

Dragonfly vs Monarch

Book One



Charley Brindley

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Dragonfly Vs Monarch

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Аннотация

Autumn Willow is a grad student at MIT. In her spare time, she co-pilots her grandfather's B-17, a restored WWII bomber. Sasha Brezhnev is a pilot for the Russian Air Force flying the SU-57 fighter jet.

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by

Charley Brindley

charleybrindley@yahoo.com

www.charleybrindley.com

Edited by

Karen Boston

Website <https://bit.ly/2rJDq3f>

Front cover art by

Niki Vukadinova

Back cover art by

Charley Brindley

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This book is dedicated to

Vern Franklin Brindley

Other books by Charley Brindley

- 1. Oxana's Pit*
- 2. The Last Mission of the Seventh Cavalry*

3. *Raji Book One: Octavia Pompeii*
 4. *Raji Book Two: The Academy*
 5. *Raji Book Three: Dire Kawa*
 6. *Raji Book Four: The House of the West Wind*
 7. *Hannibal's Elephant Girl, Book One*
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22. *Dragonfly vs Monarch: Book Three*
 23. *The Journey to Valdacia*
 24. *Still Waters Run Deep*
 25. *Ms Machiavelli*
 26. *Ariion XXIX*
 27. *The Last Mission of the Seventh Cavalry Book 2*

28. *Hannibal's Elephant Girl, Book Three*

See the end of the book for details about the others

Chapter One

In the air over Rio

Current day

Autumn Willow watched the ground below as the old B-17 bomber banked smoothly into the Rio de Janeiro landing pattern. She sat in the right seat of the cockpit and scanned the horizon as they leveled out.

“There’s Pantanal 413.” She pointed half-left toward the Brazilian Boeing 737 airliner, eight miles to the northwest and five thousand feet above them.

Her grandfather nodded and turned his attention back to the Aerovias cargo jet ahead of them in the landing pattern. He reached to the trim control knob while keeping his eyes on the cargo jet, adjusting the trim by two notches.

“Rio tower,” Autumn said into the microphone of her headset. “B-17 388. We’ve turned downwind behind Aerovias 856.”

“B-17 388. Rio tower. We are having you in our sight. Pantanal 413 and American Airlines 221 will circulate once on ten thousand over our heads to serve you time.”

“Rio Tower. B-17 388. Relay our thanks to 413 and 221. Sorry we can’t match their speed.”

“Rio Tower. They think they do not mind idling for one time

longer, more or less.”

Autumn pressed her radio button twice.

“Pantanal 413 to B-17 388. We just sit on here to enjoy the sight of you aeroplane.”

“American Airlines 221 to B-17. You’re the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen in the air.”

“Thanks, 221 and 413,” Autumn said, then glanced up toward American Airlines 221, ten thousand feet above. “Hope to meet up with you guys on the ground.”

“413. We be on there pretty quick afterward you do.”

“221. Bet on it. Are you the one flying that graceful old war bird?”

Autumn looked at her grandfather and saw him give her a wink. The old man then took his hands from the wheel and gave her a *Your turn* gesture.

She shoved the microphone up away from her lips. “You kiddin’ me?” She grabbed the wheel and lifted her feet to the pedals. “Are you kidding me?”

“I never kid anyone, Clicker. I’m just going to enjoy the ride on this landing.”

The twenty-two-year-old grad student swallowed and reached for the four throttles with her left hand. “You work the flaps and carburetor heat for me.”

“Tell me when, and how much.”

Autumn positioned the microphone back to her lips and pressed her microphone button on the wheel. “Roger that, 221.”

“B-17, looks like you got quite a crowd down on the tarmac. Show ‘em what real flying’s all about.”

Autumn pressed her microphone button twice, then called the controller at the airport. “Rio tower. B-17,” she said. “Wind check.”

She’d seen the airport’s tetrahedron pointing into the wind and knew she would have to touch down at a slight angle to the runway, but her grandfather’s words came back to her.

Never believe anything you hear, and only half of what you see. Flying is as much art and instinct as it is a science.

“B-17,” the tower answered. “Crosswind quartering, left by right. Fifteen knots, approx.”

“Roger, tower.”

Autumn scanned her instruments and added a little power. The deep throb of the four propellers increased as the engines revved up a tick. She then banked the B-17 into a sweeping right turn.

When you’re in the air, there is no wind, because your aircraft becomes part of it. Her grandfather’s words from her first flying lesson. But on landing, you have to deal with the wind aggressively. Otherwise, it’ll wreak havoc on the most powerful of aircraft.

Aerovias 856 cargo was well ahead of the B-17 and already turning cross wind.

Rio de Janeiro’s Galeao International Airport, on Governor’s Island, has one of the most difficult pilot approaches in the world.

With notorious crosswinds and the waters of Guanabara Bay off each end of the runway, there's no margin for error.

Autumn pressed her intercom button. "Buckle up, guys. Guess who's taking the Shenandoah into Rio?"

"Oh, shiiiiit," someone's voice came over the intercom from the back of the plane.

"You got your 'chute on, Andy?" said another voice.

"I do now."

"Matthew, whar y'all put my dang jug of Jim Beam?"

"Cute," she said and clicked off the intercom as she scanned the horizon for other traffic and banked the old bomber into the downwind leg of the landing pattern.

Aerovias 856 was now on his final approach and would soon touch down on runway two-eight.

Autumn saw the cargo jet crabbing to his left. She felt a bead of sweat collect on her right temple and run down her cheek. She checked the airspeed indicator and altimeter, then pulled all four throttles back a fraction. She eased the wheel forward.

"Ten percent flaps."

"Ten percent flaps." Her grandfather adjusted the flaps.

"Carburetor heat half."

He pushed the four carburetor heat knobs forward.
"Carburetor heat half."

She wanted desperately to see his expression but knew she'd read nothing there, even if he was terrified. Outside the cockpit, he always joked, treating her like one of the boys, and he never

missed a chance to brag about his granddaughter being a graduate student, studying micromechanics at MIT. But inside the cockpit, he was a serious, no-nonsense pilot all the time.

