

FAULT LINES

THOMAS
LOCKE



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Thomas Locke, *Fault Lines*
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BOOK 1

1

The Satellite Beach community center was not the sort of place to require an armed agent guarding the coffee machine. It was located in a former auto supply warehouse. The four bay doors had been replaced by walls of glass. The view was over a parking lot, a lawn shared with the neighboring church, and the inland waterway. That Monday evening the setting sun turned the bay into a burnished copper shield.

Charlie Hazard stood in what had become his normal station, midway between the coffeemaker and the jukebox. His job was to make sure the local surfers didn't totally freak out the old-timers. There were nights when he would have rather faced incoming fire.

The center was situated three blocks from the home he had inherited from his father. Charlie had been dropping by a couple of nights each week for nineteen months and he still didn't know why. He went off on a job, got it done, came home, and a night or so later he was back. The place suited him. It was safe. Charlie liked safe. And sane.

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A lot of his life away from this place wasn't either. Lately he found himself looking forward to coming back. He was comfortable with little triumphs these days—another day staying clean, another night without sweats and fever dreams.

Julio, a Hispanic kid in his late teens, hit the button on the music machine. Immediately the place was invaded by rap. Julio was a local surfer, tall and handsome despite his baggy jeans and prison tats. Charlie had every reason to dislike him and his attitude. But something about Julio hit him at gut level. What was more, Charlie's best friend here was the youth counselor, a retired Orlando detective named Irma Steeg. Irma had a definite soft spot for the kid. So Charlie kept his voice mild as he waved Julio over and said, "Think maybe you could hold off for another hour?"

Julio gave him attitude. "What's your problem, man?"

"See the old people over there by the windows? Forty-five minutes, they'll leave for their nightly meds. Then you can play the track that sounds like a bad day in Baghdad."

Irma settled a hand on Julio's arm, halting his comeback. She asked, "How about something from Ol' Blue Eyes?"

Charlie walked over to the machine and ditched the rap. To the groans of everybody under twenty, Frank Sinatra and his horn section asked Charlie to fly him to the moon.

As Charlie returned to the coffee bar, Irma gave Julio her number-one smile. "Everybody likes Sinatra, right?"

Charlie knew Julio wanted to tell Irma exactly where she could put Sinatra and his entire big band. But Julio had enough street sense to notice the steel behind Irma's smile.

He told the departing kid, "One hour, tops. Then the place is yours."

"Whatever, man. Make yourself some oatmeal, why don't you. Easier to chew, you don't got no teeth."

Charlie said to Irma, "Remind me why you put up with that lip."

"Julio has nothing and nobody. I always had a thing for strays." Irma offered him the same soft-hard smile. "As you should know."

He skipped his retort because an unfamiliar woman chose that moment to walk through the door. When her smile lit up the room, even the kids gave this new arrival thirty seconds of silence.

The strange thing was, the beautiful woman was not actually smiling at anyone or anything in particular. She seemed genuinely ecstatic to simply be here. In a former auto supply warehouse.

Maybe she had a thing for Sinatra.

Then she spotted Charlie, and the smile grew larger still.

Irma said, "Have you been holding back on me, sport?"

Charlie tensed as the woman headed straight for him.

"Apparently so," Irma said.

Charlie guessed the woman's age at early thirties. She had almond eyes tilted at an impossible angle. Dark hair. A body that couldn't be masked by her tan skirt and jacket.

Charlie knew what the woman saw as she approached his end of the counter. His late wife had described him as an old soul trapped in an underwear model's body. Dark hair trimmed short. A single scar that rose from his collar to just below his left ear. Strong features. Watchful grey eyes.

The woman stopped at the counter, stared at him for what seemed like a good year or so, then asked, "Is there somewhere we could have a private word?"

Her accent could only be described as seductive.

Irma slipped from her stool. "I was just leaving." From behind the woman's back she mouthed to Charlie a silent, *Eeeeeowwww*.

Charlie asked, "You're here looking for me?"

"I think so."

"You think."

"Yes." She had lips like bruised grapes. Cheekbones from some forgotten tribe. She did not speak so much as gradually tasted each word. "Are you a policeman?"

"Sorry, no."

Her look of defeat was a potent force. "What do you do, please?"

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“Where are you from?”

“Italy. Milan. But I live here now.”

“Can I ask your name?”

“Gabriella.” She smiled. “I should have introduced myself. Forgive me.”

“No problem.” For another smile like that, Charlie would have climbed on the roof and howled at the moon.

“You see, I am very nervous. Please, can you tell me what you do now?”

“I’m afraid that’s confidential.”

She pressed against the counter. “Your work, is it protection?”

He hesitated, then said, “We call it risk containment.”

