

PASSENGER 19

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PASSENGER 19

A Jammer Davis Thriller

WARD LARSEN

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FIRST EDITION

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*To an unwavering supporter of Manchester United—
this one is for you, Lance*



ONE

Bad news is rarely foreseeable. It can come in the middle of the night, as a knock on the door, or by a jagged ringtone. Sometimes it descends as a shocking television image, a thing that stamps forever in your mind where you were and what you were doing at that moment. The worst news always comes when you least expect it. For Jammer Davis it came at noon on a clear Sunday.

The morning had been tranquil, and he was right where he wanted to be. With the ink barely dry on his seaplane rating, a good friend had loaned him a J-3 Cub floatplane for an early morning solo. The weather was ideal, blue skies and a soft breeze, and for two hours he'd worked the finger lakes of Lunga Reservoir, which flanked Quantico Marine Base in Virginia, like a kid with a new bicycle.

He'd been hooked since the previous summer, when the same friend had taken him fishing in Alaska. Two weeks of flawless isolation, camping under the stars and casting for trout from the floats of a stout de Havilland Beaver. It was a new kind of flying for Davis. Seaplanes were not high performance aircraft—not compared to the fighters he'd flown in the Air Force—yet there was a fundamental freedom in being able to use two thirds of the earth's surface as a runway. So he skimmed across lakes and landed on still tributaries, a man without a care in the world, until the fuel gauge brought him back to earth.

Reluctantly Davis pulled the Cub up to a thousand feet, the highest he'd had her all day, and set a course for home port, a seaplane base near Chester nestled on the green shores of the Appomattox River. When the dock came in sight, Davis skimmed lower, gliding smooth

and true over the mirrorlike water. He was a mile away when he noticed a vaguely familiar silhouette standing at the end of the pier.

Davis tapped the throttle and nudged the Cub down until he was no more than a wingspan above the water. He flew right at the slim man whose hands were in his pockets, and whose tight haircut and rigid bearing sealed the ID.

Larry Green had tracked him down.

Davis flew straight over Green's head before banking the Cub sharply. He transitioned into a lazy turn and set up for a final approach into the wind. That was one of the beauties of seaplanes—without the limitation of a concrete runway, you could land in any direction you wanted. The pontoons kissed the lake, twin trails of whitewater frothing the cobalt surface behind. When the aircraft settled, Davis steered to the dock with care. Legally speaking he was now driving a boat—and one without a reverse gear, meaning maneuverability was limited. He cut the engine before arriving at the mooring station, and Green grabbed a wing to help guide the Cub into the dock. Once fore and aft lines were secure, Davis was the first to speak.

“Larry, you gotta come up with me! I just finished my check-out the other day and I've been thinking about buying one of these, maybe something with a little more payload to—” Davis stopped in midsentence. Green was staring at him, a retired two-star general who hadn't lost his regulation two-star expression. He wasn't here to discuss airplanes. And Larry Green not talking about airplanes was like a bishop not talking about God.

“What is it?” Davis asked. “You need me for a job? Let me guess—an airplane crashed in Mongolia, and nobody in your office wants to spend six months camping with marmots.”

Davis had worked for Green in the Air Force, and both were experienced aircraft accident investigators. Since retiring, the general had risen to head the NTSB's Office of Aviation Safety, and in recent years he'd called upon Davis to help with several problematic overseas crashes. Yet what Davis saw now was not the look of a commander preparing to issue a temporary duty assignment.

His gaze was intense, his mouth slightly parted, a man who knew what he had to say, but wasn't sure how to say it. In all the years he had known Green, Davis imagined he'd witnessed every mood and reaction in the general's catalogue. Never before had he seen indecision.

Green finally broke the silence. "We got a four-hour preliminary strip this morning. An ARJ-35 went down last night in southern Colombia."

The first blade of cold seized Davis' spine. He drew a slow, deliberate breath, and four heartbeats later said, "Colombia."

"The jet disappeared from radar near some high mountains and never reached its destination. There's an ongoing search, but no wreckage has been found. A passenger manifest was attached to the report."

When Green again seemed to struggle for words, Davis' senses went on full alert. His world became smaller, absolutely focused, like when a red warning light flashed on in the sky. "Larry, you're scaring me."

"Jammer . . ." Green finally said, "Jen was on board."

