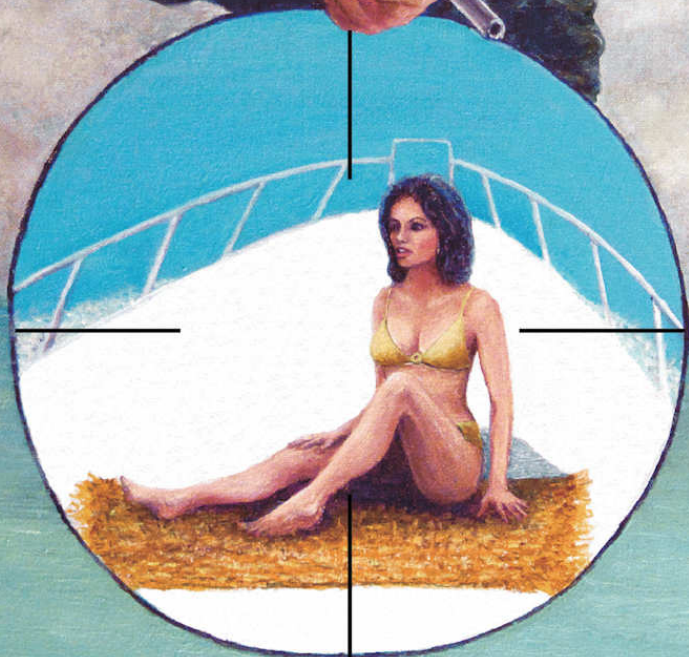


Hunter's Choice



A Matt Hunter Adventure

J. C. Hager

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**Greenstone Publishing
Rapid River, Michigan**

Hunter's Choice
by J. C. Hager

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Cessna

THE CESSNA WOULDN'T CLIMB. The pilot could see the beads of rime ice on the wings and nose cowl. The resulting drag on the controls and the increased rate of fuel use had plagued him for the past hour. Although certified for flight into icing conditions, his classic Cessna 310 couldn't handle this much ice, despite its rubber boots on the wing leading edges. Deicing fluid kept the windscreen clear, but every minute more and more ice was building up on the twin-engine plane. The weight was only part of the problem; the icy bumps stole aerodynamic lift from the normally smooth flight surfaces. The plane's performance slowly had deteriorated until it refused to climb; more ice and it would refuse to fly.

The pilot counted the ice buildup as strike two. Strike one had occurred a half hour ago when the Gore Bay Airport ILS localizer beam became intermittent. The Gore Bay tower calmly reported they were under Instrument Flight Rules due to reduced visibility by blowing snow. Crosswinds greater than thirty knots slammed their single 6,000-foot, north-south runway.

The pilot thought it was too risky to land his ice-heavy plane under such conditions. Experienced with crosswind landing techniques, he calculated that the risks exceeded his comfort level. With his newly installed GPS, reflecting the pilot's practice of keeping the plane in state-of-the-art equipment and perfectly maintained, he could have tried a GPS-only approach in lieu of using the intermittent ILS localizer, but he didn't. He had elected to keep pressing on, and now there was no turning back.

With 20/20 hindsight, the pilot would have given all he owned to be back at Gore Bay on Manitoulin Island with an opportunity for a challenging landing. He had planned an easy flight from Montreal, leaving before dawn to avoid the storm forecast for later in the day. These charter customers paid big money to be flown where they wanted to go without any questions about passengers or cargo. The business from these mysterious, sometimes dangerous, clients had kept him flying and in money for more than a decade.

He looked at the large man next to him who seemed to recognize their problem but said nothing. The beautiful woman in back was cold and bundled in her fashionable down vest that she probably wished was a jacket. Four large, military-type duffel bags filled the space between the front seats and the single back seat. Since they weighed several hundred pounds, he thought they could be jettisoned to give them a few more minutes of flying time—if it came to that.

A veteran pilot, he had experienced icing many times. He replayed this latest sequence of events in his mind: a strong tailwind had helped compensate for the initial ice drag, leaving most flight parameters acceptable. Well, except for the high gas use and sluggish controls. Heavy icing started when they were between Ottawa and Sudbury. He rejected Gore Bay to go for Sault Ste. Marie. The Sault had several runways and the crosswind conditions were less of a factor. The Sault's Automated Surface Observing System broadcast reported light snow with two-mile visibility.

During his radio contact with Gore Bay regarding their plans for the Sault, they had reported the transmission was static garbled.

