

“Will keep you on the edge of your seat.” —NELSON DEMILLE

THE  
**BAREFOOT  
BANDIT**



THE TRUE TALE OF  
**Colton Harris-Moore,**  
NEW AMERICAN OUTLAW

**BOB FRIEL**

**THE**  
**BAREFOOT**  
**BANDIT**

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**Colton Harris-Moore,**  
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**HYPERION**  
*New York*

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# Dedication

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*To great parents (especially mine), and good kids  
And to all those trying to fill in the cracks*

*For Sandi*



**PART 1**

# **REACH FOR THE SKY**



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# Chapter 1

Around 8:30 a.m. everything went to hell. Swirling 60 mph winds grabbed the little plane, shook it, rolled it, threw it down toward the jagged peaks of the Cascade mountains, then slammed it back up into the darkening skies.

The morning had started out smoothly, according to plan. After a night of lashing rains driven down the runway by gusts blowing from across the Canadian border, the predawn skies cleared and fledgling air gently blanketed Orcas Island. The barometer rose and the temperature climbed to 57 degrees, about 15 warmer than expected for a mid-November morning in the far corner of the Pacific Northwest. It looked like fine flying weather—unless you'd checked the reports and saw the obvious shitstorm coming.

Pilots of small aircraft obsess about the weather. Ill winds, icing, poor visibility—all can bring your flight to a terminal, smoldering conclusion. Before the FAA considers a pilot minimally safe to solo, he must study and train intensively, racking up forty or more hours of air time sitting alongside a calm, cool flight instructor ready to instantly take over and recover from blunders that could otherwise kill them both. During ground school, student pilots learn the one surefire way to avoid trouble with dangerous weather: don't fly in it. However, when you're a seventeen-year-old with zero hours of official flight training strapped into a stolen airplane trying to make a quick getaway from a whole lotta law enforcement on your tail . . . Well, you have other things on your mind besides the weather forecast.

As the sky began to glow, teasing misty details from the island's steep, evergreen hillsides, the teen had busied himself with final preflight preparations inside one of Orcas airport's private hangars. More than seventy small aircraft bed down on the island, and its single runway averages nearly 150 takeoffs and landings per day. You can watch the airplane action from the parking lot, the adjacent dog park, a spot just north called Smuggler's, or from the woods behind the airport's flimsy defense fence. You can also spy on the comings and goings from Orcas Island's small sheriff station—known to locals as the cop shop—that lies within badge-tossing range of the runway's south end.

A few days earlier, one of the landings was made by a 1999 Cessna 182 Skylane, tail number N24658. The would-be thief recognized that model on sight, just as he knew every Cessna, Piper, Beech, Cirrus, and other small plane. Regardless of its challenges with impulse control and social norms, the kid's brain functioned as an aircraft encyclopedia crammed with engine ratings, performance stats, and avionics capabilities. Flying had been his one constant dream, one soaring aspiration in an otherwise bottom-of-the-barrel life, and he'd been teaching himself about flight since childhood, obsessively paging through airplane books until their bindings disintegrated. Now, at an age when most kids spent all their feverish energy trying to wangle a sweaty hour or two with another teen in a backseat or on a basement couch, Colton Harris-Moore's one overwhelming desire was to spend illicit time in the privacy of a hangar with a plane he planned to make his own.

This particular Cessna, he knew, offered fuel-injected reliability and a rugged, easy-to-fly airframe. It was an airborne SUV, the Ford Bronco of the skies, and he could close his eyes, project an image of the cockpit, and reach out to virtually touch every control, switch, and gauge.

The Cessna had landed, rolled out, and taxied to its home in the airport's hangar farm. Other planes

slept under the stars, tied down out on the tarmac, but Colton wanted one stored out of sight. After sundown—after the daily FedEx flight and the last of the commuter runs had taken off for Seattle and Bellingham, and the airport’s provincial terminal went dark for the night—he simply walked through the open fence.

A typical small-plane hangar features a large door for the aircraft along with one or more regular size entrances called man doors. Plane theft is practically unheard of and few private hangars have alarm systems despite housing planes worth hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars. It took just a few seconds to jimmy open the man door. Inside, Colton switched on his headlamp and illuminated his dream.

FLIERS LOVE THEIR AIRPLANES. Passionately. During preflight inspection, a pilot caresses the frame. He runs his hands along the ship’s smooth skin, probing her flaps, stroking every inch of her propeller blades, even gently lifting her tail. It seems to go well beyond a simple safety check.

An intimate relationship with an airplane offers its pilot superhuman ability, harnessing simple physics to magical effect. Pull back on the yoke and zoom to ten thousand feet, laughing in the oppressive face of gravity that back on earth remains ready to ruin you just for tripping on the stairs or leaning too far back on a bar stool. For aficionados, planes elicit fanatical devotion.

As Colton scanned the inside of the hangar, he saw the Cessna owner’s face watching his every move. The plane belonged to Bob Rivers, a popular radio personality who lived down in Seattle and lived *for* flying his plane up to the San Juan Islands on the weekends. Promotion posters featuring Rivers’s smiling, silver-maned mug decorated the hangar walls.

The idea that Rivers owned and flew a small plane had been the subject of much banter on his morning radio show. He’d first had to overcome a deathly “medicate me and wake me when it’s over” fear of flying. Pilot friends and the interminable lines for the ferries heading out to the San Juan Islands during the summer tourist season finally convinced him to reconsider the power of flight. Now he loved it, and especially loved his immaculately kept \$175,000 Cessna Skylane.

Colton foraged around the hangar until he found the plane’s key inside a tackle box sitting amid a pile of stored boating gear. He climbed inside the cockpit, powered up the gauges, and saw that the tanks held enough fuel. As he expected, the Skylane’s POH sat inside the plane. The Pilot’s Operating Handbook is a detailed manual specific to every aircraft, and includes step-by-step checklists for prepping, starting, taking off, flying, and landing. It’s the plane’s Rosetta Stone.

