

ON THE
PINEAPPLE
EXPRESS

H. L. Wegley

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ON THE PINEAPPLE EXPRESS

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my four beautiful granddaughters, Valerie, Taylor, Andi and Charlie. I pray this book will both inform you of a danger that exists in our society and help keep you safe from it.

Here's a heartfelt thanks to all who helped bring this project to publication. I especially want to thank the Pelican Book Group team, including my editor, Jamie West, for working patiently with me through a major rewrite, and EIC, Nicola Martinez, who designed the cover. Thanks to my critique group members, Dawn Lilly and Gayla Hiss, for helping me navigate the opening of this story. Thanks to my test readers, Duke Gibson and my wife, Babe, for patiently reading the manuscript multiple times and providing feedback. Finally, thanks to the Author of the greatest romantic suspense story of all, our Lord and Savior, who taught us the true value of stories.

Praise

Hide And Seek

"Wow, Mr. Wegley definitely keeps you on the run and out of breath through this whole story." ~ Donna B. Snow, Author

"The author has done a great job of weaving a very exciting, well written story together that I could not put down until I finished it in one reading. I had to find out what happened." ~ Thomas H. Hinke, IT/Computing Security

"Mr. Wegley—let's see more of Jennifer & Lee. Either write faster, or get your publisher to publish faster. I'm waiting!" ~ Kate Hinke, Writer & Editor

"...the story really comes alive and pulls you along for a heart-stopping ride. *Hide and Seek* by H.L. Wegley is a definite keeper if you love suspense with a touch of romance. " ~ Ginger Solomon

1

Olympic Peninsula, Saturday, November 2, 11:00 AM

Jennifer Akihara's SUV slid sideways on Highway 101 when she turned in at the Lake Quinault store. She jerked the wheel left, tapped the brakes, and coaxed the vehicle into a parking spot. Huge raindrops assaulted the windshield like bullets trying to blow holes in the safety glass. The wipers slapped out their liveliest rhythm, but her heart thumped even faster as she hit Special Agent Peterson's speed dial number on her cell.

Lee Brandt, her fiancé, sat silently in the passenger seat, but his foot tapped out a tempo somewhere between *andante* and *presto*.

She pushed the speakerphone.

Lee needed to take his fair share of the coming abuse.

"Peterson, this is Jennifer Akihara."

"How is my favorite NSA sleuth on this miserable day?"

"I stumbled across something near my research site on the peninsula...something you should know about."

"Is there a little smuggling going on along the coast?"

"You could say that. Drugs smuggled in, young girls smuggled out."

Peterson's end went silent.

"This morning I analyzed the data downloaded from my wireless scanner near Forks. Nearly thirteen days ago, it recorded an encrypted cell-phone conversation."

"Cell-phone conversation? You chose that location for your testing because there's no cell service. But you need to—"

"You mean no *legal* cell service. When I had a colleague from Fort Meade decrypt the call, I heard traffickers selling girls."

Silence again.

"Can you get the unencrypted conversation to me today?" His usual booming voice of authority had softened.

"I'll e-mail it from my cell when we're finished talking. But, Petersen, the next exchange of girls is set for tomorrow night. Can you move quickly enough to stop it?"

"You intercepted a private call. That raises some legal issues we—"

"Legal issues? There's nothing legal about that call, and what they're doing is worse than illegal."

"You're not thinking like a defense attorney. First, I need to analyze the conversation. If we have enough to go on, I can form a team by late tonight or tomorrow. But without specific information, no, I can't guarantee we can stop the exchange. If we botch things, we might never get a conviction."

"Lee is forecasting the Pineapple Express rainstorm to transition to a strong windstorm by tomorrow. The message indicated they don't do exchanges if there's even a small craft advisory. So the storm may delay the exchange and buy us a little more

time, but we can't count on that. We do know they're holding the girls at an abandoned mill site on the peninsula."

"Where's the mill?"

"We haven't located it yet." She had lit the fuse on her bomb.

Lee plugged his ears.

She waited for the FBI agent to explode.

