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THE OLIGARCH'S DAUGHTER

Joseph Finder

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*For my longtime readers, with gratitude, who've stuck by me since The
Moscow Club and allowed me to make my living as a writer.*

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Also by Joseph Finder

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The Russian soul is a dark place.

—Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*

PART ONE
EVERYONE DIES
Present Day

1

Until that day, Grant had never killed anyone. He had thought about it before, of course, the way you imagine the worst thing you could do if you had to. You rehearse it in your dreams, in your unconscious. Inwardly, you debate.

How far would I go?

Grant's girlfriend was helping him cook dinner, the night before it happened. She was Sarah Harrison. She taught first grade in the town's elementary school and was sweet and gentle with a core of steel. He'd been attracted to her since the first time he met her, at the Starlite Diner five years ago. But there remained a distance between the two of them. Entirely his fault. He cared about her, but there was too much he couldn't tell her about himself.

Sarah was making a salad while he kept watch on a chicken roasting in the oven. The kitchen of the old farmhouse was big and comfortable and cluttered—red-and-white linoleum floor, a tin-topped dining table, wood-paneled walls. He'd restored the house himself, mostly, doing the carpentry in his boat shop. The whole kitchen smelled of roasting garlic, an aroma Grant loved.

As she chopped, Sarah told him about her day. "This girl threw up on the stairs during dismissal, and I sent her out to her mom," she said. "The mom was so pissed off she called the school to complain that her daughter had vomit on her shirt. 'Why didn't you clean her up before sending her out?' she said. So I get yelled at, and meanwhile, I had to clean up this giant pile of barf." Sarah was tall and slim and had shoulder-length chestnut-brown hair and cognac-brown eyes, and she was wearing her old UNH sweats, maroon with fraying cuffs. (It was a chilly evening.)

Grant tried not to laugh, but then she did, a rueful laugh, which made it okay.

"How was your week?" Sarah said. "Tim still refusing to pay you a deposit?" A local fisherman named Tim Ogilvy had brought in a bare-hull

fiberglass boat for Grant to finish out but refused to pay until the work was done.

“Today I told him either he gives me a couple hundred bucks for materials or I’ll put his boat in the yard and chain her to a tree.”

“What’d he do?”

“He paid.”

“Didn’t that piss you off? That you had to do that?”

Grant shrugged.

“There’s that shrug. Was that too feel-y a question?” she asked.

That was when his phone rang.

Later, he would wish he’d never answered the call. But it was a good friend, Lyle Boudreaux (Captain Lyle, he liked to be called), and he didn’t phone very often.

Sarah nodded and smiled, silently letting him know she didn’t mind if he answered it. She was peeling a cucumber.

“Captain, what’s up?”

“Look, Grant, I’m not feeling so hot tonight, and I don’t think I can make tomorrow morning’s trip. And I was wondering if you could cover for me. Some couple from New York. I don’t want to lose them as customers.” Lyle had a deep-sea fishing charter business and depended on repeat business.

Meanwhile, Grant was waiting for a coat of epoxy to dry and didn’t mind making a couple hundred bucks for a morning of sailing Lyle’s boat. Lyle was very protective of her, a twenty-eight-foot Downeaster, but he trusted Grant. After all, Grant had built her.

“Sure,” he said.

“Oh, great, thank you,” Lyle said, sounding relieved.

“Okay. Be at the boat at seven?”

“Can you deal? I know it’s early.”

“Sure.”

Grant had taken Lyle’s boat out for a morning charter once before, when Lyle’s second baby was born, a few months back. She was a great boat, of

course, and according to the maritime forecast, tomorrow was supposed to be a clear, sunny day.

No problem, Grant told him.

*

He woke just a few minutes before five the next morning, before his phone alarm sounded, and he turned it off before it could wake Sarah, who was staying over. It was still dark. He made coffee, dressed, and drove the ten miles to the harbor. He arrived by quarter of seven and found the *Suzanne B* docked where she always was.

There's a whole routine to starting up a boat. He pulled out the rods, set her up. Lyle kept a stack of folding chairs in the cabin so they wouldn't get wet from condensation overnight. Grant unlocked the cabin and retrieved them, set them up on the deck. He checked the engine, turned on the valves. Lyle's boat was only three years old and still looked new. He took excellent care of her, was fanatical about cleaning her, thoroughly scrubbing her down before and after each trip. *He'd want me to do the same*, Grant thought.