Colton had all night to pore over the POH as well as manuals for the avionics, radio, autopilot, and GPS navigation equipment. Out of the small flock of Cessnas roosting at Orcas airport, Rivers’s was the only one outfitted with a Garmin MX200, an \$8,000 add-on GPS “situational awareness” system that makes navigating similar to a video game. One of these modern GPS chartplotters linked to the plane’s mechanical and autopilot systems simplifies much of the flier’s in-flight calculations and workload. Click a cursor anywhere on the chart and the computer instantly tells a pilot how to get to his destination. It won’t get a plane up in the air, though.

Airplanes want to fly. Pick the right one, like the Skylane—not too complicated, not too powerful, a stable high-wing design, built to operate at relatively slow speeds—then meticulously follow the POH checklists, and there’s a very good chance that even without taking a single flight class, you could get it up in the air. Then, however, you’re royally screwed.

Flying is full of old adages, most of them with at least a touch of dark humor. One of the most famous is: “Takeoffs are optional, but landings are mandatory.”

Inside the hangar, Colton also had all night to think about what he was about to attempt—something



any rational observer would consider almost certain suicide.

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AT FIRST LIGHT, DURING the blue hour before actual sunrise, Colton pressed the button to raise the hangar's wide metal door. He unplugged the Tow Buddy from its charger and attached its beetlelike mandibles to the Cessna's nose wheel. Using the little low-g geared electric tug, he slowly rolled the one-ton plane out of its hangar. Once clear of the building, he not only walked the tug back inside the hangar, but put it in the exact spot he'd found it. Colton didn't plug its charger back in, but that wouldn't inconvenience Bob Rivers much considering he'd soon have no plane to use it on.

After closing the hangar door behind him, Colton climbed up into the Cessna's left-hand seat. Like every aviation procedure, whether it's a pilot's first Cessna solo or thousandth sortie in a 747, starting a plane is done by checklist. The challenge, at first, is just learning where all the switches and gauges are located. For Colton, though, that wasn't a problem. He'd spent many hours looking at the dashboard exactly reproduced on computer simulations. Even the walls of his bedroom, instead of being hung with scantily clad pop stars, displayed posters of airplane cockpits.

He checked that the fuel tank selector, throttle, prop, and mixture were all set to their correct positions. Normally, a pilot then yells "Clear!" out the side window to warn anyone near the prop from moving or risk being sliced and diced. As this was grand theft, it made sense to skip that step. Master the master switch on, auxiliary fuel pump on just until fuel flows, throttle back to idle. Hit the starter and feel the tingle in your privates as the 235-horsepower Lycoming whines up and the propeller begins to turn. Then suddenly the pistons catch with a distinctive throaty flutter. Go rich on the mixture, throttle to 1,000 rpms. Oil pressure? Check. Lean the mixture, avionics on, navigation lights on. Ready to roll.

Taxiing presents a challenge for first-time Skylane fliers since instinctually everyone used to driving a car tries to steer with the wheel instead of the foot pedals. But Colton knew that. (And he didn't have a driver's license either.) In fact, with all his previous study and experience, the most complex part of the entire episode to this point was adjusting the pilot's seat to his gangly six-foot-five frame.

With so many private planes based on Orcas, none of the neighbors took special notice of the Cessna's early-morning growls. Colton released the parking brake, taxied out of the hangar farm, and turned south toward the still-sleeping town of Eastsound. He then spun the thirty-foot-long plane until its nose aimed straight down runway 34. Blue lights focused his view down the black strip, which ended abruptly in the cold, dark waters of the Salish Sea.

Colton Harris-Moore knew more than enough to fly a small plane—in theory. Reality reared up when he pushed the throttle to the firewall. The engine roared, his heart raced, and the Cessna began to roll forward down the narrow airstrip. Lightly loaded, the plane picked up speed quickly, the blue lights flashing by faster and faster. Colton's eyes darted back and forth between the airspeed indicator—watching it climb toward the magic number—and the end of the runway, which came closer and closer.

This was a kid, an outcast, who'd been bullied and beaten, forgotten and failed, expelled, medicated, incarcerated, and seemingly doomed to society's lowest rung. He'd already blown a number of chances in his young life, but he wasn't going to blow this one.

Colton kept his cool, hit his airspeed number, and pulled back on the yoke. After a breathless moment, the plane's rumbling wheels suddenly went silent. The runway disappeared beneath him, replaced with an epic rush of euphoria.

The white plane rose to the sunrise like a phoenix, an image and reference not lost on its pilot despite his failure at formal education. Colton's flight from the ashes of a wretched childhood, though

had taken a crooked path. He was a wanted outlaw, a wily one-kid crime wave that had swept across two tranquil islands, damaging their small communities' sense of security. His illegal deeds had been escalating for years as he studied crime with the same intensity he brought to teaching himself how to fly. Colton had graduated from stealing food to identities, from skipping school to escaping a prison home, from assaulting a soda machine to macing a cop. He often carried a gun, and he was determined not to go back to jail.

Colton Harris-Moore had also just pulled off one of the most audacious thefts in American history—and he was only getting started.

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## Chapter 2

With the sky brightening behind snow-capped Mount Baker on the Washington State mainland, the stolen Cessna turned south, its pilot gaining confidence as the plane gained altitude. After just a few minutes, Colton crossed the border from San Juan County to Island County, and his home, Camano Island, came into view. A small airport lies at the north end of Camano, but that wasn't an option. He already had a price on his head there and his face adorned wanted posters all over the island. Colton continued on, flying unchallenged past Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, Boeing Field, and the region's largest commercial airport, Seattle-Tacoma.

He flew along the flat lip of the continent, where, after dropping precipitously from the Cascade bottomland spills into Puget Sound. It's a spectacular sightseeing route with a series of volcanoes as waypoints—whenever the weather allows you to see them. The safest course to where Colton was headed called for banking east once he was south of Seattle, putting the icy, awe-inspiring bulk of Mount Rainier in his right window and following I-90 as it cut through Snoqualmie Pass past many of the locations used in David Lynch's eerie Northwest mystery *Twin Peaks*.

Of course "safest" is a relative term.

Soon after takeoff, the rain had started back in. The skies closed and winds reared, gusting to 30 mph at sea level, even higher at altitude. According to the Air Safety Institute at the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA), 80 percent of all accidents in a Cessna Skylane—considered a very safe plane—result from pilot error. Of those, the greatest number of serious accidents occur because the pilot flies into bad weather. The statistics also reveal who is most likely to fly himself to death: a new pilot.

