

More praise for *High Hand*

“*High Hand* is a masterful political thriller, full of great characters performing noble and ignoble deeds in the wake of an attempted assassination of a presidential candidate. Reporter Frank Adams wants the truth, but the truth is costly, and ugly, for all. You won’t be able to put it down.”

—Nancy Barnes, Executive Editor, *Houston Chronicle*

“Beyond the enormously thrilling plot and pace of Curtis J. James’s *High Hand*, the storyline’s richly detailed use of spy tradecraft is a delight to read for those of us in the business. Move over, Tom Clancy; make room for Curtis J. James.”

—Kevin Giblin, first Director,
NATO Counterterrorism Office,
and FBI senior counterterrorism investigator

“Reminiscent of the best of Ken Follett and Tom Clancy, *High Hand* is a taut page-turner packed with great writing, meticulous detail, and a fascinating view of the dovetailed worlds of international diplomacy and espionage. Insider knowledge of journalism, post–Cold War Russia, and the Washington, DC, power game makes this an irresistible read.”

—Darryl McGrath, author of *Flight Paths*

“*High Hand* is a thriller in which all the players are bluffing, but someone holds the killer card. It mixes the high stakes of a US presidential race with the calculation of Russian intrigue. It’s a whodunit enriched by who did it—a creative conspiracy of three very talented authors.”

—Ned Barnett, Editorial Page Editor,
The (Raleigh) News & Observer

“This fast-paced page-turner is an effortless delight to read. It provides a rare insider’s view into the interconnected worlds of journalism and diplomacy. Meaty and engaging.”

—Kirstin Downey, author of *Isabella: The Warrior Queen*

“A compelling, gripping spy thriller that’s a must-read for all those who love the genre.”

—Clark Ervin, first Inspector General,
US Department of Homeland Security,
and founder of Aspen Security Forum

“The explosive action in *High Hand* carries a powerful message for journalists and those who depend on them to expose corruption.”

—Keith Mestrich, President, Amalgamated Bank

“*High Hand* is a well-paced, good read. The reporter dialogue rings especially true.”

—Hammad Jawdat, World Desk Editor,
The Wall Street Journal

“From beginning to end, *High Hand* is a skillfully crafted thriller demonstrating the plausibility of many of its insights about the world of intelligence. It is bound to occupy a prominent place among notable works in its genre.”

—Tony Porcaro, former CIA analyst

“Spooksville at its best! Don’t wait for the movie. And be prepared to spend a couple of late nights with this gripping page-turner.”

—Kathleen Rest, Executive Director,
Union of Concerned Scientists

“Enthralling work of fiction that is high voltage from the opening scene.”

—Serge F. Kovaleski,
Culture and Arts Investigative Reporter,
New York Times

“A jam-packed tale of high adventure combining global politics and sharp-eyed journalism with heartfelt ethics and romance.”

—Christian McEwen, author of *World Enough & Time*

“This fast-paced international conspiracy has engaging characters, a solid plot, and real-world implications for contemporary American politics. Explosive revelations keep you wondering who is behind the mayhem.”

—Jay Himmelstein, Chief Health Policy Strategist,
University of Massachusetts Medical School

“The profound experience and diverse expertise of the authors come together to create a uniquely elegant, thoughtful, riveting thriller that stays with the reader long after the last page is turned. The fun read mixes with troubling thoughts about the driving forces that mobilize some of the nation’s guardians.”

—Yosef Shiloh, PhD, Research Professor,
Sackler School of Medicine,
and Shoshi Shiloh, PhD, Professor of Psychology,
Tel Aviv University

“The story bursts with details of oil schemes, secret pipeline deals, and cross-cultural intrigue. The captivating machinations move the reader to explore each turn of events. *High Hand* is a very fun read and an educational adventure.”

—William Thompson, former gaming consultant,
President’s Commission on Organized Crime,
Reagan Administration

“A fast-moving story and great read told with futuristic technology from the shadows of international politics and intrigue.”

—Phillip A. Sharp, Nobel Laureate, Physiology or Medicine

“In this fast-moving thriller, Curtis J. James brings together political, business, and espionage characters who are so real, you wonder whether *High Hand* is fiction or nonfiction and whether its ultrahigh-tech world might really exist.”

—Andrea Pfeifer, CEO, AC Immune, Switzerland

“The characters are clearly drawn. The story charges through our new world where traditional lines—between journalism and espionage, between big business and secret government, between allies and adversaries—are all blurred. It is a great read.”

—John Radsan, founder of the National Security Forum,
William Mitchell College of Law

“A gripping, suspenseful mix of politics, journalism, business, and spy craft with enough twists and turns to keep the pages flying.”

—Gary Pruitt, President and CEO, The Associated Press

“Great story, good plot—fast paced and gripping. *High Hand* keeps you navigating inside the changing and shadowy world of espionage. It brings back memories of real international intrigue.”

