

Hunter's Choice

A Matt Hunter Adventure

J. C. Hager

**Greenstone Publishing
Rapid River, Michigan**

Hunter's Choice
by **J. C. Hager**

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Dedicated to the memory of

George F. Hager (1910–1976)

*A wonderful father, never given enough
credit, so good and smart he didn't care.*

Rachel Bottrell McGillviray (1893–1987)

*She needs a book of her own: logging camps,
Fiborn Quarry, and oh! those cinnamon rolls.*



Cessna

THE CESSNA WOULDN'T CLIMB. The pilot could see the beads of rime ice on the wings and nose cowl. The resulting drag on the controls and the increased rate of fuel use had plagued him for the past hour. Although certified for flight into icing conditions, his classic Cessna 310 couldn't handle this much ice, despite its rubber boots on the wing leading edges. Deicing fluid kept the windscreen clear, but every minute more and more ice was building up on the twin-engine plane. The weight was only part of the problem; the icy bumps stole aerodynamic lift from the normally smooth flight surfaces. The plane's performance slowly had deteriorated until it refused to climb; more ice and it would refuse to fly.

The pilot counted the ice buildup as strike two. Strike one had occurred a half hour ago when the Gore Bay Airport ILS localizer beam became intermittent. The Gore Bay tower calmly reported they were under Instrument Flight Rules due to reduced visibility by blowing snow. Crosswinds greater than thirty knots slammed their single 6,000-foot, north-south runway.

The pilot thought it was too risky to land his ice-heavy plane under such conditions. Experienced with crosswind landing techniques, he calculated that the risks exceeded his comfort level. With his newly installed GPS, reflecting the pilot's practice of keeping the plane in state-of-the-art equipment and perfectly maintained, he could have tried a GPS-only approach in lieu of using the intermittent ILS localizer, but he didn't. He had elected to keep pressing on, and now there was no turning back.

With 20/20 hindsight, the pilot would have given all he owned to be back at Gore Bay on Manitoulin Island with an opportunity for a challenging landing. He had planned an easy flight from Montreal, leaving before dawn to avoid the storm forecast for later in the day. These charter customers paid big money to be flown where they wanted to go without any questions about passengers or cargo. The business from these mysterious, sometimes dangerous, clients had kept him flying and in money for more than a decade.

He looked at the large man next to him who seemed to recognize their problem but said nothing. The beautiful woman in back was cold and bundled in her fashionable down vest that she probably wished was a jacket. Four large, military-type duffel bags filled the space between the front seats and the single back seat. Since they weighed several hundred pounds, he thought they could be jettisoned to give them a few more minutes of flying time—if it came to that.

A veteran pilot, he had experienced icing many times. He replayed this latest sequence of events in his mind: a strong tailwind had helped compensate for the initial ice drag, leaving most flight parameters acceptable. Well, except for the high gas use and sluggish controls. Heavy icing started when they were between Ottawa and Sudbury. He rejected Gore Bay to go for Sault Ste. Marie. The Sault had several runways and the crosswind conditions were less of a factor. The Sault's Automated Surface Observing System broadcast reported light snow with two-mile visibility.

During his radio contact with Gore Bay regarding their plans for the Sault, they had reported the transmission was static garbled.

At an altitude of 6,000 feet along the north edge of Drummond Island, they hit turbulence. The two engines strained to bring the heavy plane up to 8,000 feet as the pilot searched for better air with less water and, therefore, less ice in it. The pilot's pride and the nature of his cargo and passengers stopped him from declaring an emergency after passing Gore Bay. Now he fought against the hard bumps from the unstable air that hammered the lightplane.

After a particularly violent bump, both the pilot and the passenger caught the acrid odor of burning insulation and saw the puff of smoke rising from the panel. The pilot immediately shut off the master electrical switch and began bringing equipment up one system at a time. When he hit the avionics, the smoke returned. The avionics were again switched off, eliminating both GPS and radio. Strike three.

The storm from the southwest hit them with wind, snow, and more icy hail. Intermittent patches of forest flashed by below them through holes in

the clouds. He grabbed his maps and tried to read the bouncing and spinning magnetic compass. He tried to keep heading west into the storm but was unable to maintain altitude. Where were those two major highways or the huge former Strategic Air Command base south of the Sault?

The pilot fought the controls as the storm slammed the plane up, down, and side to side. Eyes widening with fear, all three on board desperately sought some kind of landing spot. The pilot asked about dumping the duffel bags. The big man growled for him to shut up and just get them down.

After another half hour, the twin fuel indicators were bouncing on their lower stops and the plane's altimeter read 1,000 feet. The pilot battled the wind-driven turbulence with sluggish, ice-laden controls—a battle he was losing.

Through a break in the white curtain of blowing snow, he spotted a patch of white amid the dark forest. A small lake. The port engine coughed. Only two choices now—land on the lake under some kind of control or later dive into the solid carpet of forest they had been over for many minutes. The densely packed canopy looked smooth and soft but was in reality a fanged monster that would shred the aluminum plane, leaving parts and people impaled on branches or crushed on the forest floor.

The pilot tightened his seat straps; so did his passenger. He instructed the female passenger in the back to get on the floor and brace herself against the large bags. There was no time to throw the bags out, and their soft bulk would protect the woman better than a single lap belt.

The pilot thought about putting the wheels down and trying to limit damage to his treasure of a plane, using flaps and props to shorten the landing. The option went away when the port engine stopped. He mashed the right rudder pedal to counter the sudden left yaw and wrestled the sluggish ailerons with all his strength and skill to level the wings. He knew he must descend quickly onto the lake to have as much landing surface as possible. Treetops cracked against the nose and wings. Pine branches scraped the windshield. One jagged crack shot across it. He fought the urge to duck as the sweet, but incongruous, smell of pine hit him. His mind and fingers raced over procedures and switches he had rehearsed hundreds of times in practice and in nightmares. He killed the right engine, feathering both props to reduce drag and engine damage. He set his jaw, concentrated on glide angle, clicked switches off, fought to keep wings level, reached for the flap lever with his right hand, all the while wincing at the deafening sounds of his first crash. Then a sudden silence produced a surreal moment as forest changed to lake.

No one said a word as the white expanse of the frozen lake filled the windshield.

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