THE CASCADES ACT AS a weather wall, giving eastern and western Washington such disparate climates that you'd think you were on different continents. Air sweeping east across the coast tries to climb these steep mountains carrying heavy burdens of Pacific moisture. Like overconfident hikers, though they can't make it to the top without casting off much of their load. As a result, the environment changes from near-rain forest to desert in a remarkably short distance from one side of the mountains to the other. The air doesn't give up its moisture without a fight, though.

As weather systems storm across the Cascades, wind shear between temperature gradients creates air waves shaped like ocean rollers, with the same effect on small planes as a Jet Ski feels running through a surf zone. November in the Northwest also brings tempestuous surface flows racing through sharp valleys that concentrate the winds and fire them into the sky like an anti-aircraft gun. Air turbulence exists even on calm days over the Cascades simply because of the push and pull of gravity reacting to the mass of the mountains. Jumbo jets at high altitude feel all these forces as sharp speed bumps and deep potholes, but their effect on a small plane skimming just above the peaks can be catastrophic. Add the rain, snow, sleet, and fog that can suddenly pounce out of the hills to swallow a plane, and you've got conditions that cause even experienced pilots to pucker at the thought of crossing the mountains when there's a hint of bad weather.

On a good day, a trip across the Cascades means lively turbulence. On November 12, 2008, the atmosphere over the mountains was a frightening world of invisible whirlpools and breaking waves.

with wind gusts exploding against the little Cessna like aerial depth charges. Colton later told a friend that as he flew into the mountains, the clouds closed around him, describing conditions as a whiteout. A full-on flush of fear replaced his euphoric buzz and screamed at him to either panic or freeze up—two decidedly fatal options for a pilot. One miscalculation on this already remarkably reckless flight would likely be Colton's last. Turning around at the first hint of weather trouble would have been the only smart option, but also meant a much greater chance he'd go back to prison—and that's not how he'd planned to play this game. In his mind, it was all or nothing. So he kept going.

Colton claims that at one point the Cessna fell into a stomach-churning nosedive toward the ground, plummeting from thirteen thousand to six thousand feet. His fright took physical form as his last meal splattered across the cockpit while he fought to keep the plane in the air.

He says he believes it took the intervention of a higher power, but he finally regained control. After what surely seemed like an eternity, the skies began to clear. Colton made it across the highest part of the Cascades and into the drier air east of the mountain range. The winds remained deadly strong, but the turbulence grew less violent. There hadn't been any question of the plane holding together, just the pilot. But he'd made it this far. Gravity now guaranteed the plane would come back to earth—in how many pieces was up to Colton.

Around 9 a.m., the Cessna left the state of Washington and crossed into the sovereign Yakama Nation, a 1.3-million-acre reservation east of Mount Saint Helens belonging to the Palouse, Sk'in-pa and twelve other tribes of the Columbia River plateau. It's an area famous for having one of the world's highest number of UFO sightings, with local aliens reportedly fond of appearing as hovering "inquisitive" balls of light that sometimes follow motorists. In the 1960s, the reservation was also ground zero for Bigfoot sightings.

It's good country for wildlife—regular earth animals as well as the mythical. Stands of cedar, ponderosa pine, and tamarack thin out to sagebrush as the hills climb into bald mountains. The land supports large herds of elk and black-tailed deer, along with mountain goats and lots of black bears. Thousands of wild horses also roam free on the reservation. Whether the outlaw who'd rustled the bucking Cessna in order to escape the angry sheriff acknowledged the Wild West symbolism or not didn't matter. Colton was just searching for a place to put the plane down.

At 9:15, a small band of Yakama hunters stalking elk looked up and saw a plane circling over Mission Creek Ridge, sacred tribal ground in the shadow of 4,710-foot Satus Peak. Totally off-limits to outsiders, it's an area the Yakama call the Place Where the Wind Lives.

To a pilot, it doesn't matter much where the wind lives, but knowing its direction and strength is absolutely critical. Airfields have windsocks and weather instruments. Someone attempting to land out in the wild, though, has to gauge wind speed by reading natural signs: bending grasses, rippling ponds, blowing leaves. On this day, with gale force winds howling around Satus Peak, you were just as likely to see flying coyotes.

The Cessna continued to buzz the area for nearly a half hour as Colton scouted a flatish spot, tried to read the wind sign, double-checklisted landing procedures, and double-gut-checked himself. He had mentally prepare for what pilots call an off-airport landing, which translates into English as, "Oh shit, I'm about to crash on a hillside."

Landings—even on a perfectly level runway—are where the experience gained by repeated supervised practice combines with a gradually earned seat-of-the-pants feel for the uneasy interface between air and ground to make an art out of the science of flight.

THE PREFERRED EMERGENCY LANDING—exactly like the preferred nonemergency landing—takes place

into the wind for the simple reason that the plane will be moving slower in relation to the ground. The tyrannical side of physics says that the energy of an impact rises as a square of speed. Where the gusts hit the ground, that means the faster you're moving the greater the likelihood of crumpling, cartwheeling, fracturing, and bleeding.

The tribal police chief who rushed to the site said the wind sweeping across the ridge that morning was blowing so strong, "it was hard for a man to stand up." Converted to mph, that's about 50, which meant a 100 mph speed difference between landing into or with the wind.

In a steady 50, an experienced pilot could walk the plane in and gently touch down moving at only 10 or 15 mph over the ground. Complications arise, however, when the wind and runway don't line up—like at Mill Creek that day. Loads of wildly popular YouTube clips keyworded to "crosswind landing" show the spine-chilling final approaches forced on pilots when the wind blows across the runway. In a maneuver called crabbing, the plane flies straight toward the landing spot while its nose remains pointing into the wind like a big-haired woman crossing the street facing the wrong way just so her bouffant doesn't get blown out of place. The plane literally flies sideways until it's very close to the ground, where the wind generally calms and where, if all goes well, the pilot can bring the nose around at the last second to face forward.

The spot Colton finally chose to put down was a small clearing at the top of a rugged switchback road where tribal hunters park their 4 × 4s before hiking into the surrounding hills. Adjacent to the clearing was another thousand feet or so of relatively flat ground covered in scrub.

