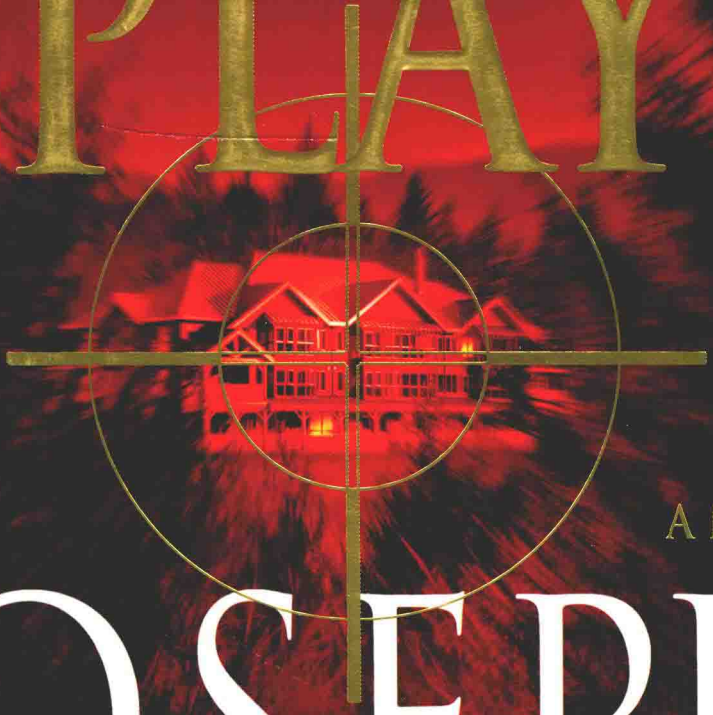
POWER PLAY



A NOVEL

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THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *PARANOIA* AND *KILLER INSTINCT*

POWER PLAY

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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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 SKY-CRUISER: 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.

2

I raced over in my Jeep. The fabrication plant was only a five-minute walk from the office building, but it was so immense—a quarter of a mile long—you could spend twenty minutes walking around to the right entrance.

Whenever I walked across the factory floor—I came here maybe every couple of weeks—I was awestruck by the sheer scale. It was an enormous hangar big enough to contain ten football fields. The vaulted ceiling was a hundred feet high. There were miles of catwalks and crane rails.

The whole place was like the set of some futuristic sci-fi movie where robots run the world. There were more machines than people. The robotic Automated Guided Vehicle forklift zoomed around silently, carrying huge pallets of equipment and parts in its jaws. The autoclave, basically a pressure cooker, was thirty feet in diameter and a hundred feet long, as big as some traffic tunnels. The automated tape layers were as tall as two men, with spidery legs like the extra-terrestrial creature in *Alien,* extruding yards of shiny black tape.

Visitors were always surprised by how quiet it was here. That's because we rarely used metal anymore—no more clanging and riveting. The SkyCruiser, you see, was 80 percent plastic. Well, not plastic, really. We used composites—layers of carbon-fiber tape soaked in epoxy glue, then baked at high temperature and pressure. Like Boeing and Airbus and Eurospatiale, we used as much composite as we could get away with because it's a lot lighter than metal, and the lighter a plane is, the less fuel it's going to use. Everyone likes to save money on fuel.

Unfortunately, the whole process of making planes out of this stuff is sort of a black art. We basically experiment, see what works and what doesn't.

This doesn't sound too reassuring, I know. If you're a nervous flyer, this is already probably more than you want to know.

Also like Boeing and Airbus and the others, we don't really build our own planes anymore. We mostly assemble them, screw and glue them together from parts built all over the world.

But here in Fab, we made exactly one part of the SkyCruiser: an incredibly important part called the vertical stabilizer—what you'd call the tail. It was five stories high.

One of them was suspended from a gantry crane and surrounded by scaffolding. And underneath it I found Martin Kluza, moving a handheld device slowly along the black skin. He looked up with an expression of annoyance.

"What's this, I get the kid? Where's Mike?"

"Out of town, so you get me. Your lucky day."

"Oh, great." He liked to give me a hard time.

Kluza was heavyset, around fifty, with a pink face and a small white goatee on his double chin. He had safety glasses on, like me, but instead of a yellow safety helmet, he was wearing an L.A. Dodgers cap. No one dared tell him what to do, not even the director of the plant.

"Hey, didn't you once tell me I was the smartest guy in the SkyCruiser Program?"

"Correction: excluding myself," Marty said.

"I stand corrected. So I hear we've got a problem."

"I believe the word is 'catastrophe.' Check this out." He led me over to a video display terminal on a rolling cart, tapped quickly at the keys. A green blob danced across the screen, then a jagged red line slashed through it.