"We? Yet? Where *are* you, Jennifer?"

"At Lake Quinault. Lee's with me, and we have five possible sites to check out."

"Far enough so I can't stop you." Peterson mumbled. "So...you don't know where the girls are, but you're driving around to abandoned mill sites?"

"Something like that."

"Jennifer, you need to back off. If you're right, these people will kill anyone who is a perceived threat. You could get the girls killed by charging in."

"Look, Petersen, Lee and I have collected some information. We've planned well, and we won't do anything stupid. But there's no way I'm going to stand by and let a group of girls be sold into a living hell. So you get your team out here as fast as you can. We'll call you when we find the girls. But for now, Lee and I are proceeding."

"You can't do that! It's too dangerous. At least wait until we can get out there."

"There's not enough time. I'm going to terminate the call now so I can send you the intercepted message. And, Peterson, ten days ago one of the girls hanged herself with her own shoelaces rather than let these guys sell her. Lee and I are going forward. I suggest you do the same. Good-bye."

Before she terminated the call, one loud, rare

expletive blasted through the speakerphone, "...that girl is stubborn!"

Jennifer held her thumb back for another second.

A barely audible mumble came across before he hung up, "...but I hope my daughter's just like her."

She smiled and pushed the red icon on her phone.

"Well, you stirred up a hornet's nest at the field office," Lee said.

"Then maybe they'll get out here by tomorrow. But if we find the mill, drive to the nearest cell reception, and call them, they'll come."

"If the storm doesn't prevent them from coming. On Sunday, they won't be able to fly here in either planes or choppers. Too much wind. Trees will be falling like bowling pins, and who knows about the roads—probably all blocked by a million board feet of timber."

Her meteorologist fiancé had raised some legitimate issues.

"Are you saying I made a miscalculation?"

"No. I'm as proud of you as Peterson." Lee chuckled. "He thinks of you as a daughter. Has since the terrorist incident last March." Lee paused. "Unless we get FBI support, we could be on our own."

"Been there before. We're not stupid, Lee. God and right are on our side. And He says nearly four hundred times, don't be afraid. So we go for it, right?"

"No other options. We can't let...what was the trafficker's name?"

"Trader."

"We can't let Trader sell any more kids. But promise me this...if we find the mill site, at the next opportunity you'll call Peterson and give him all the details. If something should go wrong—if something

happens to us—help can still come for those girls.”

“Nothing is going to happen to us. Well, only what God allows.”

“So where did all the newfound confidence come from? You were pretty gloomy when you called this morning to tell me what was going on.”

Gloomy hardly described what she felt. The voice of a young girl crying for help ripped at her heart. Only the scriptures she remembered had pulled her out of the pit. “I started thinking about my Bible study yesterday and a song on the CD you gave me—especially the part that says everything’s for His glory and we shouldn’t be afraid. We forget things—important things—so quickly, it’s a wonder God doesn’t lose patience with us all.”

“If there’s a wonder, it’s you.” He could always find a way to make her smile.

She squeezed his hand. Feeling its warmth and strength calmed her, gave her confidence. She pressed the accelerator and the SUV skidded. She steered out of the slide, clenched her jaw, and slowed. “This incessant rain! I can’t go over forty-five without hydroplaning. How far to the first mill site?”

“Less than nine miles.”

“That’s about fifteen minutes. How should we approach this one?”

“According to the satellite pictures you printed out, three or four hundred yards before the road to the mill there’s a BIA road.”

“Bureau of Indian Affairs road?”

“Yeah. We can park on it and walk to the mill through the trees.” He looked up at her. “I hope your raincoat has a hood.”

“Well, it doesn’t. So what?”

"So at the end of the day you'll look like a drowned..."

"Finish it, Lee."

"No. It isn't the truth. I've seen you with wet hair, and you're still beautiful."

"What are you buttering me up for?"

"I brought a waterproof cap. It's in my pack in the back seat. You need to wear it."

"You know I don't like that baseball-cap look."

"But you love baseball, Jenn."