He almost made it.

Evidence on the ground showed that Colton apparently crabbed the plane toward the clearing but, possibly due to the unpredictable gusts, he hit short. The impact wasn't very violent, leaving only a small gouge in the hard-packed dirt, but the landing wasn't over. The Cessna bounced back into the air and leapt forward, flying over the clearing and up a slight hill, then crunched back to earth, its landing gear bending and metal skeleton twisting from the force of the crash. The plane shuddered across the ground, propeller slicing through sagebrush, until it nosed over into a ditch and finally came to an abrupt stop.

After nearly four hours, the alternately thrilling and terrifying flight was over and the pilot's heart was still beating. He'd started the morning as Colton Harris-Moore, trailer-bred juvenile delinquent and petty thief. When he popped open the door of that stolen Cessna, though, and stepped into the wilds of Washington State haunted by the legends of Sasquatch, D. B. Cooper, *Twin Peaks*, and *Twilight*, he became Colt, the new millennium's ballsiest outlaw.

Move over Bigfoot, meet Barefoot.



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## Chapter 3

The hunters had seen the Cessna circle behind the ridge once again, but it didn't reappear. They dialed the Yakama Tribal Police and told them a plane had gone down. The police chief himself, Jimmie Shike, jumped into his SUV and raced for the road that led up into the mountains.

They say "Any landing you can walk away from is a good one." Colt ran away from his first solo landing. He headed for the trees and had barely gotten out of sight before Chief Shike drove up to the clearing.

The chief braced himself against the wind and strode up to the Cessna, which lay nose down, ass in the air, like a paper airplane stuck in the grass. The damage didn't look too extensive at first glance, certainly survivable, but when he didn't see a forlorn pilot sitting beside the pranged plane, Shike expected to find someone inside the cockpit, unconscious or worse.

He peered in . . . no body, no blood. The chief's first thought was that the pilot was injured and either stumbling around incoherent or trying to walk his way off the ridge to find help. The idea that this was a stolen plane never entered his mind. He got on the radio and ordered a search-and-rescue mission, calling in tracking dogs and teams from his force and the Yakima County Sheriff's Office along with volunteers. Then he called in the tail number of the plane to the Washington State Patrol so they could pull up the registration and find out whom he was searching for.

Bob Rivers had just gotten off the air at 10 a.m. after a typically entertaining four hours of commentary, interviews, and repartee with his radio team when his boss walked into the studio holding a cordless phone. He said there was a state policeman from Yakima who wanted to speak to Bob . . . because his plane had just crashed on the Indian reservation.

Rivers's first thought was that it was a prank call, an occupational hazard when you've spent twenty-plus years doing comedy bits and song parodies like "Cheeseburger with Parasites" and the Christmas favorite "Buttcracker Suite."

The cop asked if he was really speaking to Bob Rivers. "I answered yes, and waited for the punch line," says Rivers. "But he said, 'Oh, I'm very glad to hear your voice because, obviously, that means it wasn't you in your plane.' "

Rivers suddenly realized the guy was serious. There must be a mistake, he told the officer. "My plane is in its hangar on Orcas Island." No way his Cessna could have been in the air that day. He certainly hadn't flown it, and even though friends sometimes took the plane up, they always asked first. Besides, this was definitely a no-fly day. Just an hour before, as their newswoman read the local weather, the thought that shot through pilot Bob's weather-obsessed mind was, Boy am I glad I'm not flying in that!

The static read out the plane's tail number: November 2-4-6-5-8.

"Yes, that's my number," Rivers told him. "But a lot of people confuse the 8 with a B because tail numbers usually end with a letter." He heard the cop relay the message to the tribal police chief who was standing next to the plane. After a moment he came back on the phone: "Nope, he says it's definitely an 8, not a B. It's your plane."

RIVERS'S PHONE BEGAN RINGING off the hook: the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), FAA

San Juan County Sheriff's Office, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and FBI. The realization that his plane had been stolen began to sink in. They had no suspects, but at least, thought Rivers, with all the organizations involved and the search teams scouring the landing site, they'd be sure to catch the crook and solve the case instantly. The thief had a forty-five-minute head start, but he was outnumbered and had experienced Yakama hunters and tracking dogs on his trail.

Then Rivers received a disheartening call. "They told me that since it was now a law enforcement matter and not a rescue that they'd called off the search so no volunteers would be endangered."

Rivers's hopes sank, only to be lifted again by a call from Chief Shike telling him not to worry, that there were only two ways out of the area and one of those would mean a thirty-mile hike. The chief told Rivers that his officers were keeping close watch on the only sensible route anyone would use to get off the mountain on foot.

Colt watched the searchers from his hiding place in the woods, then struck out east, taking the longer route no one expected.

THE NEXT MORNING, THE thirteenth, the chief called Bob Rivers again. Bad news, he said, a logging truck driver reported seeing a white male, soaked to the skin, walking out of the Place Where the Wind Lives sometime around 5 a.m.

"I asked him about the status of the investigation, the FAA, the FBI, all the boys," says Rivers. "He told me, 'The investigation has been turned over to me . . . and I have concluded the investigation. Your insurance company may take the plane.' "

In fact, the chief insisted that Rivers remove the plane as quickly as possible because he was forced to keep one of his men up in the hills babysitting its carcass twenty-four hours a day or else, he said, the boys on the rez would shoot it to pieces just for target practice.

Tribal police collected a vomit sample but no other forensics from the plane. (Questions arose later as to the handling of the sample and delays in testing. Ultimately, it was tested three times but never came back with usable DNA.)

Rivers was crestfallen. "So that was it: white suspect, property crime, some rich guy's toy . . . No one really cared and they'd never find out who took my plane."

The one person who did know kept moving.

