

FEBRUARY 2010

Robert Jackson Kelley stole his last plane on a cloudy night, the moon casting hazy light through the gray-gauze sky. He crouched in the trees, his legs cramped, pausing only to be sure the cops hadn't beaten him to the hangar. This time he had to move fast. No rummaging for food. No thumbing through the manuals or pacing around the planes, admiring their gleaming wings and sleek bodies like diamond rings in a jeweler's case. Asking to be smashed and grabbed. All he needed was to pick a plane. Get into the air.

He had to stay focused.

He bolted for the building, arms pumping, sharp pain puncturing his ribs—probably bruised or cracked from his prior botched airborne escape. The cold numbed his stiff fingers. The screwdriver he'd pocketed the last time he broke into Tomkins Airstrip thumped against his leg as he ran.

He was eighteen years old.

Nowhere to go but up.

Yellow police tape fluttered across the door he'd jangled, bullied, and finally kicked in three nights before, when he'd stolen his second plane from this very airstrip. The door hadn't been replaced, the splintered wood still gaping like he'd left it.

Perhaps they were preserving evidence, but it felt to Robert like they were welcoming him in.

He stepped over the tape, but he knew he hadn't crossed the finish line just yet.

He scrambled for the hangar door and pulled it up, rattling on its track. Cold air rushed by him into the cavernous room, chilling his clammy skin.

The Cirrus SR22 wasn't what he'd flown before, but it was close enough. Its Garmin system was just as simple. The plane's nose was tipped in sea-green paint. And the cockpit was unlocked, a sign that this plane was his as sure as if his name had been printed on its keys. He slid into the pilot's seat, shut the door behind him.

Robert had already decided on Canada for his final destination, but he had sudden second thoughts. What about somewhere warmer, where he could surf year-round? This plane could fly him to Puerto Rico. Jamaica. The Bahamas. He didn't really care, as long as he made it to a new island. Anywhere but Yannatok. He'd torched his bridges in Washington.

He rapped on the plane's control panel, drumming a rhythm as fast as his heartbeat. He knew how important it was for him to hurry, but his churning stomach stalled him. His fingers slipped over the screwdriver's cold tip.

He thought he'd seen on TV that Puerto Rico had white sands and Bermuda had pink. Maybe he'd see the difference from 10,000 feet. When he got there, he could land this last flight on the beach and leave it behind, waves lapping at the wings.

Then he changed his mind. He'd stick to his plan. Canada was the way to go. Only fifty miles north. Safer. Landlocked. He'd had enough of islands. He jimmied the screwdriver into the ignition.

Two days before, the world had learned the name of the kid who could not be caught. The sheriff had released his soon-to-be-notorious mug shot, and an ambitious graffiti artist had emblazoned the Yannatok Bridge with tall red letters, spindly stalks stretching skyward: *WWRF*. Robert's mother drove past it on her way to the 911 dispatch center; Robert saw it from the vacation home he'd broken into. *WWRF*. Lots of environmentalists on the West Coast. *World Wildlife something something?* Some riff on *WTF?* The sheriff delegated the cleanup to his deputy, and eventually someone from the Parks Department power-washed the letters

away, dripping crimson into the bay. None of them figured it out. None of them knew how every time the tagger had paused, the wind blowing red flecks back into his hair, he'd gazed at the sky, looking for a star that moved.

Where would Robert fly?

Robert Jackson Kelley's Facebook page—which wasn't his, and was in fact created and maintained by Scott Adams of Levittown, New Jersey, after the second stolen plane made the news—boasted the mug shot that ran in the *Seattle Times*, photos of planes Robert had never flown, and 100,961 friends. Goth kids, frat boys, preps, tattooed bikers, the odd soccer mom, from South Africa and Amsterdam and every US state. Kids from Yannatok High whom Robert had sat next to in study hall and never talked to. Scott Adams himself was a high school sophomore and his own Facebook page hadn't been updated in months, its stale *Family Guy* memes reaching only forty-eight friends. On the night Robert stole his last plane, he had no idea that his Facebook status was a flippant, "See ya, suckers!"

Robert Jackson Kelley had 100,961 virtual friends. But when he was on the run from the police, crouching in a vacant house or in the woods, plotting his next migration, the only person he had wished he could call was his mom.

* * *

This last plane flight, Robert knew, as he huddled inside the aircraft like a cave-dwelling bear, might not work out like the others had. He knew the basics of landing from searching the Internet, and the simulators had been preparation enough: slow down, extend flaps, turn downwind, power back, level off. No tower to approve his nonexistent flight plan. Googling *Cessna* back when his only flights had been the simulated kind had yielded all kinds of useful diagrams, along with shots of six-year-olds at the controls, playing pilot. But in his gut he knew that twice he had not landed but crashed, and another crash could take him out. Or even worse: a crash could crack his spine, sever his legs. Even just breaking them would leave him helpless and bleeding in a field, or crawling through the spruce trees. Or stuck in the wreckage like an animal with a snared limb.

From the pilot's seat of this last plane, he smiled despite the pain in his neck, his chest, the rash of seat belt burn. Then Robert tweaked the screwdriver until the engine fired.

He'd land this one.

Or die trying.

ACT I

***PREPARE
FOR
DEPARTURE***

From *The Beginning Pilot's Flight Guide* (p. 13):

Perhaps the most important influence on a student pilot's safety is the flying habits of his flight instructor, both during instruction and as observed by students when conducting flight lessons and procedures. Students consider their flight instructor to be a model of skill whose habits they consciously or unconsciously emulate.

**Interview with Mira Wohl, Willamette
University cafeteria, October 2, 2010**

**From the documentary *Flight Risk: The Robert
Jackson Kelley Story*, 2011**

“No, wait. Here’s what happened.