At an altitude of 6,000 feet along the north edge of Drummond Island, they hit turbulence. The two engines strained to bring the heavy plane up to 8,000 feet as the pilot searched for better air with less water and, therefore, less ice in it. The pilot's pride and the nature of his cargo and passengers stopped him from declaring an emergency after passing Gore Bay. Now he fought against the hard bumps from the unstable air that hammered the lightplane.

After a particularly violent bump, both the pilot and the passenger caught the acrid odor of burning insulation and saw the puff of smoke rising from the panel. The pilot immediately shut off the master electrical switch and began bringing equipment up one system at a time. When he hit the avionics, the smoke returned. The avionics were again switched off, eliminating both GPS and radio. Strike three.

The storm from the southwest hit them with wind, snow, and more icy hail. Intermittent patches of forest flashed by below them through holes in

the clouds. He grabbed his maps and tried to read the bouncing and spinning magnetic compass. He tried to keep heading west into the storm but was unable to maintain altitude. Where were those two major highways or the huge former Strategic Air Command base south of the Sault?

The pilot fought the controls as the storm slammed the plane up, down, and side to side. Eyes widening with fear, all three on board desperately sought some kind of landing spot. The pilot asked about dumping the duffel bags. The big man growled for him to shut up and just get them down.

After another half hour, the twin fuel indicators were bouncing on their lower stops and the plane's altimeter read 1,000 feet. The pilot battled the wind-driven turbulence with sluggish, ice-laden controls—a battle he was losing.

Through a break in the white curtain of blowing snow, he spotted a patch of white amid the dark forest. A small lake. The port engine coughed. Only two choices now—land on the lake under some kind of control or later dive into the solid carpet of forest they had been over for many minutes. The densely packed canopy looked smooth and soft but was in reality a fanged monster that would shred the aluminum plane, leaving parts and people impaled on branches or crushed on the forest floor.

The pilot tightened his seat straps; so did his passenger. He instructed the female passenger in the back to get on the floor and brace herself against the large bags. There was no time to throw the bags out, and their soft bulk would protect the woman better than a single lap belt.

The pilot thought about putting the wheels down and trying to limit damage to his treasure of a plane, using flaps and props to shorten the landing. The option went away when the port engine stopped. He mashed the right rudder pedal to counter the sudden left yaw and wrestled the sluggish ailerons with all his strength and skill to level the wings. He knew he must descend quickly onto the lake to have as much landing surface as possible. Treetops cracked against the nose and wings. Pine branches scraped the windshield. One jagged crack shot across it. He fought the urge to duck as the sweet, but incongruous, smell of pine hit him. His mind and fingers raced over procedures and switches he had rehearsed hundreds of times in practice and in nightmares. He killed the right engine, feathering both props to reduce drag and engine damage. He set his jaw, concentrated on glide angle, clicked switches off, fought to keep wings level, reached for the flap lever with his right hand, all the while wincing at the deafening sounds of his first crash. Then a sudden silence produced a surreal moment as forest changed to lake.

No one said a word as the white expanse of the frozen lake filled the windshield.



The Hunt

THE BUCK STOPPED EATING ACORNS scraped from the forest litter, sniffed the freezing morning air, and looked around the hardwoods. Snow crystals started pelting the dry oak leaves and the forest floor. The storm approached with a noise like a distant waterfall that was magically moving closer. The deer was alert to the weather change, wanting to eat as much as possible before the snow made ground food unavailable. He sensed the storm would be a severe one. Thirsty after eating his fill of bitter acorns, and wanting the water and the shelter of the cedars, he moved upwind toward the lake and swamp. He disappeared among the large white spruce trees that formed a picket line between the hardwoods and the thick cedar swamp and lake.

Forty yards south of the buck, Matt Hunter crouched in an old deer blind he and his grandfather had built nearly thirty years ago. The woods shared a lot of history with Matt and his grandfather Manfred. The pair had built the blind like a bunker, on the “military ridge” or just off the top of the hill. Manfred was an expert with a rifle and hunting tactics; Matt remembered the whispered shooting instructions as he looked through the blind’s slit opening. “Don’t breathe on the scope. . .keep your head back or that scope will bite ya.”