Dressed in just shorts, a sweatshirt, and shoes he says were two sizes too small, Colt claims he hiked for four days with no food, subsisting on two bottles of Gatorade. Toppenish Mountain east of the landing site resembles parts of the Afghan Central Highlands. Instead of the Khyber Pass, though, Colt had access to roadways cut by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. For the first day and a half even the weather cooperated, offering him unseasonably warm temperatures 20 degrees above average. After that, it stayed a balmy 60 during daylight, but fell to below freezing at night. Colt says he hiked thirty miles to the tracks of the Northern Pacific Railway, where he hopped a freight to Oregon, jumped off, stole a car, and drove it to Reno, Nevada. Colt says he spent most of the winter in Reno, staying with a friend.

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## Chapter 4

Meanwhile, back on the Wild West's watery frontier, the residents of Orcas Island woke on November 12 to a big breakfast of WTF?

As soon as he'd gotten the call from the state police, Bob Rivers phoned his friend and plane mechanic, Geoff Schussler, and asked him to go check the hangar. Schussler found a whole lot of empty where the Cessna should have been.

Two San Juan County sheriff's deputies responded to the call. Schussler had taken great pains not to touch anything, but he says the deputies shrugged it off, giving a cursory look and telling him that "there weren't any good surfaces" to check for prints. Schussler looked around at a lot of smooth metal and hard plastic that the thief had to touch to break in, find the key, and get the plane out of the hangar. "This was an airplane," he says, "not a stolen bike . . . I thought they'd take it more seriously."

If they had successfully lifted a print, the San Juan County Sheriff's Office would have instantly found that their suspect had been in the system for a very long time considering his age. They would have gotten an earful about him and his MO from their law enforcement brethren down in Island County. With that information, they might have figured out that this wasn't Colt's first Orcas crime by a long shot. As it was, though, it'd be nine months and many more local crime scenes and victims before they even knew whom they were dealing with.

Word of the plane theft spread at small-island gossip speed—a startling velocity equaled only by the rate at which facts twist. Orcas has just five thousand full-time residents, and each exists within one degree of separation from everyone else on the fifty-seven-square-mile island. Like in any small community, but especially a small-island community, anybody's business is everybody's.

No one had ever heard of a plane theft before, certainly not one in a place where a puppy caught chasing chickens makes the newspaper's police report. This was the kind of crime, though, that locals could relish. It was extremely rare, which appealed to our sense of exceptionalism. It was bizarre, which fit the eccentric nature of the island. And hardly anyone felt threatened because it wasn't random and it was hard to identify with. Very few people are lucky enough to even have an airplane to steal, so it was like hearing that someone's pet koala had run away. "Gee, that's a shame . . . I wish I had a koala."

No one had gotten hurt during the crime, but that wasn't necessarily a factor for a juicy San Juan style sin story. The county's most famous misdeed to date had occurred in 1980, when a "kindly" older woman popped two .38 caps in her husband's head, then had her simpleminded brother chop him up in a bathtub using a decorative battle ax before burning all the bits in a barrel.

In the spring of 2007, a body washed ashore on Orcas with its hands and feet missing. Since then, nine feet—all sans bodies—have shown up in the area's waters from British Columbia down to Island County, making national headlines and prompting speculation of foot-fetish serial killers. The mordantly mundane reality is that people who jump off bridges or fall from boats or otherwise end up in the region's rivers flow to the sea just like the trees that turn into the driftwood piled high on Northwest beaches. Hands and feet, like smaller branches on a floating tree, eventually come loose, and the feet—usually shod in buoyant sneakers—sail off on their own journeys, eventually stepping back ashore to freak out beachcombers.

Our most recent headline-making incident occurred in March 2008, when we were treated to the electrifying work of a performance artist/eco-avenger named Gabriel Mondragon, who pulled on Playtex kitchen gloves and tried to cut one of Orcas's power lines with a metal pole saw. His stated goal had been to wreak revenge on "rich white people" because a young orca whale had swum into a tugboat's propeller 170 miles away in Canada. When the first lineman arrived, the anarchist's pants were still smoking. He lost an arm, but survived.

While the occasional titillating crime or wayward body part added to island lore, the core belief on Orcas was that our wide moat of chilly Salish seawater stocked with giant Pacific octopuses and killer whales protected us from the horrifyingly random rapes, home invasions, and murders of the mainland. Bad guys knew it'd be stupid to commit a serious crime on a small island with very limited means of escape. Orcas residents enjoyed such a low crime rate and had such a comforting sense of security ingrained into their island identity that most of us never locked our doors—not cars, not homes, often not even businesses. When local sheriff's deputies did shop-by-shop checks in Eastsound, our one little town, they regularly found open doors and windows.

A deputy once asked a young woman whose car had been taken (and quickly recovered) whether she'd left the keys inside. She replied, "Of course I did: I'm an island girl."

There was crime on Orcas, but it occurred at such a remarkably low level that anyone who wanted to could easily persuade himself that he lived on an island embraced by only peace and serenity. Bobbin' in a sea of denial.

HIGH CITY CRIME RATES didn't drive my wife, Sandi, and I to Orcas, but as the little SUV that dived and slipped sideways down an icy road toward the Anacortes Ferry Terminal one cold January morning in 2007, a sense of safety and security was part of the overall flush of warmth that came when the calm sea and the islands appeared and we knew we were here for good.

We'd been living in Orlando ("Place Where Humidity Lives"), where I worked as the editor of *Caribbean Travel & Life* magazine. The position was intended as a short cash-replenishing pit stop on an otherwise freelance writing and photography career. Meeting Sandi convinced me to stay longer and buy a house on an oak-lined brick street in the downtown historic district. The 1917 bungalow had been listed as a unique fixer-upper opportunity. Its brass historic plaque was the only solid part of the structure, which remained standing despite the millions of termites that found its Craftsman architecture charming and its floor joists delicious.

It took more than a year to make the house livable. The night before we were to finally move in, I began to load up all my tools. I'd been hauling gear back and forth every day to a dingy garage apartment, just in case. But now why bother? We were going to be living in the house in eight hours. I left the tools in the bedroom.

When I showed up the next morning, everything was gone. Saber saw, circular saw, Sawzall, all gone. More tools, equipment, and a couple of bikes were missing from the garage. As I was calling the police, two guys inside a beater car pulled up the driveway, then immediately reversed out when they saw my truck behind the house. They'd come back to load up the rest of our stuff. I ran out of the house and into the street, but couldn't get the plate number.

