



# CLOUDS

by Roger Jones

Full sun was coming in the French doors when David Kirkpatrick tried to open his eyes. The room kept on rolling when he turned over to get away from the brightness. Behind his eyes his head throbbed. His mouth tasted like old copper tubing. Inside his gut, below his navel, little cramps executed gymnastic routines. He tried to remember the previous night. Pleyo. Cabo Gold tequila. A drink. Another drink. Not much after that, beyond her wrapping around him.

He thought of a snake, a brown, sinewy snake, then thrust the image away. What was wrong with him? He had never had a tequila hangover like this before.

He looked at his watch: 10:30. Way too late for breakfast at Casa Leyla. Coffee. He needed coffee.

He left the light off in the bathroom. In the shadows from the high courtyard window his skin looked cadaverous, the circles under his eyes parallel oxbows. The sink water was only lukewarm; his head spun when he leaned over. He pulled on briefs, pants, a knit shirt, and reached for his wallet on the bedside table.

It took a few seconds to register. His wallet was thin and light; very thin, very light. A knot formed in his stomach, much higher than the cramps. He flipped the wallet open. It was empty. No cash; that much was immediately obvious. He flipped up the windowed driver's license compartment. No license. No pilot's license either, on the other side. No credit cards in their layered slots. He crammed fingers into the deeper compartments on either side of the fold: no health-insurance card, no AAA card, no ASCE membership card, no Houston Public Library card, even. Cleaned out. Wait. A flash

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of color from the back money compartment, a brown and white bill, a nun: a thin two-hundred-peso bill. He wasn't cleaned out. They had left two hundred whole pesos. *She* had left two hundred pesos. Pleyo.

He slammed to the dresser, leaned over to the bottom drawer, instantly regretted it.

Staggered, nearly blacking out, sat down hard on the floor. He jerked open the drawer, threw floppy hat, long-sleeve shirts, windbreaker aside, reached into the back. The lockbox was there. He kept ten thousand-peso bills in the box, two U.S. hundreds. That was his stash, his rainy-day fund against a stolen ATM card, a lost American Express. He wasn't cleaned out.

The box was there. But it was empty.

He leaned back against the base of the bed, closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again when the room began to spin. Sucker. The word flared in his head. Sucker! She had played him for a sucker. *Pleyo*. She had played him, all right.

Kirkpatrick prided himself on being able to add things up. He was a civil engineer working as an external contractor for Halliburton, based in San Miguel de Allende, a little tourist town in central Mexico. Except he hadn't been working.

His contract had been to supervise the site prep, layout, foundation, and basic structural concrete for a Pemex station about midway between San Miguel and Guanajuato City, fifty kilometers either way. The project had gotten near the end of his responsibility, but then the price of oil had bumped down with the BP fiasco in the Gulf. Pemex had put the brakes on a month ago. Since then the station had sat: apron, parking lot, and pump island poured, structural concrete and block shell up and under roof for the main building, main sign erected. But nothing more. He had gone out there a few times. The concrete was bleaching bone white in the sun. The kelly green of the tall "Pemex" oval looked a mockery against the brown desert.

He had heard nothing for two weeks from Sam Fredericks, his boss in Houston, no go-ahead, nothing about a finishing contractor and a handover. His last e-mail from Sam just said he was still waiting for word from Pemex. Kirkpatrick knew Pemex's chain of command and decision-making structure were baroque in the best of times. So he sat, like the station, waiting for word.

He was unlikely to hear from anybody but Sam. His marriage had ended two years ago. Gretchen had just gotten tired of his traveling all the time. She hadn't liked to travel herself, and the sites he had worked over the last decade for Halliburton—first in Bolivia, then Colombia, then Honduras—were not tourist-friendly places anyway. She said she just wanted to get on with her life.

San Miguel would have been different. Gretchen would have liked San Miguel. The small hotel he lived in, five blocks south of the central Jardin, was really comfortable, a rose-stucco courtyard with a fountain and a wall full of purple bougainvillea and cereus. His room was in the back, off the courtyard, tall French doors to an outside porch, a big single bed standing on the dark tile floor, a drape of orange fabric on the wall behind it, a blue bedspread. Two young girls bustled around the premises under the hard eye of the owner, Leyla Martinez. They changed the sheets and towels every day. The hot water was fine in the morning, though not so dependable after ten A.M. Fresh drinking water appeared on the counter hourly, a tall heavy glass pitcher with a blue

rim. He drank the tap water with no ill effects.

