the sliding glass doors, I saw the lights of the private airport less than a mile away. Painted on the side of the closest hangar, in huge letters, was one word: CHARTERS.

The lights were on in one of the hangars. My bag appeared. I hefted it atop my free shoulder and bumped into Ashley, who was waiting on hers. She eyed it.

“You weren’t kidding when you said you got in some climbing on the side. Look like you’re climbing Everest. You really need all that?”

My bag is an orangish Osprey 70 backpack, and it’s got a few miles on it. I use it as a suitcase because it works, but its main function is best served hiking and it fits me like a glove. It was stuffed with all my overnight and cold-weather hiking gear for my climbs in the Collegiate Peaks. Sleeping bag, Therm-a-Rest pad, Jetboil stove—maybe the most underappreciated and most valuable piece of equipment I own, next to my sleeping bag—a couple of Nalgene bottles, a few layers of polypropylene, and several other odds and ends that help me stay alive and comfortable when sleeping above ten or eleven thousand feet. There’s also a dark blue pin-striped suit, a handsome blue tie that Rachel gave me, and a pair of Johnston & Murphy’s in need of a shine—which I wore once, for the panel.

“I know my limitations, and I’m not made for Everest. I get pretty sick above fifteen thousand. I’m okay below that. These”—I hefted the pack—“are just the essentials. Good idea to have along.”

She spotted her bag and turned to run it down, then turned back, a pained expression on her face. Apparently the idea of missing her wedding was starting to sink in, bleeding away her

charm. She extended her hand. Her grip was firm yet warm.
“Great to meet you. Hope you can get home.”

“Yeah, you—”

She never heard me. She turned, threw her bag over her shoulder, and headed toward the taxi lane where a hundred people stood in line.

CHAPTER TWO

I carried my bags through the sliding glass doors and flagged down the airport shuttle. Normally it would be busy taxiing people between terminals and the private airport, but given that everyone was trying to leave the airport, it was empty. The driver was thumping his fingers on the steering wheel.

I stuck my head in the passenger window. “You mind giving me a ride to the private airport?”

“Hop in. Got nothing better to do.”

When we arrived in front of the hangar he said, “You want me to wait?”

“Please.”

He sat in the van with the engine running while I ran inside. I pulled my collar up and tucked my hands into my armpits. The sky was clear, but the wind was picking up and the temperature was dropping.

Inside I found a red-hot space heater and a white-haired guy standing next to one of three planes, a small single engine. On the side of the plane it said *Grover’s Charter*, and below that, *Fishing and hunting charters to remote locations*. The ID number on the tail read *138GB*.

He was facing away from me, shooting a compound bow at a target against the far wall. Maybe forty yards. As I walked

in, he released an arrow that whistled through the air. He wore faded blue jeans and a shirt with snap buttons, with the sleeves rolled up. *Grover* was stamped across the back of his leather belt, he carried a Leatherman multi-tool in a holster on his hip, and he'd walked the heels down on his boots, giving him a bow-legged appearance. A Jack Russell terrier stood at his heels, sniffing the air and sizing me up.

I waved at the man. "Hi."

He relaxed, turned, and raised his brow. He was tall, handsome, had a strong, square chin. "Howdy. You George?"

"No, sir. Not George. Name's Ben."

He raised his bow and returned to his target. "Shame."

"How's that?"

He came to full draw and talked while staring through his peep site at the target. "Two guys hired me to fly them into the San Juans. Land them at a small strip down near Ouray." He released the arrow, sending it whistling downrange. "One of them is named George. Thought you might be him." He nocked another arrow.

I came up alongside him and stared at his target. The evidence around the bull's-eye suggested he'd spent a good bit of time shooting that bow. I smiled. "You look like you're new at that."

He laughed, came to full draw a third time, let out half a breath, and said, "I do this when I'm bored and waiting on clients." He released his arrow, and it slid into the target, touching the other two. He set his bow down on the seat of his plane, and we walked toward the target.

