

MAYDAY!

by

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Prologue

Fifty years ago

The Jersey shore was sweltering that Fourth of July. Hank Smith sat alone on his tattered, olive-green army blanket that was spread out haphazardly on the hot sand. Between swigs of cheap beer, he stared glassy-eyed at the waves as they rolled in. Seagulls lazily circled overhead, looking for an opportunity to swoop down and steal food from unsuspecting tourists.

Nearby, two blonde, bikini-clad sorority girls strolled down the overcrowded beach arm in arm, laughing and gossiping about boys. When they crossed his field of vision, Hank stuck the ends of two fingers in his mouth and let out a loud, crass wolf whistle.

The girls turned excitedly to search for their admirer. They were shocked to see a hairy, forty-two-year-old man with a bad comb-over and a beer belly lapping over his Speedo waving at them. Repulsed, they looked at each other and squealed, “Eewww, gross!”

Hank hoisted his beer can in a mock toast and yelled, “Cheers!” Under his breath he muttered, “Bitches.” Rejected again by the fairer sex, he tilted his head back and drained the last drop from the can. Hank crushed it and tossed the empty can on a growing pile, making it an even dozen. Grabbing another beer from the cooler, he swiped it across his sweaty brow, trying to counter the effects of the thick, humid air.

With his leathery hand, Hank shaded his eyes from the glare of the sun and scanned the beach. He saw a scrawny boy headed his way. The boy was playing with a toy airplane, making loud jet engine noises as he swooped the plane up, down, left, and right.

Hank cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, “Mark!”

Lost in his own world, the boy didn’t hear the call.

“Marcus Daniel Smith!” Hank yelled louder.

The boy stopped and looked up.

“Get your ass over here!”

The boy landed the pretend flight and ran over, clutching his prized toy.

“Where the hell have you been?” Hank scolded him. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“I thought you could see me,” Mark protested. He pointed thirty feet down the beach. “I was just over there.”

“Next time tell me before you go running off like that.”

“Sorry, Dad.” Mark’s head dropped.

Regretting the undeserved scolding, Hank tried to make amends. He patted the worn blanket. “Sit down here next to your old man and keep me company.”

Knowing all too well the consequences of angering his father in his current state, Mark reluctantly plopped down on the far edge of the tattered blanket.

A few minutes of awkward silence passed. Hank polished off another can. Bored, Mark ran his finger through the sand, drawing random shapes. As Hank grabbed another beer, he looked over and pointed at the plane. “What ya got there?”

Mark’s eyes lit up. “It’s a Boeing 707! The best airplane in the whole world! It goes seven million miles an hour and can fly all the way from New York to—”

“You and your airplanes. Don’t you ever think about anything else?”

Mark’s enthusiasm immediately drained away.

Oblivious to his son’s feelings, Hank continued. “What about girls? You got any girlfriends yet?”

“Daaadd! I’m only ten.”

“You’re ten already?” Hank was genuinely surprised. Any guilt he felt about the shortcomings of his parenting slipped from Hank’s mind faster than sand through an open hand. Returning the focus to himself, Hank boasted, “Hell, when I was your age I had a different girlfriend for every day of the week.”

Mark looked like he had just bitten into a lemon. “Girls are yucky.”

“Yucky?” Hank chuckled, then stopped and thought about his own past experience. “You can say that again,” he snorted. Hank inhaled a deep breath of the salty sea air. “Enough about girls. Come on, let’s go for a swim.”

Mark looked over at the pile of beer cans—a familiar sight—and shook his head. “Can we go home now? I’m tired.”

“Tired? I bring you all the way to the beach on the one day I get you, and you don’t even want to go swimming?” Hank looked at Mark with a skeptical eye. “You’re not scared of the water, are you?”

“No. I just want to go home,” Mark fibbed.

“Bull. You’re just scared, that’s all. No son of mine is going to grow up to be a damned chicken. I know how to fix that. Same way my old man did.” Hank scooped up Mark, threw him over his shoulder and waded waist-deep out into the warm ocean.

Mark banged his tiny fists on his dad’s back. “Let me down! I don’t want to go in the water! Please, let me down!”

Ignoring his son’s pleas, Hank lifted Mark off his shoulder and tossed him into the ocean like an empty beer can.

Chapter 1

Present day

A picture postcard view of the dazzling lights of Broadway and Times Square illuminated the darkened cockpit as the pilots lined up to land at John F. Kennedy International Airport.