Matt touched the cedar logs and thought, *Like a sponge, these logs are going back to the soil they have grown from.*

Sphagnum moss covered the entire roof, which was supported by logs, corrugated steel, and dirt. At one time the blind commanded several hundred yards of cedar swamp edge and fifty acres of clear-cut white pine and hardwood stumps. Now he looked down a narrow logging trail going north through the hardwoods then west toward the swamp. Matt could see through and under the large cedars. The browse line along the cedars to the left was perfectly cut five and a half feet from the ground. The hardwoods to the right still had a lot of oak leaves and only gave intermittent views into the forest.

The blind was too high for the present growth. But Matt never passed it without going in for a period of time to relive all the exciting and rewarding hours he had spent listening to the whispered lessons of Grandfather and his cronies. He could almost smell them—the aroma of damp cedar, wet leaves, and moss conjured up the smell of wool, leather, wood smoke, and tobacco smell from so many past hunts. All gone now. The old deer blind would soon cave in from a heavy snow, or some animal efforts, or just from the relentless force of gravity and the chemistry of nature.

An hour earlier Matt heard the buck pawing the leaves before he saw him. He picked him up in his rifle scope a little after first good light and just watched him. Matt cranked the Leupold 3.5 to 10-power scope to maximum magnification and looked carefully at the fine animal. The area's limited gene pool seemed to produce strong deer with distinctive markings. Bucks tended to get very dark on the back and rump. However, old bucks could be so tough that when they finally reached the hunter's table you couldn't stick a fork in their gravy. His mother and grandmother would send hunters out to get table meat with the admonition, "Remember, you can't eat the horns." Matt thought of all the hunting camp sayings while he watched the buck move into the swamp area.

For the first time in over twenty years, Matt could hunt during the second week of the gun season. For twenty-three years he had been a high school teacher and a coach. The classroom, football, and wrestling had taken most of his time from August through early June. Now he had taken early retirement. Though he had loved teaching—and preached that there was nothing more important than helping students learn and mature into mentally and physically strong individuals—he had lived through many cycles of dissatisfaction with the teaching system. But each fall and each sport season started with total optimism; last year, the optimism didn't come. He wanted to gain control of his time and pursue several not-yet-defined ambitions. At forty-eight he said, "Today,

I'll hang up the old Acme Thunderer whistle and return my pound and a half of keys to the office."

If teaching in high school had a sabbatical he would have taken it but, facing burnout, he had no alternative except to take the early retirement. Matt forced professional frustration and guilt out of his thoughts. He vowed to enjoy the moment and the woods. Though still honed in on the buck, he didn't want to shoot it. He had dropped a nice eight point on opening day, and he was now hunting on his second deer tag for a hunter's choice that could be filled with either a buck or antlerless deer. He just wanted to hunt—to listen, see, smell, and learn from the woods.

Matt felt good about himself. He was fit and healthy with a well-muscled six-foot frame. His coaching activities had kept his weight below two hundred pounds and his heartbeat below sixty at rest. Still wrestling tough, his body did what he asked it. His brown hair was thick enough to keep his head warm, and his hazel eyes didn't need glasses yet. He was on land he owned. His name was in the plat book for over nine forties, 360 acres of very remote Upper Peninsula land in Mackinaw County. The land included a quarry last active in the 1930s, a lake, multiple ponds, over one hundred acres of hardwoods, ridges of pine, and a hundred acres of cedar swamp and grassy fields. He owned part of the largest cave system in Michigan; several branches of the Hendrie River flowed through the lowlands, and he was nearly surrounded by the eastern part of the Hiawatha National Forest. The land, inherited mostly from his grandfather Manfred, was part of the least populated county in the Upper Peninsula.

All his cousins, relatives, and friends had hunted hard and most successfully during the first week and were now back at jobs or homes scattered across many states. Matt had chosen to be alone in this magnificent country with no agenda except to appreciate the trails, trees, swamps, and associated critters of his property. The land never failed to provide what he needed when he felt down or had to plan a strategy.

Matt felt and saw the wind change. He could feel the warmer, more humid air. He knew a major storm was forecast and he had come into the woods to observe the heightened activity of the animals preceding a storm. He thought, *The best hunting and fishing is just before a storm*. His second deer tag made an excuse to stalk the woods. Understanding the reason for taking does to maintain a healthy herd balance and save more of the scarce winter forage for growing bucks, he was enjoying the hunt much more than the prospect of shooting a doe.

His cabin was nearly a mile away. He had prowled through the predawn dark along a sphagnum-covered path up to the hill, and then eased up the

hill with its frozen leaves and its skiff of snow. There was little snow on the south side, but more on the north as he looked out of the blind.