—John Lewis Jr., former FBI Assistant Director
for National Security

“Mixing the old spy world of le Carré with the journalistic sleuthing of a contemporary Woodward and Bernstein investigation, the book takes the reader through unexpected events of deception, treachery, and avarice that unfold in Los Angeles, Moscow, and beyond. . . . *High Hand* is a good bet.”

—Patrick G. Riley, author of *The One-Page Proposal*

“A paranoid, high-tech mashup of *The Manchurian Candidate* and *All the President's Men*, *High Hand* reads like a legacy journalist's fever dream, garnished with enough Bondian twists to make 007's heirs grin into their pomegranate martinis.”

—Larry Hackett, former Editor, *People* magazine

“A fantastic read! A contemporary political thriller with all the good, the bad, and the ugly you would expect, but it all comes at you in ways you never imagined.”

—Paul Mattera, Senior Vice President,
Liberty Mutual Insurance

“*High Hand* is a page-turner with fast action and terrific internal conspiracies. Ominously but importantly, it reminds us that Russia is still a player in the Big Game.”

—Charles Levenstein, economist and policy analyst,
University of Massachusetts

“*High Hand* embraces the subtle world of modern high-tech espionage and political intrigue.... This remarkable thriller builds to the point where you question the difference between reality and deception.”

—John Darbyshire, Senior Scientific Consultant,
Iridessa Sarl, Switzerland

“*High Hand* has it all: political intrigue, sex, betrayal, terrorism, and espionage—all wrapped around a love story that spans the modern world’s hot spots. A thriller not to be missed.”

—Anders Gyllenhaal, Vice President for News,
The McClatchy Company

“*High Hand* is both a recreational and educational expedition through modern-day politics, business, and espionage. Featuring terrific historical and geographic realism..., it almost reads like a documentary—until some of our favorite characters start dropping. Then it’s a screen-swiper until the end.”

—David Rossetti, former Vice President
for Network Protocol Engineering, Cisco Systems

“Lisa Hawkes is a compelling new hero!”

—Juleen Zierath, Chairwoman,
Nobel Prize Committee for Physiology or Medicine

“*High Hand* rings true, with authentic depictions of exotic but believable people, places, and events. The story brings together the complex, interconnected worlds of politics, journalism, international relations, and covert operations. The tension in these pages never lets you go.”

—Thomas M. Seamon, former Deputy Commissioner,
Philadelphia Police Department

“*High Hand* was a perfect companion on recent international trips. It features an engaging espionage plot with keen insights into geopolitics and the frontiers of science, plus tense reminders about the complexities of current energy politics.”

—Jonathan M. Samet, Director,
University of Southern California
Institute for Global Health

“A dazzling cast of characters interacting across an array of wonderfully sinister motivations and situations. It will appeal especially to techies and conspiracy lovers.”

—Robert B. Pirie, Jr.,
former US Assistant Secretary of Defense

“*High Hand*, the debut novel by Curtis J. James, is a double-espionage thriller set within the complex web of US-Russian counterintelligence, examining relationships both personal and professional that have been building since the Cold War... Deploying poker as a leitmotif, *High Hand* explores the risks and rewards of one man’s tumble into high-stakes international politics as he attempts to uncover the truth.”

—Lisa A. DuBois, author of *More Than a Place*

**HIGH
HAND**

HIGH HAND

A NOVEL

Curtis J. James

**COPPER PEAK PRESS
WASHINGTON, DC**

Copyright © 2018 Creative Joint Journey, LLC

All rights reserved. This novel is an original work of fiction. All characters are products of the authors' imaginations or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events is coincidental and unintended.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the address below.

Copper Peak Press
PO Box 27058
Washington, DC 20038
www.copperpeakpress.com

Quantity sales. Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the "Special Sales Department" at the address above.

Orders by US trade bookstores and wholesalers. Please contact BCH: (800) 431-1579 or visit www.bookch.com for details.

Printed in the United States of America

Cataloging-in-Publication

Names: James, Curtis J., author.

Title: High hand : a novel / Curtis J. James.

Description: Washington, DC: Copper Peak Press, 2018.

Identifiers: ISBN 978-0-9864303-0-5 | LCCN 2017956647

Subjects: LCSH Election—Fiction. | Presidents—Fiction. | Journalists—Fiction. | Spies—Fiction. | Assassination—Fiction. | Petroleum industry and trade—Fiction. | International relations—Fiction. | Spy stories. | Suspense fiction. | Thrillers (Fiction). | BISAC FICTION / Thrillers / Espionage

Classification: LCC PS3610.A4287 H54 2018 | DDC 813.6--dc23

22 21 20 19 18 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Tance Harris, Barbara Ellenberger and Anne Salladin

FOREWORD

IN AN 1889 essay, the noted Irish playwright Oscar Wilde wrote, “Life imitates art far more than art imitates life.” More than a century later, three prominent men from three important fields—science, journalism, and labor—teamed up to write an eerily prescient novel that life would soon imitate with the improbable election of President Donald Trump and his alleged ties to Russia.