Still, the last month of not working had been tedious: going soft from getting up late, eating too many of Leyla's enchiladas and tamales for breakfast, wandering around the town looking into shops and listening to flamenco guitarists and mariachi bands. He'd become a regular at La Pamplonada, a bar with a Pamplona motif, posters of the running of the bulls all over the walls. He had celebrated his forty-fifth birthday there in style, buying round after round bar-wide, going on and on about flying. He loved to fly, particularly gliders, and got to do it hardly at all. So he talked about it, especially when he was drunk, and he was very drunk that night. Horatio, the bartender, had started calling him "El Planeador" every time he walked in, stretching out his arms like wings and rocking from side to side. That had gotten tedious too.

The last two days, though . . . the last two days had not been tedious. And that was because of Pleyonel.

Kirkpatrick had seen Pleyonel ("Pleyo," everybody but Leyla called her) around the Casa Leyla a few times at the beginning of his stay, dressed up, packages under her arms, animated conversations with Leyla, kisses on the cheeks. She was trim, late twenty-something, dark and sleek. Leyla had introduced her to him as her daughter, pronouncing "Pleyonel" three times before he picked it up. She had hardly even looked at him.

Until two nights ago. He was lying on the bed in his room, eleven P.M. or so, reading a *USA Today* he had picked up at Pamplonada. Some golf tournament. A knock on the door.

"Señor Kirkpatrick?" He had thought it was one of Leyla's girls, late fresh water delivery, maybe a message from Sam. But it was Pleyonel, Pleyonel herself, standing there in a long red-patterned dress, silver necklace, brown arms, looking him full in the face. She had a package under her left elbow. She put her right hand out, incongruously, to shake his, invited herself in, took a look around the room, went right to the bed, and sat, crossing her legs. She assumed a pout. Her mother was concerned, she said without preamble, concerned about him. Her mother thought he was not happy in San Miguel. She had paused, raised her eyebrows, an implied question. He shrugged. Maybe she, Pleyonel, could make him happy?

She stripped the paper off the package: Cabo Gold tequila, Pamplonada's most expensive brand. She asked for two glasses, stood up to the tile counter, poured tequila, handed him a glass, raised her own in a toast. They drank, her eyes locked on his. Then she put down her glass, spread her arms, thrust out a hip, gave him a come-hither smile: Maybe they could be happy together.

It was ridiculous, Kirkpatrick knew. Talk about things that didn't add up . . . Something was terribly wrong with the scene. But he was bored, bored with San Miguel, dispirited about the project, feeling abandoned by Houston. What could it hurt to have a drink? The tequila was fine. He had another. They talked. Pleyonel was animated, told him about her "many boyfriends" in San Miguel and Guanajuato, narrated scenes of horseback riding at the family ranch. They drank. They laughed.

Five drinks and two hours later in the bed, "sleek" didn't do her justice. All long limbs, curves, and kneadable flesh. His head was spinning. He didn't know how much time passed. He certainly didn't know when she left.

Kirkpatrick had thought about her all the next day, mixing images with

questions. Why? Why had she come to him? He doubted it was his animal magnetism. Had Leyla really put her up to it? That seemed unlikely, if Leyla really was her mother. Was she? Was Pleyonel some kind of a gift? If so, from whom? For what? He had no idea. But he had thought about her. And he wondered if she would be back.

She did come back. Eleven o'clock again; a new bottle of Cabo Gold. He tried to talk to her, to find out why. But she had rushed on about weekends in Mexico City, a shopping trip to Manhattan. And she was astounding in bed, fitting their two bodies supplely into coupling configurations he had never even thought of, and hadn't been able to remember the next morning, not in any detail, though he had tried to.

That afternoon, before Pamplonada, he had sent a strong e-mail off to Sam Fredericks, suggesting it really was time for him to get back to Houston. The situation with Pleyo was . . . indeterminate. He didn't know what was going on. But he wondered if she would be there that night.

She wasn't. He tossed and turned in the bed, wondering if he should be relieved or disappointed. About three he got up and went out into Leyla's courtyard. Two blossoms hung from the cereus, huge, intricate blossoms, almost luminescently white. Night-blooming cereus, he remembered. The blossoms would be wilted by morning; a single night of astonishing vitality. What was the lesson in that? he wondered. He sat in the dark, watching the blossoms glow.

There was no return e-mail from Sam the next day. He thought about a phone call, but rejected it. If Sam even took the call, he would only tell Kirkpatrick at length what the lack of an e-mail indicated: nothing doing. Kirkpatrick spent the afternoon at La Pamplonada. That night Pleyo was back.

And now she was gone, along with the contents of his wallet, his backup cash. So tawdry. But what was he going to do?

He thought of Leyla. Should he go to Leyla? The severe mother? If she was. Tell her he had been screwing her daughter?

The San Miguel *policía*? Laughable.

The embassy? Simpson at the embassy would love the story. They might get him back to Houston, where he could tell Sam Fredericks in person. The knot in his stomach tightened. It would be his job. Or worse.

