



# SHADOW FLIGHT

A NOVEL

HARRISON JONES





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By

Harrison Jones

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Cover design by Hannah Lumme Jones

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International Standard Book Number 13: 978-1-60452-048-4

International Standard Book Number 10: 1-60452-048-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011928297

BluewaterPress LLC

52 Tuscan Way Ste 202-309

Saint Augustine, FL 32092

<http://bluewaterpress.com>

Information regarding the purchase of this book may be found online at <http://www.bluewaterpress.com>





*For Diane*

The reason all my homeward bound flights are flown with a smile and maximum speed.



## Acknowledgements

While writing *SHADOWFLIGHT*, I drew heavily on personal experience for material and characters. However, we often forget that our personal experience would not have been possible without the generous help of other fine people along the way. In my case, that would include hundreds of some of the finest aviation professionals on earth. Two of those professionals came to mind often as I wrote the book and they deserve my most sincere appreciation. As a junior aircraft mechanic, I was assigned to work for Delta Airlines Lead Mechanic, Ted Freeman, a consummate professional and a wonderful human being who insisted on exactness and attention to detail that served me well throughout my career as a mechanic and as a pilot. When I decided to learn to fly, Ted recommended my first and only flight instructor. Jim Phillips taught me how to fly airplanes and then he taught me how to be a pilot. A gentle taskmaster, Jim mentored me through all the programs. Private, commercial, multi engine, instrument, flight instructor, ground instructor, instrument flight instructor and prepared me for the airline transport pilot exam. After 20,000 hours in the cockpit, I have yet to fly with a finer pilot and my gratitude is unending. I also extend my sincere appreciation to the very talented Hannah Lumme Jones for capturing the essence of the book so beautifully in the cover design. Lastly, I thank the professional staff at BluewaterPress LLC for their expertise and for making *SHADOWFLIGHT* possible. Joe and Ardis, you're the best.



## Chapter 1

Soaring seagulls, and the little red and white Cessna, were the only things moving in the blue skies of south Texas. The seagulls were not likely to crash. The airplane, like the birds, seemed to change direction every few minutes to loiter in the same area. A casual observer would have concluded that the pilot was lost or searching for something yet unbound.

When the aircraft's engine increased to full power and the nose pitched up, it appeared to be on its way to whatever destination had been originally planned. The airplane's propeller labored at maximum RPM, but the forward progress continued to decrease as the nose went higher. The Cessna seemed to be suspended in mid-air, like an apple above Newton's head, as the speed became dangerously slow and the wings struggled to maintain lift.

Suddenly the airplane rolled sharply to the left and the nose fell forward to begin an uncontrolled dive at the earth. The pilot had obviously demanded more from the machine than it was capable of producing and the lack of judgment would now be rewarded by the inevitable and unforgiving law of gravity. The two people sitting side by side in the Cessna were now less than two thousand feet and precious moments from certain disaster. The woman in the left seat fought the controls as the windshield view filled with spinning Texas landscape. She hung in her shoulder harness and felt the sickening sensation of weightlessness as the airplane plummeted. Her adrenaline charged brain issued commands that her insubordinate hands and feet ignored.

She refused to give up. She was a pilot and would not allow herself to become a passenger, although she found herself repeating things that had already failed. At last she heard the calm voice of the man in the right seat say, "I've got it," and she put her hands up in front of her as she had been trained.

Kyle Bennett pushed the right rudder pedal and then re-centered it when the spinning landscape in the windshield became a stationary cornfield. He released the back pressure on the yoke and as the airspeed rapidly increased in the dive, he gently pulled the nose up and planted it on the horizon where the blue sky merged with Texas. He pulled the throttle back to a cruise RPM, rolled in a little pitch trim, and said, "You've got it."

Brooke Roberts took a deep breath and put her hands and feet back on the controls. She looked at the instruments and decided that airspeed was better than money in the bank.

"Don't worry, Brooke," Kyle said, "Departure stalls are tricky because of the extreme nose high attitude, but you'll get used to it. If one wing stalls before the other, the spin can develop and you have to be aggressive with rudder to stop that. I think you could have recovered on your own if you had released the back pressure on the yoke to break the stall."

"I know. I was just trying to stop the descent."

"The survival instinct is to pull, but you have to get the airflow back over the wings first. The good news is you now know how high you can pull the nose up on takeoff without stalling. We'll practice the recovery more on the next lesson and you'll be fine. Take me to the airport and we'll get in a couple of landings before we quit."

"Kyle, you just wanted to see if I would squeal like a girl and I almost did. Can we do one more of those before we go back?"

"You're not gonna barf are you?"

She laughed, "I think you're safe, Kyle."

"Okay, let's climb back up to 2500 feet and we'll set it up again. Turn back to the north so we'll stay in the practice area."

Kyle relaxed and tried to stretch his legs. The cockpit of the two seat trainer was much more suited to his petite student. Brooke sat almost a foot forward to insure that she could fully depress the rudder pedals. His aviator sunglasses blocked the glare of the sun as he watched her begin the climbing turn and he was pleased that she had not been intimidated by the previous maneuver.

He knew that self confidence was a necessary trait in all good pilots, but confidence born of simple bravado had been a deadly factor in the final flight of too many pilots. Brooke's poise was not due to ego, but rather from understanding theory and the ability to apply her knowledge—the basis for good judgment and longevity. He watched as her eyes took in the instrument panel, digesting information and applying corrections. Her dark pony tail bounced as she scanned left and right to check the horizon and look for traffic.

Brooke leveled the airplane and Kyle briefed the maneuver once again. She pushed the throttle up to maximum power and simulated the takeoff by raising the nose slowly until the angle became so extreme that air could no longer flow over the wings. This time she was ready for the stall and made a smooth recovery without help.

Kyle congratulated her, "I knew you could do it, Brooke. Now do you think you can find the airport so we can do some pattern work?"

"If I do, will you let me solo?"

He smiled, "Maybe someday, after I've bled your bank account dry."

"Kyle, you know you would do this for nothing just because you love it so much."

"Well, don't tell my boss because I'm working for almost nothing already."

"Someday you'll be a rich airline pilot and then you can buy the flying school."

The conversation was a bit of a distraction and the airplane began to climb slightly.

"Watch your altitude, Brooke."

"Sorry 'bout that."

"Use the vertical speed indicator more in your instrument scan. It will always show an up or down trend before the altimeter even moves."

"Okay, thanks, Kyle."

"I won't get rich anytime soon. I just got another rejection letter from Tri Con Airlines. I can't even get an interview."

"Don't give up Kyle—at the ripe old age of twenty-six, you've got time."

Brooke was not familiar with the requirements to become an airline pilot, but if appearance counted, Kyle would qualify. He kept his dark hair trimmed short and his blue eyes could compete with the Texas sky on a clear day. He was the clean cut young bachelor that every mother hoped her daughter would marry—airline pilot or not.

The flying school was based at a small airport located west of Corpus Christi in the less crowded airspace of a rural community. The airport was called McLane Field and named for the owner rather than a town. They descended over the plowed fields of Texas farmland and approached the single asphalt strip from the south. Kyle purposely kept his mouth shut and evaluated Brooke's entry into the traffic pattern without instruction. The airport didn't have a control tower, but she announced her intentions on the common Unicom frequency to let any other airplanes in the area know she was in the pattern for Runway One-Five.

"McLane Unicom, Cessna November Six-Eight-Three-Four Bravo, entering right downwind for landing, Runway One-Five."

She and Kyle both scanned the area but saw no other airplanes to interfere with their landing. Brooke recited the before landing checklist and accomplished the items perfectly. As they continued the landing pattern, they could hear someone key a microphone on the frequency, "Cessna Three-Four Bravo, McLane, Kyle give me a call when you're on the ground."

Kyle picked up the mic and double clicked it to informally acknowledge the message. Brooke said, "Your girlfriend must be looking for you."