He pulled out the arrows. "Some guys retire only to chase a little dimpled ball around somebody's backyard only to beat the white off it with an expensive piece of metal." He smiled. "I fish and hunt."

I eyed his plane. “Any chance I could convince you to fly me out of here tonight?”

He lowered his chin, raised an eyebrow. “You running from the law?”

I shook my head. A smile. “No. Just trying to get home ahead of this storm.”

He checked his watch. “I was fixing to close up shop, head home myself, and climb into bed with my wife.” He noticed my wedding ring. “I ’magine you’d like to do the same.” He smiled a broad smile, exposing white teeth. “Although not with my wife.” He laughed. It was easy, and there was great comfort in it.

“Yes, I would.”

He nodded. “Where’s home?”

“Florida. Thought if I could get ahead of this storm, maybe I could catch a red-eye out of Denver. Or at least get on the first flight out tomorrow.” I paused. “Any chance I could hire you to fly me to anyplace east of the Rockies?”

“Why the hurry?”

“I’m scheduled for a knee and two hip replacements in . . .” I checked my watch. “Thirteen hours and forty-three minutes.”

Grover laughed. Pulled a rag from his back pocket and rubbed the grease around his fingers. “You might be a bit sore tomorrow night.”

I laughed. “I’m performing them. I’m a surgeon.”

He glanced through the hangar doors at the airport in the distance. “Big birds not flying tonight?”

“Canceled. One of their two deicing trucks broke down.”

“They do that a lot. I think the unions got something to do with it. You know . . . they can reschedule surgeries.” He chewed on his lip. “I’ve done that a few times myself.” He tapped his chest. “Bum ticker.”

“I’ve been gone a week. Medical conference. Sort of need to get back. . . . I don’t mind paying.”

He stuffed the rag into his pocket, fed the arrows into the quiver hanging on the side of his bow, and then slid the bow into a foam-lined compartment behind the backseat of the plane. He snugged the Velcro straps. Alongside the bow were three tubes extending back into the body of the plane. He tapped the ends. “Fly rods.”

A hickory-handled something had been fastened alongside the rods. “What’s that?”

“Hatchet. I fly into some remote places. Ain’t much I can’t do with what’s right here.” He tapped a stuff sack beneath the seat, compressing a sleeping bag. “Where I fly, it pays to be self-sufficient.”

Behind the seat hung a vest covered with flies, small scissors, and a net that hung from the back collar. He waved his hand across all of it. “My clients take me to some wonderful places. I couldn’t afford to get there on my own, so I use them as an excuse to do the things I love. My wife, she even goes with me from time to time.” He looked early seventies with the body of a fifty-year-old and the heart of a teenager.

“You own the plane?”

“Yep. It’s a Scout.”

“Looks a lot like Steve Fossett’s plane.”

“Real similar. Powered by a Locoman zero-three-sixty that generates 180 horsepower. Top speed is 140 at full throttle.”

I frowned. “That’s not very fast.”

“I gave up speed a long time ago.” He put his hand on the three-bladed propeller. “She can land at thirty-eight miles an hour, which means I can put her down in a space about the size of this hangar.”

The hangar was maybe 70 feet by 125.

“Which”—he smiled—“means I get to hunt and fish some

rather remote places. Makes me rather popular with my clients.” He sucked through his teeth and stared at a large clock, calculating the time and hours. “Even if I get you to Denver, you may not get out of there tonight.”

“I’ll take my chances. Folks at the counter say that storm may dump enough snow to ground everything out of here tonight and tomorrow.”

He nodded. “Won’t be cheap.”

“How much?”

“One-fifty an hour, and you’ve got to pay my way going and coming. Cost to you is about \$900.”

“You take a credit card?”

He sucked in through his teeth, squinted one eye, and considered me. Like he was having a conversation with himself. Finally he nodded, smiled out the corner of his mouth, and extended his hand. “Grover Roosevelt.”