As the historian and curator of the International Spy Museum, I receive a lot of books—five or six a week. I’m not complaining. As a veteran with a doctorate in intelligence history, I clearly like reading books about espionage. Mine is a pretty good gig. Among the free books, one in ten is half-way decent. A far smaller fraction is good. Still rarer are those books that are exceptional—exceptional enough for us to build a program around them here at the museum, exceptional enough for us to invite the author (or in this case, authors)

to do one of our *SpyCast* podcasts, exceptional enough to ask them to hold an in-store book signing.

High Hand, which tells the tale of a billionaire business man with secret ties to Russia who becomes the Republican presidential candidate, is one such book.

Does the plot sound familiar?

It's not all that difficult to gauge the quality of a non-fiction book: Does it have relevance to what we do? Is it well-researched? Is it historically accurate and—to use the current political parlance—not filled with “alternative facts”? Perhaps most important: Is it interesting? As I read through the books that arrive on my desk, it usually doesn't take me long to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Novels, however, are the bane of my existence. Most of the time we try to avoid fiction. It's not that we don't like reading a good spy novel—of course we do—it's just that they are so hard to find. I'm not talking solely about entertainment either; some spy novels are immensely entertaining in spite of their poor quality. They are fun to read, but you learn nothing about the real world of espionage—and in many cases, you actually become misinformed about that world.

The problem is that there are really two kinds of spy novels: those penned by former spies, many of whom can't write their way out of a paper bag, and those written by professional or at least competent writers who, however, don't know the first thing about the intelligence world. It's either ex-spooks who can't write or good writers who think that working for the CIA means spending every day leaping from airplanes in tuxedos, a cocktail in one hand and a ridiculously named blonde

in the other. (And this happens only on Tuesdays—sorry, an inside joke.) Personally, I fall into the former category: I know a hell of a lot about espionage tradecraft, but I'm minimally self-aware enough to know that I won't be writing the next Great American Novel anytime soon.

All that being said, every so often we come across an outlier. An immensely readable book that gets things right. A new author or authors who trace the faithful footsteps of Le Carré, Fleming, Clancy, and the other greats. Authors who have clearly put in the time to both learn the craft of writing and learn something about the world of intelligence. Authors who put it all together, who create a novel that is enjoyable to read—and who craft a book that leaves us smarter for having read it.

Again, these are the outliers. So I didn't have lofty expectations when *High Hand* arrived on my desk. To be honest, I gave it a second look only because of the immense accomplishments of its authors—in three different fields. None of them were ex-intel types, and none were known fiction authors, but their stature in their respective professions afforded them the benefit of the doubt. To my surprise, it was clear from page one that Rosen, Harris, and Ellenberger had taken the time to do their research to learn something about their subject, to write an entertaining spy novel within a believable environment of global intrigue, to embrace intricate and complicated issues, to create real-to-life characters and not the caricatures of so many mediocre spy novels. The book was solid spy fiction, and we were happy to promote it.

Then came the election of 2016. All of a sudden, a well-written, well-researched spy novel had become something

much more. It's hard to overstate how prescient this book is, especially considering how long it takes from when a book is conceived and written until it is published. Rosen, Harris, and Ellenberger were thinking about Russian interference in an American presidential election *years ago*. Throw in the billionaire Republican candidate and the espionage angle, and you've got the classic recipe for life imitating art.

The only problem these three skilled authors will have is convincing people that they didn't hastily write this book in the summer of 2017.

Vince Houghton, PhD
Historian and Curator
International Spy Museum
Washington, DC

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

(In Order of Appearance)

Frank Adams, *Los Angeles Register* political reporter, former
Los Angeles Register Moscow correspondent*

Stuart Roberts, United States Senator, Republican billionaire
presidential candidate, former US Ambassador to Russia,
IntelliView founder*

Don Hudson, *Los Angeles Register* political editor

Viktor Romanov, *Kapital* Russian business reporter, former
KGB/SVR agent*

Thomas Hawkes, *Los Angeles Register* publisher, former
CIA official

Lisa Adams, AmeriCon Energy director of Russian opera-
tions, CIA Non-Official Cover (NOC) agent, daughter of
Thomas Hawkes, former wife of Frank Adams

Russell Talbert, CIA director of science and technology

Ken Nishimura, IntelliView senior executive

Harrison Jenkins, former CIA director

Scott Dennis, CIA director of clandestine affairs

Bud Johnson, AmeriCon Energy executive, boss of Lisa Adams

Sergei Yemelin, Russian energy consultant, CIA agent of influence

Mikhail Gusov, Russian oligarch, oil company executive, presidential candidate*

Zev Levi, Israeli diplomat, Mossad agent*

Rado Weinstien, former East German physicist, former Stasi and KGB/SVR agent, Knesset member, NanoTek founder*