"Baseball's a wonderful game. It's like an athletic chess match. But no way am I going to let my hair hang out through the back of a baseball cap like a horse's tail."

"This isn't about fashion. We need to stay warm and dry, because there's no telling—"

"Just hand me the cap, Lee. I might as well put it on now. What color is the stupid thing?"

He reached for the pack in the backseat. "Women. No matter how bright they are, they're still...women." His remark didn't deserve a reply.

She gave him a pair of rolling eyes instead. Lee was a man, a good man. But no matter how bright he was, he was still a man.

In a few minutes, she spotted the BIA road, drove down a short distance, and then veered off among some trees to park. "Show me on the map how we're going to approach this site."

He traced a path with his finger. "See...it's pretty much straight ahead through the trees. In about two hundred yards, we should come to the mill near the only building suitable for—" He stopped. His expression told her his thoughts.

"It's hard to say it, isn't it?" She pursed her lips,

quelling her own horror at the unspeakable future the girls faced if she and Lee didn't find them.

He nodded.

"Can we pray first?"

"Yes, but would you please do it?"

"Having second thoughts?"

"No. Only a lot of first-time thoughts. You do have your .38 with you, don't you?"

"Of course. But I'll pray. God's better than bullets." She kept it simple, asking God to protect them and help them find the girls.

After five minutes of slogging through the rain and being soaked by dripping branches, they approached an opening in the trees.

"Wait here for a second. I'm going to move closer. That big bush will provide enough cover," Lee whispered.

"But I'm the one with the gun."

"We don't need any guns yet. Let me take a look."

After reaching the bush, Lee pushed his head through the dripping boughs. Their target lay less than fifty yards ahead. His pulse quickened as he studied the building. Something drew his gaze upward. He exhaled slowly, backed out, and walked back to Jennifer.

"Well, what did you see?"

"The satellite picture was outdated. This isn't the place, Jenn. The roof's falling in."

It took several more drenching minutes to get back to the car.

He picked up the map and ran his finger along

Highway 101. "Only five miles to the next stop." He looked up. The back of her neck was wet. "Jenn..."

She turned her head, and her large, almond-shaped, brown eyes peered warmly into his.

"You're getting wet. Are you cold?"

"Not really. It's amazingly warm out there." She turned on the ignition. "Sixty-five degrees according to the thermometer in my car."

"That's the Pineapple Express—straight from Hawaii. Warm and wet."

"We still have four sites to check and the interview with that retired logger near Forks. We need to hurry, Lee. The rain is slowing us down more than we thought, so show me how we approach the next mill."

"First there's something we need to nail down. When we interview this logger-turned-chainsaw-sculptor, or talk to anyone else out here, what're we going to tell them? We can't divulge our real reasons for being here or we might reveal something to Trader or that other guy...Boatman. Something that would get us killed, maybe get the girls killed, too. For all we know, the traffickers live and work out here."

"How about this for a cover story? I look pretty young, so—"

"Pretty, young. That's an understatement on both counts." He scanned her face and his heart shifted to a higher gear. Jennifer's Japanese-Hawaiian heritage gave her a permanently perfect tan. Like many Asian women, she looked young. She was also a stunning beauty, like none he had ever seen. "It's hard to think about a cover story when I'm looking at a cover girl."

"Without a good cover story, we could get ourselves into trouble." As usual, she ignored his comment about her looks. "Let's see...we can say we're

researching the history of the timber industry on the Olympic Peninsula, and that I'm currently focusing on Grays Harbor, Jefferson, and Clallam counties." Hearing Jennifer say anything that hinted of deception was out of character.

It deserved his smirk.

"Don't look at me that way. It's the truth, Lee. It's just not the *whole* truth...which could get us killed." She shot him a frown. "Look, we may not be policemen, but we're working undercover and to keep us safe we need a cover story."

"OK. We're doing timber history research. We just won't tell people why. Back to your question about the next site. If we drive a quarter mile beyond the road to the mill, an old timber access road goes a short way into the trees. But this is all privately managed forest land, so we might find a locked gate across the road."