"If I had a steady girlfriend she wouldn't have to look for me. I'm always at the airport."

Brooke smiled, "In that case, they must be repossessing your truck or something."

"Not likely," Kyle laughed, "They'd take one look at it and decide it's not worth hauling in."

Brooke flew the pattern smoothly and the Cessna's tires chirped in harmony as she made a soft touchdown. Kyle knew that he would let her solo when she took her next lesson in a few days.

"Not bad for a girl, Brooke. Let's taxi back and do one more before we quit for the day."

While Brooke raised the flaps and did the after landing checklist, he picked up the mic. "McLane, Three-Four-Bravo—what's up, Roy?"

Roy McLane was the airport owner and Kyle's boss.

"Your next student showed up early. Do you want him to watch a video lesson while he waits?"

"Actually, Brooke and I are just doing one more pattern and we'll be done. Tell him he can preflight the airplane while I debrief Brooke."

"Okay, tell Brooke her husband is here, too."

"You just told her."

Brooke had recently celebrated her thirty fifth birthday and her husband had given her flying lessons as her gift. Glenn Roberts was a prominent Corpus Christi surgeon and had been flying his own light twin for years. Brooke had shown an interest and he thought it would be great to have a qualified copilot for the trips they made together. She was petite, but athletic and her obsession with playing tennis not only kept her fit, but also produced a deep and attractive tan. He was pleased to see her enjoy a new challenge.

They had reached the end of the taxiway and Brooke went through the before takeoff checklist. There was another airplane in the pattern to land and they waited for it to make its approach.

Kyle asked, "Are you nervous with your husband watching?"

She chuckled, "Of course not, I'm a pilot. I have nerves of steel."

"I'll keep that in mind if he asks about your progress."

"He's not here to check my progress. Glenn's flying the twin up to Dallas tonight for a medical conference. He'll be gone several days. As a matter of fact, I was hoping we could get in a couple of flying lessons while he's gone. Can we fly again tomorrow?"

"Sure, I'll check the schedule and see what times are available."

Kyle turned his thoughts to the requirements for Brooke to solo. "Have you made your visit to the FAA doc for your flight physical?"

She seemed to lose focus for a moment before answering. "I saw him this morning. He issued the student pilot's license and first class medical certificate."

She turned away from Kyle and stared out the window as the doctor's words played through her mind once again. She had decided not to discuss the diagnosis with her husband until he returned from Dallas.

## Chapter 2

It was his first day on the job and he felt like a teenager who had changed schools in mid semester; a ridiculous analogy for a fifty-six year old man. He convinced himself that the moisture he felt on the back of his shirt was due to the summer heat wave. Humans were the only things more erratic than the Atlanta weather.

He stopped his three year old Ford at the company security gate and lowered the window as the car's air conditioner pumped at full blast. He could feel the cool air escape as he watched the two uniformed rent-a-cops in the guard shack. They looked at him and then continued their conversation. The humidity in the car thickened by the minute and his shirt efficiently sponged.

The guards gave him every opportunity to go away, but when he lingered one of them reluctantly ambled out. Before he reached the car, a sudden blast of rap music emanated from his waist area and didn't stop until he removed the cell phone from his belt. He put the phone to his face and very professionally answered, "Whasup."

He turned away to privatize the conversation, but his occasional laughter could still be clearly heard. The Ford was becoming a sauna and the occupant's shirt and tie wilted like a lettuce leaf thrown in to cook with the French fries. When the guard's conversation finally ended, he sauntered over to the open window and impatiently declared, "You have to have a parking decal and a company ID to enter the gate."

The new employee answered, "My name is Ed White and I—."

"I don't care if you're Abraham Lincoln; you have to have an ID."

"I'm sorry, but I was told my name would be on a list to receive a visitor's pass."

"Why would someone authorize a visitor's pass for you?"

"I'm a new employee and they told me I would get a pass and then have a photo ID made when I check in with my boss."

"Your boss can't give you an ID. That has to be issued by corporate security."

"Okay."

"Look, this may take a while, but if you really want to wait I'll check it out when I get time. You can park in one of those spaces outside the gate." The guard walked away without waiting for an answer.

Backing into a parking space, the man raised the window, hoping the car would cool again. He considered taking his suit jacket off, but he didn't want to reveal the handgun, holstered under his left arm. He watched the guard shack and waited. Half a minute passed before the rent-a-cop burst through the door and sprinted across the parking lot. The new guy hesitated a moment before lowering the window.

The anxious guard said, "Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. White. I have your pass in order for you, sir. Just leave it in the windshield and park anywhere you like. Can I be of further assistance?"

"I don't think so."

"Welcome to Tri Con, Mr. White. Please don't hesitate to call if I can help in any way."

"I'm sure you'll hear from me," he looked at the guard's name tag, "Bennie."

He read the words on the blue visitor's pass before placing it in the window and driving through the gate. *Edward White – Director of Corporate Security – Tri Con Airlines. I like the sound of that.*

Tri Continent Airlines' headquarters was located at the International Airport in Atlanta, Georgia. The previous year Tri Con, as it was commonly called, had suffered devastating publicity when one of its jumbo jets went down in the Atlantic Ocean. It was the first mid-ocean ditching of an air carrier passenger jet in history and even though the heroic efforts of the crew limited the loss of life to one fatality, the accident had severely damaged the company's reputation. The tragedy was compounded by the fact that a disgruntled Tri Con employee had caused the accident by sabotaging the aircraft.

The aftermath of that debacle, and the investigation that followed, had revealed deficiencies in Tri Con's management philosophy that required immediate and aggressive attention. Harold Collins emerged as the stockholder's choice to lead the airline back to prosperity. As CEO, he made it known immediately that character would be a prerequisite to employment at Tri Con, and integrity would be essential to longevity.

Once Collins had established his expectations, a weeding out process had ensued and the management ranks had thinned considerably. Some left voluntarily and others were gently urged. In the spirit and culture of southern tradition, Collins privately declared, "They weren't raised right."

Collins had just sat down with his first morning cup of coffee when Ed White walked in.

"Ed, are you trying to impress the boss by showing up early?"

"I don't feel very impressive since it's my first day on the job. In fact, I feel like a fish out of water."

Ed White had been a special agent with the FBI until two weeks before when he had taken an early retirement to accept a position with Tri Con. The previous year Ed had been assigned as the FBI liaison to the Tri Con accident investigation. He had been instrumental in the apprehension of the Tri Con employee responsible for sabotaging the flight over the Atlantic. Collins had been impressed with the FBI agent, both professionally and personally, and Ed had become intrigued with the airline industry. Collins offered him the position of Director of Corporate Security, and after several months of soul searching, and considerable influence from his wife, he had accepted.

Collins smiled and said, "That'll change in a few days. Instead of a fish out of water, you'll feel like you're in over your head with the rest of us."

"I'm sure you're right. This will be a new experience for me. I'm much more accustomed to following orders than giving them."

"I have every confidence in your leadership ability, Ed. What can I do to help you get started?"

"I've scheduled a security staff meeting this afternoon and I hope to have a better idea of what I'll need after that. I want to deal with the personnel issues we discussed as soon as possible."

"That sounds like a good plan. You don't need my approval, Ed. I hired you because I know you'll do the right thing and that philosophy doesn't require supervision."

### Chapter 3

The Tri Con security staff arrived at work spit shined and ready to impress their new boss. The nine men and three women anxiously awaited the two o'clock staff meeting and pretended that they were not concerned about the persistent rumor of a personnel purge. When the assistant director was summoned to the new boss' office at eleven o'clock, he assumed that he was about to be sacked and would not be attending the staff meeting. He was prepared for this scenario and planned to plead only that his long time secretary be retained in an appropriate capacity.

