



The Last Bush Pilots
Prologue: A Crash in the Wilderness
(Southeast Alaska)

"Mayday, mayday, I'm going down!"

The frantic radio call rang in DC Alva's earphones. Instantly he recognized the pilot's voice: his best friend Allen Foley.

"Engine failure, south of Davidson Glacier," Allen's transmission continued. Then fell silent.

DC's guts churned. The glacier, the young pilot knew, was miles from civilization—and help. Worse, flying visually beneath the clouds as all Alaska bush pilots did, Allen would have mere seconds to save the plane.

Shoving the throttle full forward, DC banked his floatplane hard left, north up the coastline toward the crash site. The engine surged. The manifold pressure needle straddled red line. He crowded the rugged slopes of the Chilkat Range. Pine trees dense as shag carpet loomed below. *Taku* winds tumbled like whitewater over the cliffs and pummeled his craft. Left hand gripped tight about the control yoke and right hand working the throttle, he fought to keep the aircraft upright.

With trembling voice, DC relayed the distress call to headquarters. "SEAS Base, this is *Sitka Shrike*," he radioed, using the company's

designated call sign for his plane. "*Gastineau King* just called, 'Mayday.' Engine's failed. South of Davidson. I'm enroute now."

Another crash, DC thought. One was seven times more likely to be struck by lightning, for God's sake. But once again, lightning had struck too close. The question burning in the back of his mind always was, Who next? Only in his darkest nightmares had he imagined . . .

Allen would be down by now. Images flashed through DC's mind of the man dying beneath a smoldering wreck. Instinctively he shoved again on the throttle, already firewalled.

"*Shrike to King*, do you read?" DC called. No reply. "*King*, this is *Shrike*, come in!" Static.

DC leaned over the controls and squinted through the plexiglass. Drizzle cut his view up the channel to a myopic three miles. Each visual cue, each bulge in the land or curve in the shore, floated toward him through the misty curtain like ghosts in a fog-shrouded graveyard.

"Coastline. Got to keep the coastline in sight," DC mumbled, not realizing he'd voiced the thought aloud. The leaden sky pressed down on him like the slab roof of a tomb. And it might as well be made of cement, he thought: fly into it, or penetrate the blinding rain ahead, and splat across the first mountain that came along. The moist air pressed through the cabin's filters and cooled his cheeks. He shivered, more from fear than chill. The drizzle turned to rain and formed a wall around him. The drops pelted his windshield. With each moment, the terrain popped through the curtain ever closer—visibility dropping fast. Less than a mile, he figured.

He cursed, throttling back. For Allen, every minute lost was a mile closer to death. But in this weather, speed was DC's first enemy. Any worse, and he would have to turn back or land.

The de Havilland Beaver floatplane slowed. As the airspeed trickled down, DC lowered a section of flaps to compensate. The trailing edge of the wings extended downward, adding lift.

He eyed the waves near shore. Chop the size of Volkswagens.

Even landing with engine power, he could dig a float or catch a wing and flip.

DC grimaced. Allen, flying a wheel plane, had even less hope. High tide covered the soft beach. Ocean waves slammed against a rocky shoreline, backed by a forest wall. Nowhere could he have glided to safety.

"*Shrike to King, do you read?*" DC called, for the hundredth time it seemed. "*King, come in. At least key the mike!*" No reply. "SEAS Base, what about rescue?"

"Coast Guard chopper's launched, ETA thirty minutes," the dispatcher's voice crackled.

"Can you make it through?" another pilot asked.

He eyed the wall of water ahead. "I—I'm not sure."

"Negative, *Shrike*," his Chief Pilot's voice cut in. "Weather's too solid. Seas are too rough for you, DC. Turn back."

But he couldn't shake the image of the dying man from his mind. He pressed on, squeezed between cloud and ground.

An hour passed—or a minute, he couldn't tell.

The drenched air formed fog; all turned murky. Forest, beach, even the air itself retreated into shadows of twilight. The saturated atmosphere phased between the elements of cloud and sky, water and air.

"Holy—" his voice trailed off. His gut churned. He'd heard of the phenomenon but had never seen it; never believed it could happen.

The sky fell.

The cloud base dropped, sucking the air below into its fold.

DC pushed forward on the yoke. The plane dove. He led the plummeting ceiling by a mere wingspan. The altimeter needle spun through five hundred feet.

Below the legal limit, he thought. But FAA rules were the least of his worries.

Four hundred . . . three hundred . . . the needle spiraled downward.

A glance out the side window: treetops whizzed by, inches below his floats. A startled eagle took wing.

"*Shrike, I say again. Turn back immediately,*" his Chief Pilot ordered.

But his life's in my hands, he thought.

His hands. He looked at them, tight and trembling about the controls.

Flying through this weather was hazardous at best.

Flying through this weather could mean two accidents.

Flying through this weather would take all the training and all the experience he'd strived to gain while flying the Alaska bush—which, he realized now, was pitifully little.

If he crashed, his dream of flying for the airlines would crash too.

If he survived.

DC swallowed hard.

And made the toughest decision of his life.