Davis took it like a punch, his gut lurching in a way his morning joyride could never have touched. On a dead calm lake the floating dock seemed to sway. "No! There's no way. You have to consider that Jen Davis—"

"I know, I know . . . that was my first thought too. Jennifer Davis is a common name. But you told me a few weeks ago she got an internship this semester, somewhere in South America. So I double checked the passport number, and—"

"*My daughter* called me yesterday from the airport in Bogotá!"

"What time?"

A simple enough question, but his mind seemed to seize. When Davis finally spoke his voice was tight, as if caught at the end of an exhale. "I don't know . . . late afternoon, I guess."

"What did she say?"

"I didn't talk to her. I was playing in a rugby match and . . . and Jen left a message. By this afternoon she was supposed to be

taking soil samples from some damned hillside coffee farm. How could . . .” Davis turned away and put a hand on the wingtip of the seaplane, and when its floats dipped under his shifting weight, his agony translated to the physical as concentric waves swept out over the still water. “This can’t be happening, Larry,” he said in a whisper. “Tell me this is not happening.”

Green put a hand on his shoulder. “I haven’t had any updates since the four-hour, Jammer. The airplane is still listed as overdue—nothing’s been found yet.”

Davis was quiet for a moment, then he stood straight, which put him a full head above his old boss. “So maybe it only diverted because of bad weather. Or it could have been a mechanical issue.”

Green was silent.

“Even if it went down, there could be survivors.”

So disconsolate was Davis that it took a moment for him to recognize his arguments as the same ones he’d so often heard from the relatives of victims. He knew perfectly well what Green’s response would be. *It’s good to keep hope. But we have to trust the facts.* He also knew the underlying translation. *Not a chance.*

Green read him, of course. “Jammer, you and I . . . we do this for a living. You know the odds. Any of those things *might* be true. But when a small jet disappears over a big jungle, in the middle of the night, in mountainous terrain, there’s usually only one answer. It’s like we always tell families and the press—until the aircraft has been accounted for, anything is possible. But you of all people understand the chances of a positive outcome in an event like this.”

Event. Another word he’d often used. Davis gripped the wing tighter and forced his eyes shoreside where his car was parked. His phone was there, in the storage compartment between the two front seats. He had listened to Jen’s message last night, but hadn’t called back because he knew she was on another flight. A flight that never arrived at its destination. He tried to recall her exact words, but they escaped him.

Pain welled in his chest and he felt paralyzed, as if controlled movement was beyond reach. His daughter . . . *a crash victim.* Fi-

nally, Davis reacted in the only way that seemed to make sense. He pushed away from the wingtip and hurried up the dock, talking as he went. "I'm booking the first flight, Larry! When does the bank of South American departures leave Dulles? Evening? If I can catch the first—"

"Hold on, hold on! Just stop right there, Jammer!"

With all the self-control he could muster, Davis paused.

Green held out his hands, palms forward, and walked toward him cautiously. The way one would approach a drunk with a barstool poised over his head. "I knew you'd take it this way. I knew there would be no stopping you."

"And?"

Green let out a long breath. "This may be the dumbest thing I've ever done . . . putting a family member on an investigation. I can't think of any rule against it, but probably because it's such an *obviously* bad idea nobody ever thought it was worth putting on the books. At the very least this is an ethical lapse on my part."

"You're sending me."

"I already got it approved. You're on the investigation."

"Larry, I will never forget this."

"Well, hell—I had to send somebody. Turns out there were five Americans on that jet, so I'm obliged to send an observer. I've already got you a ride—there's a Gulfstream III out at Andrews, a State Department flight making a scheduled run to Bogotá. They leave in two hours. Do you still have your go-bag packed?"

"Always." The bag was an NTSB requirement. One week's worth of clothing to cover any climatic extreme, toothbrush, razor, and a few basic tools of the trade including a flashlight, camera, and handheld GPS.

"I know your passport is current, and we're working to expedite the visa."

Davis was already striding up the dock, trying to translate his anguish into momentum. "Send me the four-hour update and anything new you get. And babysit this airplane for me. The seaport office is over there, they'll tell you how to put it to bed." He

pointed to a rustic shack that looked more likely to hold a cord of firewood than a flight operations department.

"I'll take care of it." Then Green barked, "But hold on, Jammer!"