He gathered the cleaning solutions from the pilothouse down below, and in fifteen minutes he'd cleaned and sanitized the *Suzanne B*, first with boat soap and a long scrub brush and then with Clorox bleach; finally, he sprayed the deck with an alcohol-based product.

After checking the oil, Grant started the engine, let her warm up. The customers were scheduled to arrive by seven thirty, so there was plenty of time. He switched on the radios and talked to some of the early-bird fishermen who were out there already, to find out where the good fishing was. You'd think they wouldn't want competition, and some didn't. But a few Good Samaritans told him where they were having luck. It's a bountiful ocean.

Right at seven thirty a stout man appeared at the boat wearing a navy windbreaker and jeans and expensive-looking sneakers. He was balding, with curly black hair at the sides, and wore steel aviator-framed sunglasses. He had the air of an athlete gone to seed, soft around the middle but stocky, thick-limbed in ways that could be muscle as much as flab. He looked to be

in his forties, and with his pasty complexion, he didn't look much like a sportsman.

"You're not Captain Lyle," the man said.

"My name is Grant Anderson," Grant said, "and I'm filling in for Captain Lyle, who's sick today."

"All right, Captain Grant," the man said. "My name is Frederick Newman." He had a little tic, the cheek below his left eye twitching every so often. He was studying his phone.

"We're waiting for your wife, is that right?" Grant said.

"No, my wife is not coming," said Newman. "She's under the weather. She won't be fishing with us this morning." He had the barest hint of an accent, which Grant couldn't quite place, but it made him nervous.

"So it's just you?"

"Right." Newman's cheek twitched, and he resumed studying his phone. "I'm good to go, Captain Grant."

Grant gave the man a version of Lyle's introductory spiel, Newman nodding impatiently throughout as if he'd heard it all before. Probably he had. Grant said he just wanted to make sure he had a good time. He showed the man all the gear, explained about the wire line. Newman kept nodding.

He wanted to catch striped bass, he said; bluefish was too fishy to eat. Grant told him the secret to cooking bluefish was to soak it in milk for a half hour. Newman didn't care; he wanted striper. Then he said, "Hey, how about we go shark fishing? Use the speargun?" His cheek twitched.

"We'd better not." Shark fishing destroyed a lot of equipment. Captain Lyle wouldn't be happy about it. Grant knew Lyle used a speargun recreationally for striper or bluefish or flounder fishing once in a while. It was a powerhead speargun, a .44 magnum. Good protection against sharks. When Lyle fished for tuna, he used his speargun to kill sharks that tried to steal his yellowfin.

Grant returned to the pilothouse, the enclosure that allows you to stay out of rain or direct sunlight, and took the wheel. They steamed out to a cove where there was a big drop-off. The *Suzanne B* wasn't fast, could go maybe

thirteen or fourteen knots, but she was a good, sturdy boat. Mackerel swam around the edge and top of the sandbar, around thirty feet down. And striped bass loved mackerel.

Grant throttled the engine down, slowing the speed to two knots. Now they were over a school of fish, according to his fish finder. No other vessels were in view. Newman was sitting on a deck chair, examining Lyle's speargun. "I went shark hunting with this famous guy out of Miami once," he said. "That was awesome."

"Be careful with that thing," Grant said. Threaded onto the end of the speargun was a .44 magnum bang stick, a smooth stainless-steel screw-on cylinder that held a cartridge.

Newman was studying him. "You know, you look familiar," he said, setting the speargun down on the deck. "You always had a beard?"

"Oh, yeah," Grant said, attempting to sound casual, but his heart was drumming. "Long before it was cool." He was pretty sure now that Newman's very slight accent was Slavic. An eel of unease squirmed in Grant's belly. It had been years since he'd heard a Russian accent. Newman's fluent English had the flat American *a*'s of an émigré who'd spent most of his adolescence in the United States. Probably came to the U.S. as a teenager.

Frederick Newman shook his head. He was speaking to Grant in a low voice, but Grant could barely hear him over the thrum and whine of the *Suzanne B*'s engine.

"Excuse me?" Grant said.

Newman raised his voice. "You must have known this day would come, Paul," he said calmly.

Grant's stomach caved in on itself. He was looking at Newman's face, at the eyes behind those aviators. They were intent, alert, almost the eyes of someone playing a video game, neither cruel nor kind. Grant expected that tic to return, but Newman's face was absolutely placid.

"I'm afraid you've got the wrong person, Mr. Newman. I'm Grant Anderson."

“You know, Paul, everyone dies one day. With me, it’s different. Clean, quick, no suffering.”