Ignoring the view, the copilot looked over jealously at his captain in the left seat. “So, two weeks in Maui. Nice. What’s the special occasion?”

“I’m surprising the wife for our twenty-fifth anniversary,” the captain bragged.

A radio call interrupted their conversation. “Alpha Flight 347, JFK tower, cleared to land runway one three left. You’re starting to catch the plane in front of you. Slow down now to your final approach speed.”

The copilot keyed his microphone. “Roger. Cleared to land. Slowing now.”

The captain pulled the throttles back to idle and disengaged the autopilot. “Gear down. Flaps full,” he commanded.

The chatty copilot extended the landing gear and wing flaps. “Twenty-five years? You must still be on number one,” he joked.

“Yep, original model. Twenty-five years of marital bliss. Well, twenty-five years, at least. I figured after putting up with me for all those years, the least I could do is take her to a nice resort.”

“That’s gonna set you back a few bucks. Where are you staying?”

“I got a hell of a deal at the Grand Wailea Resort, right on the beach. It’s got a swim-up bar and a—”

“STALL!”

“STALL!”

“STALL!”

The startled pilots’ brains were barraged with blaring warning messages and flashing red lights indicating a dangerously low airspeed. The copilot’s younger brain cells recognized the cause of the warnings a millisecond before the captain’s. “Full power! Full power!” he screamed.

The captain grabbed the throttle levers and slammed them full forward. Superhuman strength gained from the massive shot of adrenalin suddenly coursing through his veins, caused the metal

levers to bend. Then he made a fatal mistake. Frightened by the ground rushing up at him, the captain pulled back on his control yoke.

Before the engines had a chance to spool up to full power, the cockpit shuddered violently—the sign of a deep stall. Suddenly, the right wing dropped as the plane snap-rolled into an inverted spin. Upside down, the plane plunged from the night sky above a neighborhood full of densely packed brownstones.

The pilots knew they were too low to attempt a recovery from the spin. Instinctively, they crossed their arms in front of their faces as if doing so would protect them from harm.

One second before the doomed airliner obliterated the defenseless neighborhood, the view out the cockpit windows froze.

Lights in the cockpit came on, illuminating the shell-shocked look on the pilots' faces.

The instructor pilot leaned forward and barked, “Congratulations, gentlemen. One radio call from me, while you chatterboxes discussed what color umbrellas you want in your mai tais, and you stalled the plane, killed everyone on board, and who knows how many innocent people on the ground. You’re both grounded. I want to see you in my office tomorrow morning at 8 a.m. sharp.”

With that, Capt. Mark Smith stood up and stormed out the door at the back of the simulator.

Chapter 2

The next afternoon

Over one million pounds of aluminum, highly flammable fuel, oblivious passengers, and barely edible food roared down the runway, quickly picking up speed.

The scalding jet exhaust, a broiling 750 degrees Celsius, caused the air behind the airliner to ripple like a desert mirage. Eventually, the Boeing 747 lumbered off the two-mile-long strip of concrete at JFK, thumbing its nose at gravity.

The heavy jumbo jet struggled upward into the bitter January sky as it headed off to some balmy, tropical destination. As it ascended, the plane passed over a rusting and worn hangar—world headquarters of Alpha Airlines. The company's ultramodern red-white-and-blue logo was proudly mounted above the dented hangar door. Wisps of windblown snow swirled across the dirty concrete, accumulating in gray piles of slush at the edge of the tarmac.

When the jet engine noise faded away, a snappy rendition of *Birdland* could be heard coming from behind the closed hangar doors.

Inside the large hangar, the normally grimy space had been lavishly redecorated to resemble a glitzy Las Vegas casino. A casino with the strong smell of jet fuel.

A temporary stage was set up on the oil-stained floor, along with hundreds of chairs for the occasion. A twelve-piece jazz ensemble, nattily dressed in white tuxedos, sat off to the side of the stage playing favorites by Weather Report, Miles Davis, and Billie Holiday. To the consternation of the band leader, the terrible acoustics caused the music to reverberate incessantly inside the metal-walled echo chamber.

Behind the stage, a dozen stone-faced security guards stood in front of an enormous black floor-to-ceiling curtain, preventing the crowd from sneaking a peek behind it. In front of the stage, a select assembly of people in formal attire representing all the economic powerhouses of the world

mingled in a roped-off VIP section. A group of young Silicon Valley techies dressed casually in hoodies and obscure alternative rock band T-shirts were a conspicuous exception.

