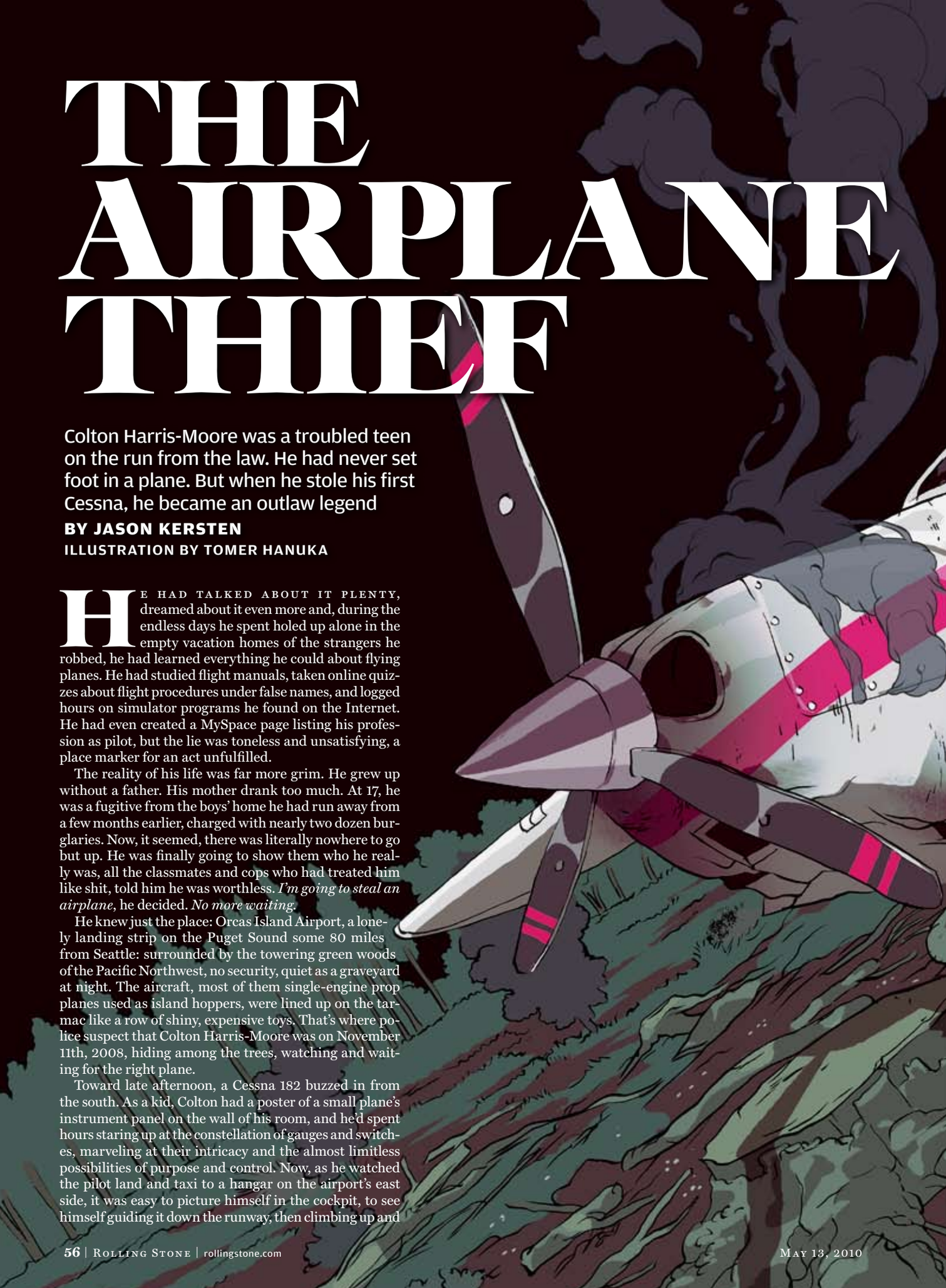
THE AIRPLANE THIEF



Colton Harris-Moore was a troubled teen on the run from the law. He had never set foot in a plane. But when he stole his first Cessna, he became an outlaw legend