“He left a Dum Dum at each crash. Root beer a lot of the time, sometimes sour apple, sometimes cherry.

“Oh my God, it was hilarious—those cops, the sheriff, their guts flopping over their belts, chunks of wrecked plane smoking all over the place, the metal all twisted. Robert Jackson Kelley long gone. And the cops stuck with those Dum Dums and no clue how to find him.”

**YANNATOK ISLAND,
JUNE 1998**

When Robert was six, he decided sleep was a big, boring waste of time and to do as little of it as possible. He didn't have a bedtime, though sometimes his mother invented one. Eight o'clock. In five minutes. Next commercial. Deb would tuck him into bed before leaving for the late shift. Robert would wait until her car had clattered away, then he'd slide out the screen door, quiet as a cat burglar. The Kelleys' trailer hunkered down between two others on a sparsely green lot. The trailer had been Deb's inheritance, a double-wide streaked mossy green and moldy gray, a metal stub where the hitch used to be. Behind their patchy yard, dense Douglas firs and cedars hid bears and raccoons. They had a rusting mailbox, a bannerless flagpole to tie his dog Hulk's leash to, and a porch with cinder-block steps. They weren't going anywhere.

Hulk knew not to bark as they ran circles around the

small lot in the dark. Robert was Spider-Man, web-slinging up the flagpole. He was Batman, the front step his racing Batmobile. He'd aim an imaginary gun at the full moon and dive for cover from enemy fire. He never stuck with one character for very long. He and Hulk skirted the edge of the firs, but stopped short of the thick brambles. He would poke a stick through the branches, fearing and hoping that some creature would latch on.

He put himself to bed when he decided.

When Deb worked nights, she'd pull in just as the school bus was shuddering up to the trailer park, and he'd pretend not to see her wave hello and goodbye. A dozen new mosquito bites would be the only evidence of his stolen playtime. On weekends, he'd bound from his bed and back outside, while Deb slept off eight hours at the Lower Coastal Counties Emergency Response Center. Robert would built ramps out of old two-by-fours and send battered Tonka trucks flying into the dirt. He chased Hulk in tight loops between his trailer and his neighbor's. The Pacific Northwest's constant fog cooled his skin and dampened his hair. On weekends Deb emerged sometime after ten, phone pressed between her ear and her shoulder, juggling her first coffee and cigarette.

She never caught him.

One Sunday morning Robert was throwing Hulk a gray-ing tennis ball when a police cruiser pulled in. Gravel

bounced off the flagpole. Robert hastily retrieved the ball and knelt down to scratch behind the dog's twitching ears. An officer ambled out of the car. Robert inspected the dirt; even though he couldn't think of his crime, he for some reason felt guilty.

"Good morning. I'm Officer Holt." The man bent down and stuck out his hand. Robert tentatively shook it, his scrawny arm flapping like an unhinged gate. Morning light winked off the officer's badge. "That's a fine-looking dog you got there. A beagle?"

"He's a mutt. I picked him from the pound."

Holt patted Hulk's head. The officer had dark eyes, a clean-shaven face, and closely cut hair. A coffee and pine smell. "I bet he's part beagle."

"He's real fast. His name's Hulk," Robert said. He'd christened Hulk himself, though the dog didn't weigh more than twenty-five pounds and hightailed away from squirrels.

"I have a dog, too. Name's Copper," Holt offered.

Robert's mother ducked her head out the screen door. She coughed and rasped, "Everything all right?"

"Got a report of a bear back here," the officer called. He straightened up. "Getting a little brave around the trailers."

Deb shrugged. Her hair had been hastily rubber-banded back. She fished a cigarette from her sweatshirt pocket and stepped onto the porch. The door rattled shut. "Haven't seen

anything.” Then she added, as she always did to people in uniform, his teachers, anyone important, “I work for dispatch.”

“Do you?” Officer Holt said. “Then we’re practically co-workers.” Holt glanced toward the thick spruces, the wall of Douglas firs. “I’m glad he’s not in your trash cans, making a mess. We’re going to try to get him out of here before he does.”

“How will you catch him?” Robert asked. He hoped they wouldn’t shoot the bear. He imagined Officer Holt emerging from the woods with a net slung over his shoulder, the bear glowering through the diamond-shaped gaps.

“We’re going to lure him into a trap,” the cop announced. “And then sedate him and drive him into the mountains, where he won’t bother anybody. I’m going to set the trap today.”

Robert had no idea what *sedate* meant. He pictured Holt and the bear wrestling, crashing and rolling through the trees.

Deb shrugged again. “Not bothering me.” She lit her cigarette, cupping the flame with her long fingers. Robert wondered how much older than Officer Holt his mother was. They’d had dinner at Red Lobster to celebrate her birthday last year, but Robert had only eaten the cheesy biscuits, and his mom had gotten a doggie bag for his fish

sticks. And any time he asked his mom how old she was, she shushed his question away.

“They’re happier in the mountains anyway. Here”—Officer Holt gestured at the trailers—“there’s too much trouble to get into.” He retrieved a bulky sack from the backseat and saluted Robert. Robert quickly reimagined the animal’s capture, this time with himself tagging along. Maybe Holt would need him to wriggle into a hollow log or narrow cave.

“Can I come?” Robert asked. He raised his hand, like he was in school instead of his own backyard.

Holt didn’t laugh. He seemed to actually consider Robert’s question before replying. “Thanks, but I think this is a one-man job. But you give me a call if you see that bear, young man. And take good care of that dog.”

Robert nodded and returned the salute. Officer Holt stomped into the woods. Robert lingered in the yard until Deb called him in to take a bath. He scrubbed quickly, then ran back to the yard, hair still wet, but the police car was gone.