I shook it. It was callous and firm. “Any relation to the former president?”

He smiled. “Distant, but they don’t claim me.”

“I’m Ben Payne.”

“You really wear a little white jacket that says *Dr. Payne* across the front?”

“Yep.”

“And patients actually pay you to look after them?”

I handed him my business card. “I even cut on some of them.” Across the bottom, the card read:

KNOW PAIN? NO PAYNE.

KNOW PAYNE? NO PAIN.

He tapped the card. “Jesus might get kind of pissed at you for stealing his slogan.”

“Well . . . as of yet, he hasn’t sued me.”

“You operate on Jesus?”

“Not that I know of.”

He smiled, pulled a pipe from his shirt pocket, packed it, and then pulled out a brass Zippo lighter from his front pocket. He flicked it open and sucked in on the pipe, drawing the flame downward and into the tobacco. Once the center was glowing red, he flicked the lighter shut and slid it back into his pocket. “Orthopedics, eh?”

“That . . . and emergency medicine. The two often go hand in hand.”

He dug his hands into his pockets. “Give me fifteen minutes. Need to call my wife. Let her know that I’ll be late, but that I’m taking her out for a steak dinner when I get back. Then . . .” He thumbed over his shoulder toward the bathroom. “I need to see a man about a horse.” He walked toward the phone, talking over his shoulder. “Throw your bags in the back.”

“Has this place got wireless?”

“Yep. Password is *Tank*.”

I flipped open my laptop, found the network, logged in, and downloaded my e-mail, which included my business and personal voice mail, which had all been forwarded as audio files into my e-mail account. Because so much of my time was accounted for, I responded to most everything via e-mail. That done, I synced my recorder with my computer, then e-mailed the dictation file to our transcription office while copying two other servers in the event we needed a backup, or a backup of our backup. It’s a CYA thing. Then I closed my laptop, figuring that I’d respond to all my unanswered e-mail during the flight, allowing them to automatically send when we hit the ground.

Grover reappeared a few minutes later, walking from the phone toward the bathroom. The picture of Ashley Knox, trying to get home, flashed across my eyelids.

“How many people can you carry?”

“Me and two more if they don’t mind sitting hip to hip.”

I stared at the airport over my shoulder. “You mind waiting ten minutes?”

He nodded. “I’ll be working through my preflight.” He stared outside. “But you need to hurry. Your window of opportunity is narrowing.”

My friend in the shuttle van returned me to baggage claim and, as I was his only customer, once again offered to wait. I found Ashley standing on the curb waiting on the next taxi. She had zipped up a North Face down jacket over her suit coat.

“I’ve hired a charter to fly me to Denver. Maybe get ahead of the storm. I know you don’t really know me from Adam’s housecat, but there’s room for one more.”

“You’re serious?”

“Should take a little less than two hours.” I stuck out both hands. “I know this can look a little . . . whatever. But I’ve been through the whole wedding thing, and if you’re anything like my wife you won’t sleep for the next two days trying to make sure every detail is perfect. This is just an honest offer from one professional to another. No strings.”

Skepticism shaded her face. “And you don’t want anything from me?” She looked me up and down. “Because . . . trust me.” She shook her head. “I’ve fought bigger people than you.”

I spun my wedding ring around my finger. “On the back porch of my condo, where I sip coffee and stare out across the ocean, my wife placed three bowls to feed all the dumpster cats that hang out in the parking lot. Now they drink coffee with me every morning. I’ve got names for them, and I’ve gotten used to that little purring thing they do.”

A wrinkle appeared between her eyebrows. “You saying I’m a stray cat?”

“No. I’m saying that I never noticed they were there until she pointed them out. Started feeding them. Opened my eyes.

Now I see them most everywhere. It's sort of spread into the way I look at people. Which is good, 'cause us doctors tend to get a bit jaded after a while." I paused. "I don't want you to miss your wedding. That's all."

For the first time I noticed she was kind of hopping around like she had nervous feet or something.