What about the cards, company cards? Should he call and cancel them? Hell with the cards. They were the least of his troubles.

His head was back against the bed. He stared at the ceiling. A long crack ran from the center chandelier into one of the corners near the French doors. He had never noticed it before. There was a lot he hadn't noticed, he thought, hadn't paid attention to. He shouldn't be in this situation. He was better than this.

But right now he wasn't. Two hundred pesos. She had left him two hundred pesos. What was he going to do with two hundred pesos?

Coffee. That was the beginning of this nightmare. He had needed coffee. He still needed coffee.

He turned left from the weathered outside door of the Casa Leyla, up the left side of Pila Seca toward the Casa Cafe, dimly aware of the familiar high stuccoed walls on either side, massive wooden garage doors, the cottonwood tree dividing the street in the middle. His chest ached. He was breathing hard, sweating.

The long black Mercedes pulled noiselessly to the curb beside him, the front right and rear left doors opening simultaneously before the car had stopped rolling. Men emerged, dark men in dark clothes, squat, square, sunglasses, slicked-back hair. The adrenaline surge hit his incapacities and stopped dead. He glanced back down the street. It was empty, but he wasn't going to run. He knew that.

"Señor Kirkpatrick." An accented voice called from inside the car. "Would you care to join me?"

He looked at the men standing facing him, hands loose. If this was a kidnapping he would already be in the car. He bent and looked inside. A thinner man in an open white shirt, no sunglasses, sat on the far side of the rear seat, looking across. He motioned to Kirkpatrick with his left hand. A casual summons.

Kirkpatrick stood up, looked at the standing men, then bent again and slid onto the seat. The front-seat man reentered as he did so, closing the door. The rear man closed the door behind him, remaining outside. The engine was silent inside the car. Only the air conditioner purred.

"Señor Kirkpatrick," White Shirt said again. "Cómo está? May I call you David? I am Raul, and these are my colleagues." He waved his right hand to take in the driver and the front-seat man. Neither looked around.

"I'm okay," Kirkpatrick said. "What's this about?"

"You Americans always want to get right to the point, no?" said Raul. He was about thirty, lighter skinned than his "colleagues," more refined looking. Perfect fingernails. Kirkpatrick had noticed when he waved his hand.

"You are in no danger here," said Raul, "in case you are worried. I just wanted to offer you a proposition, an exchange, perhaps you would say."

Kirkpatrick said nothing.

"Your part of the exchange is certain services you do for us. Our part of the exchange, we provide for the return of materials that, I believe, once belonged to you."

Raul twisted slightly away from him to reach into a thin briefcase on his right side. He extracted several clear ziplock bags, held them in the air for Kirkpatrick to see: currency in one, plastic cards in another, a passport dark against a sheaf of white paper in a third, larger bag. Kirkpatrick hadn't even thought about his passport. It had been in a folder in the drawer above the lockbox, under his sweat suit and underwear. The papers would be Halliburton correspondence—plans, drawings, official permits. Raul had it all. All his money. His cards. His passport. His correspondence. The knot in his stomach squeezed.

"Services," said Kirkpatrick. "What services?"

Raul smiled, white teeth in his tan face. "You are, I understand, a pilot?" he said. It was not a question. "You fly airplanes?" Raul's voice and eyebrows were up, but it was still not a question. "You fly gliders? It says so, on this license." Finally, the voice down. Raul peered into the bag with the cards. "Yes. I see the license here. 'David Allen Kirkpatrick.' 'Gliders,' it says. You are licensed to fly gliders, David."

Kirkpatrick thought of Horatio at Pamplonada: El Planeador. Yes, he was licensed to fly gliders. He stared at Raul.

Raul looked back from the bag to Kirkpatrick, smiled a thin smile with no teeth. "I have a glider I want you to fly."

Kirkpatrick sat, unbelieving. What to say? Finally, "Where to?" Raul's lips were thinner, compressed, not a smile at all.

"A ranch. North. A ranch in Texas. A private airstrip."

*Narco.* The word rose up in Kirkpatrick's brain like a rank bubble. Classic narco. Dark Mexican tough guys in dark clothes and shades; a black Mercedes. A plane across the border. Packets of coke, heroin. It was like a bad movie. What was he supposed to say? What was the script?

"Bad odds," Kirkpatrick said. Raul looked at him, eyebrows up. "Ground-based radar surveillance. UAVs. Blackhawks. F-15s on call. Lots of eyes."

"Not looking for a glider," said Raul, his eyebrows and mouth turned down now, a scowl, a sneer. "No radar image. No heat. No sound. Fly high. In the clouds."

"You can't fly in the clouds in a glider." Kirkpatrick's brain was beginning to move. Could he argue?

