



STRETCHED HORIZONS

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Excerpt of three chapters

CHAPTER ONE

Principal Bree Ashworth yawned, gathered up an armful of folders and headed out of her office door. Cramwell Heights Elementary had had more than the usual problems over the long exhausting week and, being the third Thursday in May, there was still the PTA meeting in two hours. As the attractive blonde woman headed through the empty outer office a buzzer sounded.

She turned to see a red console light flashing. This alarm was activated by class teachers for emergencies and came from Room 123, Jenny Dench's room. Bree frowned. Why was Jenny still in the building? It was after five and the custodian should have locked up by now. Perhaps there was another short circuit. The new system had more than its fair share of teething problems.

In one deft movement she turned on the television surveillance system and pressed the button twenty-three. It flicked alive and screams vibrated from the speakers.

"Oh my...!" Bree gasped.

A man was in the room attacking Jenny. Even in those few microseconds she saw his arm reach out. The terrified teacher was slumped back over her desk kicking and shrieking as the man wrestled with her. Bree hit another emergency button, hoped the custodian was still on the premises and headed outside.

Seattle rain hit her face as she ran across the inner courtyard, jumped a native plant garden and headed for Wenatchee Block. Trust Jenny's room to be one of the farthest away! To her relief the main door was still unlocked and corridor lights blazed.

The screams and thumps reached her senses first. Without really thinking of any consequences, she flung the classroom door open and tore in. Jenny was pinned back against the whiteboard, her blouse buttons ripped and skirt hauled up.

"Perhaps next time you might..." the attacker snarled. Jenny managed to wriggle an arm free and slap his face. He slapped her back and flung his victim to the floor.

"Leave her alone!" Bret screamed.

She launched her slender frame at the man and managed to topple him sideways away from Jenny. The petrified younger woman crawled away but Bree had more immediate problems. The attacker turned and a knife appeared in his hand.

His arm was a blur and Bree felt a sharp pain pierce her stomach. She glanced down. Blood poured from a slash in her blouse.

The man sniggered. "So our principal, Bree Ashworth is about to meet her maker."

Bree could see grinning lips and eyes totally devoid of empathy. The knife slashed at her again but she anticipated the movement and pulled back. The man grabbed her hair, her head was pulled back and a hand squeezed her throat. Another laugh filled the air. He was enjoying himself. Excruciating pain from her stomach wound and a fight to breathe was almost too much to bear...

"You bastard," she managed to hiss but stopped when the knife was held to her throat. Somehow, she knew her attacker would use it again if she continued to struggle.

Her despair turned to utter terror when a shot rang across the room.

"The next will be through your neck, Buddy," a different male voice said.

Bree felt the pressure on her throat relax. Her attacker stepped back. She opened her eyes and focused.

John, the custodian, had arrived.

She attempted to speak but purple clouds enveloped her and she sank unconscious to the floor.

It was the unusual smell that tickled Bree's senses even before she opened her eyes, that antiseptic smell of enforced cleanliness along with the more pleasant aroma of roses. She felt

things touching her, crisp material, something itching at her nose and the sensation of numbness across her lower body. She coughed and a jarring pain shot up her ribs.

"Mrs. Ashworth, are you awake?" The voice came through a fog. She should know the voice. It was Jenny Dench, the youngest and giggliest teacher on the staff. This young woman had the children in her third grade class achieving in a manner that made older staff members green with envy.

Bree couldn't fathom why was she lying down. There was the PTA meeting to attend. Someone had filed a complaint about the lunch schedule and blandness of meals being offered. She smiled in her semi-sleep condition. Of course, something like lunches would attract far more parents than if they were having a discussion about the new reading program.

"Oh Bree, please wake up," Jenny's voice pleaded. "You saved me, you know. He would have raped me now you have to suffer because you were so brave.... The bastard, took off when John arrived... "

Bree opened her eyes to see Jenny staring at her across a hospital room. "Where am I?" she muttered.

"Oh thank God, you're awake. I'll ring for the nurse."

Bree managed a smile. "No, wait a moment. Oh my..." The memories returned with everything in stark detail. She sat up. Her head spun but she was determined to stay upright.

"Jenny," she said. "Was I in time?"

The young woman opposite her blinked back tears and wiped a blackened eye. She nodded. "And I was one who reckoned the new surveillance system was a waste of money."

"And how are you?"

"Not as bad as you. Bruises and scratches. My confidence is shot to hell though. How could the bastard? He said he was Jamie Hargraves' father. Like an idiot I believed him..." Jenny's lips quivered and more tears rolled down her face. She stopped, shuddered and blew her nose. "The surgeon reckoned another inch and a major organ would have been hit when he stabbed you."

Bree pulled herself into a sitting position and saw the heavy bandage around her waist. She glanced around. The curtains were pulled but she could see it was dark outside. Their room was filled with flowers and cards. "I guess I've been out for a while? Where did you say we were?"