Waiters and waitresses dressed as flight attendants circulated among the VIPs, serving them bubbling flutes of Dom Pérignon and hot hors d'oeuvres from silver platters.

The general public, standing outside of the ropes, got nothing.

The large audience was now seated, eagerly waiting for the presentation to begin. The jazz ensemble enthusiastically played another song from their repertoire. A row of chairs, occupied by corporate types in suits, lined the back edge of the stage. One token airline captain, signified by four gold stripes at the end of each sleeve on his jacket, sat in the last chair.

A trim, distinguished-looking man in his early sixties stepped up to the podium to speak. His fake tan was noticeably out of place in the middle of the winter.

The band played on.

He waited, forcing a smile, hands firmly planted on his hips.

The band continued to play.

The man lifted his chin and drew his finger sideways across his throat, sending a clear message.

Like the game of musical chairs, the band leader stopped the music in mid-note.

The speaker smiled broadly and said, "Good afternoon and welcome to today's ceremony. My name is Ralph Sanders. For the few of you that don't recognize me, I'm the CEO of Tech Aerospace Corporation. On behalf of everyone at Tech Aero, I want to thank Alpha Airlines for asking me to preside over this momentous occasion." Always looking out for the bottom line, he added, "Of course, a very special welcome to any potential future customers of our fabulous planes in the audience." Waving the wait staff toward the VIPs, Sanders said, "Give them all the champagne they want. It's on me." His paltry attempt at incentivizing the affluent crowd to buy his multimillion-dollar planes fell flat.

Even after years of grueling development, supply chain glitches, and billions of dollars of company money spent, the FAA had the ultimate say whether a new airliner got certified as safe to fly. Fully aware of that fact, Sanders sucked up to the leader of the agency. "We are especially honored to have our wonderful FAA administrator, Michael Hernandez, joining us today." He

pointed back at the young, handsome man. Despite Sanders's gushing introduction, there was a slight tinge of disdain in his voice. The disdain betrayed his opinion that the young political appointee was way out of his depth and didn't even have the sense to realize it.

Hernandez flashed a big smile and gave the crowd a politician's wave.

Sanders got back to business. "They said it couldn't be built. Too advanced, they said. So, we brought in the best minds in Silicon Valley to work alongside our top engineers." He pointed at the techies. They turned and high-fived each other. One stood up and took a thank-you bow.

Sanders continued. "The end result of all our hard work? An aviation masterpiece. The most computerized, fully integrated, technologically advanced airliner ever conceived." He beamed as he added, "Heck, even the toilets are controlled by computers on our plane." Sweeping his hand back toward the curtain, he dramatically pronounced, "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you...the Tech-Liner!"

The hangar went dark.

The rap song "Get Ready for This" blasted from the speakers. White smoke from a fog machine blanketed the floor. Multiple spark cannons fired a shower of white-hot sparks into the air. The crowd started clapping and moving rhythmically to the beat.

If the crowd had thought about their surroundings, they should have been running for their lives. Strong jet fuel fumes plus spark cannons?

The enormous curtain fell to the floor revealing a gleaming new, twin-engine jumbo jet. Its sleek, futuristic design made it look like it was going Mach 2 just sitting in the hangar. With a wingspan of 250 feet and a length of 225 feet, the Tech-Liner was massive—by far the largest plane ever to grace the old hangar. A newly designed GE125 engine, the largest and the most powerful jet engine ever built, dangled under each wing. The enormous engine looked big enough to swallow a whole city bus in one gulp. Alpha Airlines logo was proudly displayed on the soaring tail. A tail that had been measured three times to make sure it would fit under the hangar doorframe.

Multicolored spotlights waved around frenetically, creating a garish Las Vegas atmosphere. A chorus line of sexy dancers dressed in skimpy flight attendant-style outfits strode onto the floor. They bumped and ground in unison to the thumping beat like cheerleaders for an NBA team.

Up on the stage, Sanders tried to look cool by boogying to the music. His attempt failed.

The show ended with a blinding flash of light and a loud BOOM.

“Woo! How ’bout that! Isn’t she a beauty?” Sanders gushed. “And wait until you see the inside.” Sanders straightened his tie. “I can’t tell you how proud I am of my team. Great job, guys. Now let me introduce someone whom I’ve come to know and admire during the long development process of our plane. Mike Andrews is our host today and the CEO of Alpha Airlines. Mike was pivotal in making Alpha Airlines the launch customer for our new Tech-Liner. Please welcome Mike to the podium.”