"Maybe you can," said Raul.

Kirkpatrick sat. "It's a hell of a long way from here to Texas," he said, groping.

"How far, in the glider?" asked Raul. Finally a real question.

"I don't know. Depends where in Texas. Five hundred miles maybe, eight hundred kilometers, due north."

"A glider can fly that far," said Raul flatly.

"Maybe so. On a perfect day. Good lift. No thunderstorms. If you don't get lost."

"The glider has GPS," said Raul.

"Well then, you know the distance. Why are you asking me?" Kirkpatrick tried raising his voice. He caught the movement of the driver's sunglasses in the rearview mirror.

"To see if you know," said Raul.

Kirkpatrick sat, silent. Then, "What do I get, in exchange? You said an exchange?" He couldn't believe he was asking this. He was bargaining, bargaining with a narco trafficker. Bargaining for his life, maybe. He should be jerking the door open. He should be running. He looked away from Raul at the dark figure outside, beside the door.

"You land the glider on the strip, someone meets you there. He takes cargo from the glider. He gives these to you." Raul held up the ziplocks. "You can have the glider for yourself, go where you want."

"How could I go anywhere? How could I get the glider up?"

"Maybe he tows you with his vehicle. You work that out with him." Raul waved his right hand again. A gesture of dismissal.

"And if I don't go for it, this exchange?"

Raul's mouth curved down again. "I keep these materials. Maybe they appear later, somewhere else."

Like at the scene of an assassination, thought Kirkpatrick. Maybe Border Patrol. Maybe DEA. Maybe FBI. After Fredericks had fired him, probably passed some words on. Very inconvenient for him. Very. He pursed his mouth. He was set up, no doubt about it. No good choices here.

"When would you want to fly?" he said.

"Tomorrow," said Raul. "Fly tomorrow."

It figured. Raul wouldn't want to give him time to maneuver, if he had any ideas about maneuvering. He didn't.

"I'd need to be in the air by eleven A.M.," he said.

"We can do that," said Raul. "We can meet you here, seven o'clock in the morning. We go straight to the glider. If you are here, you are here. If you are not . . ." Raul made a show of putting the ziplocks back into his briefcase. He turned back to Kirkpatrick, smiling with his teeth again. "I suggest you eat well today,

David. Eat. And sleep. All the night." His lips pulled back more. "Seven o'clock is an early time."

"Yes, it is," said Kirkpatrick, reaching for the door handle. At the movement of the lock the outside man's head appeared in the window. Raul waved his hand again. The man stepped back.

Kirkpatrick slid out the door, stood up, his back and legs complaining. The outside man took his place on the seat, the door snicking shut. The front tires ground on the cobblestones as they turned away from the curb.

Kirkpatrick stood, weaving a little. He thought he should have looked at the car license, but he hadn't. *Coffee*, he thought. He had never had any coffee. The knot in his stomach had been replaced by an empty feeling. Casa Cafe was five blocks up the street. He could get coffee and a sandwich there for two hundred pesos and have some left over. But not all that much. If he was going to fly, he had better save some for water. Was he going to fly? A strange glider? Five hundred miles? The idea was absurd. But as he saw it right that minute, he didn't have much choice.

He was leaning against the stuccoed wall on the left side of Pila Seca at 6:45 next morning; blue sweat pants, long-sleeved white shirt, floppy hat, sunglasses. Everything else was back at Casa Leyla. No room for anything in a glider. He had given Leyla the benefit of the doubt and left her a note: immediate necessity he depart, etc. She could run the Halliburton American Express card number she had on file. Maybe his leather suitcase and clothes would serve in lieu of a tip. And the laptop, even without the hard drive he had removed and thrown in a dumpster.

The sky was gray, going to gold with the morning sun. No clouds; but there never were this early. At least as far as he knew. He adjusted the windbreaker on his shoulders, shifted the lumpy plastic bag under his arm: four bottles of water, two granola bars, the last of his two hundred pesos.

The black Mercedes eased around the bend at the bottom of Pila Seca at 6:55, pulled beside him, motor running. After a moment he bent down and opened the rear door. Three dark, square men inside, looking straight ahead, slicked hair. No Raul. No good choices. He sighed, bent down, and slid onto the seat, shut the door. The air conditioner purred.

Thirty minutes later the Mercedes eased off Ruta 111 onto a dirt road, through a broken wooden gate, over a rise. To the right, Kirkpatrick saw a nondescript, dirty-orange stucco ranch house, but his attention was focused on a glider trailer parked three hundred yards ahead, hooked to a black Suburban. As the Mercedes bumped forward, doors opened in the Suburban, men emerged, Raul in his white shirt, two other men, dark and thick. Kirkpatrick saw that the trailer was parked alongside a dirt strip graded into the undulations of the desert. A ragged windsock flagged a hundred yards down; south wind, parallel to the strip. Kirkpatrick saw no stock, no cultivated fields, only a few sections of broken fence. It was not a working ranch. Just a strip.