Grandfather Baylor Willow, two years older than the Shenandoah, was born in 1941. By the end of World War II, the old aircraft had flown forty-six missions over Germany, while he still played with his alphabet blocks. He saved her from the scrap heap in 1964, and now she was one of only eleven left in the world. Of the twelve thousand built during the war, all the others had either been destroyed in battle or scrapped later.

The beautiful vintage plane drew a large crowd everywhere she went, and Autumn couldn't be prouder than to be at the controls as they flew into the Rio airport.

"Landing gear down," she said.

Her grandfather flipped the switches to lower the main gear.

She heard the hydraulics squeal to life and, ten seconds later, the solid thump of one of the wheels locking into place. She waited for the second one, but it didn't happen. Another five seconds, and still no thump. She looked at her grandfather.

His only reaction was to lift a shoulder. *You're in command, Clicker.*

She knew that was his silent response. He always called her by her nickname when they were alone. On her eleventh birthday, he'd given her an old telegraph hand key and wired it into her CD player's speakers so she could learn Morse Code. Autumn thought it was the grandest present she'd ever received and

was soon clicking out simple messages for him. She spent so much time on the key, he soon began calling her ‘Clicker.’ The nickname stuck, but it was their private nickname; everyone else called her ‘Autumn.’

Grandfather Baylor was the only father she’d ever known. Her first and second sets of parents were nothing more than blank spaces at the beginning of her life.

She received her first flying lesson from him when she was tall enough to reach the plane’s pedals. That was his present to her on her ninth birthday, just ten days after her grandparents had adopted her—her second adoption. Now she had almost three thousand hours in the air; twenty-four hundred in her grandfather’s Cessna 150, two hundred in a Link trainer, and the rest in multi-engine aircraft, including two hundred hours at the controls of the B-17. However, she’d never landed the four-engine antique aircraft at a busy major airport.

Autumn flipped her intercom button. “Anderson. Drop into the ball turret, and check the landing gear.”

“Roger, Captain.”

“Ready on the hand-crank, Williams,” she said.

“I’m on it.”

“Right gear down and locked,” Anderson reported from the ball turret. “Left gear froze halfway.”

“Crank it down, Williams.”

“Roger that.”

“Anderson?” she asked.

“Not moving yet.”

“Thirty percent flaps,” she said.

Her grandfather increased the flaps and looked out his left window to see that the flaps responded. “Thirty percent flaps.”

“The wheel moved down about three inches,” Anderson said over the intercom.

“Rio tower to B-17. We thinking you have only one wheel sticking out.”

“Roger, tower. We’re working on it.” She switched to the intercom. “Come on, Williams,” Autumn said. “We got two minutes to touchdown.”

“You might...” Williams paused to take a quick breath as he worked the manual crank, leaving on his microphone, “have to do a one...wheelie.”

“Yeah, right,” Autumn said. “If you make me go around for a second try, I’m gonna be really pissed. They’re already stacking airliners over our head.”

“I like it better...when Grandpa flies. He’s not so—”

“Crabby?” Anderson cut in.

“Mean?” someone else chimed in.

“Bitchy...is what I was...”

“Ten degrees to go,” Anderson said. “You can line up on final, Ms. Captain.”

“Yeah, when I hear a clunk, I’ll line up on final.”

“Clunk.”

“Shut up, Matthew,” she said.

“Five more degrees,” Anderson said.

Autumn turned into her final approach to the runway. “If I hit the throttles, give me full carb heat and no flaps.”

“Roger that,” her grandfather said, resting his fingertips on the flap control lever.

Autumn heard a satisfying thump from the left landing gear locking into place, and she began to breathe again. She then flexed her knees to get the circulation going in her lower legs.

“Thirty seconds to touchdown,” she said into the intercom and knew the guys would keep quiet now and get into their seats as she concentrated on the landing.

Suddenly, she heard a new sound; something above her head clinked three times and rattled, like a small metal shaft breaking apart. Then came the decreasing whine of a motor winding down. She looked out her right window at the two starboard engines; they looked fine. She leaned forward to see past her grandfather and checked the two port-side engines. He did the same thing. All four engines appeared to be in full operation. She scanned her instrument panel and glanced out over the nose at the runway that seemed to grow larger by the second.

I'm coming in too fast.

On her second scan of the instruments, she saw it: the number two fuel pressure gauge needle touched the zero, bounced a little, and fell to the peg. The other three gauges all hovered around eighty psi.

“Port engine, inboard,” she said. “Fuel pressure dropped to

zero.”

Her grandfather jerked around his head to check the engine. “Still running, but not for long.”

“I’m feathering port inboard. Airspeed?”

She knew she could land on two engines if she had to, but she wanted three. From here on in, she’d concentrate only on the runway. Touchdown was less than fifteen seconds away.

“Airspeed one-eighty,” her grandfather said.

She eased back the throttles. “Eighty percent flaps.”

“Eighty percent flaps.”

Autumn felt the increased lift right away and wiggled the pedals to feel the rudder. She watched the nose move back and forth in reaction to the rudder, then eased down the left pedal while applying right pressure to the wheel.

Ten seconds to go.

She had the nose into the crosswind, about five degrees to the left of their forward motion. The instant the two main gears touched the concrete, she’d have to correct the attitude of the plane immediately and align the nose with the yellow center stripe of the runway; otherwise, she risked losing control and running off the runway—or worse, flipping the aircraft over.

Three seconds to go. Two seconds.

Autumn heard the screech of rubber against the rough cement as both main wheels touched down together. Using the pedals and wheel in coordination, she lined up the nose on the center stripe.

“Full flaps,” she said.

“Full flaps.”

She pulled the three throttles all the way back and eased the wheel toward her stomach to settle the tail wheel down to the runway.

“Speed?” she asked as she concentrated on controlling the roll out.

“One hundred and ten.”

She couldn't apply the brakes until they slowed to seventy miles per hour. If she hit the brakes now, she risked burning out the brake linings and possibly starting a fire in the main landing gear. She had plenty of runway ahead of her, so she let the fifteen-ton aircraft slow itself.