It became very quiet after the buck disappeared into the cedar swamp. Matt could hear the snow pelting the dry oak leaves on the trees and ice pellets hitting the leaves around the blind. He left the blind to watch the storm come in. Thinking, "I should level this blind before it caves in on someone."

The storm hit hard. The wind whipped the tree limbs back and forth. The snowy mixture of large flakes and small crystals simultaneously wet and stung his face. He pulled his old black Kromer cap down on his head and brought up the hood of his hunting jacket, then started down the hill for the mile walk against the southwest wind and storm. The snow and wind were so strong he couldn't look up. He just followed his familiar path generally south. A hundred yards later, he was halfway down the slope, the snow was already two or three inches deep. He couldn't see fifty feet ahead. The wet snow stuck to his clothes. He anticipated the warmth of the cabin, some brandy-laced, reheated coffee, and the W.E.B. Griffin paperback he had been enjoying.

Then Matt heard the plane.



The Crash

MATT HEARD A WHISTLING ABOVE the howling of the wind. His brain had no catalog for that sound. Then he felt and heard a plane pass over the top of the trees, bucking the wind toward the swamp and lake. The Doppler effect gave the sound a living quality as the pitch of the engine first rose, then fell, competing with the roar of the storm. The plane cracked, snapped, and splintered the tops of the pine trees. Matt realized he was holding his breath and that there had been no engine sounds for five heartbeats. Then crunching metal, the low, bell sound of a large object slapping hard on the frozen lake, and the pop of ice cracking, followed by several concussive thuds. Finally, only the sounds of the storm.

Matt froze for several seconds, calculating his next actions. Having once worked as a lifeguard instructor at a Boy Scout camp, he knew and had taught that the first instincts in an emergency are usually wrong and can be fatal. Matt reminded himself that half of the people who jump into the water to rescue a drowning victim die in the attempt. Running directly to the wreck scene wouldn't be the best action. The lake was nearly a mile away to the west and south through thick cedars. His cabin was generally south, also nearly a mile, but the best trail to the lake went from the cabin.

With his decision made, Matt jogged toward the cabin. There, he could get material to help a rescue and a snowmobile to get him to the crash faster.

Originally the prefabricated office of an oil pipeline company, the cabin was moved into the huge, old, quarry machine shop, a barn-like structure with concrete walls and floor, steel beams, and a metal roof. The large vertical windows of the old machine shop were open slits. At one time, railroad cars and engines entered its Gothic-scale main door for repair and servicing. Matt and his relatives and friends had reinforced the cabin, added plumbing, and put on a second-floor bunk room.

Matt reached the quarry and jogged across its flat, boulder-strewn floor to the machine shop building. Several snowmobiles and assorted boy's toys scattered across the floor—from canoes to old three- and four-wheeled all-terrain vehicles. He put his deer rifle in the cabin to dry. Matt checked the fuel in one of the Polaris XLT Indy snowmobiles. Nearly full. It had a towing hitch, but its towing sleigh was gone, probably used to bring out a deer and not returned to the shop. He needed something to haul materials and maybe victims and didn't have the time to look for the sleigh. He took the seventeen-foot Grumman canoe off the wall rack, dumping out paddles, life vests, and assorted coolers and buckets that had come to roost inside what had become an impromptu shelf. Into the canoe he threw various ropes, two plastic tarps, a short shovel, and a coil of plastic anchor line. He ran into the cabin and retrieved the camp's large first aid kit, a fire extinguisher, and a gallon of water. He placed the items on the canoe bottom and secured them with the tarps and the shovel wedged under the thwarts.

He tied the canoe to the Polaris with less than two feet of leader between them. The powerful Indy machine started with one short pull. It was a 1993 XLT with three carburetors, nearly 600 cubic centimeters of engine, and more speed than any sane or sober rider should attempt. The wear rods on the skis bit into the concrete floor, the carbide studs spun and caught, the machine and canoe shot out of the wide main door. Matt had no helmet or goggles. The snow and wind lashed his face. He further impaired his vision by running the machine at over fifty mph, noting the 6,000 rpm on the tachometer dial. If he hit an old limestone block, his rescue mission would be over and they might not find him until spring. He slowed to twenty mph and negotiated his way up and out of the quarry floor. The road to the lake, once large and paved with crushed rock, now had forty-foot trees encroaching from both sides, leaving only a ten-foot-wide path, a path that appeared to have had other traffic on it in previous weeks. The 4x4 tracks and snowmobile tracks led to the lake and several scattered deer blinds. The road came down a slope to the swampy lake edge. Matt drove out onto the frozen surface. Away from the edge, the

lake had more than eight inches of ice for safe travel. However, both the swampy east and west edges had springs and even small, flowing streams. The water wasn't deep, but several feet of decayed vegetation and black muck covered the lake bottom.