The general's tone brought Davis to a halt on the wavering dock. Green closed in with a raised finger and stopped at arm's length.

"*Whatever* happens, Jammer, you promise me one thing."

"I'm listening."

"I am going way out on a limb sending you downrange in an official capacity. I'm doing it because I knew that's how you'd want it. That being the case, you will investigate . . . no matter *what* you find. If this gets too personal, if you can't finish the job, then you owe it to me to step aside. I'll send someone else to take over."

Davis squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, then nodded. "You're right, it doesn't get any more personal than this. That's why I'll get to the bottom of it, Larry. I swear to you I will."

The general's granite stare softened. "All right, then. Good luck."

* * *

Two minutes later Davis was steering his car toward the main road. The lane curved through trees, thick-trunked birch and cedar that were full and green at the height of summer, and the lake was intermittently in view on his right, a postcard-picture view. He saw none of it.

Davis drew to a stop where the gravel ended and waited for a car to pass. When it did, his foot seemed stuck on the brake pedal. His fists squeezed the steering wheel like twin vises, the faux leather handgrip grinding under the pressure. Davis leaned forward until his forehead was flat on the steering wheel. He shut his eyes and pushed everything away. Pushed until only Green's words plowed through his head.

You know the odds.

And there was the problem. He knew only too well.

Worse yet, he knew what came afterward. His wife had died in an automobile accident four years ago, a bolt from the blue

that had left Jen without a mother. That had left him without a soulmate. Together they'd buried her on a steel-gray morning, the wind sweeping brown grass in undulating sheets. A fittingly foul day to mark the low point of their tailspin, a bottom from which he and Jen had eventually climbed out and recovered. Recovered. Could it ever be called that? Not completely. The worst was behind them, the ghosting about the house, preparing tasteless meals, neighbors whispering behind cupped hands at holiday parties. He and Jen had gotten through, leaning on one another as never before. In those dark days, they had grown closer than he'd ever thought possible.

Now it was happening all over again. If he lost Jen, where would he turn? For so long it had been the two of them, and even with Jen in college they talked every day. One of them made the three-hour drive every other week. His daughter was precious, absolutely everything to him. *You know the odds.*

Davis lifted his phone from the midseat compartment and scrolled to her last message. His thumb hovered over the playback button for a long moment before tapping the screen.

From two thousand miles away, her voice was effervescent, like sunlight on a new morning. *"Hi, Daddy! I made it to Columbia. One more flight and I'll be there. I've already met a girl who's going to be on the same project. By tomorrow she and I will be shoveling dirt—too bad you're not here to help! Love you, I'll call soon. And don't overfeed Captain Jack—bettas don't need much!"*

Then silence.

Davis couldn't say how long he sat staring into space, but when he refocused the first thing he saw was the green LED clock on the car's dashboard.

It was noon on Sunday.

The worst day of his life.

TWO

Five hours and twelve minutes. That was the air time between Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland, and El Dorado International Airport in Bogotá, Colombia.

They were somewhere over the Caribbean, and through the tiny oval window Davis saw azure-blue water and an island below. He was pacing the cabin aisle, his head bumping on the ceiling, a six-foot-two clearance that was two inches shy of his personal requirement. Like a zoo animal in a cage that was too small, his hips bounced between stitched-leather seats and his boots tripped over joints in the finely carpeted floor.

He had the jet all to himself. Aside from two pilots up front, there was only one other person on board, a demoralized flight attendant who'd listened to his story and tried to be sympathetic, but who knew this was one passenger whose flight she would never make more pleasant. She'd done all she could, coming round time and again with liquor minis, a bottle of wine, and prepackaged pita wraps. She gave up somewhere near the Florida Keys.

Davis wanted only one thing—to get his feet on the ground and *do* something. There had been one last message from Larry Green before leaving Andrews, a chime on his phone that caused his heart to miss a beat. Maybe two or three. He'd inhaled deeply before opening the message, acutely aware of how many times he'd been on the other end, acting as the sender of catastrophic news to be relayed softly to the next of kin. It turned out to be a false alarm.

Still no news. Good luck, Jammer.

Since then, three hours and twelve minutes of agonizing isolation, hanging seven miles above the earth in mind-numbing limbo.

For the twentieth time Davis reached the aft lavatory, and when he performed his about-face, the flight attendant, a pert and well-meaning girl whose name was Stacy, and who was not much older than Jen, stood in the aisle right in front of him.