“Rio tower to B-17. Please receive taxiway 14-R, at ahead on your right hand.”

“Roger, tower.”

The problem with a B-17 on the ground is, the pilot can't see directly ahead because the tail is on the cement and nose is raised high in the air—a normal situation for any tail-dragger.

Autumn used the pedals to fishtail a little to see forward. “There's 14-R, two hundred yards.”

“Speed ninety,” her grandfather said.

The plane slowed quickly now. When the speed fell below seventy, she tilted the pedals forward, applying the brakes, decreasing to fifty miles an hour. When she was within forty yards of 14-R, she braked more and took the turn to her right,

revving the outboard port engine to help pull her around and off the runway.

Autumn turned to her right window to see the American Airlines Boeing 777 touch down on the far end of the runway.

“Wow,” she whispered, looking back at the taxiway. “He sure had confidence in me.”

Her grandfather slid open his window for some fresh air and reached to pat her shoulder. “So did I, Clicker. So did I.”

She glanced at him and saw the gray Oxford shirt she’d bought for him in Buenos Aires was soaked with sweat.

Chapter Two

On that same day, on 9th Avenue in New York City, Rigger Entime left an office building and tried to remember where he had parked his car.

He was ten paces beyond the little girl before the image of her eyes registered on his foggy perception of that cold December afternoon—the end of his longest day. His doctor had put him through the stress and strain of a raw recruit. He was exhausted, and he wanted it finished; all of it.

When he turned back toward the girl, an enormous baldheaded man with a cane in one hand and the Wall Street Journal tucked under his arm, bumped into him. Rigger stumbled but kept his grip on the gray slips of paper in his hand.

“Drunken fool,” mumbled the bald man as he straightened his overcoat and trudged on.

From a distance, the girl’s eyes looked both melancholy and almost gleeful. It seemed to Rigger her sadness was a tender veil, a valiant attempt to disguise her urge to play with the Barbie doll tucked in the crook of her arm.

Her fingers toyed with a bare plastic foot as she stared at Rigger. The doll’s other foot was stockinged in faded blue and covered by a tiny black slipper, with the strap swinging loose.

A cardboard sign hung around the little girl’s neck, lettered

in childish crayon, “Wil work 4 food.” Some imprinted words were torn in half along the bottom edge of the cardboard, “It’s the real thing.”

Past, present, and future fused into a frozen tide of emotion. The Earth lumbered on toward the winter solstice, and compassion warmed his aching heart. Rigger stuffed the five slips of paper into his coat pocket and knelt before her on one knee, feeling the icy cement through his tweed.

“What kind of work do you do, sweetheart?” He guessed she was about four years old.

The woman standing next to the girl spoke a daggered, “God bless you” to the back of a departing pedestrian who’d dropped two coins into her outstretched hand. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other and slipped her hands into the pockets of a dark Navy pea-jacket, the type one might buy for two dollars at a military surplus store. The outline of a torn-off chevron marked the shoulder of the jacket’s right arm. Her legs were bare below a short skirt. Thin socks and castoff Nikes rounded out her collection of old clothes. She stared up the street, over Rigger’s head, where a lady dressed in sable left a jewelry shop and came their way. Slick crimson nails tucked a fur collar tight over a harness of jewels.

A hand slipped from the pea-jacket pocket.

Rigger carefully fastened the strap on Barbie’s shoe as he watched the child’s face. He knew it would take only a wisp of a breeze to topple her into his arms, where he could hold her close

until she was warm and cozy.

“Can you drink hot chocolate with little marshmallows?” He smiled, trying to soften his expression.

He saw her face start to brighten, but then she caught herself and looked up at the woman. Rigger looked up, too. The woman ignored them as her eyes followed the sable. The eyes of the sable focused on some distant point where parallel lines came together. She elevated her nose and quickened her step.

An empty hand returned to the pea-jacket pocket.

The girl’s mother didn’t look down at the two people at her feet, but instead shifted her gaze to a young man getting out of a taxi and motioning the driver to keep the change.

“How about you, ma’am?” he said up to her. “Could you go for a cup of hot chocolate?”

She looked down at him, and he saw only bitterness. Not the slightest trace of happiness was in the woman’s face, hidden or imagined; perhaps there never had been. The shrug of her slim shoulders conveyed much more than ‘I don’t care.’ She said without a word that she hated him and every rich bastard who walked by and insulted her with a few tarnished coins. Yes, she would take his stingy offering of a hot drink, but only because she and the girl hadn’t eaten anything all day. That’s what he saw in her cold shrug.

* * * * *

“I help Mommy clean ‘partments,” the little girl said after a sip of the hot chocolate. She gave her sweet brown mustache a lick.

The three of them sat in a window booth at Hannibal’s Cafe, three blocks from where he met them. They were on one side of the table while Rigger faced them on the other. He slipped off his coat and let it fall behind his back. The woman and girl kept their coats on and buttoned.

“Oh,” he said, warming his hands on the steaming mug. “I bet you’re a big help to Mommy.”

The girl nodded as she held a sticky marshmallow to Barbie’s lips for a second, then popped it into her own mouth. She picked up her cup and slurped another marshmallow. Her mother stared out the window, with her hands wrapped around an untasted mug of hot chocolate.

Rigger looked to see what held her attention and was startled to meet her eyes in the reflection of the glass. She watched him in the mirrored window, not shifting her gaze. He blinked and took up his cup.

“We gonna get a pet l’phant,” the little girl said to Rigger.

The woman looked at the girl, narrowing her eyes. The girl narrowed her eyes back at her.

Rigger tried to interpret this fragment of intercepted communications. Was it a secret that the girl wanted a pet and

strangers shouldn't be made aware of it? Was 'pet elephant' a code phrase for something forbidden, perhaps an exotic bird, or maybe a father? Whatever it was, Rigger envied their easy relationship.

"Hurry up with your chocolate, Mama," her mother said. "We have to go."

"So," Rigger said, "you do cleaning work."