Her pleasure at his response was as intense as her plea. “Will you come with me?”

“What, now?”

“It is very urgent.”

He was out the door and into the fading dusk before it occurred to him. “Do you even know my name?”

“It doesn’t matter.” She beeped open the door to a brand-new Range Rover, then added, “Yet.”



Gabriella took the coastal route south. She gave the road an intense focus. Cape Kennedy’s rush hour was over, and traffic was light. In the high season, license plates along the coastal highway were from all over the country. Driving along A1A was like traveling through congealed grits. But this was May, and most of the snowbirds had retreated with the last northern freeze. Even so, Gabriella drove with a two-fisted grip on the wheel and watched the road with unblinking concentration. Charlie suspected it was her way of avoiding a conversation.

Like most guys who had known combat, Charlie had a well-developed awareness for trouble. Surviving the front line meant cultivating a second set of eyes, the kind that looked beyond what was

visible to civilian senses. He had learned to trust this ability when entering new terrain. Afterward, when the cordite burned the throat and the muscles jerked with the drain-off of adrenaline rush, Charlie saw precisely what had given him that first life-saving alarm.

But when he used that extra sense now and tasted the air, he found no danger whatsoever. So he turned toward the sunset-drenched window and put his memory into rewind. He walked back through what had happened since the woman's appearance in the community center. Taking it slow. Doing what he had been trained to do. What he was best at.

He said, "You were excited the minute you came in."

"Please?"

"You walked in and lit up the room with your smile. Like you had already found exactly what you had been looking for. Even before you spotted me."

Gabriella glanced over but said nothing.

"What, you were supplied with a photo of the center?" As soon as he said the words, he cast them aside. "You sent in somebody else. A spotter. You had gotten word—"

She pulled up to the next stoplight and kept her eyes pointed straight ahead. "We have not been spying on you."

Charlie gave himself a moment to absorb a fraction more of that beautiful face. Her scent was a heady mix of rare flowers and money.

"If you will please just wait, everything will become perfectly clear." Gabriella spoke the words in a carefully rehearsed manner. "Anything I tell you now will not clarify matters at all."

"Whatever you say." Charlie settled back. He had no problem with silence.

Gabriella entered the lonely reaches south of Melbourne Beach and drilled through a thickening dusk. She traversed the miles of empty green marking the Sebastian Inlet State Park, then climbed up and over the bridge linking them to the next island. The coastal route was summertime empty, a lonely asphalt ribbon laid along the narrow

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strip of land separating the Atlantic from the Indian River. Charlie had been figuring all along they were headed for Vero Beach. The Sebastian Inlet Bridge marked the border between NASA's working stiffs and the serious money farther south.

He heard bikers approaching from behind but paid them little mind. Daytona Bike Week brought in over a quarter of a million bikers from all over the globe. Many liked the area enough to stay. Sunsets along the coastal route were punctuated by multiple deep-throated Harleys. Gabriella's fragrance and her sultry tones made it far too easy to focus upon the car's interior. For a security specialist, this was tantamount to a death wish.

The first biker passed them, riding a chromed-out Harley Softail. Then Charlie's alarm senses were triggered by a second set of headlights. He leaned forward and focused on the biker riding alongside the Range Rover. He was not passing. He was moving into position.

A glint of whirling metal flashed above the biker's head, a scythe cutting into the sunset, wreaking havoc and destruction. The biker swung the chain like he was going to lasso the Range Rover, which in a sense he was. Charlie knew the chain was linked to fishing hooks the size of his fist, intended to catch the tire, the wheel casing, the brake sleeve, the axle, the undercarriage, anything. When he turned around, the biker offered him a death's-head grin.

Charlie leaned over and pressed his hand hard on Gabriella's right knee, jamming the gas pedal to the floor. He heard her gasp and felt her leg fight against him. He forced it down harder. The Range Rover's motor responded with an eight-cylinder bellow and bolted ahead. Charlie heard the biker shout his frustration as he released his chain. It rattled fiercely against the rear tire and wheel well and fender, the hooks scrambling for a hold.

Charlie released Gabriella's knee and yelled, "Brake! Brake!"

To her credit, she responded instantly.

He used his left hand to ram her back in her seat, bracing her for impact, and cocked his arm to take the air bag's first punch. His hand

slammed her chest hard enough to push the air from her body. He used his right hand to turn the wheel hard to the left. It meant his body would take the coming blow at a dangerous tilt. But that could not be helped.

The chain caught hold and wrapped up with a fierce, metallic *zing*. He shouted, “Brace for impact!”

Clearly his maneuver was the last thing the biker expected. The standard response would be to move away from the threat and if possible save the car. But Charlie knew the car was finished. He turned the vehicle *toward* the danger.