Harry Dade was only five years from normal retirement and hoped that he would receive a fair severance package. He had come to work for Tri Con twenty-five years earlier after being medically disabled from a small town police force. He had responded to a domestic dispute at two in the morning where the lady of the house shot him in the right knee, shot her husband in the left buttock, and then immediately surrendered to the emergency medical personnel who had also responded. Harry's shattered knee had prevented his continued service as a patrolman, but during his recovery the chief of police had recommended him to someone he knew at Tri Con and he was given a desk job in corporate security.

Over the years, Harry's limp had evolved into a gentle lope and with his lanky frame he made his way down the familiar corridor to meet his fate. He had been formally introduced to the hot shot FBI agent during the Tri Con accident investigation the previous summer and remembered his disciplined demeanor and professional appearance. Harry straightened his tie and brushed the lapels of his jacket.

He stopped to admire the new name plate on the wall outside the director's office.

*Corporate Security—Director Edward White.* Two workmen were busy hanging new pictures on the wall in the outer office and he noticed the

furniture had been rearranged. The secretary looked up from her computer screen and smiled, "Good morning, Harry. Do you like what I've done with the place?"

"Yeah, out with the old and in with the new."

"The director is expecting you, just go right in."

Harry took a deep breath and opened the door to the inner office. He almost didn't recognize the man sitting at the desk. Ed's jacket and tie were tossed across a chair by the window. His shirt sleeves were rolled up and his feet were on the desk. Black socks, no shoes, an ankle holster peeking from the cuff of his pants. Ed waved him into a chair and continued talking on the phone, "Well, ma'am, I'm kinda new at Tri Con and I'm not familiar with the personnel practices, but I've got several positions to fill and I want to do interviews as soon as possible. If you could contact this gentleman and set up a meeting later this week I would appreciate it."

He listened and then replied, "Yes ma'am, Ed White in corporate security. Thank you very much."

He put the phone down and said, "Thanks for coming over Harry. As you can see, I've only been here a couple of hours and the place is already in turmoil."

"I'm sure it's hectic trying to settle in and make the changes you want, Mr. White."

"Chaos is more like it, but you're right, I do want to set new priorities and settle some personnel issues as soon as possible. I hope you'll understand."

"Of course I do."

Harry noticed several packing boxes sitting around the office. Some were emptied and some were yet to be opened. He wondered if he might borrow the empty ones to pack up his office.

"Harry, I've reviewed the personnel files of everyone in the department and I've got some concerns."

"For what it's worth, Mr. White, they're all good people. I know they may not be up to FBI professional standards, but their work ethic and honesty shouldn't be questioned."

"I agree, but what is in question is the work they're performing."

"All I can say is that they do the best they can with what they've got to work with."

Ed took his feet off the desk and replaced them with his elbows, "I don't think I'm making myself clear, Harry. It's not the people I have a problem with, it's their duty assignments. Half our staff is working on pilferage and petty theft by employees. Meanwhile, terror groups are plotting against our airline and our government on a daily basis. This department's priorities are going to change and they're going to change today. I'll make that abundantly clear at the staff meeting this afternoon."

Harry had argued this issue many times with the previous director, but he knew it would sound self serving to mention that now.

Ed stood up and paced the room in his socks, "Harry, I'm pressed for time here and we need to cut to the chase. I know you've been assistant director for a long time, but this department is going in a totally new direction and it's going to happen fast. I'm going to be blunt and I think you can understand why. I need an assistant that is up to speed and in complete agreement with my program. Can you see where I'm coming from?"

"I think so," Harry eyed a couple of the larger packing boxes.

"This is going to be a tremendous challenge requiring long days and lots of travel. I know you must have given some thought to retirement, but unless you just can't agree with what I have planned, I need you to step up to the plate and help me out. You don't have to make a decision right away, but I really hope you'll stay and work with me. You have an excellent reputation and for what it's worth, Harold Collins speaks very highly of you."

The lump in Harry's throat delayed a response but then he swallowed and said, "I don't have to think about it. I want to stay as long as you think my performance is acceptable, Mr. White."

"That's great news, Harry, but I'm not going to start calling you Mr. Dade so quit calling me Mr. White. Don't call me Mr. Ed either, I hate that horse."

"Thank you, Ed."

"Okay, a couple of things I need to talk to you about. We've been authorized to hire three new employees and the first candidate will be coming in later in the week. Can you be here to help me interview him?"

"Should I wear shoes?"

Ed looked down at his feet and laughed, "Good point, we'll go formal. The other thing I need to tell you is that I want you to move your office. There's an empty space next door and I thought we'd cut a door in the wall of the outer office so we adjoin. There's plenty of room for both our secretaries."

"That would make things a lot more convenient."

"Why don't you take some of these empty packing boxes with you?"

The secretary looked up when they walked into the outer office. Ed said, "Harry is going to move in next door and we're going to have a door put in that wall. Call the sign maker back and have him put Harry's name plate next to mine in the corridor."

She smiled, "There goes the neighborhood."

Harry's secretary was well aware of the rumors concerning possible personnel changes. When he walked into the office, carrying two packing boxes, the pencil slipped from her fingers, bounced on the desk, and fell to the floor. The expression on her face was one of heartbreak.

"It's not what you think, Mrs. Maynard. The going away party will have to be postponed for a few years. We're moving to a bigger office next to the director's. You dropped your pencil."

She quickly recovered her composure, but not her pencil, "Harry, if you're scamming me there won't be a party."

"The movers will be here at nine tomorrow morning. See if you can find more boxes and then go down to the new office and decide how you want the furniture arranged."

"What's he like?"

"Form your own opinion, Anita. After lunch I have the staff meeting. You'll have to hold the fort the rest of the day."

Harry disappeared into his office and she dialed the phone. When Harry's wife answered she said, "Relax, it's all good."

## Chapter 4

Kyle had finished his fourth flying lesson of the day and was enjoying his evening meal. His Levis were hiked halfway up the cowboy boots that were propped on the desk between him and Roy McLane. Each man held a hamburger in one hand and a Coca Cola in the other.

Between bites Roy smiled, "It don't get no better than this."

"You need to seek professional help, Roy. I think some intense counseling would do you good."

"My wife and mother in law offer all the advice I can handle. Pass those French fries over here."

They were laughing when Brooke walked in wearing jeans and a Houston Astros tee shirt. Her pony tail was hanging out the back of a baseball hat. "I hope I'm not interrupting a male bonding moment."

"You're early, Brooke," Kyle answered, "And I refuse to commit aviation on an empty stomach. Make yourself comfortable while I finish my gourmet repast. You want a French fry?"

"No, and I hope your arteries don't clog until I get my license."

"Roy, can we charge extra for taking verbal abuse from a student?"

"The aforementioned wife and mother in law have rendered me void of opinion."

They laughed again. Brooke did not.

The telephone ended their banter and Roy paused to swallow a mouth full of hamburger before answering on the third ring.

"Good afternoon, McLane Aviation."

After a short conversation, he covered the mouthpiece and turned to Kyle.

"Can you fly a charter down to Brownsville tonight?"

"Sure. What time?"

"Eight o'clock. You'll be back before midnight."

"Sounds like fun; sign me up."

Roy grabbed a charter form and wrote as he continued the phone conversation.

Kyle wadded his burger wrapper into a ball and hit the trash can dead center from twenty feet. "Brooke, let's go flying before my arteries choke up. Go ahead and preflight the airplane; I'll be out there in a couple of minutes."

Roy hung up the phone and handed Kyle the charter form.

"There's just one passenger—a Mr. Gomez. He's trying to make a late Tri Con flight out of Brownsville. He'll pay cash when he gets here. Just put the money in the safe and lock up before you leave."

"Okay. I should be done with Brooke in plenty of time."

"How's she doing?"

"I scheduled her late today because the air is usually smoother when it cools off. I'm planning on letting her solo."

"In that case, I'll stick around and watch."