"Wait, don't tell me." The caustic knife of her words formed with practiced precision and cut without qualm. "You just remembered your maid went on vacation."

"No, I don't have a maid." He kept his voice soft in spite of her combative attitude.

Has life been so difficult for her that every man is a threat? Or perhaps a menace to something close to her? Why can't she see she has nothing to fear from me?

"Then your apartment is suddenly very dirty." It sounded like an accusation.

"As a matter of fact, I keep it fairly clean." This exchange was wearing Rigger down and getting them nowhere.

"What, then?"

"I just wondered how much you charge?"

"All that the traffic will bear." Her cold eye-lock never wavered, never weakened.

"Oh."

"Isn't that what you charge?"

"I don't charge anything, since—"

“I guess you just live off the fat of the land.”

Rigger gave up. “I suppose so.”

He returned his gaze to the little face framed in yellow curls and smiled as the girl silently admonished Barbie about something she apparently said without asking the girl’s permission.

I wonder if her hair is naturally curly. If not, someone spent a lot of time on it. Unusual for street people.

The woman sipped her chocolate, licked her upper lip, then took a big drink. She followed Rigger’s gaze to her daughter, who tried to catch a marshmallow with her tongue.

Ten minutes later, outside Hannibal’s, Rigger watched the two of them walk away. The girl hung on to the bottom edge of the pea-jacket as the woman shoved her hands into the pockets. Only the Barbie doll, cradled against the girl’s shoulder, looked back at him. He waved goodbye to Barbie, sighed, and went the opposite way. As he walked toward the drug store, he took the doctor’s prescriptions from his coat pocket.

* * * * *

On the following Tuesday, the day after Christmas, Rigger walked the streets. He really had no reason to return to Hannibal’s Café; he just wanted to taste the chocolate again.

He caught his breath when he saw the two of them across the street from Hannibal’s, working the busy lunchtime crowd.

They wore the same clothes as last week. He hustled through the traffic while they watched a gaggle of stockbrokers in pinstripes waddle by, half of them with cellphones grafted to their ears, hands attached. The rest of them had Bluetooth earbuds. All of them chattered a bit too loudly and waved their hands in the air, very much full of themselves.

“Hi there,” he said, coming up on their blind side.

The woman jerked her head around toward him, almost smiled, but then took on an expression that could have said, *I was actually expecting someone else.*

The child had a new sign, “Please help. Mommy lost job.” The girl’s face was stony as before, but her eyes welcomed him, and she turned Barbie his way. The doll gave him a blue-crayoned smile that wasn’t there last week.

He returned Barbie’s smile, then spoke to the mother. “How’s business?”

An urge to grab her shoulders to keep them from shrugging rose from his pectorals and tingled down to his hands, creating an awkward gesture. But she surprised him, and for an instant he thought he saw an unguarded sign of relief in her eyes.

“Not bad.” No shrug.

“You two had lunch?”

“Nope,” she said.

“I’m on my way to see what Hannibal has on today’s special. Wanna join me?”

She glanced down at the girl. “You hungry, Mama?”

The child nodded vigorously.

“Well, then, let’s go.”

Rigger stepped around the woman and picked up the girl before either of them could change their minds. She was light as a new kitten in his arms. Without hesitation, she put her arm around his neck and held on.

They threaded through the traffic, and he opened the door for the woman to precede him into the cafe.

The waitress told them the day’s special was liver, and Rigger noticed an expression of yuck on the child’s face. They ordered from the menu, and the waitress scurried away to the kitchen.

Rigger spoke to the girl. “What’s your name?”

“Rachel. I’m in the Bible, you know. This is Henry.” She held the grinning Barbie doll out to him.

“Hello, Henry.” He shook the outstretched plastic hand and felt the texture of her coral and rose pinafore—three doll-sizes too large. “I’m glad to meet you, and I must say, that’s a very pretty dress you’re wearing.”

Rachel stared at Henry, listening for a moment while adjusting the garment over an exposed shoulder. “She likes yours, too.”

Rigger studied the girl’s face. *Rachel—Appearance – 10, Likability – 10, Attitude – 8, Usefulness – 2.*

“Okay, here’s the deal,” the woman said, without warning.

Rigger and Rachel looked at her. So did Henry.

“We’ll clean your stupid apartment, but it’ll cost you fifty bucks.”

The girl and Henry looked at Rigger, expectant expressions on their faces.

He savored the moment, feeling some sort of perverse victory over the woman. Had he penetrated her icy facade and touched a warm current of femininity?

Street Woman; Appearance – 8, Likability – 1, Attitude – 0, Usefulness – 6.

“Sorry,” Rigger said, thinking he might persuade her to lighten her attitude. “My maid came back from vacation.”

“Let’s go, Rach.” She grabbed the girl’s arm, pushing her to the edge of booth.

“Wait.” He was no match for her. “Kidding. I was only kidding.” He reached for her wrist to keep them from leaving.

She glared at his hand, then wrenched away hers and settled back to her place. “Don’t fool with me, Rigger. I don’t play jokes.”

“All right, I’m sorry...” He stopped, confused for a moment. “I just wanted to see you smile.”

“I don’t do that either.”

He looked down to see Henry slowly turn her smiling face toward him.

“Okay,” he said. “No jokes, no smiles. I got it.”

The woman held her hand out to him, palm up.

“What?” he asked.

“Payment in advance.”

“Yeah, right...” He saw one eyebrow go up. “Okay, okay.”

Payment in advance. No jokes, no smiles.”

When his checkbook came out, she shook her head.

“American Express?” Rigger had reached a point where she was either going to take a joke or they were going to end this mercenary affair.

“Actually, I can do American Express.”

“Didn’t she say no jokes?” he asked Rachel, then looked the question at Henry. They both nodded.

“You have to add ten percent,” the woman said. “We do it at Punky’s Pawn Shop, over on Forty-third.”

“Seriously?”

“You don’t think a street woman can do business?”

“Oh, I think you’re a businesswoman all right. A very good businesswoman.”