"Will you let me split the fare with you?"

I shrugged. "If that'll make you feel better about going—but you're welcome either way."

She stared down the runway, shifting from foot to foot. "I'm supposed to take my six bridesmaids to breakfast in the morning, followed by a few hours at the spa." She looked at the shuttle and the hotel lights in the distance. She took a deep breath and smiled. "Getting out of here tonight would be . . . fantastic." She glanced back inside. "Can you wait three minutes?"

"Sure, but . . ." The green blob inched closer to the airport on the screen behind us.

"Sorry. Too much coffee. Was just trying to make it to the hotel. Figure the bathroom here is bigger than the one on that plane."

I laughed. "Chances are good."

CHAPTER THREE

Grover was sitting in the plane, headphones on, clicking buttons and turning dials in front of him. “You ready?”

“Grover, this is Ashley Knox. She’s a writer from Atlanta. Getting married in about forty-eight hours. Thought maybe we could give her a lift.”

He helped her with her bag. “Be my pleasure.”

He stowed our luggage behind the rear seat, and my curiosity got the better of me. “Any storage space in the tail?”

He opened a small door near the rear of the tail and smiled. “Currently in use.” He pointed to a bright orange battery-powered gizmo. “It’s called an ELT.”

“You sound like a doctor, speaking in acronyms.”

“Emergency Landing Transmitter. If we crash-land, and that thing experiences more than thirty pounds of impact pressure, it sends out a tone on emergency frequency 122.5. That lets other planes know we’ve had a bit of trouble. Flight service picks up the signal, sends out a couple of planes, triangulates our position, and sends in the cavalry.”

“Why’d it take them so long to find Steve Fossett’s plane?”

“ELTs are not designed to survive impacts that occur at over 200 mph.”

“Oh.”

We climbed into the plane, and he shut the door behind us and cranked the engine while Ashley and I put on the headsets hanging above our seats. He was right. It was tight. Hip to hip.

We rolled out of the hangar, where he sat flicking more switches and moving the stick between his knees and adjusting knobs. I'm not a plane person, but Grover looked to me like he could fly that thing in his sleep. Two dash-mounted GPS units sat on either end of the control panel.

I'm naturally curious, so I tapped him on the shoulder and pointed. “Why two?”

“Just in case.”

I tapped him again. “Just in case what?”

He laughed. “One quits on me.”

While he was going through his preflight, I dialed my voice mail. One message. I held the phone to my ear.

“Hey . . . it's me.” Her voice was low. Tired. Like she'd been sleeping. Or crying. I could hear the ocean in the background. The waves rhythmically rolling up on shore. That meant she was standing on the porch. “I don't like it when you leave.” She took a deep breath. A pause. “I know you're worried. Don't be. In three months, this'll all be forgotten. You'll see. I'll wait up.” She attempted a laugh. “We all will. Coffee on the beach. Hurry . . . I love you. It'll all work out. Trust me. And don't think for a minute that I love you any less. I love you the same. Even more. You know that. . . . Don't be angry. We'll make it. I love you. With all of me, I love you. Hurry home. Meet you on the beach.”

I clicked the phone shut and sat staring out the window.

Grover glanced at me out of the corner of his eye and gently pressed the stick forward, rolling us down the blacktop. He spoke over his shoulder. “You want to call her back?”

“What?”

He pointed at my cell phone. "You want to call her back?"
"No . . ." I waved him off, slid it into my pocket, and stared out at the storm. "It's okay." I didn't know how he'd heard anything over the drone of the propeller. "You've got pretty good ears."

He pointed at the microphone connected to my headset. "Your mike picked up her voice. Might as well have been listening to it myself." He pointed at Ashley. "There are no secrets in a plane this small."

She smiled, tapped her earphones, and nodded, watching him work the controls.

He slowed to a stop. "I can wait if you want to call her."

I shook my head. "No . . . really, it's okay."

Grover spoke into his mike. "Control, this is one-three-eight-bravo, request permission to take off."