BY JASON KERSTEN

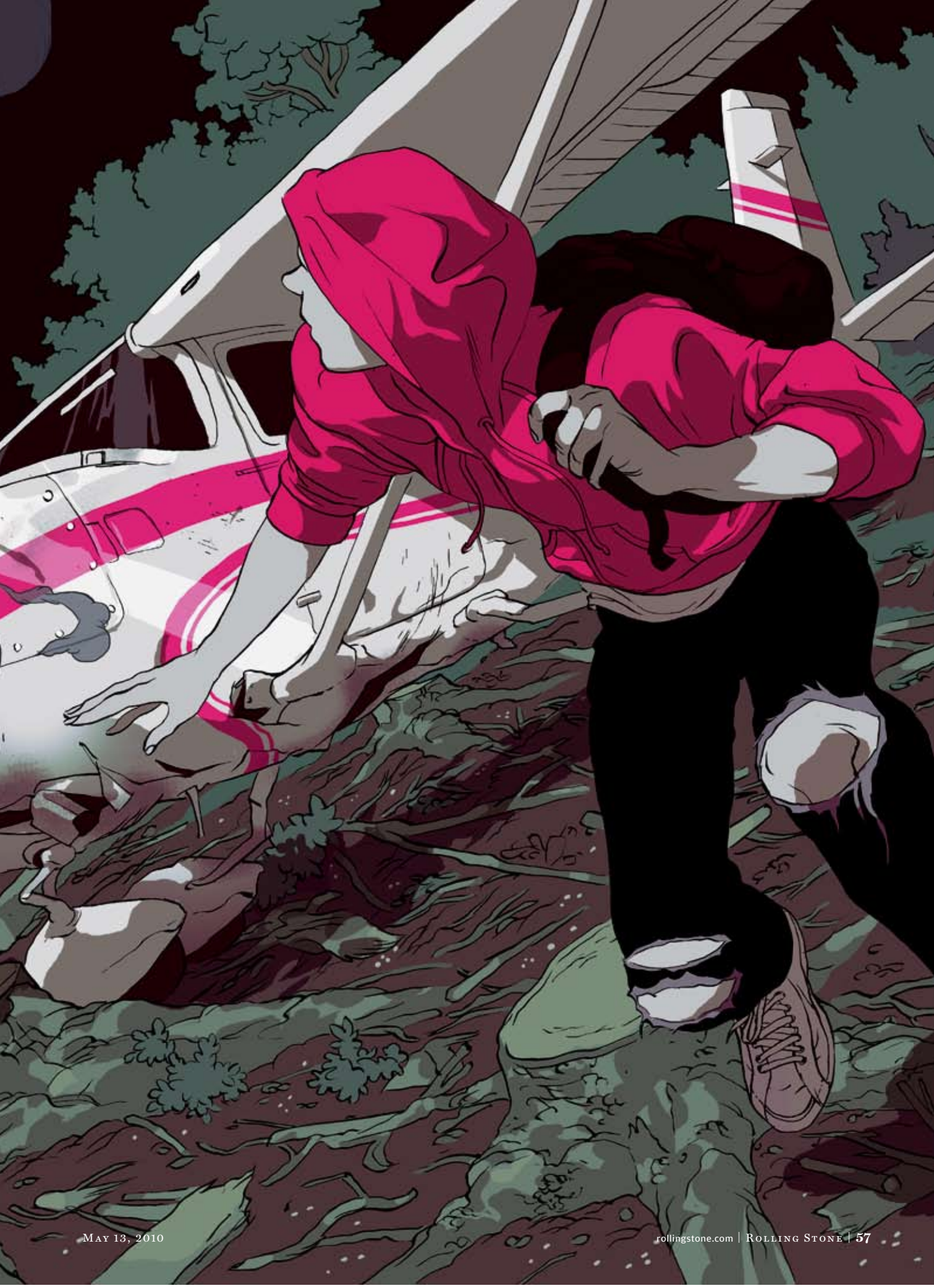
ILLUSTRATION BY TOMER HANUKA

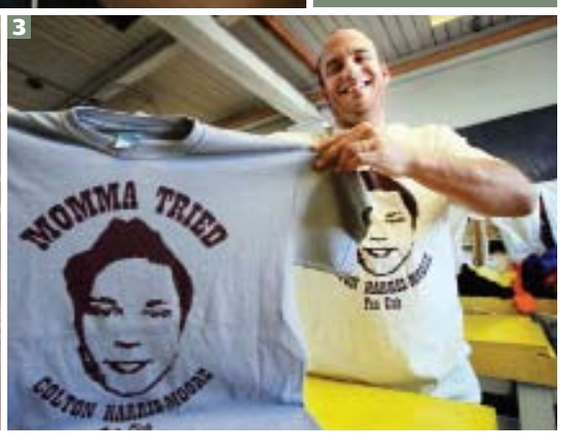
HE HAD TALKED ABOUT IT PLENTY, dreamed about it even more and, during the endless days he spent holed up alone in the empty vacation homes of the strangers he robbed, he had learned everything he could about flying planes. He had studied flight manuals, taken online quizzes about flight procedures under false names, and logged hours on simulator programs he found on the Internet. He had even created a MySpace page listing his profession as pilot, but the lie was toneless and unsatisfying, a place marker for an act unfulfilled.

The reality of his life was far more grim. He grew up without a father. His mother drank too much. At 17, he was a fugitive from the boys' home he had run away from a few months earlier, charged with nearly two dozen burglaries. Now, it seemed, there was literally nowhere to go but up. He was finally going to show them who he really was, all the classmates and cops who had treated him like shit, told him he was worthless. *I'm going to steal an airplane*, he decided. *No more waiting.*

He knew just the place: Orcas Island Airport, a lonely landing strip on the Puget Sound some 80 miles from Seattle: surrounded by the towering green woods of the Pacific Northwest, no security, quiet as a graveyard at night. The aircraft, most of them single-engine prop planes used as island hoppers, were lined up on the tarmac like a row of shiny, expensive toys. That's where police suspect that Colton Harris-Moore was on November 11th, 2008, hiding among the trees, watching and waiting for the right plane.

Toward late afternoon, a Cessna 182 buzzed in from the south. As a kid, Colton had a poster of a small plane's instrument panel on the wall of his room, and he'd spent hours staring up at the constellation of gauges and switches, marveling at their intricacy and the almost limitless possibilities of purpose and control. Now, as he watched the pilot land and taxi to a hangar on the airport's east side, it was easy to picture himself in the cockpit, to see himself guiding it down the runway, then climbing up and





On the Run

A teenage outlaw, Colton Harris-Moore embarked on a crime wave on Camano Island, near Seattle. (1) A self-portrait that police recovered from a stolen Mercedes led them to suspect that Colton was living in the woods like a "feral child." (2) After Colton was accused of stealing planes, fans began selling merchandise emblazoned with his image. (3) Police say Colton crashed the second plane he stole in a clear-cut field at a suicidal 130 mph, then rubbed oil over the interior to eliminate his prints.

out of a life that had been claustrophobic with disappointment, poverty and uncertainty. He had never set foot in a plane before. He didn't mean to turn himself into a folk hero, a winged outlaw with thousands of fans who cheered his every move. But he was about to become the most legendary airplane thief in the history of aviation.

"The shortest distance to Far Away" proclaims the official slogan of Camano and Whidbey islands, which nest together like a pair of crescents at the north end of Puget Sound. Camano's south end features some of the most coveted getaway real estate in the Pacific Northwest. For well-heeled Seattleites, it's like the Hamptons for New Yorkers or Cape Cod for Bostonians. Million-dollar beachfront homes abound, and each summer the local population of 18,000 swells by nearly half, as doctors and dot-com executives from Seattle come to sit on the decks of their cabins at sunset and watch flocks of bald eagles wheel and dive into the waters of Tulalip Bay and Possession Sound.

