

FAULT LINES

TRIAL RUN

THOMAS
LOCKE



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This book is dedicated to
Mason F. Matthews,
whose passion for quantum physics inspired this project.



*The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious.
It is the source of all true art and all science.*
—Albert Einstein

1

When Hal Drew turned off the Pacific Coast Highway, his wife took that as the moment she'd been waiting for, and reached for the real estate brochures. Again. Hal told her, "Don't get those out. It's too dark to read."

"I'll just turn on the inside light."

"Leave it off. I don't know these roads and I need to see what's going on."

Mavis Drew watched Santa Barbara slip away, the brochures clutched in her lap. "Tell me which development you liked best."

Hal waited until he was headed east out of town to say, "Remind me which one had that view of the ocean."

"Oh, you."

"It's a fair enough question." He pointed to the top brochure. "The Pacific is right there on the cover."

"So they dressed things up a little." She lifted one he didn't need to see. Again. "This is my favorite."

TRIAL RUN

Mavis had begged him to make this trip. Just visit Solvang for a look-see. She'd been going on for months about how these California housing developments were going bust. She claimed they could get a steal on a home and live her dream of retiring near the ocean. Which was why they'd taken this miserable excuse of a highway from Solvang to Santa Barbara. So Mavis could have a look at the Pacific. Soon as they drove along the harbor and saw all the pretty sailboats bobbing in the blue Pacific waters, Hal knew he'd lost his wife to the California myth.

He said, "I'm thinking we're better off staying in Phoenix."

"Why does that not surprise me?"

"Who do we know in California? Not a soul. It's just six hundred miles farther from the kids."

"Hal, both our children live in *Georgia*. There are *airports* in Santa Barbara. We fly to see the children now, what difference does it make?" She stared out her side window, seeing a lot more than the dark night ahead. "I loved that townhouse with the lake and the view."

"We got lakes out by where we live now."

"And the mountains. You said they were nice."

"We got mountains too." When she did not respond, Hal added, "I've put down roots. I like where we live, Mavis."

"And I'm ready for a change."

Hal drove in silence and fumed. The road heading inland was in wretched shape. Get away from the money and the robbers that lined the coast, and California treated their own state like an afterthought. The pockmarked highway stretched out before them, veined like a cadaver. Beside him, Mavis gave a dreamy sigh. Hal thought of the arguments to come and sighed as well.

Then it happened.

Mavis screamed so loud he slammed on the brakes before he even knew the reason. A souped-up Japanese car appeared out of nowhere, no lights at all. Hal almost took a bite out of the trunk. The shadowy car crawled along at something like twenty miles an hour, utterly dark.

Hal turned into the oncoming lane and hit the gas. The road ahead was black. Hal felt like he drove through an empty tunnel. The night just sealed them in.

As he started to overtake, his wife screamed a second time. Why, Hal had no idea. But he felt it too. A weird sensation, like the dark had grown claws that scraped the skin off his spine.

Hal slammed on his brakes again and pulled back behind the night crawler. He turned to his wife and started to ask her why she was making all the noise and freaking him out.

When it happened a *second* time.

A shadow roared past them. It had to be a car. No missile could fly that low. This second car was doing 120, maybe more.

And no lights.

The car ahead of them roared to life. It pulled a smoking wheelie and accelerated to warp speed and roared off after the other car. Still with no lights.

Hal stopped and pulled over to the side of the road. He needed a couple of minutes to pry his shaking foot from the brake pedal. And a while longer to stop his heart from stuttering over how they'd just been handed a tomorrow. Because his wife had screamed at an empty night.

When it happened a *third* time.

Two SUVs and a van roared past. Their lights were off as well. All three looked painted in shadows. Hal's headlights revealed that all the passengers wore night-vision goggles.

Then they were gone. And the night was empty. Black. Silent.

Hal turned to his wife and said, "I'd rather retire on Mars."



The woman who led the operation was seated in the first SUV's passenger seat. She knew the men had expected her to take the safer middle car. The lead vehicle was always the one to catch the worst incoming fire. Particularly in a situation like this, flying down the highway in the dead of night with the lights off. The agents from

the local FBI office probably thought she was riding in the most vulnerable position to show she was as tough as any of them. They were wrong. The woman would have to care what they thought to make such a move.

She spoke for the first time since they had started off. “Are the police in place?”

The guy seated behind her said they were.

“They know what to do?”

“We’ve gone over it with them in detail.”

“For your sake, I hope they follow orders,” the woman said. “Call it in.”

The driver picked up the radio on the seat between them and said, “The ops is a go. Repeat, go.”

The woman said, “Light us up. Keep the siren off. I want to hear myself think.”

They stripped off their night goggles as the driver turned on the headlights, then set the bubble on the dash and hit the switch.

The man in the rear seat said, “Sooo, they have a name for this midnight madness?”

The woman replied, “The car running hot is called tricking. The setup car is trolling. They trade back and forth.”

The guy in the rear seat said, “Redline down an empty highway looking for death—this is a game?”

The driver said, “I guess if I had enough drugs in my system I wouldn’t care either.”

The woman said, “They do it straight. That’s part of the deal. Straight or not at all. It amps the fear factor.”

The guy behind her asked, “How did you find out about this anyway?”

The driver agreed. “I’ve been stationed out here for nineteen months, and this tricking hasn’t ever surfaced on my radar.”

“Radar,” the woman said. “Cute.”

“Is that your answer?”

The woman pointed ahead. “Here we go.”

The road ahead was suddenly illuminated by police cars flipping on headlights, spotlights, flashing top lights. The two racing cars spun about, only to find the trio of followers had stretched out, running in flanking position, blocking the entire highway.