Two hours later the glider sat assembled, tilted on one wingtip beside the trailer. A big white glider, twenty-five meter wings, two-place tandem cockpit, ASH-25 stenciled on each fuselage side in blue stylized letters but no registration numbers on the tail. "AS" was for "Alexander Schleicher, GmbH," a German company, Kirkpatrick knew. That was all he knew. He'd never been in a Schleicher glider before.

At least Kirkpatrick had gotten to look the glider over carefully as he put it together. He noted standard instruments supplemented by an artificial horizon, front-seat cannula oxygen with the valve indicating a full bottle, a plug-in GPS unit. Two batteries lodged under the front podium, but one was disconnected. There was no radio, only holes in panel faces front and back where radios had been.

"Is it to your liking, David?" Raul said.

"Somebody knew what he was doing," Kirkpatrick responded.

"Yes, he did. A good pilot. But it became inconvenient, shall we say, for him to continue to fly for us."

"*Llegó a ser incómodo*," said one of the dark men standing nearby. The other men laughed together, not a cheerful sound. "*Muy incómodo*." They laughed again.

"So," said Raul, "we review the exchange, no?" Kirkpatrick nodded.

"The GPS, she is set. Database has two locations only, San Miguel and the strip in Texas."

Kirkpatrick snorted. Raul smiled his sneering smile.

"You deliver the glider to the strip. Cargo is taken off. Your materials are returned and the glider is yours. A clean exchange. They will pull you up from the strip. You can fly your own way, wherever you want."

"Will the glider have papers, ownership papers?" Kirkpatrick asked.

Raul sneered again. "There will be papers, given to you with the rest. I *said*: a clean exchange."

Kirkpatrick shrugged.

"So," said Raul. "The cargo." He waved and two of the men ducked into the back of the Suburban, produced two two-foot cubes in white, oiled paper laced with twine. They carried the bulky packages to the glider, bent over, and lowered them onto the rear seat, stood up and moved aside. Kirkpatrick gave a look to Raul, then leaned over and secured the seatbelts, lowered and latched the rear canopy. "Okay," said Raul. "Okay. So we go."

Sitting belted in the cockpit, Kirkpatrick looked at his watch: 10:45. That at least was good. He glanced upward through the canopy at the sky, saw cumulus forming horizon to horizon, beginning to queue up in rows. That was good, too. He thought about the two hundred meters of ten-millimeter red polypropylene rope connecting the glider's tow hook to the trailer hitch of the Suburban. That was not good. Car towing was tricky. "No problem," Raul had said with a wave, when he had tried to discuss it. He would soon find out. Dust was kicking up around him, a thermal moving over the strip. Time to go.

He fanned the rudder side to side. The dark man holding the left wingtip waved his extended arm. Kirkpatrick heard a roar from the Suburban, saw dust from spinning rear tires, felt a jerk, then was catapulting along the strip, fighting to keep the long, flexing wings level, then pulling back on the stick, nose way up, climbing, climbing. He held it until he sensed the air speed dropping, felt the stick go soft, then lowered the nose, reached out, and pulled the red handle at the top of the panel. The release thwacked open and he was free.

The glider settled and he looked at the variometer: two meters per second up. Good. He was only a hundred and fifty meters above the desert, but he was already in the thermal. He pulled the wheel up and locked it, banked, looked up for the cloud base, adjusted his bank to head to the upwind edge. A bump down, then a strong boot up. He steepened the bank and looked again at the variometer.

ter: five meters per second. Great. The base of the cloud was fifteen hundred meters above him. He would be there in no time.

Kirkpatrick repeated the pattern of the climb a dozen times over the next five hours: push over at cloud base, lower the nose and head north, keeping the little white indicator airplane over the navigational line of the GPS, dropping one, two thousand meters before thermaling up again under another giant cauliflower. The soft rush of wind through the canopy vent was the only sound, modulating as the long wings of the glider flexed with the pull-ups and push-overs. He drank his bottles of water, ate his granola bars, sailed through the summer air.

The white GPS airplane crossed the U.S. border on the screen without incident. Three thousand meters below Kirkpatrick the desert didn't change either, an undifferentiated pattern of washes and undulations in shades of tawny brown, tracery of old road tracks. But he wasn't paying much attention to the desert. He was scanning: scanning below, beside, even up into the concave bottom of the cloud he was rising toward, the full extent of the wrap-around canopy. Fifteen minutes of hard scanning; he was beginning to wonder if he had made it across the border scot-free.