Brooke thought that Kyle was strangely quiet as she taxied out to the runway. She had become accustomed to his constant chatter and instruction for every move in the airplane. At the end of the taxiway, she ran the engine up and checked the dual ignition magnetos and the carburetor heat. She moved each of the flight controls through their full travel and reset the altimeter to field elevation.

Kyle said, "Let's just stay in the pattern. Do a normal takeoff and return for a full stop landing."

He relaxed and watched as she announced their intentions on the radio and then made a smooth takeoff, climbed to pattern altitude and turned downwind for landing. She checked each item on the before landing checklist and nailed the airspeeds as she fed the flaps out and turned final to line up for landing. She trimmed the elevator and made small corrections to attitude and throttle, compensating perfectly for a gentle crosswind from the left.

The airplane touched down on the white stripe in the center of the runway and Brooke gently applied the brakes to bring them to taxi speed before reaching the turn off point. Kyle had seen enough. Once they were clear of the runway and Brooke had completed the checklist, he said, "You can stop here for a minute. You just passed your pre-solo test. I want you to do another pattern and stop here when you get back. Remember, the airplane will be lighter without my 180 pounds and it will accelerate faster. The takeoff roll will be shorter and the rate of climb will be higher."

Brooke's eyes widened in surprise for a moment, then she attempted nonchalance, but the grin at the corners of her mouth betrayed her. The first solo flight is a milestone in a pilot's life and a day that she would always remember. It would be the first entry in her logbook under the "Pilot in command" column.

Kyle stood in the grass and watched her taxi the airplane to the

departure end of the runway. He listened as she ran the engine up and performed the takeoff checks. There was a slight hesitation and he knew that she was checking everything one more time; then the airplane turned onto the runway and began the takeoff roll.

## Chapter 5

Brooke felt herself being forced back in the seat as she pushed the throttle forward. She danced the rudder pedals back and forth with small corrections to keep the airplane in the center of the runway. Glancing at the airspeed indicator, she was surprised to see it bumping sixty miles per hour already. *Wait for a little more speed just to be safe and... now!* She applied back pressure on the elevator and the airplane seemed to jump into the air. At the lighter weight, the nose had to be held higher to keep the airspeed at seventy. *Wow...it climbs fast. Look left before turning... all clear. A little left pressure on the control yoke, a little rudder...hold the bank angle...there's the heading...roll out wings level.*

All the things that Kyle had preached went through her head and she did them automatically from habit. She leveled at pattern altitude and flew the downwind leg parallel to the runway. Suddenly there was nothing to do. *Don't let your mind wander dummy...think ahead...be ready to do the checklist. There's the end of the runway...pull the power back...carburetor heat... flaps. Look left...descending turn...base leg...more flaps. Turn final...there's the runway...trim the elevator.*

Things were happening fast now. *A little high...reduce power...good. Over the runway...throttle to idle...round out the descent...flare the nose up...hold it. Touchdown...a little firm, but not bad...lower the nose...work the rudder; keep it in the middle...easy on the brakes.*

She turned off the runway and stopped. *Relax...deep breath. There's Kyle... what did he think? Do the after landing checklist or he'll think you're stupid.*

The airplane slowly moved down the taxiway and stopped near where Kyle was waiting in the grass. He walked over and opened the passenger side door.

"It looked good from here, Brooke. Any problems?"

"No, but it really performs at light weight."

He reached across the seat and offered his hand in congratulations. "I'm proud of you, lady. Would you like to take it around again?"

"You bet."

"Okay, do another full stop and if you're not tired you can do a third one. When you're done, park it at the fuel pumps and we'll top it off. I'll be at the office."

Kyle walked back to the office, but he stood outside and watched like a mother hen as Brooke flew the traffic pattern twice more. Roy joined him and critiqued her performance, rating it well above average. When she taxied to the fuel pumps they hurried inside and busied themselves as if they had forgotten that she was soloing. They ignored her when she came in until she placed a fist on each hip and glared at them. The charade could not be maintained more than a few seconds and they all broke out laughing.

Roy presented her with a nice solo certificate, emblazoned with the McLane aviation logo and her name printed in old English script. Kyle ceremoniously endorsed her student pilot's license and her logbook for local area solo and they both watched as she wrote her flight time in the logbook under pilot in command.

She asked, "When can I fly again?"

"Anytime you want too, as long as the weather is good. We'll start working on navigation and cross country flying next week."

"I know a copilot is not required, but can I fly right seat on your charter tonight? You could get paid for the charter and instructing too."

"That wouldn't be fair. You wouldn't get much instruction."

"Come on Kyle. I would learn about cross country flying and get some seat time in the bigger airplane. I'm not going to fly the trainer forever."

"Your husband would break my neck if you're not home to fix dinner."

"Glenn's in Dallas at the medical conference. He'll get a better dinner than I could cook."

Roy spoke up, "Boy, you're talking to a woman with forty minutes of pilot in command time. You better come up with a better argument. Besides that, you might need somebody to keep you awake on the way back."

"Her head does look a little bigger, don't you think?"

Roy laughed, "I remember when he soloed, Brooke. His hat has been three sizes bigger ever since. I don't know which of you has the biggest ego today, but I hope you both grow up before the customer gets here."

Kyle frowned, "Okay Brooke, you can ride along, but you can't touch the controls while the passenger is on board. I'd feel better if Glenn knew you were going though."

"I'll call his cell phone and let him know."

"If you mention that you have a great instructor, I might let you hold onto the handlebars on the way back."

"Kyle, you're the best instructor ever."

Roy said, "You two are hopeless—I'm going home. Lock the place up when you leave."

Kyle and Brooke went into the office and Kyle opened his briefcase. He handed Brooke a flight plan form and helped her fill in the blanks with all the required information.

He explained, "A flight plan is not required when the weather is clear and we're operating under visual flight rules; however, you should always file one anyway just as a safety precaution. That way the FAA will have all the information that a search and rescue team would need if the airplane doesn't show up at the destination."

"Who do you file it with?"

"Funny you should ask. Allow me to demonstrate."

He picked up the phone and called the San Angelo Flight Service Station. He put the call on speaker so Brooke could hear the conversation. The FAA specialist gave him a weather briefing and copied their flight plan to be activated when they took off. They estimated takeoff at 8:15 p.m. and an arrival time at 9:48.

With all the paperwork completed, they went out to preflight the airplane. Brooke had not flown the larger Cessna 172, but with the exception of having four seats, it was similar in design to the two seat trainer. They were just completing the walk around inspection when they heard a car drive into the parking lot. They watched as a Hispanic gentleman opened the passenger side door and stepped out. He reached in and retrieved a briefcase and an overnight bag before the car drove away. The man was rather short and swarthy looking with olive skin and black wavy hair that looked oily, even from a distance. He wore a sports jacket and slacks with an open collared shirt which made Kyle and Brooke both feel under dressed in their jeans. At least Kyle was identified by his golf shirt with the McLane Aviation logo.

The man approached them with a smile on his face. "Are you my pilot?"

"Yes, sir, my name is Kyle Bennett."

"Thanks for taking me on short notice. My name is Juan Gomez."

The man spoke perfect English, but with a Spanish accent.

"This is Brooke Roberts, Mr. Gomez. She'll be our copilot tonight."

The man looked surprised, as if he might have an objection, but then seemed to accept the extra pilot without a problem.

Kyle opened the baggage compartment door and said, "Let me stow your bags for you and then we'll go into the office for a moment before we get underway."

The three of them walked into the office and Kyle showed Brooke how to complete the weight and balance calculations, estimating the passenger and bag weights, and then wrote a receipt for the cash that Gomez gave him. Finally he asked the passenger for an ID and made a copy of his Texas driver's license to leave in the safe with the cash.