"Then you'd better watch for alternate parking spots as we go by."

"I will."

Jennifer braked and turned the vehicle onto the BIA road, heading back towards Highway 101.

"You know something? The cap looks kind of cute on you. But you need to make a ponytail, so you can let it stick out of the opening *above* the hatband and—"

"I already told you. No ponytails. In this rain it would hang like an old mare's tail."

"Old mare...I wonder what we'll look like when we're both old. I'll bet—"

"Keep studying that map, or someone might not get the chance to know."

Ouch!

Maybe she didn't always ignore his comments about her appearance.

They found a place to park the car, got wet, struck out at the second mill, and got even wetter on the walk back.

When they climbed back into Jennifer's SUV, he wondered how they were doing for time. Nearly 1:00 PM. He shook his head. Approaching the mills in a cautious manner took more time than he'd planned.

When Jennifer pulled out onto Highway 101, his stomach grumbled. *A foot-long BLT smothered in jalapenos.* The image, the spicy smell, and the delightful tingle on his tongue had leased a chunk of his gray matter. "You know, I don't remember actually planning to fast today."

"When we left I wasn't thinking about lunch." She glanced his way. "If you're hungry, we could go to Kalaloch before mill number three. We'd only have to backtrack three or four miles."

"Sounds good to me. Let's hit the deli in the convenience store. We can probably find a sandwich. If not, there's always the junk food."

Jennifer drove as fast as she dared—forty-five miles-per-hour in the heavy downpour. When the road turned parallel to the shore, she turned on the defroster.

"It's on the outside, Jenn. Fog. The defroster won't help."

Soon the visibility dropped to less than fifty yards.

"And you say tomorrow the rain will be worse?"

"To start the day it will, and then the winds come." Lee pointed his thumb towards the mountains to the east. "The rivers down the lee side of the

Olympics will certainly flood. Some rivers out here could also. Don't worry. Highway 101 usually stays open except where it skirts Lake Crescent."

"If we have to drive this slow all the way back to Seattle and maybe even slower coming out again, that's twelve hours of driving. It doesn't make any sense to go home if we don't find the mill today."

"No, it doesn't. If we don't hit pay dirt before dark, we need to stay out here."

"Do you think that's a good idea?" Jennifer glanced at him again. "I mean you and me—"

"I know what you mean."

Their marriage counseling with Pastor Nelson had begun with a commitment to enter their marriage morally pure.

Not only had Lee made this promise to God, but also to Jennifer's granddad when he asked to court her.

Granddad held a sixth-degree black belt in karate and had promised to kick Lee's head into orbit if he dishonored or hurt Jennifer in any way. Knowing Granddad meant it, and knowing he could deliver on his promise provided yet another motivation to keep the commitment he'd made to God.

"We could get a two-bedroom suite at that inn on the edge of Forks. We'd have separate rooms, and they have Internet access. That is your laptop case on the back floorboard, isn't it?"

She nodded.

"Then we're all set. You can use the laptop to check out any other sites we locate, and I can get storm updates on the Internet."

Jennifer laid her hand over his. "But even with separate rooms...well, there are temptations we've been careful to avoid."

"Surely you can restrain yourself for one night."
He grinned.

"Not funny. And it's not me who needs to be restrained."

"Can you think of a better option?"

"Better than what? Restraining you, or staying out here?"

"Considering what's at stake, Jenn, we've got to stay out here tonight if we haven't found them by this evening. Look at that stuff. I've never seen so much fog and rain at the same time." He nodded towards the low visibility outside.

Jennifer's eyes widened. "Was that the ranger's station?"

"I think so. Visibility's really bad. The ocean water here cools the air until it becomes pea soup, even with the heavy rain."

"Well, the Kalaloch store should be right—there it is." She steered hard left.

An air horn blasted. A logging truck swerved, inches from their rear fender.

"Sorry. No way I could see him coming."

"It wasn't your fault. We haven't seen another vehicle in the last hour, so it's pretty improbable he would pass us just as we turned in. Makes you think Someone's watching out for us and wanted to drive the point home."