A few seconds passed. and a voice spoke through our headphones. "One-three-eight-bravo, you're cleared for takeoff."

I pointed at the GPS. "Does that unit show the weather radar?"

He punched a single button, and the screen switched to something resembling what we'd seen on the weather channel in the terminal. The same green blob was moving left to right, encroaching on us. He tapped the screen. "That there is a doozie. A lot of snow in that green cloud."

Two minutes later we were airborne and climbing. He spoke over the microphone to both of us. "We'll climb to 12,000 feet and cruise about fifty miles southeast across the San Juan Valley toward Strawberry Lake. Once she's in sight we'll turn northeast, head across the High Uintas Wilderness Area and then descend to Denver. Flight time is a little more than two hours. Sit back, relax, and feel free to move about the cabin. In-flight meal and entertainment service will begin immediately."

Sardines had more room than the two of us.

Grover reached into the door pocket, passed two bags of smoked almonds over his shoulder, and began singing “I’ll Fly Away.”

He cut the song midsentence. “Ben?”

“Yes.”

“How long you been married?”

“Got married fifteen years ago this week.”

Ashley piped up. “Tell the truth . . . is it still exciting or just ho-hum?” There was more to her question than just the question.

Grover laughed. “I’ve been married almost fifty years, and trust me, it gets better. Not worse. Not dull. I love her more today than the day we married, and I thought that impossible when I was standing in that July sun with sweat running down my back.”

She looked at me. “How ’bout it? Got any plans?”

I nodded. “Thought I’d bring her some flowers. Open a bottle of wine and watch the waves roll up on the sand.”

“You still bring her flowers?”

“Every week.”

She turned sideways, lowering her head, raising one eyebrow, which pulled up one lip—doing that thing women do when they don’t believe a word you’re saying. “You bring your wife flowers every week?”

“Yep.”

Grover piped in. “’Atta boy.”

The journalist in her surfaced. “What’s her favorite flower?”

“Potted orchids. But they’re not always blooming when you need them, so if I can’t get her an orchid, then I go to this shop not too far from the hospital and buy whatever is blooming.”

“You’re serious?”

I nodded.

“What does she do with all the orchids?” She shook her head.
“Please don’t tell me you just pitch them.”

“I built her a greenhouse.”

A single eyebrow lifted. “A greenhouse?”

“Yep.”

“How many orchids you have?”

I shrugged. “Last time I counted, 257.”

Grover laughed. “A true romantic.” He spoke over his shoulder. “Ashley, how’d you meet your fiancé?”

“The courtroom. I was writing a story about a celebrity trial in Atlanta. He served as opposing counsel. I interviewed him, and he invited me to dinner.”

“Perfect. Where’re you two going on your honeymoon?”

“Italy. Two weeks. Starting in Venice and ending in Florence.”

Turbulence shook the plane.

She turned the questioning back toward Grover. “Just curious, Mr. . . . ?” She snapped her fingers.

He waved her off. “Call me Grover.”

“How many hours have you logged in the air?”

He dipped the plane hard right, then pulled back on the stick, shooting us upward and sending my stomach into my throat. “You mean can I get you to Denver and your wedding without dipping the nose into a mountain?”

“Yeah . . . something like that.”

He rocked the wheel, left then right, dipping each wing. “Including or not including time spent in the military?”

White-knuckled, I latched a death grip on the handle above my head.

Ashley did likewise and said, “Not.”

He leveled out, smooth as a tabletop. “’Bout 15,000.”

Her hand relaxed. “And including?”

“Somewhere north of twenty.”

I exhaled and let go of the handle. The inside of my fingers were red. He spoke to both of us. I could hear the smile in his voice.

“You two feel better now?”

His dog crawled out from under his seat, hopped up on his lap, and stared over his shoulder at us. Snarling and twitching like a squirrel on steroids. His body was one massive, rippled muscle, but his legs were only four or five inches long. Looked like somebody had cut him off at the knees. He commanded a lot of personal space, and reading his body language told me that this cockpit was his space.