Jenny gave one of her famous little giggles. "I didn't but we're in the Virginia Mason Hospital. We arrived about five." She glanced at her watch. "It's three fifteen in the morning now. You had emergency surgery and they insisted I stay the night, too."

"How's John?"

"A reluctant hero. You know how modest he? The guy who attacked us ran out the back and John almost shot the bastard. Remember that second blast?"

"No," Bree admitted.

Jenny rubbed her nose and smiled. "Let's say there's a plate glass window in my room that needs replacing. The Seattle Police are still looking for him."

"So it wasn't Jamie's father?"

Jenny shook her head. "No, the police followed that lead up. Jamie's father looks nothing like him. Anyway, the police will be in the morning to take statements from us both. I was a cot case, blubbing like a baby and the doctor told them to come back."

"Don't run yourself down, Jenny," Bree said. "There is absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. Everyone thinks that. Look at these cards and flowers." She reached for a card attached to a massive bunch of flowers, opened and read the message inside out loud.

To Giggling Gertie and the Blonde Bombshell. Don't either of you dare come back until you are 100%. Love from the Cramwell Heights staff. Bree screwed her nose up and involuntarily gasped when her ribs told her they were suffering. "Blonde Bombshell?"

"That's you, Mrs. Ashworth. Everyone calls you that, out of earshot, of course. The oldies on the staff reckon you've done more for the school in eight months than old Ethel did in eight years."

"Yes, I guess I've been a little like a sergeant major."

"You haven't" Jenny replied. "Old Ethel was. She'd blow a fuse every couple of weeks

but got nowhere. You lead rather than push."

Bree had to smile. "You do describe things very well, Jenny. I'll take being a blonde bombshell as a compliment then."

"It is," Jenny whispered. "Doubly so, now."

Bree gazed further around the room. There was a huge teddy bear propped up on the windowsill. She wriggled over to reach for it but felt queasy and collapsed back on her pillow.

"I'll get the nurse," Jenny's determined voice cut in as she pressed the red button on the remote by her pillow.

Morning arrived with visits by the police who said they were following leads but nobody had been arrested.

"We shall follow up your information about the attacker's knowledge of one of your pupils. It appears to be someone who picked you at random, though. We've had cases of men hanging around elementary schools before. The young teachers and mothers can be an attraction if a man is that way inclined." Officer Margaret Noriyuki said to Jenny. "Can you remember seeing the man any time before the attack, perhaps watching you cross the road, getting into your car or during an outing?"

Jenny frowned. There was something about him that seemed hidden in the back of her mind. "He looked a typical parent was clean-shaven and wore a new suit..." She stopped and bit on a lip. "The funny thing is I think I've seen him before."

"Where?"

"I can't remember. We meet so many parents and others on sports days and so forth. I don't think he was a parent of any of my pupils, though."

"Okay," Officer Noriyuki replied. "We'll get a more formal statement next week. With your permission a blood and skin sample will be taken from you both for the forensic guys."

Bree and Jenny nodded.

"Meanwhile, if you remember anything, no matter how insignificant just jot it down. If this is the person we're looking for it may solve a number of similar attacks."

"Other teachers?" Bree asked.

"All work related places with a high ratio of female employees, Mrs. Ashworth. Several were in high rise buildings downtown and all were when the victim was alone after hours in their own supposedly safe environment." The officer smiled slightly. "We believe this man didn't know about your surveillance monitors."

"They've only been in for three weeks," Bree replied.

"That's interesting. Perhaps the attack was planned well in advance."

"He knew I was the principal and even called me by name," Bree added.

"And you've never seen him before?"

"Like Jenny said, it's hard to tell. I doubt if I'd recognize him, though. I only really saw him from the side and can't remember his face. It all happened so quickly."

Margaret smiled and shut her notebook. "Thank you both," she said. "We'll be in touch."

The next visitor made Bree sigh.

"Rushing into things without thinking of the consequences again, Bree," the man said. "You're damn lucky the janitor arrived."

"Hello Colin," Bree replied. She turned to Jenny. "This is my husband, Colin."

Jenny frowned. The man was in many ways similar to the guy that attacked them, tall, clean-shaven, in his thirties and wore a business suit. Her principal's neutral almost cold stance was of more interest.

"So the trip will have to go," Colin said after listening to Bree's brief explanation of the events. "We'll lose the deposit but I'll cancel the tickets."

Bree's eyes fluttered with the first signs of emotion. "I'd still like to go," she whispered.

"You know I've been asked to speak at the conference."

Colin glanced away. "There's been a change of plans. I was going to tell you anyway," he muttered.

"Tell me what?" Bree's voice turned to indignation.

"I've accepted that position in San Francisco. They want me to start at the beginning of next month."

"Well, I'm not going," Bree snapped. "I am not about to give up my position to follow you around the country, Colin. We've been through all that. I've done it three or is it four times? No more..." Her eyes flashed. "...And I thought a vacation would help patch our marriage up," she added in a whisper.