Matt could not see any plane or tracks. He headed west down the middle of the lake. Nearly half way down the lake, he saw clear marks from a plane's belly slide, scouring through the snow into the dark ice. He ran the Indy as fast as he could while still being able to stop if the track ended in a hole in the ice. The plane's track turned into slush and water with visible wing or engine marks. Matt went wide of the marks. He knew the west shore would appear soon, but with the blinding snow and wind and his focus on the skid mark, he had no frame of reference to pinpoint his position. He slowed without braking; the canoe gave him a light bump to assure him it was still behind him. He smelled gasoline. Raw, not burning. He saw the broken ice slush and tortured path where the left engine had dug into the ice. The swamp area—delineated by cattails, hummocks of grasses, and old dead tree stumps—loomed ahead. The plane's path continued across this lake border. Matt couldn't see the woods' edge yet through the fierce storm. Thirty to forty mph winds howled, with the ice and snow as hard on his face now as when the speed of the snowmobile had artificially increased its fury. He stopped the machine and turned off the motor.

Only the sounds of the wind and the whack of the snow and ice against his windshield. The smell of gasoline mixed with other chemical odors. He restarted the snowmobile, realizing that the 600-pound snowmobile could get stuck in the swamp. He had no reverse. If the skis fell down between snow-covered hummocks into the icy slush between them, he was done as a rescue unit. He eased ahead another fifty feet then turned sideways to the wind. He retrieved the 100-foot nylon anchor rope and tied it to the rear bar of the Polaris. With the line, if he broke through the ice, he could pull himself out of the swamp and also find his way back to the machine.

Matt carefully moved parallel to the skid marks. With visibility less than twenty feet across the wind and less into it, he could not see trees where he knew they must be. The cedar swamp was extensive on the lake's west side. Its trees were thirty to forty feet tall with some fifty- to sixty-foot tamaracks and pines, but he could see only snow, a dark water streak, and the closest grass hummocks. He moved from grass clump to grass clump, as close to the plane marks as he could. Between the clumps were stands of water caused by the skidding plane breaking the ice. He knew the swamp area generally formed a fifty-foot border between the

lake and the cedar woods. He paid out his nearly frozen plastic line that refused to uncoil easily.

He concentrated on the line, the hummocks, the smells, and the open water, cautiously working into the wind and storm. He was sweating under hunting clothes chosen for stalking and hiding rather than jumping across grass clumps. If he opened his jacket, the snow and freezing rain would immediately soak him. He slipped off a clump, plunging one leg up to his knee in water and muck. He rolled onto his hands and knees across several hummocks and began working himself to his feet. He wondered whether his boots would keep his feet dry. As he got to his feet, his head hit the plane with a painful thud.

The white horizontal stabilizer was invisible in the storm. The jar hurt his jaw and neck and nearly knocked him between two large hummocks. He grabbed the horizontal stabilizer and simultaneously saw the vertical part of the tail, also white but with a red tip and stripe. Ducking under the tail, he could make out most of the plane. A twin, mostly white but with a red stripe. He saw several windows. One propeller blade stabbed upward. The plane's nose had slid into the cedar trees. A large, uprooted cedar tree root had snagged the right wing and turned the plane sideways. The plane's wings were level, the body burrowed into the muck and grass.

It looked like a medium-size Cessna with the entry door on the right side. The plane had spun enough to swing the tail and fuselage clear of the broken ice of the skid path, but the left wing remained out of sight in the cedars, grass, and snow. When he had hit his head, he had dropped the line. Finding it at his feet, he saw only a few remaining coils, maybe ten feet. Matt edged along the starboard side of the plane. He found a storage hatch just before the wing and tied the last of the rope around the pop-out handle. Climbing onto the wing, he brushed snow away from the side window, though it was too dark to see anything inside. Five to six inches of snow covered the windows and kept the cabin dark. No sound except the slap of wet snow and the gusting wind. The wind muted the pings and crinkling sounds of the cooling engines. Although fainter, the gas smell forced him not to use his hunting lighter for light. Matt pried the door open several inches but still could not see much in the cabin.