Colton Harris-Moore – or "Colt," as everyone called him – grew up only six miles from the southern tip of the island, but it might as well have been another planet. He was raised in a decaying mobile home on a five-acre patch in Camano's rural central woods. His father, Gordon "Gordy" Moore, was a journeyman concrete finisher; his mother, Pam, was a once-divorced city girl from the Seattle suburb of Lynnwood. She had bought the land with money she'd saved from working as an accountant for the National Park Service in Seattle. Their dream was to build a house on the property, but Gordy kept getting in trouble with the law, busted more than two dozen times for drunk driving and other offenses. He abandoned the family before Colton was two, leaving his son with a single, mostly unemployed mom in her early 40s who drank too much herself.

In spite of the conditions, little Colt was a happy kid. He put on so much weight that Pam nicknamed him "Tubby" – almost as if his body knew he'd one day explode into a six-foot-five, 200-pound teenager. When he was four, Pam met and married Bill Kohler, a gentle, heavyset man who had once served in the Army and worked as a milker at a nearby dairy. The family kept chickens out back, and when Colt and Bill walked out to feed them, Bill would pretend he was a chicken, jerking his head and strutting. Colt adored him, but Bill turned out to be almost as unreliable as his father had been – an on-and-off junkie whom Pam threw out of the house when he was using.

Most of the time it was just Colt and his mom. He collected James Bond movies, watching them over and over. He loved animals, taking care of a blind duck that wandered onto the property, and playing with his dog, a Great Pyrenees named Cody. But he devoted most of his time to exploring an obsession he'd had since he was a toddler: airplanes. A love of planes is not un-

Jason Kersten *wrote about the world's greatest counterfeiter in RS 979.*

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ISLAND COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE; ELAINE THOMPSON/AP IMAGES; COURTESY OF KIRO 7 EYEWITNESS NEWS

usual among boys, but where most move on to sports and girls, Colt got only more and more entranced with the intricacies of aviation, filling the pages of sketch pads with meticulously drawn aircraft. In the margins he listed detailed technical specifications that would have impressed a flight engineer: "*Dassault Falcon 2000EX – France, Max speed – 603mph, Range – 3,800 nm, Power Plant – two garrett ATF 4-7A-4C turbofans. . . .*" At the top of every image he included a pedigree: "*my own free hand.*" When a plane passed overhead, he could look up in the sky and tell you what company made it, the type of engine, how many passengers it held. "He was looking up at a plane every time I went outside," Pam recalls. "I got tired of looking at planes."

Before the crime spree that made him a legend, Colt had never actually been in a plane. But right across the water was Whidbey Island, home to a naval air station, and A-6E Intruders and EA-6B Prowlers tore through the skies above him on a regular basis. The Blue Angels were a top attraction at the base's annual air show, and just 15 miles east was the main Boeing plant in Everett, the largest airplane factory in the world. "He had this book of all the Boeing airplanes that they had made, and he always told me he wanted to become a pilot," says Jessica Wesson, a childhood friend of Colt's since the second grade. "He even told me that his dad was a pilot. I'm pretty sure he was lying about that, though."

Colt was determined to become a pilot himself, but social gravity seemed to have other plans for him. On his eighth birthday, his mother bought him a $300 bike. A sheriff's deputy, unable to believe that a poor kid who lived in a mobile home could have such an expensive set of wheels, accused him of stealing it and escorted him home in the back of his cruiser, embarrassing Colt in front of his mother. When Colt was eight or nine, his dog was run over and killed by the wife of a local cop. The worst blow came a year later, when his stepfather, Bill, was found dead in an Oklahoma motel room of a likely drug overdose. In a rage, Pam smashed every piece of glass in the house. "I went insane," she recalls. She hit the bottle hard after that, sometimes sinking into two-week binges in which she failed to stock the house with enough food.

Colt became depressed, unable to fall asleep until three in the morning, then waking up the next day feeling groggy and irritable. "I am not happy," he confided to a social worker at the time. "I could stay in bed all day. I need help. I am tired of this stuff." He felt trapped in his own home, at the mercy of his mother's addiction. He wanted her to quit drinking and go back to work, to provide him with what other kids had: cellphones, nice shoes, stability. He fought to project normality by keeping his hair short and his clothes clean, but he had trouble relating to other kids at school, eating by himself and rarely talking. When he did speak up, his mouth got him in trouble: In the sixth grade, he picked a fight with two kids who beat him up, and he teased another student so mercilessly that the kid began to choke him. "The older we got, the better Colton got at getting into trouble and getting out of it," recalls Wesson. "He was very sly and a good liar. I remember when he would get in trouble he always had this smirk on his face that said, 'You have no idea who you're dealing with.'"

One day when he was 12, Colt saw a cellphone sitting in an empty delivery truck in the nearby town of Stanwood. He had always wanted a phone, so he took it. After he made a few calls on it, the cops quickly tracked him down. More theft cases followed, mostly kid stuff, but it was enough to draw the attention of the authorities, who routed him into the system. A psychiatrist Pam consulted put Colt on Strattera, a failed antidepressant that was repackaged as a medication for kids with attention-deficit disorder. He began sleeping better, but Pam, claiming the drug made him depressed and moody, never renewed the prescription.

The two of them fought constantly. "He was like the Tasmanian devil," Pam says. Social workers who visited the home reported that Colt experienced "constant meltdowns pretty much every day." Once, when he was 12, his mother pressed assault charges against him. During one epic battle, Colt later recounted, Pam screamed, "I wish you would die!" Although she denies she has a drinking problem, a report by mental-health experts put the blame squarely on her: "This conflict seems largely due to mom's drinking of alcohol." Social workers recommended that Pam put Colt in counseling and seek treatment for her alcoholism, but she refused both. In a case file that petered out with no resolution, a social worker would write, "Parent states her drinking helps her deal with Colton and helps her stand up to him."