Colin shrugged. "I tried," he whispered.

"Sure," Bree's voice rose an octave. "Who was it who turned a blind eye when you never arrived home at night and during those business weekends over to the eastern seaboard. Who pretended she never noticed that Linda Rouke was also out of town at the same time? Come off it, Colin, our marriage has been a sham for years now. I'm a suitable person to have at your social functions."

Colin Ashworth caught Jenny's eyes fixed on his. He flushed slightly. "I'm sorry to hear of this attack Miss Dence," he said. "I'm glad John got to you both in time." His eyes switched back to his wife. "We'll talk later, Bree," he said. "Take care, now. 'Bye."

He walked out without even a backward glance.

"Cold fish," Jenny said.

"Yeah," Bree replied.

"Who's Linda Rouke?"

Bree's voice was cold. "Secretary cum mistress," she snapped. "The latest in a long line." She turned and her eyes warmed. "That's the trouble with teaching, isn't it?"

"What do you mean, Bree?"

"It takes a total commitment and doesn't allow for personal circumstances. Colin is into the business circuit and everything went well when I was the sexy young wife to parade around. However, when I became a vice principal's he changed." Bree shrugged. "I thought he'd be proud of me but the opposite happened. It was almost as if I was a competitor. It became worse when I moved to my present position at Cramwell Heights Elementary."

"Chauvinistic pig," Jenny replied.

"Exactly,"

"And that vacation?"

"I've been invited to talk at an international reading conference in mid January. I was looking forward to swimming in the ocean"

"Midwinter! Where, Australia?"

Bree smiled. "Well you aren't far out, New Zealand actually. It'll be midsummer there and the conference is during their summer vacation. Colin had agreed to come as it tied in with some big takeover bit his firm was about to be involved in down there." She shrugged. "I think that fell through."

Jenny nodded. "So it's all off. A pity. After all this, a good vacation away is what you need."

"You, too," Bree replied.

"Me?" Jenny laughed. "My God, I've only been out of the state once and that was up to Vancouver, BC for a friend's wedding." She shrugged. "I couldn't afford the airplane tickets let alone accommodation and other expenses. Beginning teachers don't get paid a lot, you know."

Both Bree and Jenny were discharged from hospital that afternoon with a whole weekend ahead before work the next week. Bree embraced herself ready for a final confrontation with Colin but it never eventuated. When he never answered her phone call she took a cab home to find the place empty. Colin was gone, as was everything even remotely

connected to his half of the community property. Clothes, tools, one television, the main computer and even one of their bed sets was gone.

"The bastard," Bree muttered as she walked through the house. The new washer, only purchased a month back, had gone. In its place, the old one was reconnected to the water supply.

In the kitchen she picked up a large yellow envelope. Inside was a formal inventory of what Colin had taken and a terse letter. With tears brimming her eyes she read it. He was so thorough that he'd even left a check to pay for the month's electricity, groceries and other domestic expenses.

She continued to the last paragraph.

You'll find I have closed our joint account Don't worry, half the amount in it has been deposited in your own account. As for the vacation, I never canceled the tickets. You can have them to do with as you wish. As you know, my lawyer is...

Bree stopped reading, placed the letter back in the envelope, sat down and wept. This was so typical of the man. He was too cowardly to confront her face to face and the one time she could do with a little warmth and understanding he up and left. Well, Linda Rouke could have him, she could flutter her eyebrows at his customers and pamper to his tastes until he became tired of her and found a new mistress.

She sat staring into space and almost missed the light tap on the patio windows. It was Jenny.

"Hi," Jenny said after Bree slid the glass doors open. "There's nobody home and I couldn't stand being in the apartment by myself so I..." She stopped and stared. "What's wrong, Bree?"

Bree sighed. "Does it look so obvious?"

"It's more than your bruises and bandaged arm. You look as white as a ghost."

"Come in," Bree responded. "I'm glad you dropped in. How'd you like a drink?"

"Coffee?"

"No," Bree replied. "I was thinking more of a stiff brandy. Bet the old bastard took all the liquor, too." She laughed sarcastically. "No, he'd have left each bottle half full..."

"What is it, Bree?"

"Colin's left," Bree whispered. "He took half of everything, too. It's a wonder the bastard didn't rip our sheets in half." She took the envelope from the adjacent table and handed it to her visitor. "Have a read if you wish."

Jenny nodded, accepted Bree's wave into a chair and read the long-winded note.

"Well, you're best without him," she finally said. "What a time to do it, though."

Bree shrugged. "What's your poison?" she asked and walked to the liquor cabinet.

CHAPTER TWO

Over the next couple of weeks the two women reacted to their ordeal in different ways. Bree immersed herself in work and, on the surface, appeared no different. Jenny, though, withdrew into herself. Her famous giggle disappeared and often she'd avoid the staff lounge after school when most of the staff unwound, had coffee and chattered about the day's events. Even when she was present she'd sit in a remote corner and not participate in any conversation.