Matt wiped the snow from the windshield to allow light to enter the cabin. He lay across the cracked windshield with his face near the plastic. Despite the dimly lit interior, he could make out a form draped over the left controls. He rapped the windshield with his gloved fist. No responding

movement or sound. His breath clouded the windshield, and the snow covered any cleared area within seconds. He needed to enter the plane.

Matt crawled back from the front window onto the wing. He could now see cedar trees looming over the plane. The trees broke the wind, reducing the snow and sound. He pulled on the passenger door, and it reluctantly opened; then he pushed it nearly parallel with the wing. Two people sat jammed against the Cessna's dual control yokes. Soft-sided travel bags and large military duffel bags wedged the seat forward against the passenger, a large, older man. Matt took off his gloves and touched the man's neck. Warm flesh, slow pulse, blood on his forehead. His shoulder and arm were jammed forward, his right leg bent at an unnatural angle. Matt pulled a duffel bag out of the plane, then several luggage bags. He moved into the space he had produced, finally reaching the pilot whose skin was cooler and without a pulse. As Matt felt for a pulse, he also felt the head's loose connection to the body. Broken neck.

Matt toughened his mind against the tragedy of death before him and returned his attention to the passenger. He worked to find a seat belt release embedded in the passenger's belly and clothes. He had no choice but to move the person. It would take hours to get emergency help to the location. His cell phone didn't work at camp, there was no landline phone, and the nearest home with a phone was more than eleven miles away on the road to Trout Lake. The man had to be moved and brought to the warmth and comforts of the cabin. Matt moved the passenger seat back. It clicked on its adjustable track safety catches, which had not held during the crash. The man moaned and mumbled unintelligibly. He opened his unfocused eyes, turned his head, and tried to see where he was.

Matt said, "Your plane has crashed, I need to get you out...can you hear me?"

The man said, "Help me, I hurt. Ribs. Legs."

Matt found the seat belt release and pressed it. The man gave a groan and tried to move his inside arm. He moaned again, then fell silent.

Matt needed more room inside the plane. He removed the remaining bags and luggage jammed against the front seats. The plane seemed filled with bags, heavy but soft. He pulled out more bags and pushed them out the only door. With the door open and with his eyes now adjusted to the inside light level, he could view the cluttered cabin. He pushed bags backward when he could no longer push them outside. More light streamed in with the door now held open by bags.

The pilot's seat was pushed forward. Matt checked the passenger again. His pulse was strong and regular. He had stopped bleeding from his ear

and was breathing regularly. Matt looked around the cabin. It seated five, but the space for the middle seats was used for duffel and luggage bags. He needed to clear a path to remove the passenger from the cabin.

The unrelenting snow had piled over eight inches on the wing and his footprints were almost undetectable. Visibility was nearly zero as the strong, gusty wind drove the snow into swirls. Matt knew it was getting colder; the previously wet flakes were now sleet, ice crystals, and dry flakes.

In the plane's cabin, Matt again checked the passenger's pulse, respiration, and temperature. No change. Matt wanted to keep him warm for the trek back. Although small, the dead pilot's leather sheepskin jacket could help keep the passenger warm. As Matt unzipped the flying jacket, he was shocked to find a shoulder holster and a pistol under the left arm. For no reason other than curiosity, Matt thumbed the holster release and pulled out the pistol. Even in the dim light, he recognized the SIG Sauer, a fine pistol. Long interested in guns, rifles, and pistols, he couldn't leave it out in a wrecked plane on a dead man. After checking the chamber and finding a shell, he thumbed the decocker, which safely dropped the hammer. Matt slipped it into his hunting jacket pocket. He then worked at unfastening the passenger's seat belt, moved him back in his seat, and covered him with the pilot's leather jacket. Then he left the plane.

Matt grabbed the plastic anchor rope and followed it through the wind and snow to the ice and finally found his Indy. He retied the knot of the anchor line on the snowmobile, wrapped the line around the towing bar twice, and finished with a half hitch. He then put a simple overhand knot in the remaining line to keep the slippery plastic from working its way back through the hitch. He pulled in the line and repeated the knots on the canoe's bow painter attachment. He now had the canoe attached to the Indy by a long rope. He went to the stern of the canoe and pulled it back to the plane. Nearly a foot of snow covered the grass mounds and filled the areas between them. The lower temperature was freezing the water between the hummocks. He stepped on the ice to test the freezing strength. It held him despite some spongy give under the snow. He struggled back to the plane in a minute. He was sucking wind, not in as good shape as he made his athletes achieve. If he were one of his football players or wrestlers, he would have yelled, "Suck it up, Hunter...you hoser..."