The Range Rover was a two-ton beast that was not made for a maximum turn angle at high speed. The car’s front tires locked just as the chain trapped the rear wheel and snapped home. From inside the car it sounded like a cannon shot and felt almost as powerful. If they had been going straight ahead, the car would have shuddered and jerked to a halt, slamming the driver straight into the steering wheel and the passenger into the dash, because the air bags would not have been inflated by any frontal impact. But Charlie’s actions meant the car catapulted into the air, rolling over and blocking the entire road.

The attacking biker slammed into the vehicle’s underbelly with a crash that only accelerated their roll. As the Rover flipped onto its roof, Charlie caught sight of the biker in front of them falling into a high-speed skid that shot sparks into the night. The car kept rolling, over the side and finally banging onto the four tires. The Rover bucked through a sideways slip, tilting and almost going over on its side again. Then it bounced back and quivered, and finally stilled.

Charlie was already moving. He kicked out the remaining glass from the side window, squirmed through, and tumbled from the car. He slipped to the asphalt and dropped to all fours, then scrambled forward and scouted past the hood. The remaining two bikers were huddled around their fallen men. Charlie knew he and Gabriella had only seconds before the remaining enemies came looking for revenge.

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He could not risk opening the door, so he slipped back through the window, unhinged Gabriella's seat belt, and pulled her forward. She shifted feebly, either to help or hinder, and tried to shape words.

Charlie hissed, "Quiet. For your life, don't speak."

Gabriella's flailing movement stilled somewhat. She tried to look at him but her gaze would not fasten. But there was no bleeding from her nose or ears that Charlie could see in the dim light. All her limbs moved well, so he risked hefting her over the central console and dragging her out the window. He lifted her onto one shoulder and jogged for the dunes.

"Stop, please," she gasped. "If they make us late, we lose."

Charlie took another half-dozen strides before the words fully registered. He settled Gabriella into a sandy defile and squatted down beside her. "Say again."

"Timing is everything." Her voice gathered strength with each word. "We need to arrive in precisely . . ." She examined her bare wrist. "What happened to my watch?"

Charlie had a hundred questions of his own, but there was only time for, "This is for real?"

She shoved the hair from her face. "If we are even two minutes late, we have lost. They did not need to kill us. Just slow us down."

The intense manner in which she had driven them south suddenly made sense. "Who is 'we,' Gabriella?"

The moon reflected her darkly frantic gaze. "*Please.*"

Charlie gave the span of two breaths to weighing his options. He was not under contract. This was not his client. He had no idea who his opposition was or why they were after them. Or if the woman was just the target or also part of some larger conspiracy. "They're not out to kill us?"

"I don't . . . No. Probably not. Too messy. If we're late, it's over anyway."

"If we are late."

"That is correct. We have to arrive together, and precisely on time."

He checked his phone. Smashed. “Best guess. What is our destination and how much time do you think we have?”

“We are headed for a lab at the Indian River University hospital.” She thought hard. “We have ten minutes. Perhaps fifteen.”

Charlie pointed her around to the south. “Run down two hundred meters. Stay in the dunes. Then come to the road. I will meet you there.”

“But—”

“Go.”

Charlie waited until she sprinted away, then ran parallel to the road in the opposite direction. He jerked hard left, bounded over a small dune, and hit asphalt just as the moon slipped behind scattered clouds. One of the bikes was burning fiercely, and the fire silhouetted the three bikers still on their feet. They were standing around a man lying prone on the road. Which indicated that Gabriella had told him the truth, at least about the bikers not being sent to take them out. These men were certainly not hunters. In fact, the way they stood suggested their job was done—running them off the road.

Two of the bikers must have heard him, for they turned and shouted. One of them went for his gun. Charlie came in straight and hard. He chopped the gunner in the throat, striking the soft point just below the voice box, then kicked the second man in his knee, jamming it backward. The last man still on his feet was going for his weapon, but his movements were unsteady and his forehead was bleeding. Charlie grabbed his hand, swung it in the forward motion the man was going for, and kept going, flipping him on top of the second man, trapping them both. He disarmed the gunner and brought the weapon down hard on the third man’s forehead. He then swung back to the first man just as he tried to pull a sawed-off 12 gauge from a holster sewed into the right thigh of his pants. Charlie hammered him between the eyes with the pistol, plucked the shotgun from his spasming fingers, then struck him again.

He trotted away, aiming for the one bike that was still running.

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He straddled the leather, gunned the motor, then shot the tires of the other bikes with the 12 gauge as he powered past.

Gabriella was there waiting for him on the roadside. He slowed and waited until she was snugged in tight and her arms were clenched to his chest, then blasted into the night.