For once, the local police did exactly as ordered. The officers stepped forward, guns drawn, but they held their fire.

There were two kids in each car. Three guys, one girl. Aged nineteen to twenty-three. They were cuffed and searched and crammed into the unmarked van. The kids watched through the van’s open door as two agents got into their tricked-out cars and drove away.

The woman opened the van’s passenger door, then turned and said, “Thank you, gentlemen. That will be all.”

“That’s it?” The senior agent exchanged astonished glances with his men. “What happens to the culprits?”

“Your commanding officer did not find it necessary to ask any questions when he received the call from Washington,” the woman said. “I suggest you do the same.”

The agents and the police watched the van drive west, into the night-draped hills.



The unmarked van drove to a blank-faced building in the industrial zone east of the Santa Barbara airport. The building was rimmed by fencing designed to look like a sculpted garden of metal staves. The fence’s razor tips were blackened to mask them from curious eyes. The infrared cameras and ground sensors and electronic attack systems were carefully hidden. The building’s windows were a façade. Behind them were walls of steel sheeting.

The van’s driver coded them through the unmanned entry and pulled up to the loading zone. Three security men came out. They brought the kids inside.

The kids were photographed and fingerprinted and led to individual

rooms. Actually, one was led and the other three were dragged screaming and fighting. It made no difference. They were sealed into rooms fashioned like an officers' barracks, tight spaces with narrow foam mattresses and a six-by-six shower room and a small fold-down desk and a three-legged stool. The door was plastic-covered steel and had a little ledge at eye level. Two hours after they arrived, the slit was opened and a tray was passed through with food. Otherwise the kids were left alone. No one spoke to them. There was nothing to read. There was no television. There was no sound except what they made themselves.

The woman let them cook overnight. She would have preferred to make it longer, but she was in a hurry. Outside events were bearing down.

Besides which, in her tradecraft these kids were classed as disposables.

The kids were brought into another featureless room, this one with a conference table. The woman took fractional pleasure in how they moved as they were told and seated themselves where directed. She took her time and inspected them carefully.

The girl was dark haired and beautiful in the manner of a crushed rose. She exuded the scent of undiluted sex. The woman seated on the table's other side did not need to check her file to know the girl's name was Consuela Inez.

The girl said, "I want a phone call and a lawyer."

The woman took her time inspecting the three guys. Two of them aped how the girl slouched in her seat. The pair did not actually look at her, but still they mimicked her motions and her attitude. The exception was Eli Sekei, aged nineteen. He was tattooed like the others, same spiked hair, same piercings. Same sheet of juvie offenses. But he remained very alert, very self-contained.

"Hey." The girl thumped the underside of the table with her shoe. "I'm talking here. I know my rights."

The man standing in the corner of the room started to reach for-

ward, intending to grip the girl and straighten her. The woman said, “Let it go, Jeff.”

The man resumed his position. The girl swiveled her chair. “Yeah, Jeff. Back off.” She faced the woman. “About that phone call.”

The woman said, “Officially you no longer exist. Your cars have been wrecked and burned to a crisp. Your families have been notified of your deaths. The newspapers carried photographs. You are gone. If you don’t do exactly what we say, we will make that happen. Take a good look at me, and see if you believe I mean what I say.”

It was all a lie, of course. But by the time they discovered she was not telling the truth, the outside world would have lost its hold. Either that, or they would not ever have a chance to make the discovery.

The woman knew how she appeared to them. She had been beautiful once. But now she looked blasted by some furnace, melting her down to an ultra-hard core. She spoke with a rough burr that might have been sexy on someone else. On her, it was like listening to distilled hate, or purpose, or an intent that turned her eyes into pale lasers. She gave them thirty seconds, then said, “Now sit up straight and pay attention.”

The two older boys were born followers. In the time it took for them to settle properly into their chairs, they had switched their allegiance from the girl to her. The woman had no idea whether this was good or bad. She made a mental note. Over time, if her project proved successful, such items might prove vital in making future selections.

She turned her attention to the girl. “This is your last and final warning.”

The girl scowled and cursed but obeyed.

When the woman turned back, she saw that Eli Sekei was smiling. She resisted the temptation to smile back. She hoped he was the one she was looking for.

“My name is Reese Clawson. I need two people who are utterly without fear. Only two. Two people who are willing to explore the impossible. Two people who have nothing to lose. People who will

be utterly mine. In return, I'll give you anything you want. Money, travel, sex on command. But no drugs. That's the key. Anything else, name it, and it's yours."

The girl gave her a sullen look. "So how about my freedom?"

"No problem."

Eli spoke for the first time. "After all this, you'll just let us go?"

"If you make the cut, absolutely."

"So what keeps me from going home and blowing your cover?"

"Forget that, man," the girl said. "What happens if we don't make the cut, that's what I want to know."

Reese kept her gaze on the kid seated directly across from her. "Eli Sekei, what kind of name is that, Persian?"

"Turkish."

Reese knew that already. She just wanted to know if he would respond in a decent manner. "Well, Eli. The answer is, if you were so happy being home, you wouldn't be spending your nights out tricking on the Chino highway. But that was then and this is now. What I have is so amazing, you'll never let go or do anything that would risk your chance to do it again." The woman hesitated, then added, "That is, assuming you survive."

It might have been just the two of them in the room. "How about slipping a television in my room? Nintendo, something. I'm going nuts in there, staring at the walls."

"Sure, Eli. I can arrange that." Reese stood and motioned to the two men standing guard. "But after next week, I doubt you'll be much interested. Not ever again."