COLTON AND HIS MOTHER BATTLED CONSTANTLY. DURING ONE EXPLOSIVE FIGHT, SHE SCREAMED, "I WISH YOU WOULD DIE!"

Colt tried to encourage her. He presented her with an AA handbook, but she burned it. Seething at the destruction that drugs and alcohol had wrought on his family, he resolved he would never do either. It would become his single greatest point of pride, a way to set himself apart from the adults who had failed him.

Stealing was another matter. He fell into a routine of petty theft – the cashbox from the local public library, sodas from the teachers' lounge at school, even two small boats. All he needed to take his criminal record to the next level was a mentor, who came along soon enough.

When he was 14, Colt made friends with a boy whose name sounded like something straight out of the annals of Wild West sidekicks: Harley Davidson Ironwing. Like Colt, Harley was fatherless. He'd lost his dad, an avid biker, to leukemia when Harley was four, leaving him with a mother he considered a junkie. The state placed him with a Native American foster family, and he adopted their last name. By the time he met Colt, at age 16, he was already supporting himself as a burglar, knocking over homes in and around Stanwood.

A blond, curly-haired kid with a hobbit's build, Harley was a foot shorter than Colton, but the younger boy looked up to him. "Colt wanted to be like I am, have a reputation where nobody messed with him," says Ironwing, who just finished serving TK months for burglary at Airway Heights Corrections Center, near Spokane. "He'd been bullied, and I don't like bullies. I took him under my wing."

To Colt, Harley was living life on his own terms, free from parental supervision, taking what he needed to get by without hurting anyone. "He knew I wouldn't go into a house if somebody's home," says Harley. "I'm not trying to get hit with kidnapping or anything like that." Colt realized that the key to winning the older boy's trust – and the material trappings he wanted – were right in his backyard: the vacation homes on Camano's south end. So he hid in the woods, staked out a vacant spread, then called Harley for help.

"You give me $300 upfront, and I keep whatever I find," Harley told him – and that was how the longest running burglary spree in the island's history began. Ironwing taught him how to slip through the forests between homes, pick locks and stay invisible to neighbors. Soon the two friends were pulling off jobs every few weeks, stealing jewelry, cellphones, iPods, credit cards, laptop computers, a telescope, TVs and food. They'd often steal a car to ferry the goods, but after "borrowing" it, they'd fill it up with gas, drive it

back to where they found it and wipe away the prints.

Just being inside the houses was a rush for Colton. They were clean and well-stocked with all the semblances of the normal, prosperous life he'd never had. If he was confident the owners were away, he'd kick off his shoes, pour himself a juice from the fridge and watch TV. Colton enjoyed it so much that soon he was using stolen laptops and in-house desktops to go online and learn new skills as a criminal. He taught himself how to rig a stolen credit card to a homemade reader, pull its PIN number and draw cash off it from an ATM. Later he began using the cards to shop online for commercial credit-card readers and specially crafted "bump" keys, capable of opening common household locks.

The computers and the Internet also allowed him to explore his deeper obsession. "He talked about stealing a plane," says Ironwing. An even better plan, the friends agreed, would be to steal a helicopter, which they could use to rob a Costco. "Me and him talked about landing it on the roof," says Ironwing. "There's a lot of things you can get at Costco."

For all their big talk, the two friends seemed more like teenagers playing at being crooks. They rarely left messes at the houses they robbed, careful to clean up after themselves, and Colton didn't even sell most of the goods he stole, hoarding them in a tent on his mother's property. That proved to be a mistake. One day in September 2006, police arrived at Pam's house to serve a warrant for Colton, who had missed a court date on charges that he bought $3,700 worth of computer equipment with a stolen credit card. Discovering the cache of stolen goods, they linked Colton to the string of burglaries.

Rather than get locked up for the credit-card charges, Colton decided to go on the lam. It was the beginning of his life as a fugitive: Aside from a stint in juvenile detention, he would spend the next four years on the run. Some speculated that he was living in the woods like an old-time outlaw, but Ironwing scoffs at the idea. "He had a place to stay," he says, but refuses to elaborate. What seems clear is that Colton supported himself by stealing. In a seven-month period in 2006 and 2007, police believe, Colton knocked over nearly two dozen homes, and the residents began to clamor for the cops to do something. "At one point I hated my house, which is really quite beautiful," one of the victims wrote to a judge. Another claimed that her "ability to live comfortable and safe within my own house was shattered. I didn't get a good night's sleep for weeks."

Mark Brown, the sheriff of Island County, printed up "Wanted" posters of Colton and Harley, and vowed to the media that he would capture them – an act he now says he almost regrets. "I did it to catch him," Brown says. "But the thing I agonize about is that I brought him to the media's attention in the first place."

The chase was on. To Colton, the challenge was personal, a continuation of the conflict with Camano cops that went all the way back to the bike incident when he was eight. Deputies further stoked his ire when they temporarily confiscated his new dog, a beagle mix named Melanie, who they found tied up next to his cache of stolen goods. "Cops wanna play huh!?" Colton wrote in a note to his mom. "Well it's no lil game. . . . It's war! & tell them that."

Deputies came close to arresting Colton twice, when they caught him in the midst of a burglary, but both times he simply outran them, disappearing into the woods. Then, in February 2007, Sheriff Brown's campaign paid off when neighbors noticed a light on in a summer home and called the police. His men surrounded the residence and shouted out Colton's name. Terrified, he phoned his mom. She drove to the house, stood outside, and talked to him for close to an hour by cellphone, finally convincing him to surrender.