Ahmad Durrani, Afghan archaeologist*

Qin Sun, Chinese nuclear physicist*

Svetlana Lutrova, former KGB/SVR agent

Nikolai Volkov, SVR intelligence executive

Pavel Sidorov, *Perviy Kanal* (Channel One) Russian TV correspondent

Pyotor Maximovich, *Kapital* business editor

* Former poker players in Moscow

I: CUT THE DECK

*In politics, strangely enough, the best way to play
your cards is to lay them face upwards on the table.*

H. G. Wells

CHAPTER 1

LOS ANGELES

FRANK ADAMS STRUGGLED to maintain focus. Focus had served him well as lead political reporter for the *Los Angeles Register*. He had been covering the campaign of Senator Stuart Roberts, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, for a year. This stop afforded Frank a rare return home to Los Angeles. The candidate was addressing the faithful at Pershing Square. Hearing Roberts's stump speech for the umpteenth time, Frank half-listened for a new nuance; with the other half of his brain, he was remembering his father's stories about the 1951 pennant collapse of "Dem Bums," the Brooklyn Dodgers, and their redemption four years later.

Frank was just behind Roberts with a dozen other reporters and as many TV crews, twenty yards away on the raised stage at the head of the plaza. Standing next to him was his good friend Bill Wilson of the *Chicago Tribune*.

Bill looked at Frank with a smirk.

“Geez, Adams. Why are you so dressed up? Nobody in L.A. wears a coat and tie.”

Frank ignored the taunt. He still believed that an address by a presidential candidate, even in the summer at an outdoor venue, required more formal attire.

The afternoon sunlight filled the plaza. The crowd applauded as Roberts dove into his stump speech.

“As you know, I was the United States ambassador to Russia in the 1990s. I was also proud to serve as a young man under President Ronald Reagan! As the presidential nominee of our great Republican Party, I intend to carry his banner all the way to the White House!”

A man in the crowd yelled out, “God bless America!”

Amid raucous cheering, Roberts gave a thumbs-up with his right hand, forced his campaign smile and waited for the crowd to calm down.

“President Reagan deserves much of the credit for winning the Cold War. But even though Soviet Communism is in the dustbin of history, there are new threats from Russia. Now let me make clear that my concerns are not aimed at the Russian people. I have many Russian friends. But there is a growing danger to the United States and Europe coming from Moscow. Its leaders have rolled back—”

An explosion ripped through the stage. It reverberated in the concrete canyon of buildings surrounding the plaza. Frank was thrown off his feet. Dazed and entangled with his colleagues, he saw people running for safety, but a ringing in his ears muted their screams.

As he tried to stand, Frank realized that Wilson was sprawled across his legs. Frank rolled away from the motionless body, and as he stood he saw the crushed side of Bill's face.

Bill had borne the blunt of the blast—and unwittingly saved Frank's life.

Frank moved his arms and legs. He was intact but covered with Bill's blood. He had a wound in his left forearm. He removed a handkerchief from his back pocket, clinched a corner between his teeth, wrapped it above the wound and pulled it tight.

Chaos overtook the stage. Secret Service agents surrounded Roberts. Reporters, campaign aides and local supporters stumbled to their feet, some of them reaching for their cell phones. Others lay in tangles, moans rising from them. Ambulances with wailing sirens raced to the platform.

A medevac helicopter landed next to the stage. Police and Secret Service agents cleared the area. Roberts was strapped to a stretcher. Secret Service medical techs ran the stretcher to the chopper and loaded him briskly on board.

As the chopper took off, Frank reached into a hip holster and pulled out an edgy-looking device. He gave a voice command. "Office—Editor!"

Los Angeles Register Political Editor Don Hudson answered.

"Don! A bomb went off near Roberts! He's hurt—I don't know how badly! They just medevacked him! Let's get something up online! I'll call back when I know more!"

Frank ran up to a cop and flashed his press credentials. "How bad is Senator Roberts?"

"I'm not authorized to talk."

“How many people are dead?”

“I’m sorry—you have to call headquarters.”

Frank saw Michelle Hayes, a Roberts campaign aide, and raced over to her. She’d also been cut. Blood covered her arms and spotted her cream-colored pantsuit.

“Christ, Michelle, are you okay?”

Michelle was teary-eyed but tough. “I think so. This is a nightmare.”

“Roberts—how bad?”

“I don’t know. Shit, I hope he’s alive.”

“Did you see him after the blast? Was he conscious?”

Michelle’s eyes welled up. “I just can’t believe this.”

Frank gently grabbed her shoulders. “Michelle, was Roberts conscious before they took him away?”