The woods spooked Holt.

Every rustle, every snapping twig sent his head swiveling. His fingers brushed habitually against his gun. Drawing it in his frazzled state would be a mistake; he might end up

pointing it at a hunter, a camper, a kid. Not the best way for a rookie officer to make friends.

He was used to drunks, speeding tickets, noise complaints. The occasional break-in or fight. Tourist season was picking up and so were arrests, and he'd spent the night babysitting the drunk tank. A particularly obnoxious guy had been rounded up, his face tomato red, reeking of beer and sweat.

"Say good night, Rob," Sheriff O'Shay had ordered, pushing the drunk into the holding cell and slamming the door. He locked the cell, then warned Holt. "Rob here really likes to talk. Do not encourage him."

O'Shay then went back out on patrol. Rob, a bulky guy in a flannel shirt and a Mariners cap, slouched against the wall for a moment with his eyes closed. He groaned, head lolling to the side. Holt wondered if the guy would throw up. He certainly didn't want to smell the contents of this drunk's stomach all night.

"Hey," Holt said. "You gonna puke? Toilet's two feet to your right."

Rob opened one eye, unleashed a bullfrog belch, and grinned. Then he beat a fist against his chest. "I'm a former marine. Iron stomach."

Holt nodded and tried to busy himself with paperwork.

Rob closed his eyes again, rapped his hands randomly against the floor. He was quiet for a few minutes, and Holt

thought he heard faint snores. Then Rob abruptly opened his eyes and belted the chorus of “Bad Moon Rising.”

“You like CCR?” Holt asked. Rob had slightly botched the lyrics.

“What do you know about CCR? What do you know about *anything*?” Rob’s eyes narrowed. Then he pointed, his finger aiming for the opening between the cell bars. “I’m gonna tell you something. I seen a bear tonight, right back there behind the tavern, big enough to eat a horse. Bet he’s got a few hikers in his belly already.”

“Did you, now.” Holt kept his voice flat, even, unimpressed.

Rob rocked forward, his fingertip steady in Holt’s direction. His wolfish grin revealed surprisingly straight white teeth. “About fifteen years ago, when I was still up at the elementary school, bear did eat a man. An officer of the law like yourself, I believe. He tore that poor bastard to shreds. Threw his bones all over the woods. I bet it’s that same bear. And I bet you, Sheriff, are going to have to go out there and tangle with him before he makes a tourist his dinner.”

“I’m not the sheriff,” Holt replied.

Rob sang one last time about bad moons, blowing hurricanes, and overflowing rivers before passing out, head on the bare mattress of the cell’s lone bunk.

Holt laughed, shook his head, and flicked on the station’s television. He tried to distract himself with a baseball game,

but when O'Shay finally returned to relieve him at two a.m., he had to force himself to stride slowly to his car instead of breaking into a run.

And then Kent Yardley from the Parks Department had called, elevating Rob's ramblings to a prophecy.

"Just lay the trap," Kent said, claiming a crippling stomach bug, the result of potluck macaroni salad left too long in the sun. "I'll owe you. I've got some lady up on Dunes Road on my ass, saying she's afraid a bear's gonna eat her Pomeranian. Did you see the *Tide*?"

Holt squinted against the sun, rays piercing through some cloud cover outside his window. He cleared his throat, tried to shake off the drunk's tall tales. Of course he'd read the *Tide*. Copies of the local newspaper were always around the station. "I read it."

The article's title had been "A Bear of a Problem." Holt bit his tongue and didn't mention how the reporter had detailed the futility of the Parks Department's relocation attempts. As a newbie, Holt didn't want to state what the paper already had: relocation was a bad idea. Relocated animals often struggle to survive in their new homes, and introduce new diseases and parasites to the area. The only truly effective way to alleviate conflicts between man and beast is to eliminate whatever lured the animals out of the woods in the first place. Instead, Holt asked, "What should I do if I see it?"

“You mean what should you do if it sees you? Throw your hands over your head. Hold still. Whatever you do, don’t try to run. But you’re not going to see it. Just lay the trap.”

Holt fervently hoped the beast had skipped town of its own accord. How long did wild bears live? Ten years? Twenty?

“No Pomeranians will be eaten on my watch, sir,” Holt said. He’d hung up the phone and headed for the woods.

A bird fluttered past him, perching high in the trees. Holt craned his neck. The dense branches blocked so much light that ten a.m. looked more like dusk.

Why hadn’t he brought Copper? His canine chum would be welcome company. Holt crept through the brush until he came upon a clearing large enough to lay the trap. He bent down, unzipping the bag.

A branch snapped like gunfire. Holt jumped. He drew his pistol, aimed it at the trees. The branches a few yards to his left thrummed, leaves bungeeing. Holt quickly replaced his gun. Hadn’t that article said that hikers should clap their hands, make noise, if they encountered a bear? That it was best not to sneak up on the animal, make it feel trapped?

Holt continued unzipping the bag. He sang as loud as he could about bad moons.

He made it through the song three times before the trap was set, and he hustled out of the woods, blinking at the sun.

**Interview with Mira Wohl, Willamette
University cafeteria, October 2, 2010**

From Flight Risk: The Robert Jackson Kelley Story

“Listen, I know firsthand what happened. I knew him. I mean, it’s a small island. We went to elementary school together. Half of what people are saying now is totally made up.

“You gotta picture this. The plane’s crashing through the trees. Branches breaking, birds flapping away. Rattling like the wings are gonna tear off. Robert’s about to eat pine. His life’s flashing before his eyes like in the movies. He’s wondering what God will look like.

“Bam! The plane hits the ground. It’s a steaming hunk of scrap metal.