Colton, now 16, pleaded guilty to three counts of burglary and was shipped off to Green Hill School, a maximum-security facility for juvenile offenders. After a psychologist determined that he was at heart a good, intelligent kid who didn't do drugs, he was sent to Griffin Home, a minimum-security group residence in the Seattle suburb of Renton. With only about 30 residents, the quiet, low-key setting made it feel more like a summer camp than a detention facility. He would be confined to Griffin for three to four years, depending on how quickly he straightened up his act.

Colton found the home stultifying. The fluorescent lights burned his eyes, and the counselors forced him to take a class on drug and alcohol abuse, lumping him in with the dopers and tweakers. For him, it was the ultimate humiliation, and he began teasing other boys during therapy sessions, playing the clown. But his wiseass routine failed to win him friends, and he felt isolated, misunderstood. "I wish I was home," he wrote on an elaborately designed card he sent to his mother, "but since I'm not, this is the best I can do. I hope you like it." He drew a sylvan scene evoking the best of home: a butterfly, a chicken, flowers, fir trees and a flaming barbecue.

Art was one of the only classes he enjoyed at Griffin. A collage he created before he was locked up, on the theme of what he wanted out of life, displays the crisp, orderly focus of someone who knows exactly what they want to accomplish. It consists of 106 images, most of which are text, in a precise and careful arrangement. The word "money" appears four times, along with "wealth" and "dollars" and a dozen designer labels, from DKNY to Hugo Boss. Most of the images are high-end gadgets – Rolex watches, cellphones, PDAs – but there is also a strawberry cheesecake, and tourism logos from Mexico and Argentina. At the top of the collage, dead center, is a passenger jet, framed by prophetic words: "May I have another" and "Profession: Pilot."

But the life he wanted would never come to him as long as he was confined to Griffin Home. The place had no fence, and from his bunkhouse, the freeway leading back to Camano was only a thousand feet away. At 8:40 p.m. on April 29th, 2008, Colton waited until the first evening bed check was complete, then slipped out of his bunk and into the night.

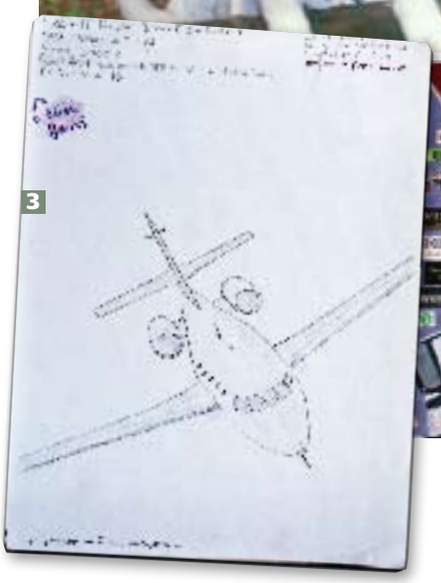
COLT PULLED BACK ON THE YOKE, AND THE PLANE ROSE GENTLY OFF THE EARTH. AFTER 17 YEARS OF DREAMING, HE WAS FLYING.

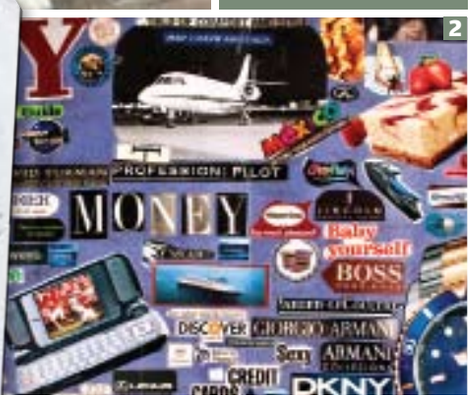
There was no turning back for Colton once he left Griffin Home. He had violated the terms of his sentence, which would only add to the time he would be locked up. If they were going to catch him again, he decided, they would have to do it while he was pursuing his dream. He knew he wasn't going to win his wings by conventional routes: the military, college, flight school. He'd have to train himself, which would take time and resources.

What he did after fleeing Griffin can't be confirmed, but police suspect he resorted to his old habits. Two weeks after escaping from the home, they say, Colton was back on Camano, hitting the weekend homes hard. He applied for credit cards with info stolen from burglary victims, and had one sent to him at a mailbox he installed by his mother's property. (While he was at it, his mother insisted on cooking him a big breakfast – hash browns and eggs and sausage and bacon. Then he took off so she wouldn't get in trouble for harboring him.) He allegedly used the stolen cards to withdraw $300 in cash, and he went online and ordered card scanners and two iPods. He managed to stay off the police's radar for three months, until a deputy spotted him driving a stolen Mercedes. When the deputy gave chase, Colton jumped from the car and escaped into the woods.

Fight or Flight

Colton grew up in a broken home, where he fought with his mother and was picked on at school. From a young age he became obsessed animals and flying. (1) As a boy, with his dog, Melanie. "He confided in his animals, because they would listen to him," says a friend. (2) An elaborate collage that Colton created illustrates the central goals of his life: big money, fancy gadgets and airplanes. Above the aircraft are the words "Profession: pilot." (3) A sketch he made of a plane, accompanied by precise technical specifications. As a boy, he could cite details of any plane passing overhead.





Colton was clearly enjoying himself: Police recovered a backpack from the Mercedes containing a digital camera with photos he had taken of himself. In one, he's lying on his back among the trees and ferns, wearing a Mercedes polo shirt and smirking as he listens to one of his stolen iPods. The photo would become the iconic image of Colton, emblematic of his outlaw mystique: a cocky, resourceful thief, comfortable on the lam, doing his own thing.

Based on the photo, it was easy to assume that Colton was a survivalist, living in the forests of the Pacific Northwest like a boy Rambo or a "feral child," as one Camano detective called him. To track him down, the police sent out dog teams and helicopters equipped with infrared radar, but they never found a trace. That's because Colton was most likely staying in vacant homes, or with friends: He wanted to fly, and he needed to be close to the Internet to prepare himself. He could download training programs like *Microsoft Flight Simulator* or *X-Plane,* fire them up on a stolen laptop or desktop, and practice for hours. Both programs offered dozens of planes to choose from, with realistic terrain and cockpit displays, weather settings and thousands of airports. By early November, seven months after leaving Griffin Home, his secondhand knowledge had reached its limit. He needed to fly solo, and the only way to do it was to steal a plane.