“Yes, I saw him talking with Peter. I don’t know what he said.”

“Do you know where they took him?”

“UCLA Medical Center.”

Frank dashed off to his car.

Ninety minutes later Frank waited in the media throng near the hospital’s entrance.

Secret Service agents swept the emergency room, asking all but two gravely wounded gunshot victims to leave. Ambulances sped injured reporters to the Good Samaritan Hospital on Wilshire Boulevard three miles away.

Frank waved off a medic’s attempt to dispatch him there for treatment of his arm. More reporters arrived in the roped-off area outside the hospital.

Looking up at UCLA's Ronald Reagan Medical Center, Frank made a mental note: Roberts had been rushed to the hospital named after his political hero when it opened in 2008, replacing an antiquated facility across the street that the 1994 Northridge earthquake had damaged.

Frank's cell phone vibrated. He pulled it from his shirt pocket, saw that the call was from Moscow, punched the green button and held the phone to his ear.

"Privyet, Frank, this is Viktor!"

Viktor Romanov was a Russian reporter and Frank's friend from his Moscow assignment at the turn of the century. Frank strained to listen over the noise of TV reporters doing live stand-ups and traffic streaming by on Gayley Avenue.

The two journalists spoke in Russian.

"Frank, I just read your online piece about the attack on Stuart Roberts. Are you alright?"

"I'm okay, thanks. I'm at the hospital, waiting to find out his condition. I might have to jump off, but we can talk for now."

Frank debated whether to tell Viktor of his arm wound. It occurred to him that when he'd called Hudson, his editor hadn't inquired of his condition.

"Frank, any attempted assassination of a White House candidate is a big story everywhere. But the hit on Roberts is especially huge here because he was the US ambassador—and because he's been criticizing the Kremlin."

Scanning the hospital entrance for the signal to start the briefing, Frank weighed his next question to Viktor. "You don't think the Kremlin could be involved with this, do you?"

A few seconds of silence across the Pacific.

“People here are whispering about that. You know how we Russians love conspiracies!”

Viktor hadn’t answered Frank’s question. He was trying to wrap a serious topic in good-humored banter—an old reporter’s trick at which the Russian was particularly skilled.

Frank tried a different tack. “Are you looking into this?”

Seeing that his ruse hadn’t worked with Frank, Viktor gave a more measured response. “I’m making some discreet inquiries. You know what happens to reporters who ask too many questions that offend the Kremlin.”

Frank thought to himself: “They disappear.” He continued listening.

“But the notion that Russia tried to take out Roberts could be a false flag.”

“False flag—what’s that?”

“It goes back to ancient times when armies hoisted an enemy’s flag to deceive the opposing force. Both sides used it in World War II. Since then, intelligence agencies have found creative ways to extend it beyond the battlefield.”

Keeping an eye on the reporters around him, Frank understood that personal concern wasn’t the real reason for Viktor’s call. He wanted to exchange information.

Viktor switched gears. “Stuart and I have stayed in touch since we became friends at your poker games.”

Frank half-teased the Russian. “Viktor, are you working on a piece about Roberts?”

Viktor dodged the question. “We’re a weekly, Frank. We don’t publish until Friday.”

Frank scoffed to himself: as if *Kapital*, the top Moscow business journal, didn't have a website where Viktor and its other reporters constantly blogged, updated their print stories, filed fresh articles—and broke exclusives.

Viktor had recently written a series about a Russian oil scandal. Billions of rubles in government royalties were missing. Why this sudden interest in American politics?

Frank had another question. "When did you see Stuart last?"

"I've covered his visits here with other senators, but he and I just had some brief chats. The last time we really sat down together was after his big Israel trip when he was running for Congress. He spent three days here in Moscow with friends. He had a private dinner at Gusov's flat. I helped arrange several high-level meetings for him. He was already worried about Russia moving away from democracy. He wanted—"

A hospital staffer summoned the reporters. Frank cut Viktor off.

"Viktor, gotta go."

Frank put the phone back in his pocket and followed his colleagues inside. They walked through a maze of hallways and into an auditorium. As the reporters took their seats and the camera crews set up their tripods, the hospital's director waited at the front with the physicians who were treating Roberts. The director approached the podium.

"Good afternoon, I am Dr. Ricardo Montemayor, head of the UCLA Medical Center. Joining me is my team of trauma care physicians who are attending to Senator Roberts. Before I take questions, I will provide a summary of the senator's condi-

tion. Our communications staff has prepared a more detailed report that is being distributed and will be available online.”

Montemayor took a sip of water. “Senator Roberts was injured in an explosion at Pershing Square. He sustained serious but not life-threatening injuries and is resting in the ICU. I can take your questions now. Please state your name and affiliation.”

A young reporter spoke first as TV cameras swirled toward her.