At 8:20 the Cessna took off and turned to the southeast. Kyle activated

the flight plan by radio as they climbed to 7500 feet on a direct course for Brownsville. They could not out climb the setting sun and soon the cockpit was illuminated only by the dull glow of the instrument panel lights. Brooke was mesmerized by the hypnotic illusion of being suspended between the twinkling lights on the ground and the twinkling stars above them.

At 10:25 p.m. central time the FAA specialist at the San Angelo Flight Service Station picked up the phone and pushed the button that would connect him directly with the control tower at Brownsville-South Padre Island International Airport. The phone rang several times before a harried controller finally answered, "Tower, Nicolson speaking."

"Hey Nick, it's Bill at San Angelo Flight Service. I'm looking for a Cessna November 3562 Echo. Did he close out a VFR flight plan with you guys?"

"Hang on, let me check...man it's nuts down here tonight...we've got a fur ball of airplanes in the pattern. No, I don't have anything on him, Bill; we haven't had any VFR closeouts in the last couple of hours. Was he landing here or one of the smaller airports?"

"He was filed with you as the destination. He's a little more than thirty minutes overdue."

"Wait one; I'll see if we can raise him on tower frequency. What kind of airplane is it?"

"A Cessna 172 squawking 1200."

A minute later the controller came back, "We tried him on approach and tower both with no response, but I've got plenty of 1200 VFR squawks on the screen, believe me."

"There's a news flash. Okay Nick, I appreciate your help. If he shows up let me know right away."

"Will do, see ya."

The specialist had experienced many pilots forgetting to close out their flight plans, but he had a bad feeling about this one. He had taken the flight plan over the phone himself and the pilot seemed very professional and experienced. He got out the notification list and started making phone calls. The first call went to the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center, who would in turn notify the Texas Wing of the Civil Air Patrol, and the U.S. Coast Guard. State and local police were also notified to be on the lookout. They would all be actively searching for Cessna N3562E when the airplane's fuel exhaustion time came and went two hours later.

## Chapter 6

The first search and rescue briefing was scheduled for shortly after sun up at McLane Field. Roy McLane had been notified at eleven o'clock the night before and told that one of his airplanes was overdue at Brownsville. He had not been back to bed. He had taken off at midnight and flew to Brownsville and back in search of Kyle's flight. He had seen nothing in the dark to indicate a crash site and repeated calls on the radio had gone unanswered. The Civil Air Patrol had flown a sortie during the night as had the Coast Guard.

Roy had just finished brewing a pot of coffee when the first radio call came. "McLane Unicom, Coast Guard Rescue One-Four, five miles out for a straight in final, Runway Three-Three."

Roy picked up the mic, "Coast Guard One-Four, McLane, wind calm, no reported traffic."

Roy didn't realize it was a helicopter until he heard the whop-whop of the rotor blades. He keyed the mic again, "Coast Guard One-Four, we don't have a designated helipad, but the grassy area beside the hangar is clear and flat."

"Roger sir, thank you."

Thirty seconds later the radio squawked again, "McLane Unicom, Cessna November Eight-Nine-Six-Three Charlie, five miles south."

Roy answered, "Cessna Six-Three Charlie, wind calm, suggest Runway Three-Three. There's a helicopter on short final."

Roy walked out to watch the chopper land and then saw the Cessna with Civil Air Patrol markings touchdown and rollout. Ten minutes later the three Coast Guard crewmen and the two Civil Air Patrol pilots were gathered in the airport's lounge and consuming Roy's fresh coffee. Five minutes after that they were joined by the county sheriff and two state troopers. When everyone was introduced, Roy led them into the flight

school's classroom. The room featured two long tables with chairs and a huge aeronautical chart on the wall.

Roy said, "Gentlemen, I really don't know where to start. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your being here and I want to do everything I can to help."

One of the state troopers spoke up, "The first thing we need to know, Mr. McLane, is who was on the airplane."

Roy answered, "The pilot is Kyle Bennett. He's my flight instructor and charter pilot. He took one of his students along to fly copilot. Her name is Brooke Roberts and she's the wife of Glenn Roberts, a well known local surgeon. Glenn is on his way home from Dallas. I called him last night with the bad news. The charter passenger is a Mr. Gomez."

Everyone was taking notes as Roy spoke and the trooper asked, "Do you have any information on Mr. Gomez?"

"We require ID on all our passengers, but all I have is a copy of his driver's license."

"Okay, I'll need a copy of that too."

"I'll make you a list of all their names, addresses and phone numbers."

"That would be great. All our troopers have been notified and are on the lookout for the airplane."

The sheriff spoke next, "All our deputies have been advised also."

One of the Civil Air Patrol pilots was the commander of the San Angelo squadron, "Mr. McLane, we have two airplanes in the air right now and more on the way. Each one will have at least one observer as well as the pilot. I want to get airborne again as soon as possible myself, but I need to go over the flight plan with you before I do."

"I'll give you what information I can, sir."

"This is what the FAA gave us last night. The airplane is a red and white Cessna 172 equipped with a transponder. We assume he was squawking a code of 1200 for radar surveillance and had three souls on board. He reported off McLane Field at 8:20 local with an ETA at Brownsville of 9:53 local. He filed a cruise altitude of 7500 feet and a direct route to destination with a little over four hours of fuel on board."

Roy confirmed, "That's all correct and I can tell you that Kyle is an excellent pilot. I can't imagine what could have happened."

"I know the airplane is required to have an emergency locator transmitter, Mr. McLane. Do you know when it was last tested?"

"We recently upgraded to a new model ELT with satellite capability. It transmits on all three emergency frequencies. The signal should have been picked up right away."

The Coast Guard pilot asked, "Did they have water survival gear aboard?"

"No, we don't usually carry the raft, unless it's required, because of the extra weight. I'm sure Kyle didn't plan on going out over the Gulf."

"I'm sure you're right sir, but we'll cover that possibility in our search just in case."

The CAP pilots were looking at the wall chart, "We'll concentrate our search initially in the rural areas along and either side of a direct line between here and Brownsville. If they went down in a populated area someone would have reported it."

The sheriff said, "It should be pretty easy to spot something as big as an airplane."

The CAP commander answered, "We normally don't look for something as big as an airplane, sheriff. A crash site usually looks like someone dumped a truck load of trash in the woods. Sometimes you can put most of the pieces in your pocket. It can be a pretty gruesome sight from the air, but our ground crews are the ones who suffer nightmares."

The sheriff replied, "I can relate to that. I know you folks are all volunteers and I appreciate what you do."

The pilots were anxious to get back in the air and after dividing the search area between the CAP and the Coast Guard, everyone prepared for a long and grueling day. Another CAP airplane arrived and delivered a ground coordinator who would remain at the airport with Roy to coordinate the search effort. The pilots would stay in touch and make their reports via radio or cell phone.

At mid-morning Roy recognized a familiar call sign on the radio, "McLane Unicom, Seneca November Four-Two-Six Mike Delta, left downwind for Runway Three-Three."

Glenn Roberts had paid extra to have the MD included in his aircraft's registration. Roy answered the call, "Four-Two-Six Mike Delta, wind is light and variable, Runway Three-Three is active. Welcome home Glenn."

"Any good news?"

"Not yet, I'll fill you in when you land."

Roy watched the twin engine Piper Seneca turn final and line up with the runway as the wheels came out of the fuselage and locked in place. After landing, the Seneca taxied up to the fuel pumps and the engines were shut down as an exhausted and worn looking Glenn Roberts stepped out of the airplane. When Roy and the CAP coordinator filled him in on all they knew, he looked even more dejected. It was all they could do to dissuade him from getting back in the airplane to search for his wife.

At 8 o'clock that night, the flight school's classroom was standing room only when the day's debriefing was held. In addition to the morning's participants, the FAA, along with many more Civil Air Patrol and Coast Guard personnel were present. The FAA had examined the radar data from Houston Air Traffic Control Center and also from Corpus Christi local radar.