"See that red line?" he said. "That's the bond line between the skin and the spars, okay? About a quarter of an inch in."

"Cool," I said. "This is better than Xbox 360. Looks like you got a disbond, huh?"

"That's not a disbond," he said. "It's a kissing bond."

"Kissing bond," I said. "Gotta love that phrase." That referred to when two pieces of composite were right next to each other, no space between, but weren't stuck together. In my line of work, we say they're in "intimate contact" but haven't "bonded." Is that a metaphor or what?

"The C-scan didn't pick up any disbonds or delaminations, but for some crazy reason I decided to put one of them through a shake-table vibe test to check out the flutter and the flex/rigid dynamics, and that's when I discovered a discrepancy in the frequency signature."

"If you're trying to snow me with all this technical gobbledygook, it's not going to work."

He looked at me sternly for a few seconds, then realized I was giving him shit right back. "Fortunately, this new laser-shot peening diagnostic found the glitch. We're going to have to scrap every single one."

"You can't do that, Marty."

"You want these vertical stabilizers flying apart at thirty-five thousand feet with three hundred people aboard? I don't think so."

"There's no fix?"

"If I could figure out where the defect is, yeah. But I can't."

"Maybe they were overbaked? Or underbaked?"

"Landry."

"Contaminants?"

"Landry, you could eat off the floor here."

"Remember when some numbskull used that Loctite silicone spray inside the clean room and ruined a whole day's production?"

"That guy hasn't worked here in two years, Landry."

"Maybe you got a bad lot of Hexocyte." That was the epoxy adhesive film they used to bond the composite skin to the understructure.

"The supplier's got a perfect record on that."

"So maybe someone left the backing paper on."

"On every single piece of adhesive? No one's *that* brain-dead. Not even in this place."

"Will you scan this bar code? I want to check the inventory log."

I handed him a tag I'd taken from a roll of Hexocyte adhesive film. He brought it over to another console, scanned it. The screen filled up with a series of dates and temperatures.

I walked over to the screen and studied it for a minute or so.

"Marty," I said. "I'll be back in a few. I'm going to take a walk down to Shipping and Receiving."

"You're wasting your time," he said.

I found the shipping clerk smoking a cigarette in the outside loading area. He was a kid around twenty, with a wispy blond beard, wearing a blue knit beanie, even though it had to be ninety degrees out here. He wore Oakley mirrored sunglasses, baggy jeans, and a black T-shirt that said NO FEAR in white gothic lettering.

The kid looked like he couldn't decide whether he wanted to be surfer dude or gangsta. I felt for him. During the eighteen months I'd once spent in juvie—the Glenview Residential Center in upstate New York—I'd known kids far tougher than he was pretending to be.

"You Kevin?" I said, introducing myself.

"Sorry, dude, I didn't know you weren't supposed to smoke back here." He threw his cigarette to the asphalt and stamped it out.

My cell phone rang, but I ignored it. "I don't care about that. You signed for this shipment of Hexocyte on Friday at 1:36." I showed

him a printout of the inventory log with his scrawled signature. He took off his sunglasses, studied it with a dense, incurious expression, as if it were Sanskrit. My phone finally stopped ringing, went to voice mail.

"Yeah, so?"

"You left early last Friday afternoon?"

"But my boss said it was cool!" he protested. "Me and my buddies went down to Topanga to do some shredding—"

"It rained all weekend."

"Friday it was looking awesome, dude—"

"You signed for it and you pulled the temperature recorder and logged it in, like you're supposed to. But you didn't put the stuff in the freezer, did you?"

He looked at me for a few seconds. My cell started ringing again.

"You picked a lousy weekend to screw up, Kevin. Heat and humidity—they just kill this stuff. There's a reason it's shipped packed in dry ice, right from the Hexocyte factory to here. That's also why they ship it with a temperature sensor, so the customer knows it was kept cold from the minute it leaves the factory. That's an entire week's work down the tubes. Dude." The cell finally stopped ringing.

The sullen diffidence had suddenly vanished. "Oh, shit."

"Do you know what would have happened if Marty Kluza hadn't caught the defect? We might have built six planes with defective tails. And you have any idea what happens to a plane if the tail comes apart in flight?"

"Oh, shit, man. Oh, shit."

"Don't ever let this happen again." My cell started ringing for a third time.

He gave me a confused look. "You're not telling my boss?"

"No."

"Why—why not?"

"Because he'd fire you. But I'm thinking that you'll never forget this as long as you live. Am I right?"

Tears came to the kid's eyes. "Listen, dude—"