He took some currency out of his wallet, riffling the new twenties to separate them. When he passed two twenties and a ten to her, he looked up to see the waitress glancing from the money to him to the woman.

She shrugged and asked, “Meatloaf?”

He made room for her to set the plate before him. She placed the chicken-fried steak in front of the woman, dropping it from a height that made an annoying clatter, but not quite enough to break the plate. Rachel got a hamburger with a side order of M&Ms, gently.

Henry sat down on the table, with her legs splayed out. She watched Rachel pick out three green candies. One went into

Henry's lap.

Rigger picked up his fork and stared at it as if he'd forgotten what he was going to do with it.

When did I tell her my name?

Chapter Three

Rigger's apartment on Central Park East, facing Sheep Meadow.

Rigger roused himself from semi-paralysis and reached for his remote control to pause the Mozart. He hit the wrong button, bringing the TV to life.

A newscast blinked on. "...missing from her morning dance class." A video of a hysterical mother pacing in front of an old redbrick building popped onto the screen. "No one, *no one*, especially Rudolf, my dumb-ass ex-husband, is supposed to pick up my daughter. I've told them and told them, he's an imbecile, he'll grab her and take off to Albuquerque or someplace. I bet he did it. I know the sonofa—"

The video of the woman abruptly changed to the contrite, chiseled face of a young news anchor with much-too-blue contact lenses. He squinted to read the teleprompter.

"However, the Tiny Tyke Academy's spokesperson told our reporter that Samantha Ann Cramer wasn't picked up at the school. They had no record of her arriving for her regular Wednesday morning bullet..." the man stopped and blinked at the camera. "Ah...uh..." he stammered, clearing his throat. "I mean ballet, her Wednesday morning ballet class. The mother insisted she had dropped off the four-year-old girl at nine a.m.,

as always, and watched her until she was inside the building. Meanwhile, police and child welfare authorities began—”

Rigger clicked off the TV when his doorbell chimed. He opened the door to see the familiar pea-jacket, Henry the Barbie doll, and sweet Irish eyes of Rachel.

“Come in, come in.” He stepped aside and waved them into his apartment, imitating the enthusiasm he wanted to feel.

When he closed the door, a fluffy ball of fur came bounding around a corner on the opposite side of the large living room. The puppy tripped on the red ribbon trailing from his neck, tumbled down the four carpeted steps, landed on his head, rolled end-over-end, and jumped to his feet. With tiny pink tongue flapping out the side of his mouth, he ran straight for the girl.

“L’phant!” she cried and ran behind the woman. He chased after her. Rachel dodged away. “L’phant, l’phant!” she squealed. “Save me.”

On the third time around, the woman grabbed the girl and held her up high. The puppy sat, panting, looking up at the child, still wanting to play.

“What the heck do you think you’re doing?” She didn’t give Rigger a chance to answer. “If I wanted her to have a dog, I’d buy her a dog. And it wouldn’t be a scruffy mutt like this one.” She shoved away the puppy with her foot.

Instead of being rebuffed, the dog took it as an invitation. He yipped happily, pouncing on the woman’s foot.

Rachel squirmed around to watch him.

“Who said it was for her?” Rigger asked.

“Oh, so it’s your dog?”

“Yes. I’ve been thinking for a long time I needed a watchdog.”

She blew out a breath through pursed lips and shoved away the puppy again. “You call that a watchdog?”

Rigger nodded.

“What’s his name, then?”

“I call him...um...” He glanced down at the playful tan and white half-spaniel. “Wolf. His name is Wolf.”

“Wolf?”

“Yes.”

“Well, if you’ll take your vicious watchdog named ‘Wolf’ and lock him in a closet or something, I’ll put Rachel down and get to work.”

“All right.” Rigger knelt down, swallowing his pain and moving as smoothly as a twenty-eight-year-old man should have been able to. He picked up the little dog. “Come on, pup. You can play in the bathroom for a while.”

Wolf—Appearance – 10, Likability -10, Attitude – 10, Usefulness – 0.

When he came back from putting the dog in the upstairs bathroom, he found Rachel standing in the middle of the living room, gazing at the artwork.

“Henry likes your pictures.” She turned the Barbie doll toward Rigger.

“Thank you, Henry.”

Rigger watched the woman remove her coat, drape it over a chair-back, and take a bibbed apron from her handbag. The apron still had a K-Mart price tag attached. She yanked off the tag, stuffed it into her pocket, slipped the neck strap over her head, and tied the apron strings in the back. Her apricot blouse contrasted nicely with the short tan skirt. It wasn't the same outfit she wore before. Neither were her red peep-toe pumps.

"I'll start in the kitchen. That's always the worst."

She didn't wait for a response before walking away toward the formal dining room, which opened onto a large sunny kitchen. Her heels tapped across the hardwood floor that shimmered under a new coat of wax.

Rigger sat on the edge of his chair and looked at Rachel. "Well, what are we to do?"

"Henry Bouvier got to have operate."

"Right now?"

"Yes, she's dying."

Rigger blinked. Building a dollhouse of cushions was what he'd expected. "Who'll do the surgery?"

She looked at him, her brows knitted as well as a four-year-old can do that sort of thing.

"Operate," he explained. "Who's going to operate on her?"

"You are," she said matter-of-factly, as if that should have been obvious. "But first she has to go to the bathroom."

"Wolf is in the upstairs bathroom, but there's another one, just down that hall." He pointed toward a hallway to the right of the

fireplace.

Rachel looked intently into Henry's eyes. A small volume of two-way optical twittering went on for several seconds.

"Nope," Rachel said, "has to be the upstairs bathroom."

"Okay, but—"

The girl jumped up and ran toward the stairs, giving the kitchen a quick look.

"Hey," Rigger said in a loud whisper.

She stopped, turning toward him, her foot on the second step.

"You forgot Henry." He picked up the doll from where she lay at his feet.

Rachel ran back, grabbed Henry from his hand, and ran again for the stairs. With another glance toward the kitchen, she bounded up the steps.