“Angela Jackson, *Boston Globe*. You say Senator Roberts’s injuries aren’t life threatening. Would you characterize his condition as critical? And is he able to communicate?”

Montemayor’s face remained expressionless. “The senator underwent surgery for a significant leg injury. He is under light sedation, but he spoke with our staff before surgery.”

Jackson almost cut Montemayor off in order to speak before another reporter could jump in. “Quick follow-up: what did Senator Roberts say before the surgery?”

Montemayor had a ready answer, which he delivered with the slightest of smiles. “He thanked our team for taking excellent care of him. And he assured us that he would be fine.”

A popular local TV correspondent spoke next. “Zhi Peng, WZYT Los Angeles. In reviewing our video, it appears that Senator Roberts was bleeding from the head after the explosion. Did he suffer a head wound?”

“The senator was conscious when he arrived at the medical center. Our examination indicates that he suffered only a minor head injury.”

Frank grew impatient. As often happened at news

conferences, he thought his colleagues weren't getting to the point. "Frank Adams, *Los Angeles Register*. Is there anything in Senator Roberts's condition that would prevent him from meeting the rigorous demands of campaigning for president or, if he is elected, serving in the White House?"

Montemayor cleared his throat. "I am a physician, not a political expert. I will leave that question for Senator Roberts and his advisers to answer."

CHAPTER 2

LOS ANGELES

AS IT APPROACHED eleven, Frank, Don Hudson and Thomas Hawkes sat in Thomas's cherry-wood-paneled office. Thomas walked over to his liquor cabinet and poured Knob Creek bourbon into two tumblers. Before closing the cabinet, the publisher saw the bottle of Stolichnaya that Frank had brought him from Moscow a few years ago. Normally the vodka would have been long gone, but Thomas kept it unopened in his cabinet. It stood as a symbol for all the grief Frank had caused him. The messy divorce from his daughter. The hard drinking that had contributed to the breakup. The disappearances from work. Frank's refusal to admit he was an alcoholic until Thomas threatened to fire him if he didn't get help. The failed rehabs before one last try took hold.

Hawkes sometimes wondered why he'd stuck with Adams. It was tied to a rare feeling for him—guilt. After their return

from Moscow, Frank and Lisa bought a fixer-upper in Santa Monica, one of those pink-stucco shoeboxes that cost a couple grand when it was built in the 1930s. The couple paid a million dollars in 2001 and considered it a steal. Like so many of their professional peers, they gutted the house and doubled its size. At Lydia's insistence over Thomas's grumbling, Frank and Lisa had lived with them for nine months during the construction. How many nights had he and Frank sat up into the wee hours playing chess and downing one shot of Stoli after another?

To use one of those psychobabble words Thomas hated, he'd enabled his son-in-law. Frank hadn't been much of a drinker before the Moscow assignment. After almost three years there, tossing back Stoli to gain the trust of Russian sources who drank vodka like iced tea, he came home a different man. Thomas took pride in his ability to read people, but he had missed the signs with Frank. He himself was old school when it came to booze. Hell, not much different than the Russian men of his generation. He could drink all night, day after day for years, and never come close to becoming a drunk. Frank and the other kids were different. They weren't as tough overall—"more sensitive" in the current parlance. Not being able to handle their liquor was just one piece of it.

Thomas and other men his age weren't good at introspection. It took him a long time to realize he'd let Frank down. He'd been too pissed off to cut him any slack. Pissed off at him for squandering his considerable talents and slamming the doors Thomas had opened for him; for leaving his daughter (well, she'd left him, but same difference); and most of all,

for failing to deliver a grandchild. Frank and Lisa had talked about having kids, but she was close to fifty now and hadn't remarried. She would never be a mother.

There was more: Thomas was responsible for bringing Lisa into the Agency. Not that she needed his help to succeed at Langley. She was so damn competent at everything. But he'd always thought she might have been an ambassador or a Fortune 50 executive or a tenured professor at one of the Ivys. She would never have been interested in the spy business if it hadn't been for him. Lisa led a double life the whole time she and Frank were married, one that Adams still didn't know about. Few marriages could survive that level of secrecy. It had been different with Thomas and Lydia—the CIA had made their union possible. There had never been that kind of deception between them.

The most important reason Thomas hadn't let Frank go was the simplest one. Adams was still the best damn reporter at the paper—when he was sober. As he had been for three-plus years and counting.

Thomas handed one of the bourbons to Don and took the other for himself. He gave Frank a glass of club soda. Their eyes caught for a second as Frank took the drink, an acknowledgment that the sober center still held.

Frank's print article had been put to bed. Before filing it, he'd posted a half-dozen updates on losangelesregister.com. They were decompressing, looking ahead to the next day's coverage. Frank transferred a file to his work PC from the wand-like device he'd used to call from the plaza.

Thomas frowned. “What the hell is that?”

Frank was amused. “A bioWave—the consumer gadget IntelliView is about to release.”