Grover again. “You two, meet Tank. My copilot.”

“How many hours has he got?” I asked.

Grover’s head tilted, and he was quiet a minute. “Somewhere between three and four thousand.”

The dog turned and stared out through the windshield. Satisfied, he hopped down off of Grover’s lap and curled back into his hole beneath the seat.

I leaned forward slightly, staring over the top of his seat to watch Grover’s hands. Gnarled. Meaty. Dry skin. Big knuckles. Wedding ring thin around the edges. It hung loosely around the base of his finger, but probably needed dishwashing soap to get it around the knuckle.

“How long will it take us to get there?”

He slid a silver pocket watch from his shirt, clicked it open with one hand. A woman’s picture was taped to the inside of the cover. He then stared at his instruments. His GPS gave him estimated arrival time, but I got the feeling he was double-checking his instruments. Something he’d done a lot. He clicked the watch shut. “Given our crosswind . . . right at two hours.”

The picture I’d glimpsed was tattered and cracked, but even faded she was beautiful.

“You got kids?”

“Five, and thirteen grandchildren.”

Ashley laughed. “You been busy.”

“At one time.” He smiled. “Three boys. Two girls. Our youngest is probably older than you.” He glanced over his shoulder.

“Ben, how old are you?”

“Thirty-nine.”

He spoke again. “And you, Ashley?”

“Don’t you know you’re never supposed to ask a lady her age?”

“Well, technically I’m not supposed to put two people in that backseat, but I’m old-school and it’s never stopped me and you two seem to be doing just fine.”

I tapped him on the shoulder. “What’s the deal with one or two people?”

“The FAA has stated from on high that I’m only allowed one person in that backseat.”

Ashley smiled and stuck a finger in the air. “So this isn’t legal?”

He laughed. “Define legal.”

She stared out the glass. “So when we land . . . are we going to the terminal or to jail?”

He laughed. “Technically, they don’t know you’re on this plane, so I doubt they’ll be waiting to arrest you. If they do, I’ll tell them you kidnapped me and I’d like to press charges.”

She looked at me. “I feel better.”

He continued. “This plane is designed to fly low and slow. Because of that I fly under a VFR designation, meaning ‘visual flight rules.’ ”

I didn’t understand any of this. “Which means?”

“Which means I don’t have to file a flight plan as long as I plan to fly by sight. Which I am. Which means what they don’t know won’t hurt them. So?” His head was cocked back, looking in Ashley’s direction. “Your age?”

“Thirty-four.”

He looked at his instrument panel and then eyed the one of the two GPS units and shook his head. “Wind drift is killing us. This is a big storm coming in. It’s a good thing I know where I’m going; otherwise we’d be way off course.” He laughed to himself. “Youngsters. Both of you. Your whole life before you. What I wouldn’t do to be thirtysomething, knowing what I know now.”

The two of us sat quietly in the back. Ashley’s disposition had changed. More pensive. Less charming. I wasn’t all that comfortable knowing I’d just put her in a precarious position.

Grover picked up on it. “Don’t you two worry. It’s only illegal if you get caught, and I’ve never been caught. In a couple hours you’ll be on the ground and on your way.” He coughed, cleared his throat, and laughed some more.

The night sky shone through the Plexiglas above my head. The stars looked close enough to touch.

“All right, you two.” Grover paused, checking his instruments. He coughed again.

I’d heard it the first time, but it was the second time that caught my attention.

He said, “Given that we’re trying to outrun that storm over your left shoulder and given the wind drift and given that we’ve got a pretty good tailwind now and given that I don’t carry oxygen, we’ve got to stay below 15,000 feet or you’ll land with a headache.”

Ashley said, “I hear a *so* coming.”

“So,” Grover continued, “hold on because we’re coming up on the Uintas.”

“You-what-as?”