“And he just walks away.

“They found pieces of the plane for miles. I know somebody selling them on the Internet now. Robert was just an annoying kid from the trailer park, and now everything he ever broke is for sale.”

JULY 1998

911 dispatchers didn't make a lot of money, but they had to “keep their heads,” as Deb always said. That she could stay calm on the phone while people were bleeding to death and clutching their chests and pleading with her to help amazed Robert. Particularly when she was freaking out about the dishes not being done and the trash overflowing in pungent heaps, or screaming at him to slow down and *focus*. Think about what he was doing, for Christ's sake.

Robert imagined her talking to Officer Holt, giving him directions to the bank robbery or the four-alarm blaze. *Ten-four*, he'd say. *Over and out*, Robert's mom would reply.

The operators shared their strangest calls, and Deb came home with plenty of warnings.

“I ever catch you fooling with a BB gun, I'll break it in half,” she'd say. Or, “Don't let any idiot kid talk you into a

stupid stunt like cannonballing off a roof into somebody's pool."

She didn't seem to realize she was giving him ideas.

Two Sundays a month his mother worked a second job, mucking out stables and exercising a wealthy couple's horse. His mother was a horse person. She didn't do the job for the money, which was menial, but for the chance to ride. She had some friends who were horse people, too, and Robert noticed that a lot of horse lovers resembled their prized animals in some way: the prominent teeth, the knobby limbs. His mother's blond ponytail. As if they wanted to be horses.

If Robert could be any animal, he'd be lazy, happy, tail-wagging Hulk.

Or a bird.

Those Sundays Deb would try to get Robert's father to come by and watch him. Robert Senior almost always said no, and Deb would slam the door behind her. In that case, Deb just left him with Hulk.

Robert had only met his dad seven times. The first three times, they played checkers and ate potato chips at the trailer while Deb mucked the stables. The fourth time, Robert Senior took his son to the Pine Tavern and let him wing darts at the black-and-red board. The fifth time was only for a few minutes, until Deb kicked Robert Senior out of the trailer, screaming and red-faced for reasons Robert didn't

know. During the sixth visit, Robert discovered his father was a war hero.

“Operation Desert Storm! Stormin’ Norman!” his dad crowed. “You ever hear of him?”

Robert shook his head. They were ensconced in the elder Robert’s pickup, slurping down thick milkshakes and munching on salty Arby’s fries, staring into a night sky that skimmed the beach like a drawn stage curtain. Deb had slammed through the front door earlier that evening and been confronted with a pile of Hulk’s shit curling on the carpet. She had noticed the mess in time not to step in it, but instead had mashed a tender foot onto one of the five hundred or so Legos Robert had dumped out of his plastic tub to build the world’s tallest tower. She had hobbled to the phone and demanded Robert Senior come get his son right this goddamn minute. And surprisingly his truck had rattled up, and he’d hoisted Robert onto the front seat.

“Stormin’ Norman Schwarzkopf,” his dad repeated, nodding his head reverentially. “Shoulda run for president.”

Robert still didn’t know who Schwarzkopf was, so he pictured Shaquille O’Neal. Robert Senior was just about as big and could lift Robert Junior over his head with one hand, his tree-trunk arms bulging. He’d drop his son back on the ground, the boy red-faced and out of breath.

“I’ve never told you about Desert Storm?”

Robert shook his head. He didn’t think so, but

sometimes, even when he thought he was listening, he didn't remember what teachers or his mom said. A forgotten homework assignment, a skipped chore, a missing shoe or key or pencil: each lapse ambushed him anew. Maybe his dad had told him about Desert Storm and he just didn't remember.

Robert Senior gulped his milkshake, his cheeks ruddy beneath the brim of his camouflage cap. "I was fresh out of basic, rarin' to go. Head shaved! Still in my twenties! Can you picture that?"

Robert grinned and shook his head. He got his own head buzzed every June, but his dad always had a mess of shaggy blond hair.

"I got sent right to Kuwait. You know where Kuwait is?"

Robert looked out the window. White tents dotted the beach. Someone must have been having a party. Must be rich people. At every party Robert had gone to, they just ate brownies the kid's mom made from a mix and chased each other around the yard. Or played video games, if the kid had them. Robert shook his head again.

"You know where Egypt is?"

Robert nodded, even though he didn't.

"You're so quiet! Whose boy are you?" Robert Senior elbowed him in the ribs. "Say 'Yes, sir.'"

His side smarted. "Yes, sir."

"Anyway, the USA gets there and we're prepped for a

long fight, but the Kuwaitis treated us like heroes,” Robert Senior continued. “Miles of desert and surrendering Kuwaitis. They’d give their guns right over, smilin’ away. You’d bring some lollipops and pencils for the kids. They’d hug your legs.” He slurped his milkshake. “So the Iraqis had gotten a prisoner. Daniel McQuaid. Sweet-lookin’ kid with a wife and a baby, and while the Iraqis are getting their asses handed to them, they’re broadcasting video of Danny McQuaid, saying America is the great devil and praise to Allah and all that garbage. You can tell looking at the tapes that Danny McQuaid hasn’t had a wink of sleep in weeks. He’s got two shiners and they’ve probably got electrodes hooked up to his balls.”

Robert Senior used the end of his straw to shovel the thickest parts of his shake, so Robert Junior did, too.

“One day we’re sailing through the desert, waving to the Kuwaitis, when we come upon this cave. And lo and behold! It’s Danny McQuaid,” Robert Senior said. “He’s surrounded by Iraqis, but me and my guys open fire. McQuaid was so weak I swung him over my shoulder and carried him, like I used to carry you to bed. Guns were blazin’ behind me. We get out of the cave and there’s sand blowin’ in my eyes. Can’t see anything, but I get old Danny to the chopper and back to the USA.”