Rigger smiled. *Wolf—Appearance – 10, Likability – 10, Attitude – 10, Usefulness – 10. Perfect score.*

Five minutes passed. He listened to the too-loud cleaning noises coming from the kitchen. Another five minutes, and Rigger began to wonder if Rachel was all right.

The woman came in from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. "Where's Rachel?"

"Um...in the bathroom." Rigger looked at the stairway, then at the hall. "It's down there." He pointed toward the hall on the right side of the fireplace, where the downstairs bathroom was.

"Well, I probably need to do that next anyway." She started for the hall.

“Wait!”

She stopped and stared at him.

“How did you do in the kitchen?” He went to inspect her work. She followed.

“Oh, man,” she mumbled loud enough for him to hear. “I hope this isn’t going to be one of those kind of jobs.”

After a cursory inspection of the kitchen, he glanced over the woman’s right shoulder, watching the stairway. “Looks pretty good.”

Her face took on a quizzical expression.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I never asked your name.”

“Katrina. Katrina Raider.”

He held out his hand to her. She took it. Her hand was limp and cold in his. He let go.

“I’m Rigger.”

“Glad to meet you. How many bedrooms you got in this place?”

He regarded her, wondering why she asked that.

“It’s a professional question. I’ve got to clean them, you know.”

“Oh. Three.”

“You sleep in all of them?”

Rigger knew this wasn’t a joke. “Yes.” He saw Rachel tiptoeing down the stairs with Henry and smiled. “But not every night.” He waited until the girl took a seat on the hearth. “Come on, I’ll show you where they are.”

“Hi, Mama,” Katrina said as she and Rigger walked into the

living room. "What'cha been doing?"

Rigger marveled at how sweet she was to the girl and contrasted that wonderful camaraderie he saw between them with the resentful, almost spiteful way Katrina talked to him. He envied a relationship so close, a mother and her little girl could call each other 'Mama.'

"Thinking," Rachel said.

"About what?"

"That house with a yard back grass you told about."

"You mean grass back yard."

"And monkey box."

"Monkey bars."

"And sand box."

"Is that your gadget?" Katrina asked Rigger, nodding toward the mantel.

Rigger looked at it, then back at her. "Excuse me?"

"I said, what is that gadget?"

He walked to the fireplace and reached for the object. It was an electromechanical device suspended in a solid block of clear Lucite. It measured exactly three and a half inches square. He rotated it to catch the light, admiring the precision milled parts and tiny gold-etched circuit paths running zig-zags over the octagonal silver cover.

"It's a triple-stabilized, self-calibrating thermionic gyroscope."

"Oh." She took it from his outstretched hand. "Sounds

dangerous.”

“Only if you hold it too close to your heart.” He grinned at her.

She held it away from her body and looked at the other side.

“What’s it for?”

“It’s part of the guidance system for cruise missiles.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” He expected some show of admiration, or at least approval.

“Then you’ve killed a lot of people.” She handed it back to him.

“Maybe I should’ve said it’s used in the guidance system of the Benedict Arnold also.” He put the gyroscope back on the mantel.

“Or at least a variation of this one.”

“Traitor?” she said. “The anti-cruise-missile missile?”

He raised an eyebrow.

“I’m destitute, not illiterate. There was an exhaustive article in Newsweek last month about the Benedict Arnold, also known as The Traitor.”

Rigger had read the same article. During the second Gulf War, eight cruise missiles had gone astray, three of them killing civilians. The same problem had occurred in the Afghanistan war. It was during that war the Pentagon decided to proceed with development of the Benedict Arnold, which soon became called the Traitor. Its main purpose was to birddog the Navy’s Tomahawk cruise missiles. If one of them deviated from its course, even by as little as two degrees, the Traitor, which

measured less than four feet in length, would instantly accelerate and destroy the errant cruise missile. Still an embarrassing mistake, having a highly developed weapon misbehave, but an airburst wasn't nearly as deadly as having a confused cruiser fly through the window of a new bride's wedding party. If the cruise missile performed as prescribed, then the Traitor would follow it into the target and add its own small contribution to the resultant explosion.

The second reason the guys in the Pentagon E-Ring wanted the Traitor developed was for use against enemy cruise missiles. This was, perhaps, the more important mission; a mission they knew would play a leading role in next war.

"Where's your copy of the gyro for the Traitor?" she asked.

"They wouldn't let me have one." He didn't bother to add that the new model was still too hush-hush even for the developer to have one in his own home. There was also the Dragonfly project, but he felt no desire to invite any more animosity from her; she was hostile enough.

"Now I'm impressed," the woman said.

Rigger stared at her for a moment, thinking it would have felt better if she'd simply slapped his face. "I'll show you the bedrooms."

The words came out with a flinty edge, leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. He walked past her toward the hallway. He'd had enough of her surly attitude. After showing her the master bedroom downstairs and two additional bedrooms upstairs, he

left her and returned to the living room to find the little girl.

“What’s your name?” Rachel asked.

“Rigger Entime.”

She held Henry in front of her face, with the doll facing Rigger. “I don’t think so,” she said in her deepest voice.

“Then what do you think my name is?”

“God.” She laid Henry on the carpet and began removing the doll’s clothing.

Rigger was taken aback. *God?* he thought. *A god is a creator; not a destroyer. Obviously, she doesn’t realize who God is, or isn’t.*

“Well, Rachel...” He was lost for a moment. “I’ve been mistaken for a lot of different people, but never anyone as magnanimous as He.”

She looked up at him, narrowing her eyes. She then crooked her pointer finger, motioning him to come closer.

He bent down.

“There’s something I have to tell you,” she whispered.

“What’s that?” he whispered, too.

“I don’t like big words.”

He straightened up. “Oh, sorry.”

“If you’re going to use big words, you have to talk to Kat... I mean Mama.” She went back to work on Henry. “She knows about big words.”

“Well, I’d much rather talk to you.” *Rachel—Appearance – 10, Likability – 10, Attitude – 9, Usefulness – 7.*

“I think it’s right here,” she said. Henry lay naked on the floor

between them, smiling up at Rigger. Rachel pressed her fingertip to the doll's tummy.

“What’s right there?”