He heard the Blackhawk at almost at the same time he saw it, the rush of turbine noise punctuated with the quick *whump, whump, whump* of the rotor. It was a thousand meters below him, eleven o'clock, coming up fast. He wondered if they planned to give him a warning shot. Or would it just be a Sidewinder.

Two hundred meters above him the broad cumulus was sending down tendrils around its edges. He was in a banked left turn, climbing. He had been ready to push over, head north again. But now that was not an option. There was only one choice here, and he was lucky to have it. Raul had said he might have to fly in clouds. Raul was right.

The world above and beside him went to gray before the world below. He took a last look at the Blackhawk, now only five hundred meters below, then focused on the artificial horizon. He maintained his climbing turn three seconds more—counting thousands—before he straightened out due west, with some idea of backtracking past the Blackhawk if it were hovering where he went in. They couldn't track him in the cloud, wouldn't venture into it themselves. He took a moment to be grateful for the conservative rules of engagement of the U.S. military. He just had to stay out of sight until they gave up.

One more thing. He had to keep the glider together, too. No telling what you would find in a tall cumulus: up and down gusts that could tear off the wings, rain, hail, ice. All he could do was keep the glider rightside up and hope for the best. He thought about oxygen. If he got caught in a big updraft he could be at six thousand meters in no time. He slipped the cannulas in, the hooks over his ears, twisted the valve, felt the cold gas in his nose.

For a time, the artificial horizon, the airspeed, and the compass were his world. Gusts banged him up to sixty-five hundred meters, down to four thousand, but never spit him out. The wings arced and flexed, but they stayed on, and he stayed rightside up, zigging and zagging in the grey of the cloud, flying away from any increase in white.

His watch told him he had been a half-hour in the cloud. The white airplane on the GPS showed him twelve kilometers east of his course. Time to peek out.

He turned the glider north and held it there as best he could. A minute went by. Two. Three. The world ahead got lighter, much lighter, blinding white, then

he was out of the cloud into blue sky, towers and temples behind him, half-way up the face. The altimeter said 6200.

He scanned for the Blackhawk, but saw and heard nothing, not even the whisper of air through his canopy vent. He had closed that long ago in the cloud when he had zipped the windbreaker. Nothing to do but get back on course. He turned northwest to intersect the GPS line. He would fly in and out of the clouds as he came to them, and watch, watch, watch. The Blackhawk was not likely to be so generous if it sighted him again.

An hour later Kirkpatrick needed to pee, bad. He had finished three bottles of water, both his granola bars. He squirmed in the deeply contoured seat, conscious of the pressure of the lap belt.

At least it wouldn't be long. The white airplane on the GPS screen was nearing the northern terminus of the lined-out course. The screen scale had contracted twice in the last ten minutes to account for proximity: eight kilometers out indicated. Kirkpatrick was scanning the desert ahead. He probably wouldn't be able to see the strip until the last minute, but he should see a vehicle. He didn't want to descend until he saw a vehicle. He didn't want to give away the sixteen hundred meters he had until he was sure.

The GPS was showing a twenty-five kilometer wind from the west. But that was up there. What about near the ground? Kirkpatrick looked for dust, but didn't see any. No sign of any ranch, no buildings, nothing but desert. Four kilometers, said the GPS. He squirmed in the seat.

Then suddenly there was dust, a rooster tail flagging west behind a dark pickup dead ahead. He saw a scar of road, then picked out buildings, shells of buildings anyway, no roofs. And then he saw the strip, a skinny rectangle on the brush-pocked desert floor, oriented northeast to southwest. The vehicle dust was west, so the wind was consistent all the way down. He would land southwest, deal with the crosswind.

Kirkpatrick dropped and locked the wheel, pulled the spoiler handle back halfway, craned left and right to be sure the spoilers were out: red vertical panels. He pushed the handle forward to gauge air suck, left his hand on the grip, and rolled the glider into a shallow descending turn, drifting north. Below he saw the pickup approach the north side of the strip and stop, doors opening, figures emerging. The dust drifted off. He couldn't watch anymore; time for him to concentrate on the landing.

He crossed the north end of the strip ten feet off the ground, spoilers half out. Then the wheel touched and he was rolling, flogging the stick to keep the wings level, kicking the rudder to keep from weathercocking. He glimpsed the truck out to the right as he passed it but didn't turn to look, focused on the end of the strip, gauging his roll. The glider wallowed as it slowed and he banged the stick over left, pushing the left wing down to scrape along the ground, into the wind. Then silence; nothing but the wind swirling into his vent window. He let out his breath.