Robert couldn’t recall his father ever tucking him in,

but that must have been because he'd been too young to remember.

“They don't release the soldiers' identities in cases like that. Some people don't want all the press. I know I didn't. McQuaid got all the attention. After the war I just wanted to come home and live with your mom, but you know how that turned out.” Robert Senior shrugged. Robert had only ever seen his parents argue. They'd gone to high school together, but the trailer was so definitively Deb's—her sweaters and jeans strewn about, her boots slouched by the door, her Bud and Diet Coke cans littering the kitchen, her Marlboro Menthols and fluorescent pink lighter stashed with her keys on the windowsill over the sink, her horse wall calendar, her grandmother's hand-crocheted afghans slung over the secondhand sofa, *Oprah* and *Law & Order* blaring on the television. Robert couldn't imagine his dad ever living there.

“I did meet the president, though. George Bush. Shook my hand, thanked me for serving my country with such bravery.” Robert Senior nudged his son. “That's what you should do. Enlist.”

Robert's milkshake was just about gone, a melting mound of chocolate. “I want to be a policeman.”

Robert Senior laughed and shook his head. “A cop? Uh-uh. Not you.”

Why not? Robert didn't ask. Maybe his dad just didn't like cops.

When he was a bit older, Robert realized that was the longest conversation he and his father had ever had.

Then came that seventh time. The last time.

**Interview with Mira Wohl, Willamette
University cafeteria, October 2, 2010**

From Flight Risk: The Robert Jackson Kelley Story

“When you’re a kid, everyone’s always asking, ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ I usually said actress. Sometimes singer. When I got a little older, my dad kept trying to convince me I wanted to be a news anchor. I even went through a phase where I thought I wanted to be president. But I always knew I wanted to be famous. I wanted crowds and lights and cameras and autographs and couture dresses and magazine covers and all of it.

“But for now anyway, Robert’s the most famous person I know. And he got that way by running away. By hiding. He disappeared and so we could decide he was whatever we wanted him to be. And what we wanted was for him to never get caught.”

AUGUST 1998

Rapping on his window woke Robert up. Robert Senior peered in. Robert tossed his blankets aside and scrambled out of bed. He struggled with the window, his race car-covered pajama top riding up his tummy as he tugged, but finally he got the frame pulled about a quarter of the way up. Cold night air rushed into his closet-sized bedroom.

A thin rivulet of blood ran down the bridge of Robert Senior's swollen nose. His knuckles were scraped raw. Sweat and liquor pinched Robert's nostrils.

Robert Senior looked hurriedly over his shoulder. "The cops are looking for me. I borrowed one of their cars. You should have seen the sheriff's face! Got them good." He chuckled and swung a thumb behind his shoulder. "Left it a ways back there. Think I hit a deer."

Bright lights flashed over both of them, illuminating Robert Senior's swollen, rubber Halloween mask face.

“They’re coming for me, boy!” His eyes lit up. His face flushed. He drummed on the windowsill, chuckling again. “I’m gonna have to make a run for it!”

“Run, Dad!” Robert yelled.

Robert Senior grinned at his son. He reached out and ruffled the boy’s hair with a sweaty palm.

Then he crashed into the woods, and Robert never saw him again. He never told Deb he’d spoken to his father that night. And when Deb said a few weeks later that Robert Senior was in jail in Seattle, the maximum-security prison this time, Robert decided she was wrong. Robert Senior was camping in the woods, where there was less trouble to get into.

Holt and O’Shay recovered the sheriff’s cruiser at the edge of the trees, its door flung open. Glass from a smashed headlight littered the asphalt. Scratches clawed the driver’s-side door. Holt reached inside to turn off the lights, still splashing blue and red over the trees.

A boot, Rob Kelley’s own dirt-crust-ed Timberland, lay on the cruiser floor. Like Rob had gnawed it off to free himself from a trap. Holt took a slim digital camera from his holster and began snapping photos. A long shot of the boot, tipped over, laces still tied. Close-up of the tread, to compare with any footprints they might find.

“Oh, *shit*,” O’Shay swore. Holt hustled over to the front of the cruiser, where O’Shay had been surveying the damage.

A body was splayed near the middle of the road.

Holt’s peripheral vision shrank. An arm, snapped and bent. A wrinkled hand, fingers stretching toward the car’s front right wheel. The head turned away from him, mercifully, so that all he could see was white hair sprouting beneath a ball cap.

Something gleaming in the road, a white island in a sea of maroon. A tooth.

Holt lunged backward and hung his head over the grass. He gagged and heaved, and finally spat bile into the dirt. O’Shay called for an ambulance, though they both knew it was far too late. Then he took the camera from Holt. When he was done taking pictures, O’Shay covered the body with a blanket from the cruiser’s trunk.

“Do you know who it is?” Holt asked.

“No. Could be a vagrant. No ID.” O’Shay pointed at the trees. “Rob’s that way. I just know it.”

“He told me he was a marine,” Holt said. A sour taste oozed down his throat. He peered into the woods. Broken pine boughs marked where Rob must have dived into the forest. Holt ran a hand down his own stubbled cheeks. Those needles must have torn up Rob’s face, his bare arms. Holt turned back to O’Shay. “Maybe he has survival training.”

“That’s bastard’s no marine!” O’Shay yelled. “He’s a drunk with a kid he doesn’t support. I’ve been hauling him in since he was fifteen years old. He disappeared in Seattle for a few years, probably making a complete pain in the ass of himself there, too. But he tells all kinds of stories about what he was up to. He’s a war vet. He’s a middle-weight boxer. He’s been crab fishing up in Alaska. I used to think I could help him. Don’t ever make that mistake. People like him just drag you down with them.” O’Shay spat toward the trees. “At least now he’ll have a true story to tell in jail.”