He took a long breath and dragged the seventy-pound canoe up to the plane fuselage behind the right wing, opened the folded plastic tarps, and made a bed in the canoe, leaving plenty of plastic to cover the passenger.

Inside the cabin, the passenger had moved a little, sideways over the controls now with his head touching the pilot. His vitals didn't seem to

be any different than when Matt had left him. Matt brought his face close and yelled, "Can you hear me?"

Instantly, he felt dumb for saying such a thing. The man opened his eyes and tried to focus on Matt. He mumbled something, totally lost in the wind sounds.

"I'm going to pull you out of the plane. Help if you can," Matt yelled.

The man gave a quick shake of his head and closed his eyes against the blowing snow curling in.

Matt removed the pilot's leather jacket and put it aside. He grabbed the passenger's jacket by the shoulders and slowly pulled him out of the cabin. The man groaned but looked up, wordlessly saying keep going.

Matt slid him out of the plane and down the wing. At the canoe he stopped. How to do this? He turned the canoe on its side, dragged the man into it below the mid thwart, and pulled him under it to the middle of the canoe. Then he righted the canoe and adjusted the man on the bottom of the canoe. He was very careful with the right leg, which felt broken. The passenger had plastic under him; Matt put the pilot's jacket and more plastic tarp above him to cocoon the man from the weather and stabilize him for the mile trip across the lake and quarry.

Matt went back to the bags he had pushed out of the plane cabin and shoved them back in so he could close the door. The wind blew the snow, now well over a foot deep, into major drifts wherever it could. He moved into the cabin and moved the bags to the rear so he could close the door. As he turned to work his way through the litter and baggage to leave, he heard a cough and a moan.

He held his breath, thinking the wind and storm noises had fooled him. He shouted, "Hello, where are you?" though he was embarrassed for yelling in a cabin about the size of a club cab pickup truck. He then heard a movement under the avalanche of bundles.

The light was poor, the windows covered by a foot of heavy, drifting snow. The cleared door window offered some weak light. He started to move bundles to the front of the plane. He felt like being in a life-sized Rubik's Cube. On the floor of the cabin he found an ankle covered by a dark stocking. A very nice ankle. He went one way and found a very nice foot in a moccasin. Drawing on his vast anatomical knowledge, he worked his way up the ankle and, predictively, found a knee, then a thigh. After the thigh he found a skirt bunched around a very impressive group of warm feminine goodies.

A SIG and this on the same day?

Matt moved bundles until he could see the rest of the person attached to the ankle, knee, thigh, and goodies that his first exploration had discovered. Her dark hair blended into a dark turtle neck sweater, and both framed an oval face with a small nose and well-formed lips that could belong to a female of twelve to thirty-five. Out of her seat, she lay in a fetal coil on the plane's floor. She must have been in the small seat at the rear of the cabin. Matt lost a few seconds, struck by her beauty and vulnerability.

The complexity of this find called for thought. Matt had a very severely injured person outside, possibly dying and surely freezing in an aluminum canoe on an ice covered lake—and now he had another very much alive, warm, and good-smelling survivor.

Triage...the word popped into his mind. How do I save these two people?

The man was in poor condition. The girl, although unconscious, seemed in better shape, literally and figuratively. With an outside temperature in the low twenties or even the teens, he couldn't leave her. He had one trip to reach the warmth and comfort of the cabin. He had to move them both at one time.

Matt touched the girl's face. He continued to the neck, the pulse strong and regular. He felt her neck. Normal. He worked down each shoulder to the arms and hands; he found no abnormal lumps or conformations. He couldn't straighten her out without knowing the state of her backbone, neck, or head injuries. She didn't have any leaks he could see or feel in the limited light. He would move her to the canoe, hoping he did her no further injury. He lifted her to a sitting position. Everything seemed to move normally. He found a down vest on one arm. He put it on her and zipped it up, pulling its collar up. He moved her toward the left side behind the pilot, stepped over her, and left the cabin. The weather couldn't have been any nastier. Wind and snow came in antagonistic gusts.

Matt's grandfather had always told him, "There is no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothes." Matt knew how to dress and move with various weather. However, the two comatose victims were not dressed for this storm. Matt needed to move quickly; he had over a mile to transport both people down the lake and through the woods in subfreezing temperatures with a wind chill below zero.