The urge to pee returned with a vengeance. He unlatched the canopy, tilted it forward, clicked open the belt closures. Hands on the sides of the fuselage, he drew his legs back, stood up, fighting off a cramp in his right calf. The truck was streaming toward him across the strip, extended cab, windows dark-tinted. He stepped over the side of the fuselage, unzipping as he turned away, his

stream producing a red puddle in the dusty sand, evaporating even as he zipped back up. He heard the truck skidding to a stop behind him, rocks bouncing off the wheel wells.

He turned, hands open. The right-side doors of the cab opened together. Two more dark men, but now jeans, flannel shirts, faded baseball caps.

"*Buenas tardes*, Señor Kirkpatrick." Accented Spanish; the man with the red cap had spoken, striding toward him, the blue-capped man in his wake.

"*Buenas tardes*, yourself." He wanted a drink of water, but he checked himself before reaching back into the glider.

"Did you have a good flight?" Red Cap asked.

"Fine flight." He wondered idly about the Blackhawk. No need to mention that. He just wanted to get this over with. "You want me to unlatch this back canopy, or do you want to do that for yourself?" The two men were at the glider now, seamed, dark faces, heavy squint lines beside the eyes, no sunglasses.

"You unlatch," the man said, smiling an insincere smile. "We take the cargo. Check it out. Then we talk, no?"

Kirkpatrick slid the latch on the rear canopy, tilted it up, stood aside. Red Cap looked in, hoisted out one of the cubes and handed it to Blue Cap, took the second cube himself. They walked to the back of the truck and lowered the tailgate. Kirkpatrick thought about his last bottle of water. He still didn't want to reach into the glider. There would be time for water later. Or not. He pushed the thought away.

He crossed his arms, leaned against the fuselage, let his head droop, suddenly tired. He looked at his watch: 5:28. 11:00 to 5:30. Six and a half hours in the air. 835 kilometers, the GPS had said; about 130 kilometers an hour groundspeed. What was that, eighty miles an hour average? Not bad, considering the time in the clouds. What was happening at the truck?

Voices, that was one thing. The men were still behind the tailgate, but they were talking to people inside the cab, not talking, arguing, it sounded like, in Spanish.

*Shit*, thought Kirkpatrick.

The driver's door opened and a boy stepped out. He looked like a boy to Kirkpatrick, anyway: early twenties, thin build, bleached-blond spiky hair, a tight black T-shirt. He looked at Kirkpatrick, back into the cab, moved along the fender, leaving the door open. Voices lower, but still agitated. The boy pulled a cigarette pack out of his pants pocket, extracted a cigarette. He fumbled for a lighter in the other pocket, dropped the cigarette, looked over at Kirkpatrick, bent over and picked the cigarette up, lighted it and turned away, blue smoke blowing away eastward from his mouth.

Kirkpatrick saw the door behind the driver's crack open. Another person out, moving straight to the tailgate, slender as the boy: dark, sleek hair, black pants and white shirt, silvered sunglasses. More conversation at the tailgate. Was it Raul? It looked like Raul, from where Kirkpatrick was standing. But it was unlikely. Kirkpatrick had left Raul at the ranch outside San Miguel at 11:00 that morning. Of course, Raul could have flown commercial from the airport at Leon. . . .

Something had been decided. The three tailgaters were walking toward him, White Shirt a step behind, with a bulky briefcase. The other two had weapons. Red Cap on the left had a pistol in his belt; Blue Cap swung a long-magazined automatic from his right hand. *Tec-9*, thought Kirkpatrick, wondering how he knew that, as his heart ramped up. *Shit, shit, shit*, he thought. A *clean*

*exchange*. That's what Raul had said. Right. A narco's promise. His stomach started tying itself up to go with his heart.

Kirkpatrick raised his head, but didn't uncross his arms. Red Cap said something to Blue Cap in Spanish. Blue Cap laughed. A nasty sound. He brought the automatic up in front of him, put his left hand under the barrel.

White Shirt lost another step on the other two, but they all three kept coming, now thirty feet away. Kirkpatrick was focused on the two men in front, watching the automatic, so only glimpsed peripherally a quick motion from White Shirt behind, an arm up, then a loud pop and Blue Cap pitched over like someone had hit him in the head with a bat. Red Cap was reaching into his belt when Kirkpatrick heard the second pop. The man doubled over into a fetal position and went down like that, lying on his side.

Kirkpatrick stared at the men on the ground, feeling his heart thudding, surprised after a moment to notice he hadn't changed position—still standing against the fuselage, arms crossed across his chest. When he looked up, White Shirt was putting a pistol into the briefcase, turning to look at the boy back at the truck, who was staring as fixedly as Kirkpatrick had been, his arms at his sides, like a scarecrow on a pole. White Shirt waved his right hand and the boy came to life, clambering back into the cab, shutting the front door.

Kirkpatrick didn't move. White Shirt transferred the briefcase from his left hand to his right and advanced purposefully, silvered sunglasses on Kirkpatrick's eyes. Something about him . . .