Two Orlando cops showed up four minutes after I called. They were very nice, and listened politely while I described the car and one of the guys I knew had ripped us off. He was a thirtyish downtown street stain who'd snuffled around whenever I was outside working on the house, giving me sob stories and asking if I had anything for him to do. A week before the burglary, I finally gave in and offered the guy ten bucks to help me haul a load of drywall into the garage.

He groaned like every piece he lifted was his last, then suddenly developed a limp and, when that didn't faze me, a hacking cough. Inside the garage, he eyed the bikes and asked how much work it would take for him to get one. Not for sale or trade, I said. Then he looked at the extension cords I had coiled around the yard and asked if I had any power tools. I gave him his ten and told him good-bye.

The cops *hmmm'd* and *ahhhh'd* at all the right spots during my tale, and even walked around the porch to look at the window the guy jimmed to get inside. When I bent down to show them the fingerprints clearly visible on the sill and asked if they were going to pull them, they both gave me pitying looks. One tore off a copy of the report, told me that's what my insurance company wanted, and they left.

Ours was a relatively minor burglary, but it still cost thousands out-of-pocket to replace our stuff. I learned that one of the biggest aggravations is that if you're not totally anal and haven't itemized, cataloged, and place-mapped every single possession, you never know all that's missing until you have reason to miss it. Where's that antique drill my grandfather gave me? Did you see my college ring? That, though, was nothing compared to what that worthless hairbag did to our sense of security.

From the first night on, every creak of that very creaky old house might be him or one of his buddies coming back for more, or for worse. Obviously the crooks had been keeping tabs during the renovation and just waiting until there was enough loot to make breaking in worthwhile.

I made my living traveling, leaving town for about one week every month, seven nights when Sandi would have to come home to an empty house on a dark downtown lot where she could never be sure there wasn't someone lurking. The thought of that pissed me off so much that every evening for two weeks after the burglary I walked the downtown streets with a pair of heavy work gloves in my back pocket—I didn't want his blood literally on my hands when I beat the bogus tuberculosis out of him.

I never found him, but there wasn't a single night spent in that house over the following six years when he wasn't there in spirit, as the outside lights were turned on, the windows and doors double-checked, the new alarm armed, and the big dog put on duty.

WE BOUGHT PROPERTY ON Orcas Island after a single hearts-and-minds-winning visit in 2002. Each subsequent summer vacation was filled with our ideal outdoor lifestyle—kayaking, boating, scuba diving, hiking—and an expanding circle of local friends. Orcas became our sanctuary.

We'd wrap up last-minute job details, hassle through airports and across 2,600 cramped sky miles to battle the traffic up I-5 out of Seattle to the ferry terminal . . . and then exhale. The ferry ride offered a leisurely segue from mainland madness to the evergreen air of the San Juan Islands that demanded you take deep breaths. Some 750 islands, rocks, and reefs make up the San Juans. Ninety-seven of them have names, and Orcas has most of the superlatives: largest island, tallest mountain, deepest fjords. It's a place where green meets blue, forests flow into the sea, and mountains climb into the sky, all within the intimate embrace of an island.

Jeremy Trumble, who owns the Inn on Orcas Island and whose parents began bringing him here when he was a child in the fifties, describes arriving like this: "When we got here, my dad suddenly started driving more calmly and us kids started behaving better. You were friendlier to people because the island just invited that—it had this aura. Somehow, Orcas made you a better person. You just wanted to enjoy every moment that you had on the island because it was such a special place."

Sandi and I were determined to live within that Orcas aura for more than two weeks each summer. We spent every spare moment figuring out how to knock years off what was first a retirement plan, then a fifteen-, ten-, and finally five-year plan to move to Orcas full-time.

We'd been able to buy island property only because, after a life spent as a hand-to-mouth freelance



I had a steady magazine paycheck at a time when bankers were flinging mortgage money at anyone with a pulse. Creatively maxing out our finances still bought only a small, drafty cabin with floors that flexed so much you could knock a cup off the kitchen shelf by stomping on the bedroom floor at the other end of the house. A natural history museum's worth of dead critters clung to the fouled insulation in the crawlspace, and the plumbing sounded as if flushing the toilet angered a clan of badgers living inside the walls.

The original owners had collected rainwater to bathe in and wash their clothes, and they used an outhouse for much of their time on the property, which they named Raven Ridge. When we moved in, the outhouse remained amid a copse of young cedars, standing by with a wonderful view of the water and a fresh roll of TP.

A contractor who came out to bid on bringing the septic system up to snuff brought along an old timer who didn't say a word while we poked at pipes and walked off distances that'd have to be dredged down our roller coaster of a driveway. Something about the quiet islander's thoughtful manner said "common sense," and at the end of the tour I sidled up and asked: "If this was your property, what would you do?" He looked me up and down, gave me a slight nod, and said simply, "I'd paint the outhouse."

Our cabin windows looked out over nothing but woods and water without a neighbor in sight. The closest lights we could see were on a Canadian island. We never even considered putting up curtains. If voyeuristic eagles and raccoons wanted revenge for all my years of watching National Geographic, so be it. At night, those bare windows turned the darkest black. On Orcas, though, the darkness was never threatening.

From Orcas you can see Vancouver Island—which has North America's highest concentration of mountain lions. You can also see a big chunk of mainland British Columbia, which has the most black bears. Not far up the Inside Passage are islands lousy with gigantic *Ursus arctos horribilus*—grizzly bears. However, the most dangerous wild animal on Orcas other than our overpopulated kamikaze deer is the river otter. Each evening, our dog, Murphy, and I walked the shadowy woods. There were plenty of noises to spark primordial tingles, but you always knew that nothing lurking in the Orcas forest had any intent more nefarious than gathering nuts and nibbling leaves.

I continued traveling frequently for assignments, but now I never worried about Sandi. She was perfectly safe at home, and if she broke down on the road, the next person along would stop and either fix her car or drive her to town. Teenage girls hitchhike around the San Juan Islands without a worry, and getting a ride is so easy that longtime residents think nothing of even counting on their thumbs to get them to the ferry on time.