Airplane theft is a rare crime. In 2009, only seven airplanes were stolen in the United States; the suspects are almost invariably members of drug cartels, who use the planes to transport their products. Almost unheard of are airplane thieves like Colton, who take to the sky with no practical experience and no greater motivation than to simply be airborne. An article in a 1929 edition of *Popular Science* tells the tale of a British mechanic who, responding to a dare, took off in a bomber. "He was gone for four hours and Royal Air Force planes went out to look for him or the wreckage," reads the account. "When he was sighted on his way back, they rushed fire apparatus to the landing field, expecting him to crash. But he made a safe landing, even if it was obviously inexpert." More recently, in March of last year, a Texan named Joshua Paul Calhoun commandeered a Bonanza 836 from a municipal airport and crashed it in a stand of trees five miles after taking off, walking away with only minor injuries. Later, in a jailhouse interview, Calhoun explained his motivation to a reporter in terms that Colton could relate to: a lifelong fascination with flying.

Once Colton reached the hangar at Orcas Island Airport on the night of November 11th, his burglary experience came in handy. The door was locked, but he had no trouble forcing it open. There in front of him was the Cessna 182 that police say he had scoped out earlier that day. He rummaged around the hangar until he found a key to the Cessna, then climbed into the cockpit.

Colton browsed the manual, which owners are required to keep in the plane. Then, at first light, he switched both fuel tanks to the "on" position, pushed the mixture-control rod to "full-in" so that plenty of fuel would reach the engine, and flipped on the fuel pump to prime the aircraft. Moments later, after turning the key and pushing in the throttle, he found himself racing down the runway at 80 miles per hour, with nothing but the cold, unwelcoming waters of Puget Sound beyond. As the Cessna's nose wheel tipped off the tarmac, he pulled back on the yoke, and the plane popped gently off the earth.

After nearly 18 years of dreaming, he was flying.

Whether or not Colton had a destination in mind is known only to him, but his options were surprisingly limited. Unless he wanted to draw attention by crossing into Canadian airspace, his best bet was to stay far enough east, which is precisely what he did. He banked southeast, toward the Cascades. Heavy rain was pounding the mountains that morning, but to avoid the weather all he had to do was climb to 10,000 feet. There, he could soar between blue sky and a cottony sea of white, with Mount Rainier peaking through the clouds to his right like a sugar castle. Except for the occasional glint and contrail of an airliner, it was a world completely unmarred by humans, a bright, serene dreamscape that felt like it belonged entirely to him.

"In soloing – as in other activities – it is far easier to start something than it is to finish it," Amelia Earhart once said. She was referring to the art of safely landing

COURTESY OF PAM KOHLER, 3

an aircraft, a task that Colton faced three and a half hours after takeoff. He couldn't put down in a small airport without drawing the attention of authorities, so his only choice was an open, level field. He found one just on the east side of the Cascades, on the high plains of the Yakama Indian Reservation. He circled around, lined up for an approach and reduced speed, entering into a controlled fall that he had to precisely time and align. Bearing in to the field at over 80 miles per hour, he was attempting a feat that had gotten pilots with far more experience killed.

Tribal police from the Yakama Reservation found the Cessna later that day. Its landing gear and propeller were mangled, its undercarriage crumpled. Where Colton disappeared to was anyone's guess. He was miles from the nearest town, and 250 miles from home. The only trace he left behind was dried vomit in the cockpit. Whether it was brought on by airsickness or fear, it was a small price to pay. Flying had been everything Colton had imagined it would be – and better. He wanted more.

It would take almost a year for the authorities to accuse Colton of the Cessna theft. By then, he had already gained notoriety as the "Barefoot Burglar" – an alias bestowed on him after a security camera captured him stalking through a store he had allegedly robbed, sans shoes and socks. It was part of a frenetic string of suspected burglaries last summer, which not only included more homes but a boat, a bank, five stores, a rifle from a police cruiser, and another plane. According to the local sheriff, Colton stole his second aircraft, a Cirrus SR22, from the airport in a sleepy town called Friday Harbor, on September 11th of last year. He flew it only about 10 miles, back to the airport on Orcas Island where he had stolen his first plane – but what's remarkable is that he did it at night.

Night flying requires far more focus than daylight flight. Unless there's a good moon, physical reference comes down almost exclusively to points of light. The FAA requires pilots to be "instrument rated" to fly in low visibility, an entirely different license that means you can go from takeoff to landing based on the readings from your instrument panel alone. John F. Kennedy Jr., who was not instrument rated, died along with his wife and sister-in-law while attempting to fly on a hazy night. Colton came close to nailing it on his first try.

"He broke one of my $300 runway lights," Beatrice von Tobel, the airport manager at Orcas, says with a laugh. "But the plane was actually still flyable."

The next night, a deputy spotted the fugitive in the town of Eastsound and gave chase. Colton easily outran the cop, laughing as he disappeared into the woods. The deputy said that Colton had "vaporized."

He was on a tear, suspected of linking together crimes so quickly and unexpectedly that the police could do little more than tabulate the toll. After outrunning the deputy, he worked his way to a nearby marina, where he stole a small yacht and navigated 15 miles north to the town of Point Roberts, right on the Canadian border. Based on subsequent burglaries there, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police believe that Colton crossed into Canada, then made his way to the British Columbia town of Creston, where he broke into two airplane hangars at the local airstrip. Unable to find a plane to his liking, he seems to have crossed back into the U.S. on foot, stolen a car, and driven it straight to another small airport in Bonners Ferry, Idaho. There, on September 29th, he is suspected of stealing the plane that would make him famous.

