

POWER PLAY

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POWER PLAY

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High Crimes
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NONFICTION

*Red Carpet: The Connection Between the Kremlin and America's Most Powerful
Businessmen*

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For my editor, Keith Kahla—the best

Knowing your own darkness is the best method
for dealing with the darkneses of other people.

—Carl Jung

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

BEFORE

If you've never killed someone, you really can't imagine what it's like. You don't want to know. It leaves you with something hard and leaden in the pit of your stomach, something that never dissolves.

Most of us, I'm convinced, just aren't wired to take a human life. I'm not talking about some stone-cold sniper with a thousand-yard stare, or one of those psychos who come back from the war and tell you that killing guys was like squishing ants. I'm talking about normal people.

I remember reading once how, during World War II—the Good War, right?—maybe 85 percent of the soldiers never even fired at the enemy. These were heroes, not cowards, yet they couldn't bring themselves to aim at a fellow human being and pull the trigger.

I understand that now.

But what if you don't have a choice?

I was standing at the end of a splintery wooden dock in the pale moonlight, the turbulent ocean at my back, blue-black and flecked with gray foam. On either side of me was rock-strewn beach.

And less than ten feet away, a man was pointing a gun at me, a matte black SIG-Sauer nine millimeter.

"Boy, you're full of surprises, aren't you?" he said.

I just looked at him.

He shook his head slowly. "Nowhere to run, you know."

He was right, of course. There really was nowhere to run. There was nowhere to swim, either. And I had no doubt that, the moment I made a move to jump, he'd pull the trigger.

I took a long, slow breath. "Who says I want to run?"

I could smell the seaweed, the tang of salt in the air, the faint rot of dead fish.

"Just put your hands up, Jake," he said, "and come back inside. I don't want to hurt you. I really don't."

I was surprised he knew my name, and I was even more surprised by the gentleness in his voice, almost an intimacy.

But I simply looked at him, didn't answer, didn't move.

“Come on, now, let’s go,” he said. “Hands up, Jake, and you won’t get hurt. I promise.” The crash of the waves on the shore was so loud I had to strain to make out his words.

I nodded, but I knew he was lying. My eyes strayed to the left, and then I saw the crumpled body on the sand. I felt a jolt, felt my chest constrict, but I tried to conceal it. I knew he’d killed the guy, and that if it were up to him, I’d be next.

It wasn’t up to him, though.

I don’t want to do this, I thought. *Don’t make me do this*.

He saw my eyes move. There was no point in trying to stall for time anymore: He knew what I’d just seen. And he knew I didn’t believe him.

Don’t make me kill you.

“Jake,” he said, in his lulling reasonable voice. “You see, you really don’t have a choice.”

“No,” I agreed, and I felt that hard lump forming in the pit of my stomach. “I really don’t.”

PART ONE

1

We got trouble.”

I recognized Zoë’s voice, but I didn’t turn around from my computer. I was too absorbed in a news report on the website AviationNow.com. A competitor’s new plane had crashed a couple of days ago, at the Paris Air Show. I wasn’t there, but my boss was, and so were all the other honchos at my company, so I’d heard all about it. At least no one was killed.

And at least it wasn’t one of ours.

I picked up my big black coffee mug—THE HAMMOND SKYCRUISER: THE FUTURE OF FLIGHT—and took a sip. The coffee was cold and bitter.

“You hear me, Landry? This is serious.”

I swiveled slowly around in my chair. Zoë Robichaux was my boss’s admin. She had dyed copper hair and a ghostly pallor. She was in her mid-twenties and lived in El Segundo not too far from me, but she did a lot of club-hopping in L.A. at night. If the dress code at Hammond allowed, I suspected she’d have worn studded black leather every day, black fingernail polish, probably gotten everything pierced. Even parts of the body you don’t want to think about getting pierced. Then again, maybe she already did. I didn’t want to know.

“Does this mean you didn’t get me a bagel?” I said.

“I was on my way down there when Mike called. From Mumbai.”

“What’s he doing in India? He told me he’d be back in the office today for a couple of hours before he leaves for the offsite.”

“Yeah, well, Eurospatiale’s losing orders all over the place since their plane crashed.”

“So Mike’s lined up meetings at Air India instead of coming back here,” I said. “Nice of him to tell me.”

Mike Zorn was an executive vice president and the program manager in charge of building our brand-new wide-bodied passenger jet, the H-880, which we called the SkyCruiser. Four VPs and hundreds of people reported to him—engineers and designers and stress analysts and marketing and finance people. But Mike was always selling the hell out of the 880, which meant he was out of the office far more than he was in.

So he’d hired a chief assistant—me—to make sure everything ran smoothly. Crack the whip if necessary. His jack-of-all-trades and U.N. translator, since I have enough of an engineering background to talk to the engineers in their own geeky

language, talk finance with the money people, talk to the shop floor guys in the assembly plant who distrust the lardasses who sit in the office and keep revising and revising the damned drawings.

Zoë looked uneasy. “Sorry, he wanted me to tell you, but I kind of forgot. Anyway, the point is, he wants you to get over to Fab.”

“When?”

“Like an hour ago.”

The fabrication plant was the enormous factory where we were building part of the SkyCruiser. “Why?” I said. “What’s going on?”

“I didn’t quite get it, but the head QA guy found something wrong with the vertical tail? And he just like shut down the whole production line? Like, pulled the switch?”

I groaned. “That’s got to be Marty Kluza. Marty the one-man party.” The lead Quality Assurance inspector at the assembly plant was a famous pain in the ass. But he’d been at Hammond for fifteen years, and he was awfully good at his job, and if he wouldn’t let a part leave the factory, there was usually a good reason for it.

“I don’t know. Anyway, like everyone at headquarters is totally freaking, and Mike wants you to deal with it. Now.”

“Shit.”

“You still want that bagel?” Zoë said.