The FAA safety inspector explained, "Since all VFR flights squawk the same 1200 transponder code, it's impossible to know for sure which one belongs to the missing airplane."

The sheriff and the state troopers had been busy also. It seemed that the mysterious Mr. Gomez did not reside at the address on his driver's license and in fact the license itself was a fake.

## Chapter 7

The Tri Con flight from Atlanta touched down at Gulfport-Biloxi Regional Airport and taxied toward the terminal. The ground crew patiently waited and watched as the airplane slowly maneuvered its way through the maze of taxiways to the gate. Seat 1-A in the first class cabin of the MD-88 was occupied by William B. Butler. The seventy-two year old man was well known to everyone on the Mississippi gulf coast as Billy Butler. Seat 2-A was occupied by a burly thirty-five year old body guard who answered to the name Georgie. The expression on Georgie's face conveyed the message that Mr. Butler did not wish to be approached or disturbed. Neither man was happy with their first class accommodations.

Billy's Gulfstream V corporate jet was down for maintenance and he was incensed that he had been forced to fly commercial. He was further enraged that there was no non-stop service to New York and he had suffered the humiliation of having to change airplanes in Atlanta, both going and coming back. Georgie had been horrified when it was explained to him that he would not be allowed to take his usual assortment of weapons on the flight. He had felt naked and vulnerable during the entire experience.

As the airplane approached the gate, Georgie stood up and blocked the aisle so that Mr. Butler would not be hindered or delayed in leaving the aircraft. When the pilot misjudged the stopping point and slammed the brakes on, Georgie toppled into the bulkhead, grabbing for his shoulder holster that wasn't there. By the time he realized there was no threat, the seat belt light had been turned off and the other passengers were standing and retrieving their bags from the overhead compartments.

Georgie once again blocked the aisle and Billy Butler moved unimpeded to the forward door where he would wait impatiently for several long minutes until a gate agent arrived. He would wait several more minutes as the agent drove the jet way on an excursion of the ramp area while trying

to position it at the door. The flight attendant's smiling attempt at small talk did nothing to soothe Billy's impatience and she stooped to peer helplessly through the small round window in the door. The loud warning bell on the jet way didn't stop ringing until the airplane rocked back and forth, announcing that the agent had ultimately achieved ramming speed.

When the door finally opened, the passengers were ready to stampede and it was as if the airplane were regurgitating humans into the terminal. Georgie moved ahead of Billy Butler providing a clear path for his boss to move through the crowd. The body guard was one of those rare human beings who could actually walk without swinging his arms. It appeared that his transmission was in neutral and his ape like upper appendages hung motionless at his side with his palms facing aft. The faster he walked, the more robotic he appeared as his feet moved and his head swiveled, but everything between remained disengaged.

Billy Butler had no problem matching Georgie's pace. Billy had grown up working on shrimp boats and still walked with the rolling balance of a sailor on a moving deck. His posture was not as upright as it once was but he was far more graceful than most seventy-two year old men. His long silver hair and dark leathery skin were both testament to the many years he had baked in the gulf coast sun. Billy still lived on a boat but it had nothing to do with the shrimp industry. His present home was a ninety-foot yacht that he berthed at one of the luxury resort casinos in Biloxi. It seldom left its mooring unless he was entertaining business guest.

Butler Enterprises encompassed many business endeavors and the economic benefits for the gulf coast area were such that local politicians and law enforcement officials were quick to jump when Billy said frog. As a teenager, Billy had learned that when the shrimp boats made their forays into the Gulf of Mexico, they sometimes returned with more profitable cargo than crustaceans. While working as a deckhand, he had become fluent in Spanish while making rendezvous' with other boats, in international waters, where cash was exchanged for white powder. His apprenticeship as an entrepreneur had been served as a distributor. He was smart enough not to indulge in the product and his profits had been invested wisely. Butler Enterprises now controlled several successful global corporations and they served very well as facades for the even more profitable transactions that Billy declined to report for tax purposes.

Outside the airport terminal, a traffic cop waved his arms and blew a whistle in order to keep the flow of traffic moving. Stopping was allowed only long enough to pick up or drop off passengers, but the cop ignored Billy's stretched Mercedes that had been idling at the curb for thirty minutes. He was relieved to see Georgie emerge from the terminal and hold the rear door open for his boss. The dark tinted windows of the Mercedes had prevented the policeman from noticing the attractive Asian woman sitting in the back seat. When the door closed, the cop walked into the roadway and held his hand up to stop traffic as Georgie climbed

into the front passenger seat. The body guard exhaled a long sigh of relief when he saw his shoulder holster and hand gun lying on the seat. The Mercedes pulled away from the curb as Georgie ran his fingers over the leather harness and caressed the weapon like a long lost child.

Billy smiled at the woman in the back seat, "Ling, I'll have a drink before you start telling me about all the problems that have occurred in my absence. Feel free to indulge yourself also, if you like."

She raised her left hand to reveal a half empty glass with red lipstick on it, but proceeded to mix another for Billy. She asked, "How was New York?"

"Dirty, noisy, rancid, and rude. When will my airplane be fixed?"

"They're working on it around the clock. It should be back in service tomorrow afternoon. Gulfstream is replacing the engine at no charge."

"How nice of them, the airplane is only three months old."

"They expressed their sincere apologies and offered to reimburse your travel expenses."

Billy laughed, "There is no amount of money that could compensate the pain of commercial travel."

He watched Ling mix the drink and realized how much he had missed her while in New York. Her title was administrative assistant but she was far more than that. Billy had first encountered Ling when she came to Biloxi a year before. She had bought into a blackjack game with 1500 dollars and several hours later she cashed out with over 100,000 in chips. The casino accused her of counting cards and banned her from the game. Counting cards or not, it was obvious that she was a mathematical genius and Billy recruited her to work for him.

Ling's many talents extended far beyond crunching numbers and she quickly gained an understanding of Billy's business practices. The necessity of harsh and sometimes brutal activities did not challenge her ethics and she soon became his closest confidant.

The Mercedes traveled south from the airport and then turned east toward Biloxi on the beach highway. Billy said, "The supply situation in the northeast is becoming critical. If we don't find a way to meet the demand, we're going to lose share to the competition and that will get ugly very quickly."

"We have more than enough product," Ling replied, "As usual, the problem is getting it across the border. We lost another pilot this morning."

"What happened?"

"The DEA has access to all the FAA records of licensed pilots. They've developed a profile of pilots that might be tempted to make quick money and they're very accurate. They arrested our pilot when he landed in Houston and confiscated the product. Not only are we losing pilots, the publicity is making it very hard to recruit new ones."

"Have you explained to the Mexicans how we expect them to solve that problem?"

"Romero has agreed to the plan. His man, Gomez, was here two days

ago and I explained the details. He promised to take action right away and we should see results in a few weeks.”

The Mercedes entered the casino complex and drove to the marina parking area on the lower level. Georgie got out and looked around before opening the door for Billy. They both waited for Ling to slide across the back seat and exit also. Georgie tried, but failed, to avoid the distraction of her long legs and short skirt. He quickly recovered his focus and then stood watch as they walked up the gangway and disappeared inside the main cabin. There were three security guards, dressed in plain clothes, stationed around the perimeter of the boat twenty-four hours a day.

Georgie approached the sentry in charge. “What’s the situation?”

“The usual—a few tourist admiring the floating palace, but nothing suspicious.”

None of the men on the dock took particular notice of the attractive woman standing on the observation deck on the casino level. Nor would they think it was unusual that she was talking on her cell phone. She took the cell away from her ear long enough to use the zoom feature of the camera phone to snap a picture of Billy and Ling as they walked aboard. She saved it to the menu that contained earlier photos of the Hispanic man with greasy hair that had visited Ling two days before. The camera also had a nice shot of the boat’s transom and the words, *Beau Vie Biloxi, Ms.*

## Chapter 8

Ed White sat hunkered over his desk as he read yet another case file. He glanced at his watch when Harry Dade walked into his office, surprised that it was after seven p.m. already.