So we settled in happily, having only the same great concern as every other working person on Orcas: Now that we found this wonderful place, how the hell do we afford to stay here? A good number of wealthy people live on the island, and many more have summer homes. The guy in front of you in line at the hardware store may be the ex-CEO of a huge multinational, a Hollywood producer, or a sickeningly young Internet retiree who optioned out of lastbubble.com just in time. At the other end of the scale, nearly 9 percent of San Juan County residents lived below the poverty line in 2000. There are people who are homeless and there are people who squat in illegal campsites, jetsam shacks, and barely floating boats. There are tarp-topped trailers and threadbare yurts, and a number of people you regularly see around the island look like they've escaped from somewhere.

In between the lost souls and CEOs lay the rest of us: retirees getting by and a working middle class of small-business owners, organic farmers, county workers, carpenters and other tradesfolk, plus an eclectic mix of sculptors, potters, painters, musicians, and writers—many of whom wish they knew

carpentry or some other skill that might earn them a steadier income.

~~The island has no industries other than real estate, construction, and seasonal tourism, so there are~~ very few jobs that pay enough to keep you alive in a place where the price of necessities like groceries and gas are 30 percent higher than the mainland. San Juan County has the second-highest income per capita in Washington State, but its average wage is ranked thirty-fifth out of thirty-nine counties. That means that while there's a lot of money floating around the islands, very little of it is being made by residents who have to work for a living. Most of it comes via investment income of the rich and retired (one-fifth of Orcas's population is over sixty-five). Property costs—which are bid up by the wealthy from all over the world who discover Orcas and want to own a piece as a part-time getaway—coupled with the few jobs and low wages make it especially hard for kids born here. They grow up in this fabulous, desirable place, but then many of them find they can't afford to stay if they ever want to own a home of their own.

While I took on every assignment I could wrangle, Sandi went to work in real estate, because there's one thing in this world you can count on, it's the real estate market.

As the crash began, Sandi picked up a second and then a third job, becoming one of many, many Orcas residents who work multiple jobs in order to help their family cling to what they think is the most wonderful rock on the planet. Orcas or bust.

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## Chapter 5

I was drinking a late-morning cup of tea when the news reached me about Bob Rivers's plane.

With some 230,000 general aviation aircraft based in the United States, there have been, on average, only eight stolen each year of the last decade. Nearly all of those thefts happen near or across the Mexican border, especially in Baja, where authorities say cartel lookouts keep watch for the right kinds of planes—primarily Cessnas—then call in trained air pirates to fly them off to join drug-carrying fleets. American private pilots even refer to certain antitheft devices that fit over throttles and props as “Mexican locks.”

Of course there's another border to the north. Ever since it became part of the United States, Orcas Island, with its scalloped shoreline, deep fjords, and dark, secluded coves, has enjoyed a storied history as a transshipment point for whatever products the era's taxes and laws made profitable to move from Canada into the lower forty-eight. Silk, wool clothing, Chinese laborers, opium for the Chinese laborers, Prohibition whiskey, and so on came through with a wink and a nod. At its closest point, the Canadian border lies less than a five-mile boat run from Orcas's northwest tip. The beach at the top of the island isn't called Smuggler's for nothing.

Today, the most popular hooch flowing south from Canada is the mind-bendingly potent wack weed called BC Bud that, according to our local Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers, trades pound for pound with the cocaine headed north. The vast majority of drugs drive across the line hidden in trucks, but CBP has found weed, coke, and hockey bags filled with cash aboard boats crossing the 165-mile-long watery border that runs a zigzag course from the shore of the mainland around the San Juan Islands, and out the Juan de Fuca Strait to the Pacific Ocean. The CBP's Air and Marine base in Bellingham, just thirteen miles from Orcas, operates blistering-fast nine-hundred-horsepower patrol boats along with a Black Hawk helicopter loaded with all the high-tech surveillance goodies to keep watch on the sea border. Still, it's the thinnest of thin blue lines.

Orcas residents who live near the airport have grown accustomed to hearing planes taking off and landing at all hours of the night. “There are a lot of legitimate reasons for planes to be operating there, especially medical evacuations,” says Bea Von Tobel, the airport manager. “But it's also not too hard to imagine a plane coming in to drop off a bag of something and then taking off again.”

Once a bale, bag, or bad guy smuggled out of Canada made it onto Orcas Island, it or he would be close to home free. The San Juans may mentally, culturally, and psychically feel like its own independent, far-out archipelago, but it's part of the United States. Orcas is one of four islands in the group served by Washington State Ferries, the largest ferry system in the country, third largest in the world. There are no passport checks, no Customs, and no security screenings to walk or drive onto the ferry at Orcas, and there'd only recently been some random stops at Anacortes on the mainland, where cars rolled off to drive to Anywhere, U.S.A.

“My first thought, after checking to make sure any of my pilot friends who might have borrowed the plane were okay, was that it obviously had to be taken for a drug run,” says Bob Rivers. “Everything fit. The random stops were happening. Somebody must have had a load they needed to get off Orcas, so they brought in a pilot to fly it out. Where does the plane end up? The Yakama reservation, where they have plenty of problems with drugs and gangs. Even the spot my plane landed was at the top of

road where they could have had an SUV waiting. And they weren't worried about getting the plane out, just transporting the load. It all made sense; it had to be drugs. My plane stolen to take a joyride. Never. Especially not on a day like that!"

Rivers's insurance agent had other ideas. "I started feeling like a suspect because all the insurance guy ever said was, 'We're sure it was someone you know. Who do you know who could have done this?'"

In one of many fateful connections and coincidences to emerge as Colton Harris-Moore stole his way around the Northwest, his theft of Bob Rivers's plane actually saved a life. One of Rivers's pilots had been suffering through devastating health and work problems. Things looked hopeless, so he came up with a plot to kill himself by flying a small plane up into the Cascades until the wings ice over and it fell out of the sky. When he heard about Rivers's plane, though, he had to cancel his suicide because he knew the insurance company would never believe the coincidence of two aircraft connected to two friends going down in the same mountains, both under suspicious circumstances. He feared that his family would never collect the life insurance. So he kept living, and things ultimately turned around and got better for him.

While the insurance company grilled Bob Rivers over his crashed Cessna, the residents of Orcutt went back to their lives, the theft just another twisted footnote to add to local history.