With the busy final weeks of the term upon Cramwell Heights Elementary School, conversation about the attack dropped from everyone's lips as other items rose to the fore and life returned to normal.

One of the items Bree did during the last two weeks was to hold an informal interview with each staff member. Here, they'd discuss anything the teacher wished about their class, and children, parents or school life in general. The first ones Bree held the term before were somewhat formal with teachers feeling apprehensive and often on defense. However, this time the meetings were relaxed and gave the staff a chance to air items in privacy. They trusted Bree

and knew any comments or criticisms would not go beyond the office walls.

During these interviews Bree found there was deep interest in her own welfare with

staff members asking how she coped after her marriage split up. Several offered suggestions and supported her decision to still go on her New Zealand vacation. Also, Bree discovered that most staff members noticed Jenny's change in behavior with concern. Several had tried to help the young teacher but to no avail.

After morning recess on the Wednesday, a substitute teacher took the third graders in Room 123 while Jenny went into Bree's office for her interview. She looked pale and appeared timid and formal.

"I'm sorry about the class, Bree," she blurted out before the principal even sat down. "They've been quite naughty and it's all my fault. I'm sure Joan has already...." Joan was the syndicate leader in charge of the Grade Three classes.

"I've spoken to Joan," Bree replied. "She said she is proud of your efforts. Your planning and record keeping is superb, parent interviews were thoroughly researched and everything is carried out professionally."

"But what about Mrs. Flores?" Jenny bit on her lip.

"Mary Flores has three children at this school, She complains about every teacher every year." Bree smiled, "Frankly, if she hadn't mumbled about her little Christopher in your room I would have wondered what was wrong. Next time just refer her on to me. We have an understanding. She moans on and I ignore her. The poor lady is quite lonely, you know."

"I know, but..."

"So what's really wrong, Jenny?" Bree interrupted.

Without warning Jenny broke down into shuddering, heart rendering tears. Her body trembled and, for a few moments, she just sat on her chair unable to control her emotions. Afterwards she stood and would have headed out the door if she wasn't intercepted.

Bree held Jenny in her arms as the younger woman continued to sob.

"Here," Bree said a moment later and handed Jenny a paper tissue. "Just let it all come out. Don't hold back. I understand." She smiled softly. "I was there. Remember."

"I know. Perhaps you're the only one who does understand but it doesn't affect you, Bree."

"It doesn't? Then perhaps you could explain why I've spent nearly every night since Colin left sleeping with a light left on?"

Jenny stopped sobbing, stepped back and wiped her eyes. She turned them up to stare into Bree's. "You have?"

"Yes," Bree whispered. "It's so silly but the house I've lived in for over a decade has suddenly started to make strange noises. I reckon I hear every creak and groan of the timbers. Colin was a ripe pain in the butt but he was always there or returning soon. Now I wake up in the middle of the night covered in perspiration and can feel the monster's knife stab me."

Jenny whispered. "Me, too but you're always so self-assured."

"A facade I've built up, Jenny. In my position it is necessary. I've just used it a little more often in the last couple of weeks. That's all."

Jenny smiled through her tears. "And I've always aspired to a position like yours. Fat lot of good I'd be at helping others when the first little thing that goes wrong makes me collapse in self-pity like a pack of cards."

"It wasn't little and I believe you're coping well."

"Until now."

"Not necessarily. It is harder to talk about these things than to try to bury them in the back of your mind."

Jenny grinned. "My God, we're talking in clichés aren't we?"

"It makes what I'm going to say easier, though."

Jenny's face dropped, her eyes widened and face paled. "Go on," she stuttered.

"Oh it's nothing bad. You know all about the vacation Colin and I planned?"

"Sure."

"I can't cancel half a ticket and to cancel and to re-book it for one costs more than I'd save so I thought you might like to come with me."

"Bree, I'd love to but I can't afford it. Anyhow, I'm not really into swimming."

Bree held up her arm. "My stomach's still in stitches. I doubt if I can manage much

swimming either. I'd still like to go for a dive in the ocean on New Year's Day just to say I've done it. I've managed to get the itinerary changed in New Zealand. Instead of pre-booked accommodation at the flash resort hotels Colin likes I've booked into family motels. We can hire a car and go wherever we please."

"Damn, Bree. If I had the money..."

"You only need living expenses. Think of it as Colin's shout. The bastard owes me that much. If I go alone it will cost exactly the same amount and I'd like your company." She held another paper tissue out to her assistant who was on the verge of tears again. "And that's as a friend, Jenny if you'd like to think of me that way."

"I do but of all the people you could choose..."

"Stop arguing, Miss Dench. The offer's there. Do you want to come or not?" Bree's attempt at being very formal faltered when she had to smile.

"How can I turn down a direct request from my principal?" Jenny said. "My God, I haven't even got a passport, I'll need a new summer clothes and..."