Grant caught the quick flash of gunmetal. The man’s right hand. Something had taken hold of Grant, something icy and willful and deliberate. His heart was racing, and he felt the first prickles of sweat on the nape of his neck. He didn’t know what to do.

“You’ll need to pilot the boat out another seven miles or so,” Newman said, “so we’re catching the Labrador Current. Best to have no body washing ashore.”

“But you’re making a mistake,” Grant said. With a calm, slow motion, he took out his wallet and drew close to Newman. “I told you, you have the wrong man. Here, let me show you my captain’s license.” He opened his wallet to his driver’s license and displayed it, holding it too close to Newman’s face. He had no captain’s license. “See, you’ve got me confused with someone else.”

For just the briefest moment, Newman glanced down at Grant’s wallet, and in that instant, Grant lunged at the man, fist balled, and batted the gun out of his hand as hard as he could. The weapon went skittering and clattering across the deck and splashed into the water.

Smoothly, with scarcely a pause, Newman picked up the speargun lying at his feet and hoisted it until it was pointing at Grant’s chest. The man seemed to know what he was doing. The gun was probably five feet long, its end just a few inches from Grant’s body. “You build boats for a living,” Newman said. “You’re very good at it. You know what I do for a living. Trust that I’m good at it, too.”

Obligingly, Grant reset the wheel.

Gesturing around at the water, the wide-open vista, Newman said, “See, in my business, this is what we call a ‘clean field of action.’” He glanced at something on his wrist, maybe a GPS nav device, Grant wasn’t sure. “Bring us seven miles southwest, Paul.”

“Berzin send you?” Grant said, sounding resigned. He watched Newman remove the cotter pin from the cartridge at the end of the bang stick, the

safety. So he did know what he was doing.

“You’ve only made things harder on yourself, Paul,” Newman said. “Messier. More painful. It didn’t have to be this way.”

“The currents shift a lot this time of year, you know.” Grant didn’t meet the man’s gaze but looked elsewhere. He felt the ocean waves gently rolling the deck, smelled the diesel. He moved very slowly and carefully toward Newman.

With a sudden motion, he shoved the end of the speargun up and away from his chest and pointing into the air, to point at neither of them. His heartbeat thundered in his ears.

What followed was a blur.

They grappled over the gun, Newman yanking at the weapon, trying to gain control of it, Grant trying to grab it away from him. Grant knocked Newman to the deck, the two men struggling, fighting with each other, each of them grunting. The other man was stronger than he looked. With a guttural roar, he wrenched the speargun out of Grant’s hands, and as the distal end struck the underside of Newman’s jaw, there was a deafening blast. Grant’s face was splashed with blood. His ears rang.

At once he saw what had happened. The .44 magnum round had torn a jagged hole in Frederick Newman’s throat. Blood gouted from the wound, down Newman’s chest, pooling on the lacquered wooden deck. Grant’s face was beaded with blood and sweat. He squatted next to Newman and felt an artery in his bloody neck. There was no pulse, but he knew there wouldn’t be one.

Grant’s stomach was roiling. Something oily rose in his throat. He hadn’t killed the man; the struggle over the speargun had done it. But he felt like he had just crossed some Rubicon, violated some ancient taboo, and was now on the other side of it.

Staggering to his feet, he just made it to the side of the boat and vomited.

He thought of Sarah and the little girl at her school.

Then he took the dead man’s iPhone out of his back pocket. He looked at it. The phone’s home screen was locked. But how to unlock it? Would face ID

do it? He held the phone up to the dead man's face, but the eyes were closed, so it didn't work.

In any case, your mobile phone could be tracked, he remembered, so he had to get rid of it. Standing at the side of the boat, he dropped the phone into the ocean.

Now he was operating out of purest adrenaline. Cleaning up the puddle of blood would be easy. But what to do about the body?

The solution came to him instantly.

Returning to the wheel, he navigated over to where the sonar fish finder told him there were sharks. A whole school of them, probably tiger sharks. He throttled down to two knots.

He removed the man's wallet from his back pocket. Opening it, he found a New York State driver's license in the name of NEWMAN FREDERICK G. In the man's front pocket was a set of Porsche keys. He thought a moment. Tossing the wallet and keys overboard, he dragged the body a few feet over to the side of the boat, eased it over the edge, and tipped it headfirst into the shark-infested water with a dull splash. A cloud of dark blood instantly bloomed, and the ocean began to churn, and once again he was sick.