The little girl jumped up and ran toward the hallway, then down the hall to where Katrina worked in the bathroom. A moment later, she came running back and fell to her knees at the doll's side.

“Apengitus,” she said.

“Apengitus?” He stifled a chuckle. “You mean appendicitis?”

“Yes, and it’s got to come out.”

Rigger went to the kitchen and came back with an assortment of flatware and three linen napkins. He laid out forks, spoons, and a butter knife beside the ailing Barbie doll.

Rachel stared up at him, her eyes wide.

“It’s okay,” Rigger reassured her as he knelt on the floor. “Henry won’t feel a thing. Now, I’ll be the doctor, and you’ll be the nurse. When I ask for an instrument—”

She gave him a severe look.

“I mean tool. When I ask for a tool, you’ll hand me one of those.” He took one of the white linen napkins, folded it twice, and placed it over Henry’s face. “Now she’s out. We can get to work.” He flipped a second napkin into a triangle and tied it around his face, outlaw mask fashion. He placed the third napkin around Rachel’s face in the same manner, tying it in the back.

Rachel took her place on the opposite side of Henry, glancing from Rigger to the doll.

“Butter knife,” he said, holding out his hand to Rachel as he pressed an index finger to the doll’s stomach.

* * * * *

Ten minutes later the operation was over, the offending appendix removed, and Henry still slept under the napkin.

Rachel and Rigger looked up to find Katrina staring at the two masked operators on either side of a naked doll, with a collection of silverware lying around. The doll’s face was still covered.

“We did it,” Rachel cried as she pulled down her mask and whipped the napkin off Henry’s face, then grabbed the doll. “Her belly’s fixed, and pretty soon she’ll be able to dance the ballet again. God said so.”

“Really?” Katrina said. “Ballet?”

For the first time, Rigger saw the tiniest smile soften her face.

Rachel dressed Henry as Rigger gathered up the flatware. He pulled down his mask as he got up, leaving it to hang around his neck. He walked toward the kitchen.

Katrina followed. “I’m finished, except for that one room upstairs. You’ll have to unlock the door if you want it cleaned.”

“No, it’s fine.” He dropped the silverware into the sink and thought about the Dragonfly behind that locked door.

“Guess you wanna inspect everything.”

Rigger faced her. “No, but I need your phone number.”

“Why?”

“You do such good work, I may want you again.”

As they walked back to the living room, he jotted down the phone number she gave him.

“Come on, Rach, we’ve got to go now.”

As soon as Rigger saw them out, he picked up the phone to make a call. When someone answered on the other end, he said, “Hi, Pugsley.” He listened for a moment. “Yeah, I’m fine.” He pulled the mask from around his neck to daub at his forehead, while the other man talked. “Listen,” Rigger interrupted him and glanced down at the notepad with Katrina’s phone number. “I’ve got a job for you.”

Chapter Four

Rigger didn't die on that night, almost a year before, but something went wrong inside his body. In that bloody parking lot, he picked up some dreadful disease, perhaps something those two deviants left on the ground or in the air. Some alien pathogen that crept into him as he stood looking down at what was left of his life. A timed-release murder, relentlessly gnawing at his insides, destroying him from within.

He didn't actually know where the disease came from, but in his seething rage at what those two had done to his life, he imagined they were killing him as well.

Ten months passed before he realized or even cared that something was wrong with him. His doctor put him through an exhaustive battery of tests, taking almost a week. The day he met Katrina and Rachel on the street was the day he'd received his death sentence. On previous visits to Dr. Ruth Macintyre's clinic, her nurses had drawn blood and taken other samples from him. They sent them off to some laboratory for analysis. They ran EKGs, EEGs, CAT scans, stress tests—the works. Later came more blood and urine analysis. Then on that fateful day, his doctor delivered the dreaded news.

“Spongiform encephalopathy,” she told him.

After a half-hour of sitting beside him on her Sears couch, holding his hand, and going into great detail about current

research, online support groups, and hope for patients in the future, she told him the hard truth.

“Rigger, in all my years of practice, I’ve never had to tell a patient there’s no hope. There’s always been an array of drugs, surgeries, and other treatments, radiation, chemotherapy for me to choose from. But this time, there’s nothing for me to cut out, there’s no tumor to bombard with radiation, and no infection to fight with drugs.” Dr. Macintyre let go of his hand and stood up to pace the floor before him. “It’s an insidious disease that worms its way into the cerebellum and bores tentacles into every corner of the brain. I’m sorry, Rigger; it’s inoperable, incurable. Go home and make peace with your God or get roaring drunk, it’s your choice.”

She gave him a yellow plastic bag filled with sample vials of Buprenorphine, a narcotic analgesic and powerful painkiller. She also wrote a prescription for morphine, refillable without limit, an anti-depressant, and Nexium and Tagamet to combat the side effects of the other medications.

Yes, he said in answer to her suggestion, he would get a second opinion, and a third. But he knew his days were numbered. He’d be dead in less than a year, according to Dr. Macintyre.

* * * * *

The ringing of the phone jolted Rigger from his soft recliner. The sun was up, but the room covered in darkness, as if fearful

of the new day.

“Hey, Rig.” Pugsley’s voice came from the receiver. “That phone number you gave me to check on? It’s a home for battered women.”

“What?”

“Yeah, but you can’t talk to anyone. They have a series of voicemail boxes where you leave a message. If the woman wants to talk to you, she’ll call you back.”

“Pugsley, that’s all you got?”

“There ain’t nothing to get; it’s a dead end.”

“Even a dove leaves a trail through the mist, if one has the eye to see it.”

“Yeah, well, that may have worked for Longfellow and Hiawatha, but I gotta have feathers. You got Caller ID, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then call that place, leave a message for her, and my bet is, she’ll call back from a different number. That’s the trail of your little bird I need to see.”

* * * * *

Rigger called Pugsley the next day. He’d dialed the number Katrina gave him and left a message, saying he wanted her to come back the following week to clean his apartment. She’d called back an hour later and told him she’d be there on Tuesday.

