

(Excerpt from *Past Tense*, the opening of Chapter 4)

Sky King

On a Saturday evening, Daniel headed out to Jacksonville to take some pictures. The plan was to get the plane looked over that evening and actually take the pictures in the morning. Problem with flying an old plane, so much fun, was that using it for business meant that every one hundred hours it required inspection and the inspection required repairs and the repairs seemed to cost more and more. The good thing was, though, there were things he could do in Jax while he was waiting for the plane -- hang out, call some people, do a little battle with his natural tendency to mischief. There were actually two plans, an ostensible plan and a plan plan. The mischief was part of the latter. sHe was loading the plane with the stuff for the ostensible plan when the cell phone tweeted. It was Adrienne, his daughter.

“Hey.”

“Hi, Sweetie, whassup?”

“Where are you?”

“I’m at our cozy little Florida airport here in Ormond. Where are you?”

“Driving to the Y. I wanted to tell you my grades were good and when are you coming to see me?”

“Let’s go for it this summer. Maybe you come down to Florida.”

“Sounds good. Let’s figure it out. I’m free until Labor Day.”

“Everything else okay?”

“I guess. Free long distance on the weekends, what more could I ask?”

“Boys?”

“Don’t start with me, okay?”

“But first tell me is everything okay with your boy friend?”

“Don’t go there, Dad, I’m telling you. Traffic’s bad. Gotta go. Please call me. I might want to drive down to Florida with friends and hang out, this

summer or next. Pleeeeeaaaaase?” Then she was talking to people who were in her way. “Ugh. Turn, lady! Gotta go, Poppsie, see you soon I hope.”

“I’ll call and we’ll work out a get-together, up there down here, we’ll figure it out. I love you.”

“I love you, too. Bye.”

No sooner was he off than the cell phone barked again. Roberta.

“Is Sky King there?” As with a lot of pilots in the you-know-what generation, Sky King was a recurring theme in his life.

“Ha.”

“Say again? Mister King? Is this you?”

“I’m taking messages for him, since he’s dead.”

“Oh he is? Well damn.” She laughed, switched gears. “I’ve got to tell you something, Mr. Sky King,” she said. He could hear his dog barking in the background. Shadrak was a malamute, alert and primitive, in the house mostly but in the backyard sometimes, always with an opinion and grumbling in his big, deep, wolfy bark. Roberta was home early.

“Did you have a good day?” He turned around and stared across the tarmak. For the past few weeks, her mom and dad had been in town and had left that morning. She was feeling free and had been on a little romp with friends from her shift at the hospital.

“We went over to Cassadaga and I got a reading from your old pal Janet Bender, who looks like shit by the way.” Dan and Janet had graduated from the same high school in Illinois. She was one of the few long-time Central Floridians who hailed originally from Tuscola, and until the recent six months or so Dan had stayed in touch with her. Though they were several years apart and hadn’t known each other back in Illinois, they were old friends now because destiny had landed both of them in Florida. Once in a while Dan liked to talk to her just to hear the downstate Illinois twang. It was Roberta, however, who was most taken, by Janet’s talents as a fortune teller.

“Did you find out the future?”

“Stop it. It’s fun to do and I don’t want another word about it.”

Ready to go, he closed the door and sat down in his lawn chair in the shade of the wing. “So, was it fun?”

“Yes, I said it was and it was.” Then toward the backyard, she yelled, “Shadrak. No!” It sounded like a little scuffle at the back door. Then she was back. “He wants to hump our new neighbor.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Very funny, Skylur.”

Dan and Roberta’s new neighbor was a young woman, cute in a feisty sort of way. She’d been there just a few hours when Dan left, but he did see her talking with Roberta and making friends with Shad over the back fence.

Word was she had a “partner” who’d be moving in soon. Oh well. “Why’s Janet looking bad?”

“Your dog’s breaking my back, I’ll tell ya.”

“*Our* dog. He’s a good boy. He’s just dumb. Why’s she looking bad?”

She sighed. “Okay. That’s what I’m calling you about. For the past few months, up until just very recently apparently, she’s been living with a guy, guess who.”

“Janet was?” Janet Bender wasn’t the kind to be living with guys, at least not anymore. For one thing, she had a teenage daughter in the house, and this wasn’t the time. For another thing, she’d lived her way down some hard road and men were the problem. Something sounded wrong with the story.

“Guess who she’s been living with, Mr. Sky King, and hold your breath.”

“It wasn’t very long ago I talked to her.”

“It’s been a year, trust me.”

Actually it hadn’t been that long, but Roberta had no way of knowing that. Dan would call on a whim about any time. But it had probably been six months. “Tell me who. I gotta go.”

Roberta sighed again. “This is why I’m calling. You know him.”

“Who?”

“It isn’t good news.”

“For who?”

“Anybody. Mostly you.”

Dan did a sort of restless three-sixty in the shade of the wing, took up the chair and loaded it in. “Tell me, honey -- I gotta go.” He wasn’t too worried. He didn’t know anyone, really.

“Your asshole pal Skidmore.”

Dan did another three-sixty, this one mental, but it felt the same, like when the air drops out from under your wings and your internal gyroscope does a bob and whirl.

“Don’t wig out on me,” she said.