"It's four weeks away," Bree cut in. "I'm sure all that can be sorted out."

"Thanks Bree," Jenny replied. She glanced at her watch. "Damn, I need to get back to my room. The substitute has only been left work for half an hour."

She blew her nose, wiped her moist cheeks and gave Bree a hug. "You're one in a million," she said and headed for the door.

"Another cliché, Miss Dench. You must try to be more original."

Jenny smiled "Yes Ma'am," she said, gave a mock salute and disappeared.

Bree glanced at her appointment book. Oh my, the next interview was with Jocelyn Hamilton, the one faculty member who needed massive amounts of guidance; not that she would accept any. It was time to pull rank.

During the final week of the term Jenny almost became her old self again. The giggles and comical interruptions returned to the faculty meetings and she was there every afternoon.

"I reckon I'll buy my swim wear down there," she said to Bree one evening when she called around with a pile of pamphlets and books about New Zealand. "The whole country is only about the area of Washington State and has a population similar to Seattle's. I got a New Zealand Herald out at the airport. I thought their clothes were expensive until I realized one buck is about two-forty in their dollars."

"It's one of the great outdoor tourist resorts of the world with mountains, lakes and geysers as well as beaches." Bree added. "Well, that's what the brochures say."

Jenny giggled, unfolded a map onto the carpet and knelt down in front of it. "I got my passport," she said. "Told them there was a family emergency and I needed it straight away." She glanced up and saw Bree's raised eyebrows. "Well it is, isn't it? We had the emergency. I just forgot to tell them it happened here."

"Oh Jenny," Bree said with a laugh. "I don't think we'll be bored down there, not even for a minute."

The waiting room was in one of the new sections of the hospital with comfortable armchairs, low tables and assorted magazines spread around. The receptionist's counter was empty, as staff had long gone home. Three people were in the room, a couple in their sixties and a man a generation younger who strutted endlessly around. He stopped by a vertical goldfish bowl to gaze at the tiny creatures frolicking around in the artificial light, before running a hand over his day old stubble and continuing his relentless pace.

"Come and sit down, Ray," the woman said. "Can I get you another coffee from the dispensing machine."

"Damn windows," the man replied. "Why don't they have windows in the place?"

"Something to do with the cost of making them earthquake proof," the third person in the room, a gray-headed man, replied. "It was cheaper to leave them out."

Ray Barnett turned. His eyes were haunted and a vein in his neck twitched. "Sure, Ken," he said and switched the conversation back to what was really in their minds and hearts. "Why are they so long? They said midnight at the outside." He glanced at a clock on the wall that showed it was two fifteen.

Ken Preston turned to his wife. "Can we both have a coffee, Emily?" he said softly and walked over to comfort his younger companion.

"I'm sorry," Ray muttered. "I know it is just as difficult for you two, probably more so. After all, Maxine is your daughter. I've only known her for a decade." He acknowledged the hand on his shoulder with a faint smile and allowed himself to be guided into an armchair.

Emily returned with two paper cups of coffee. She handed them out and met Ray's eyes. "Thank you," she whispered. "Whatever happens tonight, I want you to know you were the best thing that happened to Maxie..." Her own voice broke and she turned away.

Another quarter an hour slipped by before an end door swung open and a nurse dressed in operating fatigues entered. Her body language told the grim story before she even opened her mouth.

"Doctor Mansfield will speak to you in a moment, Mr. Barnett," she said.

Ray stood and stared.

"My wife..."

"I'm sorry, Ray," the nurse continued. "Maxine died on the operating table at two forty three, five minutes ago. Doctor Mansfield will be here soon."

The hushed room was cut by sobs as Emily broke down and buried her face in Ken's chest. Her husband clasped her tightly as he fought his own emotions.

"Thank you," Ray replied. "We knew it was a long shot and I'm sure you all did everything possible." Without another word he walked out of the room.

"Let him go, Emily," Ken said when his wife went to follow. "He needs to grieve in his own way."

Emily tipped the bucket of dirty water down the sink and stood back to check her work. It was six months since Maxie's funeral and, in her view, Ray had taken it hard. They'd tried to persuade him to stay in Auckland but he'd made up his mind to accept a position to survey noxious weed spread in native forests three hundred kilometers away in the southern part of the North Island. His reasoning that this position gave him a chance to follow up his botany degree knowledge was, in Emily's opinion, just an excuse to move away from his memories. She hoped he'd get it out of his system and return to sometime. The home that Ray and Maxie lived in for five years was sold and the furniture headed south to where Ray had bought another house. She glanced up as the man in her thoughts walked in.

"An empty house loses its soul, doesn't it, Ray?" she said.

"The house lost it when Maxie went," Ray replied. "I thought I could cope but the memories are too vivid. I must move on before I wallow in self pity and become embittered."

"But you can come back," Emily said. "Our home is always open for you whether it's just for a weekend or for a longer term." She fixed him with a compassionate gaze. "Keep in touch, won't you?"