O’Shay returned to the van and popped the trunk. Holt took a few steps toward the trees. The curtain of needles could certainly hide a man. After all, it still held the bear that Holt had failed to trap.

He tried to forget this second fugitive lurking in the forest as O’Shay tossed him a thick jacket and a pair of gloves, and they parted the trees.

**Interview with Brad O'Shay,
Pine Tavern, October 9, 2010**

**From the documentary *Flight Risk: The Robert
Jackson Kelley Story*, 2011**

“Before that night, Rob Kelley was a drunk, an obnoxious one who’d get himself fired from shitty job after shitty job and try to tell you he was Batman after he’d had a few. But he was harmless. There were about a dozen other guys on this island just like him, warming seats in this tavern every night. I never thought that son of a bitch would cost me my job. Cost somebody his life. You talk to James Holt about any of this?

“He won’t talk? Doesn’t really surprise me.

“That night, Rob’s practically falling off his stool, and he starts talking about the Gulf War. Barely making any sense. Going on and on. I’m off duty, technically, but around here the sheriff’s shift never really ends. I have the cruiser. Usually do. I try to shut Rob up. Tell him to go home, get some sleep. Eat something. Of course he doesn’t listen. Never did.

“Gets to be the time of night that Rob retires to the drunk tank. But he doesn’t want to go quietly this time. We scuffle a little bit. Nothing major. He can’t hit the broad side of a barn at this point, but he’s nothing if not persistent. So we tangle. But my keys are sitting by my beer, and damn if he doesn’t grab them. He’s grinnin’, ornery, so pleased with himself. He runs off and hops in my cruiser. There are people who’d say I should have shot him right then. But that’s not how the law works. I gotta call in for backup. By the time they show up, Rob Kelley is *gone*.

“Took all my men, plus SWAT from Seattle, to finally get him. Snipers were leaning out the windows of the high school gym. After all, the man was a wanted murderer.

“After three days in those woods, his fingertips were black. Broken nose, too. I heard he lost two toes. And still he tried to run. But we were ready for him. Tased him.

“Can’t run forever. Like father, like son.”

NOVEMBER 1998

*Robert liked first grade. He liked the busy hallways, teeming with other kids like darting fish. He liked the cafeteria's warm, crunchy tater tots and cold milk cartons. He liked the library with its shelves and shelves of books, liked to pull one free, flip through it, put it back, grab another. He liked his teacher, Ms. Milhauser. He liked her tiny silver earrings, the way she let the kids shout along when she read *Green Eggs and Ham*, and how she let them take as long as they liked at the water fountain. He liked her even when she moved his seat away from the window, even when she tapped his paper and quietly said, "Focus." He liked gym, how the kids' sneakers squeaked across the shiny floor. He was always the fastest, and he never got tired.*

* * *

At home, Robert found a dirt-streaked beer bottle near the mailbox, its Coors label peeling and flaking like sunburned skin. Coors, he vaguely remembered, or perhaps decided, was what his father always drank.

The bottle winked against the mailbox's stake. Robert bent the label's corner, picked at it like an itchy scab. He almost expected to find a letter scrawled on the back. Instead the paper crumbled between his fingers.

Two days later, he spotted a plume of smoke dancing over the trees like a charmed snake.

Could his dad be hiding in those trees? Was the bottle a sign? He'd seen TV shows with castaways hurling bottles with rolled-up messages into the sea, hoping they'd wash up on the shore. Of course, the bottle he'd found had been empty. But still. Maybe his father just didn't have a pencil and was counting on Robert understanding anyway.

Robert watched the twisting gray trail of smoke until it fused with a few threatening thunderheads and the storm drove him inside. The trailer's roof had started springing leaks. Water plinked onto the kitchen floor, smearing bright streaks of yellow linoleum through the room's coat of grime. Robert stood beneath the biggest hole and tried to catch drops on his tongue. Hulk's paws slipped, and his feet slid out from under him. A damp chill invaded the rooms.

Deb finally recruited a neighbor, a man, to climb up onto the roof and secure a blue tarp over the trailer. He

covered the part over Robert's bedroom, too, which was lucky, because new gaps poked through the ceiling soon enough.

On nights when Deb was home, when Robert couldn't sleep and couldn't escape into the yard, he piled on blankets and studied the holes and thought about the signals his father sent from the woods. He tried to fit them together, decipher his dad's coded messages.

When Hulk barked at night, Robert knew his dog could see Robert Senior, too.

Sometimes, as his eyelids finally fell, the blue pinpoints melted into falling, streaking stars. Sometimes, he wished that he could stretch his arms high enough to push away the tarp and peel the trailer's roof away like the top of a tin can, and let in the sky.

Officer Holt visited Yannatok Elementary one Wednesday afternoon. He brought two obedient German shepherds, whose ears pricked with attention as Officer Holt talked about stranger danger and saying no to drugs.

Robert sat up straight and tried to ignore the whispering classmates around him. He wondered if Officer Holt recognized him. He wondered if he'd be able to ask him if he'd caught the bear.

The kids behind him were talking in hushed tones about

a video game Robert didn't have, one where the player pretended to steal cars and lead the cops on a wild chase down a crowded highway.

"Half the time, you crash," one kid said.

"Not me," bragged the other.

Robert turned around, caught himself, and swiveled forward again before the teachers noticed.

"I made it to the city level," the kid replied. "You get to jump the car onto the sidewalk in that one."