This time he took a Cessna 182 belonging to a local cattle rancher who used it to fly to auctions. "He broke open the passenger door with a crowbar or a screwdriver and got in the plane," says the rancher, Pat Gardiner. "He must have spent time in there reading manuals, because they figured he got in the night before, stayed in there and then opened up the door at first light, pulled the plane out."

Colton couldn't find any keys for the Cessna, but most single-engine planes are as simple to boost as a 1974 Pinto; he apparently started it up by jamming a screwdriver into the keyhole and twisting. An airport worker who saw the plane take off reported that its engine was "firewalled" – running at full bore – but even then Colton had trouble getting off the ground. Gardiner's Cessna was equipped with a variable propeller, which is kind of like a gearshift for propellers. He was taking off in low and barely cleared the tops of the trees.

After takeoff he turned southwest, following the Kootenai Valley to Spokane, then on to Walla Walla, where he swung northwest and crossed central Washington. He was heading home – but just before crossing the Cascades, his fuel reserves ran low. A few miles outside the town of Granite Falls, he dropped down beneath a thick cloud cover to search for a place to land. That's when he found himself in serious weather – and trouble.

COLTON'S EXPLOITS MADE HIM A FOLK HERO: THE BOY WHO NO ONE HAD CARED ABOUT BEFORE NOW HAD FRIENDS EVERYWHERE.

Gardiner was stunned when he was briefed on an FAA reconstruction of the next few minutes, during which wind gusts in excess of 30 miles per hour tossed the small plane around like a toy. Colton nearly lost control of the aircraft. "He was going 90 degrees up and every which way," Gardiner says. As he finally leveled off, Colton spotted a timber clear-cut and bore down for a landing. Eager to get out of the rough weather, he approached the stump-strewn clearing at a suicidal 110 knots – a good 40 miles per hour faster than it's safe to land. It was the equivalent of jumping a pickup off a hill at 130 miles per hour and trying to put it down safely in a field of fire hydrants. Upon contact with the ground, he immediately began careening into tree stumps, which ripped away the plane's wheels and buckled the undercarriage. "When he hit the ground there were only 90 feet of marks," says Gardiner. "He had about a six- or seven-G stop." In pilot parlance: He went from almost 130 miles per hour to a dead standstill in less than three seconds.

The airbags in Gardiner's plane deployed, probably saving Colton's life. Investigators later determined that Colton was so scared the airplane would explode that he kicked open the passenger side door and ran from the crash still wearing his headphones. When no flames erupted, he returned and diligently rubbed a quart of oil over the interior, successfully eliminating his fingerprints.

A logger discovered Gardiner's plane two days later; three days after that a family in Granite Falls reported a burglary, and the local police quickly mobilized a search team. As they scoured the woods behind the house, one deputy reportedly heard a gunshot. "It was close, and they felt threatened," a police spokeswoman later reported – but deputies found neither Colton nor proof that he had fired a weapon.

Harley Ironwing, who had turned himself in not long after Colton, saw the story on TV in prison and instantly recognized his friend. "I said, 'That's my little partner,'" he says. "I was actually expecting him to steal a helicopter." He has a firm opinion when it comes to the gunshot. "I know there's no way Colton fired that shot. Colt may be big, but he wouldn't hurt a fly. Everybody knows the hills around Granite Falls are filled with tweakers. It was probably somebody worried about their meth lab."

It was the Idaho plane theft, and a 26-year-old writer from Seattle named Zack Sestak, that turned Colton into a modern-day legend. Sestak had read about Colton back in September and decided to start a fan page on Facebook. "I read the article and thought, 'Wow, this kid is nuts,'" he

Life on the Lam

(1) Colton was caught on camera robbing a store on Orcas Island last September. **(2)** At a court appearance in 2007. **(3)** Harley Davidson Ironwing, Colton's mentor and partner in crime.

says. "I started it kind of as a joke. For the longest time there were like seven members." After an Associated Press article about the Idaho plane theft mentioned the fan page, Sestak was surprised to find that it had gained more than 1,000 members in less than a day.

"Fly, Colton, Fly!" "Colton is a true hero" and "You're a modern day Jesse James" were among the messages his fans wrote. Girls wanted to date him. Dozens offered to hide him from the police. A Seattle entrepreneur hawked Colton T-shirts, mugs and hats emblazoned with his face and a slogan cribbed from the title of Merle Haggard's song: MAMA TRIED. The boy whom hardly anyone had given a shit about when he needed help suddenly had friends everywhere.

"You got people reading headlines about billion-dollar bailouts and executives getting million-dollar bonuses with taxpayer dollars," Sestak says. "People feel disillusioned, and they see Colton wearing the hat of somebody who's taking on the system by himself, and it looks like he's winning. It captures the imagination."

Colt was baffled by the celebrity. He called his mom and read her the Facebook messages. They had some good laughs, especially over newspaper articles that portrayed him as a barefoot renegade living in the woods, stealing food for survival. "He doesn't live in the woods and he never has," Pam says. "He lives in a house, with a lady and a couple of guys. The woman is a chef." She claims not to know the woman's name, but adds that Colton earns his keep by doing some sort of "computer work" and believes that the residence is behind a gate and "heavily guarded." Colton drives a brand-new car, she boasts, and even goes out in public, albeit disguised. There are also rumors that he now has a girlfriend.

"The way I look at it is, he's living his life his way, and to hell with everybody else," she says. "I'm proud of that."

Since November, Pam has been under siege by reporters from as far away as Brazil. She insists on being paid for interviews, and is perplexed when they explain that they are only allowed to pay for photo rights. The ceiling in her kitchen is collapsing in on her, drooping insulation.

"I miss him," she says despondently. Colton rarely calls her anymore. These days her most regular visitors are cops. Once, after Colton's dog, Melanie, flushed a cop out of the trees behind her house, an entire SWAT team emerged from the forest, looking for Colton. Pam sleeps with a shotgun and posted a plywood sign out front reading NOTICE: IF YOU GO PAST THIS SIGN, YOU WILL BE SHOT.