Ray nodded. "I will," he whispered. "You're my only family now." He stepped forward, wrapped his arms around her chubby body and kissed her on her cheek. "Well, I'd better go."

"Sure," Emily replied. "I'll lock up and get the key to the lawyer."

CHAPTER THREE

The rolling blue surf hit the white sand at Mount Maunganui. Despite its name, it wasn't a mountain but a conical hill that rose two hundred meters at the point of a narrow peninsular. This was one of New Zealand's top beaches and was crowded with thousands of vacationers. Hundreds of people from toddlers to grandparents crowded the beach and, surrounding urban area. Youths in knee length shorts goggled at tanned girls in skimpy attire while children built sandcastles in the sand. Red and yellow surf patrol flags flew and two women shared the waves a dozen meters from shore with dozens of other bathers.

"My God," screeched the younger woman. "That breaker!"

A wave curled up over their heads ready to break. "Dive beneath it," Bree shouted as the wave crashed.

Everything disappeared in a wall of green but the water beneath the surface was surpassingly calm. Bree rose to the surface, shook wet hair from her eyes and glanced around. A spluttering Jenny came up beside her to find the wave that had broken into a mountain of surf inshore from them. However, behind another wave was mounting.

"Jump up with it and start swimming," Bree called.

Jenny hesitated but it was upon them. She leaped up and began kicking. The crest caught her and she was propelled forward like an express train. After the exhilarating body surf she found the sand scraping her tummy and stood up laughing. Bree, several meters across from her, also rose and let water slide off her body.

"How did you know what to do?" Jenny shouted above the roar of surf and children's shouts.

"My family moved to Hawaii for five years when I was twelve. I reckon in my junior high days I was in the water more often than I was out."

"It shows, too," Jenny replied. "Shall we go and catch another one?"

"Sure," Bree replied and led the race out.

For another forty minutes the pair dived beneath, jumped over or caught an occasional breaker that carried them ashore. Finally, they staggered out, collapsed onto their beach towels and dried themselves down.

"Well we did it," Jenny gasped as she ran a comb through her hair.

"What?"

"Had an ocean swim on New Year's Day. With the airplane not getting here until noon. I didn't think we would manage it."

"Well, everything was organized. We had our rental car waiting and the motel booked." Bree began to rub sunscreen lotion on her arms. "It's a great little place, too. Far better than those impersonal hotel rooms Colin preferred."

"Bree," Jenny said. "Your promise!"

"Oh yes." Bree laughed. "I said I wouldn't mention his name."

"Then don't," Jenny replied in a school madam's voice.

They dried in the hot sun and watched the holiday crowd. Music from a children's ferris wheel behind them competed with the shouts of a group of teenagers playing a ball game on the sand and the roar of two speed boats that zigzagged back and forth beyond the breakers. Jenny rolled over and let the sun warm her back while Bree opened a local woman's magazine she'd bought and began to read.

The pair spent the night at a tiny motel that was a complete contrast to the upmarket hotel Bree usually stayed at when she traveled with her husband. It was, though, clean and quiet with comfortable beds and their rental car was parked right outside the door. Thursday arrived, two days before Bree was due at the conference in Palmerston North, a city across five hundred and

sixty kilometers southwest across the North Island. According to the map Jenny had studied with enthusiasm, the land between the two centers consisted of mountains and hilly terrain.

They'd cross exotic pine forests and Lake Taupo, fly south of three mountains and over forested hill country until they arrived over the Manawatu Plains. They were booked to fly out early on Friday morning on a small link airline.

The *West Central Air* hanger at Tauranga airport was an austere building that once belonged to the aero club before they shifted to modern facilities. Inside the untidy interior a small monoplane had its engine cowling removed and two men peered at the partially assembled engine.

"Will she be ready, Peter?" one man said. "With our other plane having its annual check we've no reserve."

"Sure Vince. I've put the new carburetor in and have cleaned the fuel lines all out with compressed air. I only have to reassemble it all. Give me an hour and you can take her up for a test flight."

"Okay, see you later." Vince climbed down from the maintenance platform and disappeared outside.

Peter continued to work away for fifteen minutes or so. He whistled to himself and never noticed a visitor until someone coughed. He glanced down and saw a guy in a white coverall standing beside the Cessna.

"Gid'day mate," he said. "Do ya want something?"

The man climbed up the other side of the triangular ladder and flashed an identity badge at Peter. "Jamal Schmidt," he said in an American accent. "I'm from the Cessna head office in The States."

Peter stopped and wiped his hands with a greasy rag. "You don't look like one of those office types to me."

Schmidt laughed. "No, I'm in maintenance like yourself. I was told you ordered a new carburetor for the Stationair. We've had a bit of trouble with similar models back home. Since I was in the country with the big bosses trying to get a new order from a local crop-dusting firm, they suggested I drop by to see if you had the old carburetor around."