“The High Uintas Wilderness. Largest east-to-west mountain range on the continent, home to 1.3 million acres of uncivilized wilderness, gets five to seven hundred inches of snow a year—

more in some of the higher elevations. More than seven hundred lakes, some of the best fishing and hunting anywhere.”

“Sounds remote.”

“Ever see the movie *Jeremiah Johnson*?”

“One of my favorites.”

He pointed down. Nodded longingly. “That’s where they filmed it.”

“No kidding?”

“No kidding.”

The ride was starting to get bumpy. My stomach jumped into my throat. “Grover? You know those 3-D theme park rides that move but don’t go anywhere?”

He rolled the stick toward his left knee. “Yep.”

“I call them vomit comets. Is this going to be one of those?”

“Nothing to it. Feels like little more than a rolling roller-coaster ride. Nice and easy. You should actually enjoy it.”

He stared out the glass and we did likewise. The dog jumped up on his lap.

“In the middle is a national forest that’s designated a wilderness, which means there are no motorized vehicles of any kind allowed. Hence, it’s one of the more remote places on the planet. More Mars than earth. Tough to get out of and hard as nails to get into. If you robbed a bank and were wanting to hide, it’d be a great place to do it.”

Ashley laughed. “You speaking from experience?”

Another cough. Another laugh. “I plead the fifth.”

The wilderness spread out beneath us. “Grover?”

“Yep.”

“How far can we see right now out the windshield?”

He paused. “Maybe seventy miles, give or take.”

There was not a single light in any direction.

“How many times have you made this run?”

He tilted his head. “A hundred or more.”

“So you could do it with your eyes closed?”

“Maybe.”

“Good, ’cause if we get any closer to the snowcapped peaks beneath us, they’ll scrape off the bottom of the plane.”

“Naw . . .” He was playing with us. “We got a good hundred feet. Although it will pucker up your butt if you start looking at them.”

Ashley laughed. Grover pulled a sleeve of Tums from his shirt pocket, popped two, started chewing, and coughed again. He tapped his chest, covered his microphone, and burped.

I tapped him on the shoulder. “Tell me about your bum ticker. How long you been coughing and popping antacids?”

He pulled back on the stick, bringing the nose up, and we climbed, rose up over what looked like a plateau, and skirted between two mountains. The moon appeared out the left glass. Shining down on a world blanketed in white.

He was quiet a minute, looking right, then left. “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Ashley answered for all of us. “Surreal.”

“Doc,” Grover started, “I saw my cardiologist last week. He’s the one recommended the antacids.”

“Did you have the cough then?”

“Yep, it’s why my wife sent me.”

“They run an EKG?”

“Yep. All clear.”

“Do yourself a favor and go back. Might be nothing. But might be something, too.”

“Think I should?”

“I think it’d be worth another look.”

He nodded. “I live by a couple simple rules. One of those is that I stick to what I’m good at and I give people credit at sticking to what they’re good at.”

“So you’ll go?”

“Probably can’t get in tomorrow, but maybe the middle part of the week. That soon enough?”

I sat back. “Just get in this week. Deal?”

Ashley interrupted us. “Tell me about your wife.”

We were rolling across mountaintops with precision. Grover was quiet a moment, then spoke, his tone lower. “A Midwest girl. She married me when I had nothing but love, dreams, and lust. Gave me children, stuck with me when I lost everything, believed me when I told her we’d be okay. No offense to present company, but she’s the most beautiful woman on the planet.”

“None taken. So, got any advice for a girl forty-eight hours from walking down the aisle?”

“When I wake up in the morning, she’s holding my hand. I make the coffee, and then she sits with her knees touching mine while we drink it.”

Grover liked talking, so we let him. Not that we had a choice.

He took his time. “I don’t expect you to get all this.” He shrugged. “Maybe one day. We’ve been married a long time, seen a lot, experienced much, but loving somebody gets better the more you do it. You might think an old man like me doesn’t get fired up when she walks across the bedroom in a faded flannel gown, but I do. And she does for me, too.” He laughed. “Although I don’t wear flannel gowns.