"*Buenas tardes*, David."

Pleyonel. It was Pleyo's voice. She stopped five feet from him, removed the sunglasses with her left hand, smiled a hard smile. He saw that her hair was pulled back, tied at her neck, tucked under her shirt collar.

He didn't know how to feel. But then he did: relief. The gun was in the briefcase. The boy was in the truck. He wasn't going to die, not right that minute.

"Pleyo." It was a statement, in one word. "I sure didn't expect . . ." He stopped.

"I'm sure you didn't," she said. "I didn't . . ." he started again.

"You need to learn to trust us," she said. "Raul said the exchange would be clean. If others disagree, well . . ." She waved her left hand, with the sunglasses, gesturing behind her.

"Raul . . ." started Kirkpatrick.

"Raul is my brother," she said flatly.

He nodded. That, at least, didn't surprise him, given everything.

"All your materials are in here," she said, lifting the briefcase, with difficulty, he saw. It was a big briefcase. "Cash, cards, papers from your company, passport."

"Papers for the glider?" he asked.

"Yes. Ownership papers. Signed to you. Raul is very thorough." He nodded again.

"Other things, too." She reached into the briefcase, extracted a slim electronic pad, held it out to him. He saw "Garmin" across the bottom as he took it. "A GPS," she said, "with a complete U.S. database. So you can get us where we need to go."

"Where do we need to go?" He had asked Raul that question, he remembered. But . . . "we"? Who was "we"?

"Raul said you would know."

"We?" He raised his eyebrows.

Pleyo smiled her hard smile again. "You and me," she said. She reached into

the briefcase, emerged with a single sheet in its own ziplock bag. Ornate edging, flowing script. "David Allen Kirkpatrick," he read on a line by itself. "Pleyonel Marguerite Martinez" on another. "29 julio 2010." "Matrimonio." His signature at the bottom. His signature?

He looked at her.

"We are married," she said. "Two days ago. All very legal. Your signature, there at the bottom. Filed at the embassy. Where we go, I am your wife. So . . ." She pursed her lips. "Where do we go? It is getting late, no?"

"Wait a minute," Kirkpatrick said. "I don't understand this. Why? I tried to ask you that in San Miguel. Why . . . all of this?"

"Raul is my brother. I said." She looked hard at him. "My big brother. He is looking after me. He knows . . . he knows I need to get out of San Miguel. It is bad there for me."

"So I'm your ticket out." Kirkpatrick returned her hard look.

"Maybe. Raul has needs. He has cargo, for the U.S. I drive across the border, passport, visa, and this." She waved the marriage license. "You fly across the border with the cargo. Very skillful flier you are." She smiled with a trace of her real smile. "We meet. Felipe . . ." She waved towards the truck. "Felipe is very loyal to me. He loves me." She smiled again. "Felipe takes the cargo. You take me." She tossed her head, smiled all the way to her eyes.

"Or you take me," Kirkpatrick said.

"Either way. It is not such a bad ticket, no?" Still smiling, she reached into the briefcase, emerged with an inch-thick, rubber-banded stack of U.S. bills. He saw that the top one was a hundred. "I have dowry," she said. "Raul is *very* thorough." Kirkpatrick shook his head.

"So," she said. "The sun is going. We go too, no?"

He nodded. The sun was still high, but the heat was slacking. He looked at his watch: 5:56. Twenty-five minutes since he had landed. Only twenty-five minutes. Drugs off-loaded. Two men dead. Pleyonel and her marriage license. Only twenty-five minutes. But still late for flying. He would have to think about everything else later.

He pushed the power button on the GPS, waited while it booted, acquired satellites, gave him a current location map: north of Laredo, middle of nowhere. He pushed the "NRST" button, waited for a list of airports. KUYA was second from the top of the list. Uvalde. He knew where that was, knew there were glider operations there, knew a local pilot even. Reynolds, something Reynolds. He would need someone to help him with . . . arrangements. There would be lots of arrangements. He thought about Sam Fredericks. Later.

He scrolled up the KUYA airport information on the GPS, entered "GO TO." The screen formed itself into a map; the familiar line appeared with the little white airplane at the bottom, middle-of-nowhere-north-of-Laredo Uvalde at the top. They could be there in an hour.

"Is Felipe going to tow us up?" Kirkpatrick nodded toward the truck.

Pleyo nodded, smiled again, reached back into the briefcase, out with a bulky ziplock this time, a fat, tight roll of red synthetic rope, same as in San Miguel that morning.

"Two hundred meters, ten-millimeter polypropylene," she said. He shook his head, couldn't help smiling a little himself.

"Raul is *very* thorough," he said. She smiled back. ●