"Sure it's here but it's bugged."

"That's what we're interested in," the American said. "If you don't want it, I'd like to take it home to be checked for metal fatigue. We've had several other complaints from operators."

Peter shrugged. "Nah, the casings okay. We decided it was easier to put a new carburetor in rather than replace all the bits, that's all. It's over on the bench. Take it if you wish."

Schmidt, though, seemed to be in no hurry to leave. He glanced at the work Peter was doing. "Those aren't standard fuel lines are they?" he said.

Peter laughed. "Nope. Everything from your country costs the earth so we often use locally manufactured stuff or buy it in from Taiwan." He sniffed. "It's just as good and quarter the price."

"Fair enough. Where did you say the old carburetor was?"

Peter turned and pointed. For a moment he faced the other way so never noticed his visitor reach an arm down and tuck a disk the size of a man's thumbnail on the under the carburetor. It was magnetic and clung to the steel like super glue.

"Right, I see it," the American said when Peter turned back to face him. "I'll leave you in peace then. Thanks for your help. If there is anything wrong, head office will sent your boss an email."

"No problem" Peter said, shook the man's extended hand and continued joining the fuel lines up.

He never saw the tiny disk or noticed Schmidt toss the old carburetor in a pile of debris behind the hanger.

The woman behind the Air New Zealand counter glanced up at the pair from her computer monitor. "We don't handle the *West Central Air* ticketing, Madam," she said to Bree. "Their counter is over beside the rental car kiosks."

"Thank you?" Bree said and followed Jenny and their luggage trolley across the terminal building.

There seemed to be no reception area for *West Central Air* near the rental car firms. "There it is," Jenny said and pointed to a small counter tucked in an alcove. A pile of cardboard boxes almost hid the modest company sign.

"Thank goodness," Bree replied. "We're due to leave in twenty minutes."

The man in a pilot's uniform smiled at them from behind the counter. He glanced at their tickets and banged them with a stamp. "It's only a small six seat Cessna Stationair," he said after he heard their American accents. "We don't offer the comfort of the Air New Zealand flights." He grinned. "You'll be the only passengers. I'll be glad to have your company." The man laughed when he noticed Jenny's screwed up nose. "My names Vince Thorton, pilot, attendant and cleaner. We take mail and freight out every morning and fly back again at five in the afternoon. Often I fly alone. Still want to come?"

"A small airplane will be a change," Bree said. "I've heard it's quite a scenic flight."

The pilot nodded and walked around the counter. "I'll take your luggage. As soon as I get these cartons loaded we can be off. Go to Departure Gate 3 in about quarter an hour..."

The flight was quite unlike any Bree and Jenny had been on before. In an airplane the size of a station wagon and with the wing above them they had a tremendous view of the country below. It was rugged, steep and covered in thick bush, as Vince called the forest below. Bree sat in the front beside the pilot with Jenny in the seat behind.

"We'll be over pine forests soon," Vince said above the murmur of the engine. "Then it's Lake Taupo and the central high country. I'm afraid there's a northerly storm coming in so the mountains may be hidden."

The three volcanoes were visible, though, and still had snow on their shady southern slopes. The wide twin peak Mount Ruapehu towered above the conical shaped Mount Ngaurahoe and smaller Mount Tongariro while the surrounding land of light brown tussock had a black line cut diagonally across it.

"The Desert Road," Vince said. "Ruapehu, that biggest mountain is two thousand seven hundred meters high; that's a little over eight thousand feet. It's the largest in the North Island."

"Impressive," Jenny replied as she gazed out the window. "Those clouds behind it sure look black, though."

"The storm's coming in quite quickly," Vince replied. "We should be right, though. We're moving southeast away from it.. There's more high country for a while then you'll see the Manawatu Plains."

The sky behind the three mountains was an inky black and one misty section showed where a downpour covered the landscape.

"Oh my," Bree muttered as the whole northern sky split open in white sheet lightning. Seconds later, thunder rumbled and the Cessna buffeted. She grinned at Jenny who appeared a picture of tranquillity. Her own stomach felt queasy and she concentrated on looking straight ahead through the spinning propeller.

The sky darkened and more sheet lightning cut across the sky in increasing intensity. Thunder rumbled and the Cessna vibrated with each sound. Bree now felt quite ill and reached for the security of a paper bag. Even Jenny had paled a little but the nonchalant pilot took it in his stride. He reached for his radio, changed frequencies and a different voice came through the speakers.

"The great divide," he explained. "We're in the central air control district. There's a radar

station east of Palmerston North. They're just telling us we're on their scope." He grinned. "Half an hour and we'll be there."

Bree braved a look out a side window where thickly forested hills poked out of misty rain clouds. Visibility dropped and the instruments glowed in semi-darkness. Suddenly hail hit their airplane, pelting stones of ice that drowned the engine noise. It lasted for two or so minutes then disappeared as quickly as it came. More lightning flashed but it was behind them and a ray of sunlight pierced the clouds in the east.