Matt went to the canoe and opened the plastic tarps slightly; the man was still warm and had a strong, steady pulse. He seemed to be breathing better stretched out. Matt quickly returned to the plane, pulled and carried the girl from the cabin to the canoe. He thought he heard sounds from

her, but the wind was too strong to be sure. She felt solid and strong as he carried her to the canoe. He pushed her feet first under the mid thwart from the stern. Her legs came to the man's waist. Matt packed her into the canoe and wedged the plastic tarp back around the man and her legs and waist. Matt put his wool hat on the girl and it pulled down well over her ears and forehead. Just as he closed the tarp around her and tucked it under her and the stern seat, he felt a movement. He leaned close to her head and yelled, "We are going back to a warm cabin. Just hold still. Don't move. Don't move. I'll take care of you."

He found the plastic line and then found his Polaris. It took two pulls to start it. After all three carburetors had finally agreed to put the right amount of gasoline into the cylinders, the engine ran smoothly. Matt slowly took up the slack on the nearly one hundred feet of anchor line. As soon as he felt the canoe move, he went off at an angle that wouldn't allow the canoe to hit the tail. He was worried about falling into the plane's icebreaker skid path. After about thirty feet of slow travel, he stopped the machine. He went back to the taut line. It extended out of sight into the howling snowstorm. He pulled on it, and it came with the expected amount of effort. He pulled hard, the thin line cutting into his wool army glove liners. The wind and snow made it impossible to see even a few feet. He felt the canoe getting close, the angle of pull changing as the canoe's bow slid to within a few feet of the snowmobile. He retied the line around the snowmobile and threw the remainder of the line into the canoe, tucking it in under the bow seat. He checked the two passengers in the canoe. They seemed well covered, with their weight balanced. He didn't open the plastic to check any vital signs. He couldn't do anything for them anyway and doing so would only cause them to lose a lot of heat.

Matt jumped on the Indy. The powerful machine didn't like to go slow, but it did. It pulled the two victims and Matt across the lake, onto the shore, through the woods, then down into the quarry. By going directly downwind on the lake, he found the shore edge about where he had come onto the lake. Blowing snow totally obscured the path to the cabin, leaving old landmarks snow covered. The low speed further disoriented him. Matt finally made out the old base of the crusher building, like a huge double garage. He went on; without a hat and its protective bill, the snow swirled constantly around his face. He had his jacket's hood pulled tightly around his head. The wind came from his back and made vision a little better. He drove, kneeling on the machine to see better. The machine's light did nothing to help. Midmorning with such poor light that Matt could see blowing snow sparkling in the headlights. He was on the right

road and soon came to the cave-like maw of the door to the huge building that covered his cabin. He pulled into the cover of the building and across the relatively snow-free floor to the cabin door. He hit the orange kill button on the right handle bar and ran to the cabin door, opened the screen, and held it open with the device on the pneumatic spring. Then he opened the inner door and blocked it with the large rock that, over the years, had been trained for that purpose.

With some effort, he unpacked the two victims from under the several inches of icy snow covering the plastic. The girl was easiest to remove—lighter and not packed under the thwart that would impede Matt's lift. She moaned, and he felt some muscle tension as he lifted her. He carried her into the cabin and put her on one of the two couches. She breathed regularly and had good color in her face, lips, and fingertips. He covered her with a quilt that lived on the couch. Moving the man was a lot harder—bigger, heavier, and lodged under the center thwart. Matt could not lift him with his hands under the man's back and legs but only drag him by holding him under the arms.

Easily two hundred fifty pounds, the man would have wrestled as a heavyweight, Matt thought as he tried to move him out of the canoe. He pulled and slid the man out of the canoe, laying him on the cement outside the cabin. Matt went into the cabin and returned with a six-foot rag rug that normally lay in front of the kitchen sink. He worked the man onto the rug and grabbed the rug by its edges, curling it around the man, then dragged him into the cabin. It was as smooth a way as he could think of for getting the man into the cabin. He dragged him to the other couch, facing a coffee table that separated the two couches. He grabbed the man's coat and lifted him partially onto the couch. After his hips reached the couch, Matt lifted his legs onto the couch. He got a blanket from a bedroom on the second floor and covered the man, then turned the propane heater's thermostat up to seventy-five and listened as it obediently kicked in.

Matt searched the refrigerator for the gallon jug, remembered it was in the canoe, went out and got it, and took a long, cool drink. On his second drink, he looked at the injured people on his couches and contemplated his next steps.

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