“Anonymous,” he told Pugsley over the phone as he looked at

the display on his Caller ID.

“Great!”

“Great?” Rigger said. “What’s so great about anonymous?”

“Have you received any other calls?”

“No, she called just a minute ago.”

“Then pull the plug on your phone line. I’ll be right over.”

Ten minutes later when Pugsley knocked, Wolf beat Rigger to the door, yipping with puppy excitement. As soon as Pugsley stepped inside, Wolf attacked and gnawed a shoestring on a shiny cordovan Oxford.

Pugsley picked up the dog. “Now, this,” he said as he ruffled the blond and tan hair on the puppy’s head, “is a good idea.” The little dog squirmed and licked his hand. “You need something lively in this place.”

“I guess so.” Rigger smiled. “Too bad he can’t learn to use a litter box.”

“How you feeling these days?”

“Better, thanks.”

“Yeah,” Pugsley said softly. His face hardened into a severe expression. “I can see that.”

Rigger brought Pugsley a cup of coffee as he wired a homemade electronic device between Rigger’s Caller ID and phone line.

“Two creams, two sugars.” Rigger placed the cup on the end table, by the phone. “Right?”

“Yeah, Rig. Thanks.” He took a sip, smacked his lips.

“Perfect. Sweet and smooth.” He set down the cup. “Now,” he said, rubbing his hands together, “first we set your phone to ‘Anonymous.’” He pushed some buttons on his device. “Then we page back on your Caller ID.” Pressing the back button on Rigger’s Caller ID brought up the Anonymous entry from Katrina’s call. “Now we do magic.”

He pressed a button, but nothing happened. Pugsley checked the connections on his box, then on the phone. He laughed when he found the phone was still unplugged from the wall.

Slipping the phone cable into the wall plug, he pressed a button on his device, and they heard the rapid tones of a number being dialed. After a few seconds, they heard sounds of relay clicks at the phone company’s substation, and a second number was dialed. As soon as it rang one time, a phone number popped up on the red digital display of Pugsley’s device. He flipped a switch to disconnect the call.

“If she has Caller ID,” he said, “all she’ll see is ‘Anonymous’ on her end.” He took out a small notepad and his pen. “That’s a different number, right?”

Rigger glanced at the number on the display. “Yes, it is.”

“This little box is more fun than a windy day on the Street of Short Skirts.” Pugsley removed his electronic device and reconnected Rigger’s Caller ID. Five minutes later, his coffee finished, he was out the front door on his way to resume digging.

Pugsley—Appearance – 2, Likability – 10, Attitude – 10, Usefulness – 10.

* * * * *

Two hours later, Rigger got a call from Pugsley.

“Katrina Loraine Raider, twenty-three-oh-one Kimberley Ridge, Number twenty-one, a townhouse, thirty-two hundred bucks a month is the rent—”

Rigger interrupted him. “What the Sam Hill are you talking about? She lives on the street.”

“Twenty-six years old, five-foot-four, dark hair, dark eyes. That sound like your dove?”

“Yes, but—”

“Last month’s electric bill, three-hundred-eighty-two, water and trash, forty-seven, both paid on time, employed at Wellington Labs—”

“Employed?”

“Works the swing shift, six p.m. till two a.m.”

“I can’t believe all this nonsense.”

“She has a degree in—get this—pharmacological ethnobotany. I know you’re going to tell me what that is.”

“It’s the study of how cultural groups use indigenous plants to make medicine.”

“Well, why the hell don’t they just say that?”

“Wouldn’t look good on a diploma.”

“Right,” Pugsley said. “She’s also going to school part-time, working on her master’s degree.”

Rigger was quiet, trying to assimilate all this alien information about a street woman he thought he knew.

“Drives a late model Volvo, dark red, never married—”

“Pugsley, what’s going on here? When I met this woman, she and her daughter were begging on the street.”

“Daughter?”

“Yeah, she has a four-year-old girl.”

“Nope. This babe has no dependents.”

“Pug, my friend, I’ve wondered when you’d screw up and get tangled in the wiring of that computer of yours.” Rigger was relieved in a way. He knew he couldn’t be that far off on Katrina.

“Admit it, you struck out on this one.”

“I doubt that. What’s the kid’s name?”

“Rachel. And her doll’s name is Henry Bulyea.” Rigger chuckled. “Maybe you can track down something on her.”

“Her who?”

“The doll, Henry.”

“Her doll’s name is Henry?”

“Yeah, a Barbie doll named Henry Bulyea. I bet there’s lots of info on the Internet about her.”

“How you spelling that last name?”

Rigger spelled it out.

“I’ll call you back.”

The line clicked as Pugsley hung up.

* * * * *

No dependents, Rigger thought as he hurried down the street. He checked his watch again. Pugsley tracked down the wrong woman; that's the only explanation. Miswired that little box of his, that's what happened. Dialed the wrong number.

At 12:29, he sat at the bus stop across the street from Miss Wiggley's Day Care. At 12:30, it seemed as if a large school bus had been tipped up to spill a load of laughing kids into the play yard. Rigger leaned forward, intent on the children—especially the girls, one little girl in particular. It wasn't Rachel, but like Rachel, she had a flouncy air about her, that little loose-limbed, almost awkward stride, and there was a musical note in her laughter that he knew so well. She could have been Rachel's sister.

Thirty minutes later, Rigger, empty of purpose and bereft of hope, trudged home, keeping to the edge of the cold afternoon shadows.

Halfway home, in the middle of the block, on a nearly deserted side street, he stopped.

This is creepy. I've heard of people feeling someone's eyes watching them from behind, but I always thought it a bit melodramatic.

He turned quickly and saw someone. He couldn't tell if it was a man or woman. The person jumped into a doorway. Curious, he walked back. When he came to the doorway, he found it led

into a place called O'Malley's Bar and Grill. The glass-half of the door was grimy and frosted around the edges. In the dim interior, he made out a dozen or so patrons sitting at the bar, sipping their drinks. Three more sat at a beat-up wooden table, playing dominos. They were all men, and it could have been any one of them.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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