They swapped tips and dubious tales of video game glory, and Robert found himself picking at his shoelace, jiggling his knees, and sneaking glances over his shoulder until he caught a teacher in the aisle glaring at him. He straightened and tried to pin his stare to front of the auditorium.

When Officer Holt started passing out pamphlets and lollipops, Robert suddenly realized the assembly was over. He reddened, embarrassed he'd missed important crime-solving tips and a possible update on the wild bears behind his house.

"Hi there, young man," Officer Holt said when he got to Robert. He shook Robert's hand. Officer Holt's jaw was pink and freshly shaven. His brow furrowed for just a moment, and he kept hold of Robert's hand when he asked, "Is your last name Kelley?"

"Yeah," Robert replied, grinning. Officer Holt remembered him. He scrambled to stand up, pumping Officer

Holt's arm. He hoped all his classmates were paying attention.

Holt nodded slowly. Robert felt like he'd been called on and for once answered a question correctly. Holt released his hand and asked, "How's that dog of yours?"

"Good," Robert answered. "Did you catch the bear?"

Officer Holt chuckled. "You know, we never did. He ate donuts right out of my trap and ran off." He handed Robert a sour apple Dum Dum. "But don't worry. We'll get 'im."

**Interview with Joey Kovach, Gold's Gym,
Seattle, October 10, 2010**

**From the documentary *Flight Risk: The Robert
Jackson Kelley Story*, 2011**

“He was in my class in second grade, I think. At least that’s what I remember. One day, early on in the year, it was pouring outside and we had indoor recess, which everybody knows is the worst. But Kelley especially couldn’t handle it. He was like a fly stuck indoors, buzzing around, crashing into the windows, trying to get free. Meanwhile, I’d been bothering everybody, knocking down blocks, interrupting card games, messing with the girls. Finally, the teacher plunks us both down in the corner and gets out Risk. You know, that old board game that takes like five days to play? Teacher says, ‘Play this. Don’t get up until somebody wins.’

“Well, that game had about ten too many rules for us to deal with, so we just made up our own games. We would set up armies and then just roll the dice at them, try to knock them over. Or we’d set up all the armies, real precise, and then we’d yell, ‘Earthquake!’ and just shake the

shit out of the board. Or we'd set it up on the floor and pretend to stomp all over the world. Kept us busy, anyway. That teacher was cool. He let us play that game sometimes on regular recess days, too, when the rest of the boys were playing basketball or football and we were just standing around, not getting picked.

“Risk. We never did learn to play that game the right way.”

SEPTEMBER 2001

On September 11, Robert hunched in a desk with the rest of the fourth graders and watched the second plane hit the second tower on the small television in the classroom's corner. As it dawned on both the teacher and the news anchors that something more sinister than an aviation accident was in progress, the teacher directed the kids to open their readers and scrambled to turn off the broadcast.

All the kids on Yannatok grew up around planes, as much a part of the scenery as the ocean and the forests. Every day Robert's school bus lurched past Yannatok County Airport, one of the island's two airfields. Tomkins, a few miles beyond the bus route, catered to tourists looking for private island tours and tandem sky diving. Commuters and locals made up most of Yannatok County Airport's traffic. A private plane could shorten the commute to Seattle from a three-hour ferry ride to a twenty-minute blue-sky jaunt,

skipping over the spiraling, tourist-filled lines. The island was full of amateur airmen, retirees whose private planes were like an old dude's convertible. Geese waddled on the runways in the weak morning light, honking and pecking. Anxious pilots fired their rifles into the air to scare them off, the shots booming and echoing while Robert was at the bus stop, the frantic Vs scissoring above him.

As his teacher whispered into her classroom phone, Robert read and reread the same paragraph in his reader, words scattering like those startled birds. Before he'd ever heard of terrorists and radical Islam and jihad, all Robert could think was, *How stupid do you have to be to crash a plane into a giant skyscraper?*

On September 11, Sheriff Holt met with a frantic coast guard and visited the island's airstrips. In his three years as sheriff, he'd never had a busier day. He spoke with the owners about security and ID checks. The importance of reporting anything amiss, no matter how minor. Yes, he admitted, the terrorists in this horrible case were swarthy and dark, but danger could come in any guise. A white tourist, he had to go so far as to say while stopping at Tomkins Airstrip, should be treated with the same scrutiny as one who looked Middle Eastern.

He flew the flag outside the sheriff's department at half-mast for the rest of the month.

At one a.m., after an endless, grueling day, he drove to the beach, took off his shoes, and let the waves wash against the cuffs of his pants. He watched the sky.

JUNE 2003

When he was eleven, Robert tired of his patch of grass and dirt outside the trailer and decided he would learn to surf. Yannatok Island's small but pretty beach was only a few minutes away. Vacation homes sprouting decks and grills and umbrellas hugged the shore. All summer Deb dropped him off on her way to the dispatch center and picked him up when the sun's last rays sparkled on the water. He wore his only pair of swim trunks, ragged ones with a ripped lining, printed with a salt-faded, hinge-jawed shark.

Deb gave him five bucks to rent a board. *Island's cheapest babysitter*, she'd chuckle. Hulk tagged along, barking at the waves and licking salt off Robert's feet. Robert staked out a patch of sand away from the castle-building kids and the tanning teenage girls and laid out his towel and T-shirt. The current tugged and sucked at his ankles; the sand and sun and the ocean's brine toughened his skin. Robert

paddled out on a chewed-up board and let the waves toss him like a piece of beach glass. Time and again he fell under the churning water and washed up after his board. He'd scramble to catch it, give Hulk a quick scratch behind the ears, and run back into the waves.

Jeeploads of teenagers tumbled onto the sand mid-afternoon, the girls in bikini tops and cutoff shorts and the boys carrying gleaming boards. When he saw them with their boards tethered to their wrists, Robert realized the rental boards were missing leashes. The older guys didn't waste the time board-chasing that Robert did.