Frank’s beta-testing of the device had proven that it was more substantial than a mere gadget, but extolling its remarkable technical prowess would be lost on his boss.

“That’s right,” Thomas offered, “you’re leading one of our efforts to score a breakthrough in digital news delivery. If you hurry up, perhaps we can stop hemorrhaging money and stay out of bankruptcy.”

Thomas was a hard-driving newspaper publisher out of a 1940s B-grade movie, shirt-sleeves rolled up to his elbows and an unbuttoned vest with its flaps hanging loosely on a surprisingly fit man in his early seventies. He loved the clatter and mess of the old Linotype presses at the papers where he’d started out, but his industry’s harsh economic lessons of the last decade had forced him to regard the emerging technologies, what the kids called I-T, with a wary respect.

Thomas addressed the two men across from him. “It looks like Roberts is going to pull through. Where do we go next?”

Don spoke up. “I’ve got the entire National staff working on this, and I’ve pulled some of the Metro reporters. We’re planning to get at least three stories up on the web early tomorrow, with another five articles online by three p.m.”

Thomas drew on his cigar. The whole newsroom—hell, the whole fucking building—was legally smoke-free, thanks to the damn county, but Hawkes broke the law from time to time at night or on a Sunday morning.

“What are the mainbars?” Thomas asked.

“One article will focus on Roberts, his condition and medical treatment,” Don replied. “Another will look at what this does to the White House race. The third mainbar will track the investigation. The feds won’t talk about leads this early, but we’ll interview former prosecutors and report on the theories already popping up online, who might have been behind the bomb blast, and why. Tied to this, we’ll do a forensics sidebar exploring what type of explosives was used and where they might have come from.”

Thomas peered at Frank. “You and Roberts go way back to Moscow. Played cards together, didn’t you? Any idea who might have done this?”

Frank had some ideas about the hit on Roberts, but he wasn’t prepared to share them with Hawkes.

Newspaper publishers traditionally ran the business operations while leaving the journalism to editors and reporters. Thomas, though, had a reputation in the newsroom for meddling in its coverage, especially on big stories.

Frank responded with a quip. “Maybe the Islamic State and the Kremlin are in cahoots. Hard to pick which one he hates more.”

Hawkes pursed his lips: a typical wisecrack from Adams. He knew his ace reporter was hoping he’d rise to the bait, so he saved his thoughts for later.

The three men sipped their drinks. Thomas admired his cigar and spoke with a wry tone. “You and Lisa had your problems, but I’m glad my former son-in-law is still alive.”

Thomas shook his ice and took a handful of cashews. “Roberts was the ambassador back when the two of you met in

Moscow. Any chance the attack on him was tied to his posting there? He's been jabbing the Kremlin strongman pretty hard, accusing him of bringing back the Soviet empire."

Watching Hawkes and Hudson drink their bourbon, Frank felt the familiar pang of desire for a taste of booze. But it was fainter now.

Duly noted.

That was what they taught you at rehab: note your desire, and then move on.

Frank picked up the thread. "America and Russia became friendly after 9/11 because they needed each other. But then we went into Afghanistan and invaded Iraq. Russia got rich when speculators drove up oil prices. The Kremlin got greedy in Ukraine. Our national interests don't coincide now as neatly as they did right after September 11th."

Thomas puffed on his cigar. "So the last thing Moscow wants is an anti-Russia hard-liner like Roberts in the White House."

Hawkes stirred his drink and looked at Hudson. "Don, let's start thinking outside the box. I'd like you to set up a file in the G-drive that everyone can access. Send out an all-points e-mail inviting story suggestions. Make it clear that you're casting a wide net. Sometimes even the strangest ideas contain a nugget of truth. We want to encourage the whole staff to give us their best thoughts."

As his editor and publisher talked, their voices receded from Frank, and his phone chat with Viktor outside the hospital unspooled in his mind. There was something odd about it . . . something important he'd overlooked. Just as

he sometimes replayed his digital recorder to catch a crucial word, Frank retraced his talk with Viktor in his mind.

It was something Viktor said at the end of their conversation, just before the reporters got called into the hospital for the briefing on Roberts.

What was he missing?

Then it came to him: Roberts's stop in Moscow after his trip to Israel.

His 2006 visit to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem had been widely covered at the time. On his way to winning a Senate seat from California and already considered a future White House candidate, Roberts had met with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and other Israeli leaders at photo ops that were nevertheless important props for winning the Jewish vote, padding his campaign coffers and establishing his foreign policy bona fides.

Frank had accompanied the candidate and filed articles from Israel. But he and other reporters were told that Roberts's travels had concluded there. When Stuart left Israel, Frank had spent an extra day in Tel Aviv to complete a Sunday piece before returning to Los Angeles.