"Harry, I thought you had gone home for the day."

"I'm on my way out. Do you need anything before I go?"

"Yeah, I have a couple of questions if you've got a minute."

Ed reached for a file, but the phone on his desk rang before he opened the folder. He motioned a wait one signal to Harry before punching the speaker button, leaving his hands free to open the file.

"Ed White."

"Ed, it's Susan Burrow. I thought you might be working late, but I expected to be intercepted by a secretary."

Susan Burrow had a distinctive lilting voice, but he barely recognized it through the tinny speaker. She was with the Drug Enforcement Agency and he had worked with her on several cases in the past.

"This may come as a shock to you, Susan, but in the real world secretaries go home at five o'clock."

"Imagine that. You'll have to get your own coffee."

Ed laughed, "Are things going so well at the DEA in New Orleans that you have time to make harassing phone calls?"

"Actually, I'm not in the office. I'm doing a little field work in Biloxi. I was hoping you might be able to help me with some information."

"Without referring to my scorebook, I seem to recall that I might owe you a favor or two."

"According to my score, you owe me more than that, but I just need some information without jumping through bureaucratic hoops to get it."

"Don't we all? State your case, Sue."

"Okay. We just began running surveillance on a person of interest here

in Biloxi. Yesterday he flew in from Atlanta on a Tri Con flight and I would like to know his travel history. You know what will happen if I try to get that from the local Tri Con people."

"You may not believe this Sue, but even after being here two days I don't have that information in front of me. However, you may be in luck. We're on speaker phone and my assistant is here with me. He may be able to point us in the right direction. Say hello to Harry Dade."

"Hello, Harry Dade. I'm glad someone is there to keep Ed out of trouble."

"We're doing our best, Ms. Burrow. Can you give me this person's name and flight number?"

"Yes, his name is William B. Butler and he came in on Flight 1816 yesterday."

Ed's computer terminal sat on a credenza behind his desk. Harry sat down and began typing with two fingers.

While he typed Ed asked, "Why is this person under surveillance, Sue?"

"He owns several local companies and our undercover folks have traced a few deals to people who work for him. We're just trying to find out how high in the company the involvement is. It may be a dead end, but we don't want to just grab the street dealers if we have a chance to identify the importer."

Harry looked up from the computer screen.

"Ms. Burrow, I have the travel records for you if you're ready to copy."

"Are you serious? I was expecting this to take days."

"Mr. Butler left Biloxi three days ago on a morning flight. He made a connecting flight in Atlanta to LaGuardia. He returned yesterday via Atlanta again and flew first class both ways. He was accompanied by a Mr. George Moretti on all four flight segments."

"I think Mr. Moretti is a body guard. New York is an interesting destination; I'll see if our people up there can trace his activities."

Harry pulled up a new screen.

"The reservations were made by a Ms. Ling Kwan and charged to Butler Enterprises. Mr. Butler's name doesn't show up in our data base again in the last year, but the Butler Enterprise frequent flyer account is very active with other people including Ms. Kwan and Mr. Moretti. Ms. Kwan seems to favor Las Vegas and Mr. Moretti's most recent flight was to Tampico, Mexico."

"Tampico! Now you really have my interest."

"There are several pages in the account's history. I could e-mail them to you if you'd like."

"That would be great, Harry. I'll put in a good word for you with your boss."

"I appreciate that. It takes five attaboys to make up for one oh crap."

She chuckled, "Tell me about it. Ed, I really appreciate this."

"Glad to help, I like to keep the DEA indebted to us. Is there anything else we can do for you?"

There was a hesitation before she answered.

"This will probably sound crazy, but I'm going to ask anyway. There was a Hispanic gentleman who left on a late flight two nights ago to Houston. Without a name, I don't suppose there's any way to pull his records up."

Harry began typing again.

"That would be one of our commuter flights...there's only one departure to Houston and it only had eight passengers aboard. Only two have Hispanic names and one of them is a Maria Lopez. The other is a Juan Gomez. Could that be the guy?"

"Harry, you're amazing. That has to be him."

"Okay, he connected to a flight to Corpus Christi that arrived at 11:30 that night. He used a Texas driver's license for identification with a Corpus address. Should I include that in the e-mail?"

"Would you please? This is all off the record. If I need it for evidence I'll go through the drill and subpoena it."

Ed said, "Yes you will. You didn't get this information from us."

"What information?"

"Nice talking to you Susan. If anything pertaining to Tri Con comes up I want to hear about it."

"You got it."

Harry sent the information to the e-mail address she had given them and logged off the computer.

"Let's get out of here, Harry."

As they walked to the elevator, Ed said, "I've set up an interview with a prospective new employee at 12:30 tomorrow. Can you be there?"

"Sure."

"Good—if he works out, we'll still need two more people, but I want quality people, even if we have to wait awhile. When we were talking to Susan Burrow it occurred to me that one of them should be female."

Susan Burrow went back to her quarter slot machine by the window overlooking the casino's marina. She looked out at the yacht and began to assimilate the new information she had just learned. Her cell phone chirped and she scrolled through the long e-mail of passengers and destinations.

Her desire to keep a low profile was thwarted a few minutes later when the slot machine lit up and began a loud wailing noise. A crowd gathered to see the lucky player and how much the payoff would be. She now faced a moral dilemma. *How do I account for plus \$8423 on my expense report? Do I have too?*

## Chapter 9

At 11:45, a muddy four wheel drive pickup truck stopped at the Tri Con security gate. Word had spread fast among the rent-a-cops that a new sheriff was in town and attitudes had been adjusted accordingly. One of the two rent-a-cops bounced out of the guard shack immediately and noted the strange combination of the muddy truck and a young man neatly attired in a suit and tie. He approached the open truck window, "Good morning sir. How can I help you?"

"My name is Cason Haley. I'm here for an interview with Mr. Edward White."

"Oh, of course, Mr. Haley, I have you on the visitor's list. Director White is expecting you. Please wait just a moment and I'll get your pass for you."

The guard returned with the blue card and asked, "Do you need directions, sir?"

"I think I can find it, but thank you."

"I'll get the gate for you; have a good day, Mr. Haley."

Twenty minutes later, the neatly dressed young man stepped off the elevator on the third floor. He walked over to the directory board and began reading the long list of names and offices. There was no Edward White listed. He thought *this is why you always show up early*. As he pondered which hallway to explore first, the elevator doors behind him opened with a ding and a gray haired gentleman stepped out.

"Excuse me, sir. I'm looking for corporate security and the office of Edward White. Can you point me in the right direction?"

"Of course, in fact I'm heading that way myself, just follow me."

"Thank you very much, sir. I appreciate your help."

The older man walked with an unusual lope and Cason wondered if it was a permanent condition or a temporary injury. They discussed the

weather during the brief walk and entered the outer office to find two secretaries giving directions to a workman cutting a hole in the wall.

One of the women asked, "Are you Mr. Haley?"

"Yes ma'am, I'm afraid I'm a little early."

"Just have a seat; I'll let the director know you're here."

He turned to thank the gentleman for directions, but he had disappeared.

Harry closed the inner office door behind him, "Our applicant just showed up."

Ed glanced at his watch and said, "He's early, that's good. What's your impression?"

"Very neat appearance, very well mannered, but his eyes don't miss much and he walks with the posture of someone who could rip your head off if he chose too."

"That's an astute observation, Harry. Here, look at his application. A month ago he was an active duty Navy Seal."

"Well, if you make him mad don't tell him where I live. Okay?"

Ed laughed, "I won't. Let me get my shoes on and we'll invite him in."