Jennifer pulled into a parking spot by the store. "We need Him to keep watching out for us. We could encounter things a lot more dangerous than that truck."

2

Lee groaned at the deli stripped bare of everything. Tourist season at Kalaloch had ended. So much for his BLT. Instead it would be imperishable, semi-junk food, or hardcore junk food.

Jennifer stood at one end of the hardcore row.

Like her face, Jennifer's figure was something most girls would die for and most guys would—he needed to keep his thoughts in check.

God had blessed him with a soul mate, soon-to-be wife, with incredible beauty and an IQ that was off the scale. To him, she represented perfection, except for her temper, her difficulty forgiving people, and maybe—

“Lee Brandt, what do you think you're doing?”

In front of the rack, his hand was frozen onto a king-sized candy bar. His gaze had been following Jennifer as she walked up and down the aisles of the small store. He didn't have a clue how long he'd been staring at her, soaking her in.

“Wake up. Let's get going. We've got work to do.”

All things considered, they hadn't done too badly. An assortment of protein bars, energy bars, juice, and one king-sized candy bar. They walked out of the store and rounded the corner.

Enveloped in pea-soup fog, there would be no prying eyes. How convenient, except for the deluge.

He tugged on Jennifer's arm and pulled her close.

She turned her head up and let him pull her nearer, obviously not opting out of his kiss.

It started out wonderfully, but she pulled away coughing. She put her cheek against his neck and whispered half-choked words. "Was that...for anything...special?"

"Not unless you consider me special."

"I do, but the water dripping off your hood kept running up my nose. You nearly drowned me and—" Jennifer put her arms around his neck and pushed his hood forward. Then she joined him under the hood's shelter, returning his kiss without the deluge.

If she was exercising a woman's prerogative, he wasn't going to complain about it.

When he opened the car door a few seconds later, his thoughts followed a familiar migration route...from Jennifer to food. "Let's get in. I'm hungry. Can't live on love, you know."

"How could you possibly know that, Lee Brandt?"

"Good question. Maybe someday soon we can test that hypothesis."

They devoured their lunch while Jennifer drove slowly up Highway 101 towards Forks. In a continuous roar, the rain peppered the vehicle with watery bullets, building up a thick blanket of water on the surface. Perfect for hydroplaning.

The brief interlude at Kalaloch seemed to restore something missing since Jennifer's discovery of the trafficking, a full realization of the depth of their love for each other. Lee sent a heartfelt thank You to the Lord.

As they passed Ruby Beach, he swallowed his last bite of a peanut butter and chocolate candy bar. He gathered up the paper and stuffed it in a trash bag.

“Great meal. Should we thank the chef?”

“If he sampled his own cooking very often, he’s probably dead.”

“Dead, but well preserved.” He paused. “Uh...Jenn?”

“Just ask me, Lee. It’ll save time.”

“OK. Why are we driving to Forks when we were supposed to check the third mill site?”

Jennifer slammed a palm into her forehead. “How could I have forgotten what we—it was your fault, Mr. Brandt. You...you made me forget.”

He couldn’t let her mood slide into the abyss where it had been this morning. “You’re right. It was my fault. I distracted you and I got...really distracted.”

Jennifer drove in silence for a while, then reached across and took his hand. “It wasn’t your fault, Lee. I wish we could’ve stayed at Kalaloch for a while. But we don’t have any time to waste and—”

“Let’s assume it was providential and choose our next target.”

She gave him her squinting frown. “Providential? A kiss, providential?”

“Let’s see what it provides. Right now it’s providing us an opportunity to check out the mill north of Forks. We both thought it was one of the most promising sites.”

“On to Forks, then. You know, it’s looking awfully dark for the middle of the afternoon.” Jennifer craned her neck to look up through the windshield.

“Yeah. The cloud depth is increasing as we approach the rainiest part of the storm. It’ll get dark around 4:00 PM. That means we probably won’t get to visit all the sites today, and we’ll still be here tomorrow when the wind picks up. We don’t want to be on this