“I wish I could do something to help. Your daughter sounds lovely.” Her mouth crinkled at the sides as if trying to smile and frown at the same time. She was doe eyed and sympathetic, and wore something between a uniform and a dinner dress that was cinched in her favor at the waist. Not a blond hair was out of place, and her perfect teeth were an advertisement for whatever whitening agent she used.

Davis sank into the aft executive lounge chair, one of eight scattered in groups around the cabin. “She’s everything to me,” he said.

Stacy took the adjacent chair, an opposing basin of plump, cool leather, and between them was a rich wood table.

“Does her mother know yet?” she asked.

Davis hadn’t gotten that far, and the question put him in a square corner—no way out. He explained about his wife, and Stacy’s hand went to his arm sympathetically. Not the product of customer service training, but a gesture from the heart.

“You poor man. I’d be happy to—”

The goodhearted Stacy was cut short by a two-tone chime. She scurried to a panel near the front of the cabin and picked up a phone handset. She listened for a full minute, by which time Davis was standing next to her.

“What is it?” he asked as she hung up.

“The pilots want to talk to you.”

* * *

It was entirely new for Davis: living in a state of dread. When Diane died it had been straightforward, a dour state trooper at his door with one crushing sentence. *There’s been an accident, sir.*

This was altogether different, a metered process of torture. Every ringing phone and doorbell sufficient cause for a coronary.

“Up front?” he asked.

Stacy the Good nodded.

Davis knew it was against the rules for passengers to enter the cockpit during flight. He also knew that some captains still allowed common sense to rule. He had introduced himself to the pilots on the ground, and established that he and the skipper, a former C-130 driver, had more than a few friends in common from active duty days. The cockpit door unlocked and Davis pulled it open.

The flight deck was much brighter than the cabin, and he squinted as his eyes adjusted.

“Come on in,” said the captain, whose name was Mike. “Take a seat.” He pointed to a fold-down jumpseat behind the two crew positions.

Davis pulled and pushed the thing into place, and then wedged his wide shoulders between the port and starboard bulkheads.

“Have you heard anything new?” Davis asked.

“No,” said Mike. “But we just sent that message you requested. We figured you’d want to be here if a reply came through.”

“Yeah, I would. Thanks.”

“Sorry about your daughter, Jammer,” said Ed, the copilot. “That’s gotta be the worst news a guy can get.”

“Like you can’t imagine. What’s our ETA?”

“Two hours to landing in Bogotá. We’ll go straight to Customs. We already called ahead to explain your situation—told them you were a special emissary of the United States Office of Foreign Aid. You know, like you might be delivering a big check or something.”

Davis grinned for the first time in eight hours. “Thanks,” he said, “that should get me through the gauntlet.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. His back and shoulders felt knotted, like a shirt that had been twisted into a rope and left to dry in the sun. “So what are you carrying down below?” he asked.

“Below?” Mike queried.

“Well, yeah. You’re clearly not moving passengers, so I figured you must have a belly full of diplomatic freight or mail. I was told this is a regularly scheduled State Department run.”

The two pilots swapped a look. “State Department? Nah, those guys have their own air force, although we do run occasional contracts for them. This is a private jet, and today’s load manifest is basically you.”

Davis was surprised. “Maybe the return leg back to D.C. is a full boat.”

Mike shrugged. “Could be, but you know how corporate flight departments work. They don’t tell us anything. We just answer the phone, try to show up on time and sober.”

A communications alert sounded, and on the navigation scratchpad a single word flashed to life: MESSAGE.

The pendulum of Davis’ situation went on a hard downswing. He watched Ed call up the message, and they all read it at the same time: FROM LG AT NTSB. NO NEW DEVELOPMENTS. CONTACT IN BOGOTA COLONEL ALFONSO MARQUEZ.

Davis blew out a sigh, then combed his fingers through his short brown hair.

“They still haven’t found any wreckage,” Ed offered. “That’s good. Maybe the jet lost an engine and diverted to some grass strip in the middle of nowhere.”

A depressing silence followed. Captain Mike typed .89 into the Mach window of the flight computer. “That’s as fast as we can go without peeling the paint off. Why don’t you go back in the cabin and get some sleep.”

“I will,” Davis said, knowing perfectly well he would not.