Five minutes later, the secretary escorted Cason Haley in. Ed stood and offered his hand, "Mr. Haley, I'm Ed White and this is my assistant, Harry Dade. Please, have a seat."

"Thank you, sir. I'm pleased to meet you." He turned to shake Harry's hand, "Nice to see you again, sir. I didn't get to thank you for the directions earlier."

"That's quite all right. We need to update that directory board."

After they were all seated, Ed said, "Mr. Haley, to be fair, I should tell you that this is my first week on the job as director of corporate security. Feel free to ask whatever questions you like, but I may need to call on my assistant to provide answers. Did you have any problems at the security gate this morning?"

"No, sir, they passed me through with no problem."

"Do I detect a hint of concern in your voice about that?"

"To be honest, Mr. White, I was surprised they didn't ask for an ID."

Ed laughed, "I had that very same concern when they issued my visitor's pass earlier. I could have been Abraham Lincoln for all they knew. I've scheduled a meeting between Harry and the rent-a-cop contractor to discuss that among other issues."

"I don't presume to criticize, Mr. White, it was just a thought that occurred to me."

"A good thought, Mr. Haley. I see that you were recently discharged from the Navy."

"Yes, sir, I served eight years and I'm proud that I did, but my fiancée and I decided that civilian life will be a better situation for starting a family."

"Congratulations, when is the big day?"

He smiled, "As soon as I can determine that I'm employable and can support her."

"Well, I wish you all the best. Can you tell us what you did as a Seal?"

"I'm afraid not, sir."

"I assumed as much when I saw the security clearance you have. Can you tell us where you served?"

"I'm well traveled, sir."

"I admire your discretion. Let me try another approach. Do you have any language skills?"

"Yes, sir."

"Would that include Farsi?"

"Yes, sir."

"How about Spanish?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you ever had Columbian coffee?"

"Yes, sir. Lots of it."

"Have you had any experience in undercover work?"

"Not in a civilian context, sir, mostly recon."

Ed smiled, "Are the Seals sometimes allowed to grow beards?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you have any experience as a goat herder?"

"You ask very good questions, sir."

"You give very interesting non-answers."

Harry spoke up, "Mr. Haley, I read somewhere that most goat herders in Afghanistan have thick beards and speak Farsi. Have you ever heard that?"

"Yes, sir, I've heard that."

Harry continued, "I also read that the members of the Columbian drug cartels drink a lot of their country's coffee. Have you ever heard that?"

Cason smiled, "Yes, sir, lots of it."

Ed discreetly reached under his desk and pushed a button. The intercom immediately buzzed and his secretary announced that he had a phone call on line three. He said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Haley, I've got to take this. Could you give us a couple of minutes here? I'll have the secretary find coffee for you if you don't mind waiting in the outer office."

"I don't mind at all, Mr. White."

When the door closed, Ed asked, "What do you think?"

"I think I want one of those buttons under my desk. It would be a total waste of talent for this guy to investigate employee theft."

"I agree. What's the procedure for hiring someone?"

"You have the authority and the power to do that, but we normally run background checks first and require a physical. It takes several days."

"How long does it take to get a physical?"

"That can be done this afternoon; it's the background check that takes several days."

Ed opened his desk drawer and pulled out a file. "Take a look at this, Harry. Tell me why we shouldn't hire this guy."

Harry opened the file and saw the FBI seal on each page. "This looks

more like a dossier on an international spy than a background check. It lists every duty assignment this guy ever had as a Seal and it includes performance reports. How did you get this?"

"I know a guy who used to work at the FBI."

"I like your style, boss."

"Get him back in here."

When they were all seated again, Ed said, "Mr. Haley, let me explain what little I know about Tri Con procedures. As I understand it, what's going to happen now is, Mr. Dade is going to take you to his office and offer you a job. He will discuss salary and benefits and answer whatever questions you have. If you agree, he will arrange a physical exam for you this afternoon. Assuming that all those squares are filled, when can you start?"

"As soon as the physical is complete, sir."

"Harry and I are both going to be tied up this afternoon and I don't want you in my secretary's way, so how about 0800 tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir."

## Chapter 10

Rural airports can be eerie at night. McLane field was no exception. Sundown usually found the place deserted and generally void of purpose. The white lights that defined the runway, and the blue lights that identified the taxiway, came on at a preset time determined by Roy McLane and an electronic timer. The only sign of life was the hind legs of crickets rubbing together to chirp off key and the occasional rabbit hopping through the dew covered grass in search of a nocturnal snack. The only man made sound, if you happened to be close enough, was that of the airport beacon whirring as it continuously rotated high above the hangar. The beacon beamed a bright white light from one end of its housing and a bright green from the opposite. To a pilot in the night sky, the beacon appeared as a white flash followed by a green flash, identifying the airport location from miles away.

The cold iron of parked airplanes sat lined up like soldiers in formation and an occasional soft whisper could be heard among the ranks. Some would say it was produced by a gentle breeze blowing across the wing struts, others would imagine the restless ghosts of Lindbergh and Earhart.

The red rotating anti-collision light of an airplane blinked in the sky to the southeast and three miles away the pilot turned on the landing lights. His mind was in another place and he performed his task by habit. A slight surge in engine noise could be heard when he placed the propeller controls in high pitch to maximize performance in the event that he had to go around.

Minutes later, Glenn Roberts parked the Seneca and didn't really remember much about the approach or landing. He knew that his state of mind was not conducive to flying alone but there was no rule against a pilot with a broken heart operating an aircraft. He had searched the rural countryside again and found himself near Brownsville when the sun went

down. He would not allow himself to consider thoughts of Brooke lost forever. If that were the case, he would just point the Seneca at the ground and share her fate.

It was after ten o'clock when he drove into his driveway and tried to remember if he had chocked the wheels of the airplane when he parked it. He thought he might be losing his mind and was glad that the hospital had gently suggested that he not perform surgery until matters were more settled. He appreciated, but certainly did not enjoy, the sympathy that everyone had shown him.

The mirror in the foyer reflected an unshaven grunge holding a briefcase. He dropped the briefcase on the floor and considered his options. To the right was the kitchen, stocked with cooked meals provided by friends and neighbors—he had not eaten since a muffin for breakfast. To the left were his study and the liquor cabinet. No one had thought to stock that for him, but he turned left anyway. Scotch might help him sleep—food wouldn't.

The silence of the big house was deafening and he jumped when the phone rang. *I'm not going to answer that. There's no one I want to talk to...could it be news about Brooke?* He picked the phone up, but hesitated.

"Glenn, are you there?"

"Yes, I'm sorry."

"This is Angie, next door. I saw you drive in and decided to see if you were okay."

Angie LeMay had retaken her maiden name a year earlier when she had divorced her accountant husband and won the house in the settlement. She evidently had not been emotionally scarred by the proceedings. A gym membership along with a new wardrobe had allowed her to enter her mid-thirties with a co-ed appearance and an active agenda.

"Oh—Hi, Angie."

"I've been worried about you, Glenn. How are you holding up?"

"I'm okay. Thanks for asking."

"Have you had anything to eat? You know I'll be glad to come over and fix something for you."

"I ate a little while ago."

"All you have to do is call if I can help in any way. You know, sometimes it helps just to talk and I've been through some tough times myself."

"I appreciate that, Angie, but I'm okay for now."

"Well, I'm here for you any time. I'd like to have you over for dinner soon and lend my support. I hope you consider me a friend as well as a neighbor."

"You're very kind, Angie."

He was relieved to finally end the conversation. *God save me from do-gooders and good intentions. Thanks for asking about Brooke.*

He sat at his desk and looked at the clutter of papers. The scotch was having little effect and he was as depressed as ever. He had resisted the urge to prescribe something for himself and vowed to avoid that slippery

We hope you enjoyed this sample of Harrison Jones' *Shadow Flight*. It's a great story, is it not?

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