Hollywood also came calling, offering to buy the rights to Colton's story whenever he turns himself in or gets caught. Colton told his mother he wasn't interested, and that if he did make any money off his story, he'd give all of it to an animal shelter. Pam says she tried to talk him into turning himself in, maybe use the movie money to hire a good lawyer, but he wasn't interested. He was nervous that he wouldn't get a fair trial, that cops were so angry over his success that they'd shoot him on sight.

Mark Brown, the sheriff of Island County, expresses disgust over Colton's notoriety. To Colton's fans, Brown and the cops are country bumpkins who can't catch a 19-year-old kid operating on a criminal's worst tactical ground: islands. Yet among all the summer homes, Colton has found a perfect niche, a hole too big for the cash-strapped sheriff's offices to fill. "You could step into one of these cabins and live for months," Brown says. "It's seasonal – by the time anyone reports one of his burglaries, he's usually been gone for days, sometimes weeks." It appears that until Colton makes a mistake or gets unlucky, he'll continue to run the game.

Colton, for his part, apparently has a long-term plan. "He wants to start his own private airline, a very private airline," Pam says with a completely straight face. It may sound completely insane – how could an 19-year-old kid plastered all over the Internet believe he could make a living by piloting stolen planes? – but drug runners and smugglers have done it practically since the invention of flight. An estimated 27,000 small planes take to the air in America each day, and as long as Colton keeps a low profile and masters his landings, he could theoretically reuse a stolen plane indefinitely. Many small airports sport unattended fuel pumps that accept credit cards, which would enable Colton to fly almost anywhere in the country. "If he's staying away from airports with commercial airliners, controllers really don't care what you're doing or who you are or where you're going," says Max Trescott, an award-winning FAA flight instructor. "It's like the Wild West in that regard. A small airplane is like a car. Does anyone pay attention to you when you drive down the street?" For as little as $6 a day, Colton could park the plane at a small airport and no one would be the wiser. Although the FAA requires small airports to log the tail or "N" numbers of visiting planes, the numbers are never crosschecked.

The last time Colton called his mother, he mentioned that he was deep into his latest self-learning project: mastering a foreign language through Rosetta Stone. Pam refuses to say whether he is studying Spanish in preparation for a run to the border. Smuggling drugs may seem like a stretch for a kid who detests them, but Colton is legally no longer a kid, and if there's one thing as certain about adulthood as the law of lift behind an airplane's wing, it's that we learn to compromise our way to our dreams. Other than his dogs, flying has always been the only thing Colton can count on to make him forget his troubles. [*Cont. on 77*]

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: SAN JUAN COUNTY SHERIFF; ISLAND COUNTY SHERIFF; COURTESY OF KIRO 7 EYEWITNESS NEWS

AIRPLANE THIEF

[*Cont. from 63*] "He never had the love he needed," says Harley Ironwing. "His mom never showed him the unconditional love most parents show. She looked at him as a mess-up or something. He confided in his animals, because they would listen to him. Dog may be man's best friend, but that's not the only thing that's man's best friend. A person always needs somebody they can talk to."

The last time Pam saw her son, almost two years ago, he showed up at her house in the middle of the night and started ransacking his bedroom, looking for something. "He never told me what," she says. It was raining, and he was soaking wet. As he started to leave, she held his arm. "Wait a minute," she said. "Give me a hug and a kiss." He left her standing in the doorway, her clothes damp from the embrace.

By early February, no one had heard a peep out of Colton in four months, and it looked as if he were folding up his wings, possibly even preparing to turn himself in. "He's waiting until the media coverage dies down," says Pam. "Then maybe he'll work out a deal." Harley Ironwing echoes the same sentiment: "He's in a good place, he doesn't need to steal. I think he'll wait until things settle down and turn himself in."

It sounded like a good plan: Take the Hollywood money, and use whatever he didn't give to the dogs to hire a good lawyer. After doing his prison time, he could still obtain a pilot's license because FAA regulations only bar applicants with felony drug or alcohol convictions. Colton, after all, is still 19. His whole life is ahead of him. But if there's one thing that all flying creatures have in common, it's that they don't like to be cooped up.

CATCH ME IF YOU CAN A message Colton left after his last crime.

On the evening of February 10th, just a week after Pam and Harley speculated that Colton might surrender, a Cirrus SR22 took off from Anacortes Airport, located right across the sound from Orcas Island. The plane's transponder was squawking loud and clear, and Whidbey Island Naval Air Station – one of the U.S. airports tasked with keeping an eye out for possible incursions into airspace surrounding the Winter Olympics in Vancouver – tracked the tiny plane closely. The pilot, unaware of temporary FAA guidelines established just for the Olympics, had failed to turn his radio to the designated frequency of 1207. The plane, which was weaving erratically, eventually passed out of range without incident. The pilot – who police now believe was Colton – flew back to the scene of his first flight, Orcas Island Airport.

It was his best landing yet.

Airport manager Beatrice von Tobel saw the plane the next morning. The only damage was some mud in one of the wheel cowlings, probably caused by veering into the ditch between the strip and taxiway at the end of his landing. "If he had taxied in and tied the plane up, I wouldn't have even thought twice about seeing it," she says.

The town of Eastsound wasn't so lucky. After exiting the plane, Colton made his way downtown, where he allegedly burglarized five stores. At the Homegrown Market & Deli, he took not only $1,200 in cash and a cheesecake – one of the items from his elaborate art collage – but also some chalk. He used it to write a message. After all, he was now an outlaw, with 20,000 Facebook fans to please, from countries as far away as Turkey and Mozambique. He drew 39 giant footprints on the red concrete floor, a trail that led right to the store's entrance. There, he also wrote a note:

C-YA!

MEREDITH GRIFFITH/"ISLANDS SOUNDER"