“Maybe she ain’t as perky as she was in her twenties, maybe her skin sags behind her arms and down the back of her butt. Maybe she’s got some wrinkles she don’t like, maybe her eyelids droop, maybe her underwear ain’t as small as it used to be, maybe all that’s true . . . but I don’t look like the man in our wedding pictures either. I’m sort of a white-haired, wrinkled, slower, sun-burnt reflection of that boy. It may sound cliché-ish, but I married a woman who fits me. I’m one half of a two-piece puzzle.”

Ashley spoke again. "What's the best part?"

"When she laughs . . . I smile. And when she cries, tears roll down my cheeks." He nodded. "I wouldn't trade that for . . . for nothing."

The drone of the motor vibrated the plane as we rolled over mountaintop and across valley. Grover pointed at the GPS and then out the glass, waving his hand across the earth. "Spent my honeymoon down there. Hiking. Gayle loves the outdoors. We go back every year." He laughed. "Now we drive a Winnebago. Sleep under heated blankets. Electric coffeemaker. Really roughing it."

He shifted in his seat. "You asked me for some advice. I'm going to tell you the same thing I told my girls before they married. Marry the man who's going to walk with you through the next fifty or sixty years. Open doors, hold your hand, make your coffee, rub lotion on the cracks of your feet, put you up on a pedestal where you belong. Is he marrying your face and your bottle-blond hair, or will he love you when you look like whoever you're going to look like in fifty years?"

I broke the silence. "Grover, you missed your calling."

He chuckled, checking his instruments. "How's that?"

"Dr. Phil's got nothing on you. You should've had your own television show. Just you, a couch, and one audience member at a time."

Another laugh. "You two walked into my hangar tonight and saw a blue and yellow plane piloted by a crusty old man with age spots on his hands and an angry little dog at his heels. A quick hop to Denver so you can get on with your busy, scheduled, e-mailed, voice-mailed, text-messaged lives." He shook his head. "I see an enclosed capsule that lifts you up above the problems of the earth and gives you a perspective you can't get on land. Where you can see clearly."

He waved his hands across the landscape passing below us in shadows. “All of us spend our days looking through lenses that are smudged, fogged up, scratched, and some broken. But this here”—he tapped the stick—“this pulls you out from behind the lenses and for a few brief seconds gives you 20/20 vision.”

Ashley’s tone was quiet. “That why you love flying?”

He nodded. “Sometimes Gayle and I will come up here and spend two or three hours. Not saying a word. And not feeling like we need to. Not filling the air with a bunch of static. She’ll sit back there, put her hand on my shoulder, and we’ll skirt the earth. And when we land, all the world seems right.”

We were quiet several minutes.

Then he coughed.

Grover grunted, something low and guttural. He grabbed his chest, leaned forward, pushed off his headset, and his head slammed against the side of the glass. He arched his back, then grabbed his shirt and pulled, tearing the shirt and popping off the buttons. He lunged forward, hunched over the stick, jerked the stick hard right, and then dipped the wing ninety degrees toward the earth.

The mountain rose up to meet us. It felt like we were falling off a tabletop. Just before we hit, he corrected her, pulled back on the stick, and the plane began to stall. Our speed slowed to almost nothing, and I remember hearing treetops brushing the underside of the plane.

Then, as if he’d done it a thousand times, he pancaked the plane against the mountain.

The tail touched first, then the left wing, which hit something and snapped off. The weight of the right wing pulled on the plane, tilting us and making an anchor of sorts. Somewhere in there Grover cut the engine. The last thing I remember was spinning, somersaulting, and the tail breaking off. Then I heard a

loud crack, Ashley screamed, the dog barked and floated through the air. Snow peppered my face, followed by the sound of breaking tree limbs, followed by the impact.

The last image I remember seeing was the green blob inching across the bluish glow of the dash-mounted GPS.