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## Chapter 6

The fire blazing in their outdoor woodstove made it feel like our friends Jay Fowler and Teri Williams were telling ghost stories that cool summer evening in 2008, several months before Bob Rivers' plane was stolen. Teri, a real estate and building permit pro, had found our home for us. Jay works as a lineman for OPALCO, which is officially called Orcas Power and Light Cooperative when things are operating okay, but is locally known as Occasional Power and Light because the electricity goes out whenever a seal farts near the underwater cable that feeds the island.

Between the two of them, they knew the island, its people, and its goings-on as well as anybody. They'd been instrumental in helping us rush our plans to move to Orcas full-time, and now, when the wine and beer were flowing after we'd just finished off a wonderful Northwest potluck of fresh-caught salmon and Dungeness crab, they were telling us there might be a crime problem.

Teri said that the top cop on Orcas had passed along a private warning about a series of strange break-ins on the island. "He said, 'If you knew the shit that I did, you'd start locking your doors.' "

I was incredulous. We'd been living on the island full-time for over a year and a half and nothing had occurred that might cloud the idyllic image of our new home. Sandi and I discussed it on the way home and weren't concerned enough to change anything. Besides, neither of us had even seen a house key since Christmas.

The details were sketchy anyway—just jungle-drum rumors. I figured I'd check out some of the stories floating around to see if there was anything to them. Little did I realize that what we didn't know—including some unnerving incidents that our sheriff's office was trying hard to keep quiet—was enough to fill a book. Our untouchable little island had already become the happy hunting ground of the twenty-first century's first outlaw legend.

THOUGH JUST A BIT over thirteen miles wide, it can take an hour to drive from one side of Orcas to the other, as roads skirt mountains and coast around the three inlets that cut deeply into the island from the south. A seven-mile-long fjord, East Sound, nearly cuts Orcas Island in two. At the top of the waterway lies the island's only town, creatively named Eastsound.

The town wanders back from its waterfront Main Street and climbs a slight rise. On the other side of the hill, which runs down to the ocean, lies a pocket of schools and churches and the small airport. From shore to shore—fjord to sea—Orcas is barely 1.3 miles wide at Eastsound, with the great bulk of the island hanging down to either side of town. A big-idea guy once tried to dig a canal across the narrow span so trading ships wouldn't have to sail clear around the island and up the long sound. Fortunately he gave up after dredging only about four hundred yards, leaving what's known as the Ditch, now used as a marina, between the airport runway and Smuggler's Villa Resort.

Behind town on Mount Baker Road—named for its spectacular view of the closest snow-capped volcano on the mainland—lies Orcas Center, the cultural core of an island that hosts a tremendous amount of artistic and musical talent in relation to its size.

From Main, Eastsound's shopping district runs up two streets: North Beach Road and Prune Alley, which contrary to popular belief was not named by the island's retirees in homage to their favorite fiber. It got its name because, along with apples, pears, and strawberries, Orcas farmers once grew an



exported large harvests of Italian plums.

There are no stoplights in Eastsound—or anywhere else on the island. It's a one-horse town, though instead of a horse, there's a cow. Her name is April, she's twenty-three, lovably homely, and lives in a field at the end of Enchanted Forest Road. April the cow is also a perennial candidate for mayor. Since the town remains unincorporated, it has no actual government. Each year we elect an animal honorary mayor. It costs \$1 a vote, and all proceeds go to support Orcas Island Children's House, a facility that helps local working-class families with educational day care and preschool. The fundraising pitch for Children's House reads in part: "money not invested in a child during this early phase may cost the emerging community member, and society, enormously in the form of a socially disruptive adulthood."

From an adult's perspective, the island seems an idyllic place to grow up. For some tweens and teens, though, once their hormones tell them that climbing trees and catching fish can't possibly be the end-all of excitement, the island becomes a big ball of boring. With nothing much to do—not to mention a very limited dating pool—kids begin looking for trouble. Some manage to limit themselves to high jinks such as Yogi Bering picnic baskets and beer from tourists in Moran State Park. Others go further, venturing into more felonious behavior. No matter what they do, though, there's a good chance they'll get caught. Kids call the island Orcatraz because everywhere they turn there's a prison guard in the form of someone who knows their parents and won't hesitate to call them.

In the early nineties, there suddenly seemed to be a flood of serious trouble with local island kids. Orcas residents looked around and realized they had a big problem.

The single mother of one troublemaker asked Mike Stolmeier, manager of Smuggler's Villa Resort, to accompany her son to the courthouse in Friday Harbor, the county seat, over on San Juan Island.

"There was a dozen other Orcas kids on that ferry, eighth and ninth graders, all going over to get felony charges put on them, and not one parent or even a lawyer with them," says Stolmeier. "I thought, What a bunch of idiot parents we got around here."

Stolmeier had been on Orcas since 1985, was raising his own teen, and saw the storm developing. "Yeah, the kids were screwed up and behaving badly, but it was as if we were eating our young. The community was after them, the cops were after them, and the prosecutor we had at the time was trying to make a reputation so he could move on to someplace else. The community overreacted and really ruined some lives—there was no way those kids would ever get a chance to try and fit back into our society. As a sociological event, it was horrible."

Level heads in the community came up with an alternative to hiring a *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*-style child catcher. They developed a number of sports, activities, and mentoring programs to give the kids something constructive to do. "These were things that should have been here for them in the first place," says Stolmeier. "It worked for the kids who hadn't already gotten in trouble, and things got a lot better for everybody."

According to stats put together by one of those nonprofit programs, the Orcas Funhouse, over the last decade Orcas kids have grown significantly less drunk, stoned, and pregnant. They've also consistently graded above state average in testing across all subjects. And the latest numbers show that between 2000 and 2006, overall arrests of ten- to fourteen-year-olds fell 63 percent, and proper crime arrests of ten- to seventeen-year-olds in San Juan County fell 83 percent.

AS FAR AS SPORTS and activities for those over twenty-one, Eastsound has the Lower Tavern. They used to be an Upper Tavern, too, which lives on in stories told whenever visitors ask what the Lower is lower than. Almost all of the stores, restaurants, and inns around Eastsound are mom-and-pops—and

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