In the last year, as Roberts pursued the presidency, Frank had researched the candidate's past exhaustively while writing substantive campaign profiles. He also had stayed on top of his competitors' reporting, reading hundreds of blogs and articles about Stuart.

As the major newspaper from Roberts's home state, the *Los Angeles Register* was determined to be the leading authority on him. And as its top political reporter, Frank was determined to know more about him than any other journalist.

Now, gazing out the window in his boss's office, Frank was certain that Roberts's three-day stopover in Moscow at the threshold of his political career had never been reported. For a candidate eager to bolster his standing on national security issues, the omission was curious.

Why hadn't Viktor reported on the visit? And why today, two hours after a bomb blast that almost killed Roberts, had Viktor disclosed the trip to Frank in their brief phone talk?

Don and Thomas were trying to pull Frank back into their conversation. Hudson was waiting expectantly. "Any thoughts before we close up shop for the night?"

Frank instantly made up his mind. "I need to go to Moscow."

It was hard to tell which of his two bosses was more astounded. Hudson let Hawkes speak. "Moscow? Are you out of your mind? It's one thing for us to bandy about Kremlin conspiracies over booze. But this is one of the biggest political stories in years! I need you here to lead our coverage."

Frank responded calmly. "There might be a better story in Moscow, Thomas. Don has other reporters covering the presidential campaign. Roberts's doctors say he won't be back out on the trail for a while. Why not make use of my Russian skills and Moscow connections?"

Hawkes scoffed. "Have you forgotten how your Moscow posting ended? The Kremlin kicked your ass out of there! And now you think you're just going to saunter back into town right after someone tried to knock off the most anti-Russian White House candidate since Reagan?"

Frank held his ground. This was typical harrumphing from the gruff publisher. "I didn't get kicked out. The Kremlin

told me they could no longer guarantee my safety. Besides, I've made three trips to Moscow since then."

Frank knew these were pretty thin defenses. He wasn't surprised that Thomas tore through them.

"'No longer guarantee your safety?'" That's Kremlin-speak for get the hell out of Dodge! And as for your so-called return trips, they've been with the president or with congressional delegations. You've been inside the bubble. You haven't gone back alone."

Frank still didn't know just what the Kremlin had meant. His reporting on post-Soviet corruption had fingered so many culprits, it was hard to calculate who he'd offended the most: the old Communists who'd rigged the rules to acquire capitalist riches; the bureaucrats at every level of government who were always on the take; the oligarchs with their billions of rubles tied up in webs of indecipherable business dealings; the shady oil dealers transforming Russia into a force in the world crude market; the criminal syndicates rooted in the ancient Caucasus enmities of Georgia, Armenia and beyond; the Chechen rebels who, like the Afghan mujahedeen, used the opium trade to finance jihad.

More recently, the *Register* had sent Frank to Ukraine, where his reporting on Russian aggression in the Crimea had angered senior officials in Moscow.

The Kremlin's claim that it couldn't protect his safety could have been a veiled threat, an honest admission—or both.

Hawkes was speaking again. "You can't even be sure you'd get a visa. Let alone in a day or two."

"A former source of mine works at the Russian Consulate

in San Francisco. We usually have dinner when I go to the Bay Area. I think he could come through.”

“And not tell his superiors in Moscow?”

“He was one of my best confidential sources. Let’s just say there are things he wouldn’t want me to share with his bosses.”

Hawkes laughed. Adams always had worked all the angles. “But it’s still too risky for you to go in with a journalist’s visa.”

Frank paused. “I’ll get a tourist visa. An old squash partner manages the Hotel National now. I don’t need to tell him why I’m coming. He’ll reserve a room for me and wire the consulate in San Francisco. I’ll tell my consulate source to watch for the wire.”

Don entered the fray. “Do you have any concrete leads there?”

Frank caught his editor’s eye. This was their signal. He’d share some details with Hudson later when Hawkes was beyond earshot.

Frank spoke to Thomas. “You need to trust me. I can’t give you any guarantees, but there’s a good chance that it will prove worthwhile for me to go to Moscow.”

Thomas had learned over the years that Frank’s hunches sometimes panned out. Unwilling to grant verbal consent to this gambit, however, he merely nodded and drained the remaining bourbon in his tumbler.

Frank and Don got up to leave the office. As Frank opened the door, Thomas gave the reporter his marching orders. “One week and then you get your ass back here!”

Adams and Hudson left Hawkes’s office and entered the darkened newsroom. A couple of unfortunate souls on the graveyard shift sat before lit computer screens.

Hudson nudged Frank's elbow. "You didn't tell Hawkes about your call from Romanov."

"Come on, you know we never tell Thomas everything. It's risky to give him too much information."

"I assume Romanov must have told you something to make this trip worthwhile?"

All playfulness disappeared from Frank's gaze. "I don't know, Don. Let's just say I have a feeling that Roberts left some clues in Moscow."