"Almost through," Vince said

Bree caught Jenny's eyes and smiled. She hadn't vomited and her stomach felt as if it could now handle the vibrations. Away ahead the clouds broke and green flat land came into view. This gave her confidence. She glanced at her watch, sighed and brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes. Their arrival time was twenty minutes away. Thank God they were almost there.

The crack sounded like one of those tiny fireworks crackers. It was muffled but ominous. The engine screamed of tearing metal, spluttered and stopped. The pilot frowned, adjusted some controls and the engine roared to life. However, it howled like a chain saw gone wrong and cut out again. Everything shuddered and their airplane slipped sideways. Dials in front of the pilot competed with a siren and flashing red light for attention.

In an eerie near silence of rushing air, Jenny gasped and all Bree could do was clasp her seat belt and stare at the sky ahead.

Vince swore, reached out and pulled a switch. The engine clanged once more but wouldn't start.

"What is it?" Bree shouted. Her voice reflected the terror in her mind.

"I reckon a pistons seized" Vince replied, his own voice calm. "I'm trying to isolate it. It could be the fuel line. If we...." There was a clink and a misty vapor poured from the engine "Bugger," Vince swore. "The fuel pipe's broken away. That's aviation fuel pouring out." He pressed the radio transmission button. "Mayday! Mayday! West Central Air Cessna ZK VPB has lost engine power. Our position is...."

Bree stared at Jenny. The windshield was splattered with liquid and the distinct smell of aviation fuel entered the cockpit. Below, thick hills of forest poked out of the misty clouds. It appeared as if they were suspended in the air and the trees were rushing towards them.

"Can you talk to the air control," Vince shouted. "I need to bring the nose up."

Bree nodded, clamped the spare headphones on and spoke. "This is the Cessna. I'm a passenger. Vince is trying to pull the nose up."

"Central Air Control. Cessna ZK VPB. Can we have more details, please."

Bree swallowed and pressed the red transmit button. In a voice far calmer than she felt she described what happened.

"And your name, Madam," the voice cut in.

"Bree Ashworth,"

"Good, Bree," the voice said. "Has Vince started the motor?"

"No," Bree replied. "The windshield is covered in liquid. I think it's aviation fuel."

"Has Vince pulled the nose up?" the controller's calm voice continued.

Bree glanced up "Yes. Our nose is up but the propeller has almost stopped turning. We appear to be level." She described everything while the pilot wrestled with the controls and the Cessna's wings straightened.

Seconds, which seemed like eternity, passed before Vince touched her arm and smiled in appreciation. "I've stopped the dive and can talk on the radio now," he said and immediately began to read out technical data of their position, rate of descent and weather conditions. "We have five minutes at the most," he reported. "...Steep terrain all around. I'm heading into a valley. There's fog below and the ground view is obstructed..."

"Bree," whispered a voice. Thank you. You're more than just my principal, you know."

Bree glanced back at Jenny's pale face. "We'll make it," she whispered.

The other woman nodded and attempted a smile. "We swam on New Year's Day, Bree."

"Yes, we did. And we'll go back for more before we leave to go home..."
Jenny grimaced and pulled her seat belt tighter.

Beside them, clouds blurred past. Rain mixed with the fuel on the windscreen to make lines of smudged rainbow colors.

"Hang on!" Vince said in an emotionless voice. "We're going in."

The descent, with the possible exception of that attack in Jenny's classroom, was Bree's most terrifying moment in her life. They dropped into fog, so thick she couldn't even see the slowly revolving propeller. Vince concentrated on guiding the Cessna and kept his eyes glued on the instruments while Jenny clasped the front seat and bent forward to look through the windshield.

"Keep your eyes out each side," Vince's terse voice cut the silence. "Shout if you see anything. I'm trying to sit her down in a valley."

"I'll do the left side," Jenny shouted.

"Okay." Bree said. She strained to see. White mist swirled by but it appeared to have substance. Oh my, there were trees whizzing by. Suddenly the fog disappeared and she could see that they were in a narrow valley barely wider than the airplane. Below was a boulder strewn stream with ferns and trees hiding both banks.

"Hang on ladies," Vince shouted. "This is it!"

They hit the water. Spray shot everywhere but the rocks couldn't be avoided. The howl of crumbling metal and the shuddering fuselage jarred Bree's senses. There was a violent left turn and one wing disappeared. Sensations! Noise! Pain! Bree was bumped, wrenched, tossed and squeezed but the seat belt held her. A jab in the stomach left her gasping and her hand came away from her waist covered in blood.

Something cracked and a million pieces of safety glass showered over her; they were in the air again but, no, they'd only bounced over something. They landed with a grinding thud into a wall of water that actually hit her. Where was the other side of the airplane?

Her stomach lurched and something thumped on her head, Dizziness competed with nausea but her body could stand no more so switched off and she lost consciousness.

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