All day they tracked between the shore houses and their towels, dripping six-packs dangling from their fingers. He knew none of them had a sticker fixed to their school ID to let the lunch ladies know they qualified for free lunch. He knew that if their boards got shredded on rough sands, they'd buy new ones.

They ignored Robert, but, sitting on his board, he sometimes took a breather and watched them. The guys sailed to the sand on wave after wave. They'd still be there when orange streaked the sky and Deb pulled up and honked, engine running. The summer sun didn't set until nine o'clock, and even when she wasn't working, Deb let him stay out until then.

July and its bright heat had arrived before Robert managed to ride a wave straight to shore. The ocean was

whirling and gray green, and he liked standing above it, as if he were its master, as if at any moment he could take off and skim its glassy surface, soaring and dipping like a gull. He landed on the shore, coasting to a sandy stop, and he and Hulk danced and whooped on the beach.

This kid is unstoppable! Ladies and gentlemen, the legendary surf champion!

The water never warmed past sixty degrees, even on the hottest summer days. Robert tried swimming with his T-shirt on, but he shivered in the thin material. Goose bumps prickled over his skin. Robert was still flailing through his victory dance when someone tapped him on the shoulder. One of the teenage boys held out a ratty rash guard, the stitching loose around the edge of its long sleeves.

“You’re gonna freeze to death,” the older boy said. “Take it.”

Robert slipped the rash guard over his head, the collar hanging loose like a secondhand turtleneck. He struck scrawny muscle poses and kicked up sand. The teenagers laughed. Then he splashed back into the surf.

Sometimes while he waited for a wave, paddling on his board and staring out over the horizon at the glittering water, he spotted a plane, getting ready to land at one of the island’s two runways. And he would imagine Robert Senior’s tour in Iraq, and he eventually decided that the most likely place for his dad to be by now was Canada. He’d have

hiked his way through the forests all the way up to the border. He would have grown a thick, furry beard and crossed Canada's invisible line under the cover of night, crawling on his belly, calling on his stealth military training. From there he could have worked all kinds of odd jobs: fixing engines, painting houses, cutting down trees. But Robert figured his father had probably chosen to keep hiding out. Hunting. Drinking and fishing from the clear, crisp streams, maybe even grabbing trout with his bare hands.

One of the best parts of Holt's job was helping out the local kids. When he was elected sheriff, shortly after Brad O'Shay resigned in disgrace after pictures of his stolen cruiser appeared on the front of the *Tide*, Holt had aimed his first public initiative at the island's youth. As far as Holt could see, Yannatok parents had two major concerns: drugs and water safety. The two were often connected. Boredom led to drinking and drugs; drinking and getting high near the beach led to unsafe swimming. So Holt had worked with the Parks Department to sponsor low-cost surfing and swimming lessons. At least one lesson each session addressed emergency first aid basics and the dangers of participating in water activities while intoxicated. Holt had ridden out to the beach during the first day of lessons, and though he was instantly sweating in his full uniform, hat

and all, seeing the smaller kids splash around and the older ones wobble to a stand atop their surfboards had put a smile on his face. He had squinted at the water, lucky to have been entrusted with these kids' safety. He had been as proud as a father.

Once he'd returned his board to the rental shack and headed home, Robert spent his evenings engrossed in his other new hobby: flight simulators.

Zonked from the sun and the waves, Robert zoned out in front of the computer. Deb had made a big deal out of the Internet being for school only, something she hoped he'd use to raise his increasingly mediocre grades. "No excuses now," she crowed. "Don't have to rely on the library."

Deb talked about installing blocks and monitoring his searches, but she never got around to it. She set up the computer, a refurbished Dell, in the cramped living room, where she could peek over her son's shoulder. Robert clicked away, hopping from one page to the next. TV had never kept him entertained, but the computer could follow his every twitching, scattered thought. Videos of heinous surf wipeouts! Pictures of the inside of a shark's stomach, a surfer's hand buried in the gleaming pink guts! A gnarly toothy shark tattooed on a guy's arm! The world's most tattooed man, his skin a grimy blue gray, inked over every inch.

brought home a busted pair of headphones from the dispatch center. The set was mended with a cocoon of Scotch tape, wound over the left earpiece, but Robert didn't care. Now his focus was impenetrable, a force field against the outside he'd never experienced before. He didn't take his eyes off the screen until he flopped into bed, Hulk curled up at his feet, waves and sky dancing on his eyelids.

Other kids he knew liked Myspace and shooting games and even videos of people having sex. He watched some sex videos, too, ferreting out the free ones, the ones with two girls, the ones with two girls and one man. Joey, for example, had a list of the free sites folded into the back pocket of his bookbag, for easy reference when his mom thought he was using their computer for homework.

One evening, one click led to another to another, and on a page filled with diagrams of WWII fighter jets, a link promised a “historical flight simulator.” Robert tried to download it and gave up several error messages later. But then he found and downloaded another free flight simulator, billed as “the most realistic free flight sim on the web!” His screen transformed into a plane’s dashboard. He’d later come to recognize the Cessna’s round meters and long, rectangular center panel. He pounded the space bar, tapped at the arrows, and for flight after imaginary flight didn’t make it into the air at all before veering off the runway or petering to a disappointing stop. The simulator offered another point of view: from outside the plane, like a passing bird. He tried the alternate perspective, then switched back to cockpit mode. Easier to concentrate that way.

As he played, the trailer and his mother fell away; he shed them like a snake sloughing off skin. Deb complained that the game’s noise—engines revving and firing, static bursting with control tower inquiries—bothered her, and she