Andrews walked up with the swagger of a fighter pilot. The glaring disparity between his cocky gait and his slovenly appearance caused some in the audience to chuckle under their breath. Halfhearted, obligatory clapping greeted the dumpy middle-aged oaf of a man as he arrived at the podium.

Sanders vigorously shook Andrews’s hand. “Mike, on behalf of all 80,000 employees at Tech Aerospace, I want to thank you for your unwavering trust in us. I present to you the key to Alpha Airline’s first Tech-Liner.” Sanders handed him a large, tacky cardboard key.

The two turned toward the press and engaged in a long photo-op handshake, smiling for the cameras. Andrews turned his back to the crowd and said in a low voice only the two of them could hear, “This thing better live up to the hype, or I’m yanking the entire order.” The two men continued to smile and shake hands. Sanders got the message from his largest customer. With a forced smile plastered on his face, he sat down.

In the blink of an eye, Andrews did a Dr. Jekyll-like transformation back to friendly CEO. “Thank you, Ralph. I’ve enjoyed working with you as well.”

Holding up the cardboard key, he joked, “What, no key ring?” When the anticipated laughs didn’t come, Andrews continued. “Seriously, we are thrilled to be the launch customer of this fabulous plane. It represents my vision for Alpha Airlines: Be first. Be the best. That’s why I’ve committed my airline to its largest aircraft order in our history—seven *billion* dollars—for a fleet of Tech-Liners.”

In the crowd, members of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, Local 1987, burst into applause.

Shifting gears, Andrews said, “The inaugural flight of our new plane this evening will be under the command of our chief pilot, Capt. Mark Smith.” Andrews pointed back at the lone pilot on the stage. “Mark, stand up.”

Mark reluctantly stood up and gave a half wave to the crowd.

From a distance, Mark's broad shoulders, sturdy six-foot-two frame, and just the right amount of pewter-gray hair to inspire confidence made him the quintessential pilot with the "right stuff." A closer look into his seafoam-green eyes revealed a different person entirely: someone tired, lonely, and worn down from life's many wounds.

That hadn't always been the case. As a young US Air Force pilot, Mark had had a sparkle in his green eyes and the type of roguish good looks that attracted women in droves—attributes that made him very popular among fellow pilots when out partying. Eventually, he had to choose his long-term career path. So, a lifetime ago, Mark left the Air Force after his commitment was up and got a "real" job flying for the airlines. Not as exciting as flying supersonic, upside down, at five hundred feet, but calmer. Calm being a relative term when used to describe the volatile airline industry. An industry that wears down even the hardest of souls.

"Captain Smith is our most experienced and trusted pilot. Rest assured, you will be in good hands. So please, enjoy the buffet while we get the plane ready for its maiden flight to London. Soon we'll be ready to light this candle!" The aviation-savvy audience members audibly groaned at the plagiarized Alan Shepard quote.

Andrews walked over to Mark and halfheartedly shook his hand. Mark wasn't amused at being used as a prop. "Light this candle? Really?"

Andrews snapped, "Look here, Smith, I've got a lot riding on this trip. I can't tolerate any problems."

"Relax, I'll make it a memorable one," Mark assured him.

"See to it that you do." Then Andrews spitefully added, "You were damn lucky your union was able to get you back in the cockpit. This is your last trip, Smith. Don't screw it up." Andrews achieved his goal with that last crack—getting under Mark's skin.

Mark felt his blood pressure rapidly rising. He fumed inside at his boss for throwing that dark period from his past in his face. Yes, he had been lucky to get his job back after hitting rock bottom four years ago. If it hadn't been for the union going to bat for him too many times to count, Mark would have been fired long ago. But that was the distant past. During rehab, Mark learned to swallow his pride and took full responsibility for his drinking. He cleaned up his act and had been sober ever since. As far as Mark was concerned, his internal demons were pretty much under control.

Now all he wanted to do was fly to London without anyone dredging up his past mistakes—especially Mike Andrews. Before his temper got the better of him, Mark said, “If you’ll excuse me, Mr. Andrews, I need to go do my flight planning.” Mark quickly made his exit down the stairs on the side of the stage.

As he waded through the large crowd swarming around the shiny new plane to get a closer look, a young boy broke loose from his father’s hand and ran up to Mark. “Are you a policeman?” the boy said, with awe in his voice.

The embarrassed father quickly stepped in and apologized. “Sorry, sir. He saw your uniform and thought…”

Mark understood. “No problem; don’t worry about it.” Looking at the boy, Mark said in a teacher-like voice, “See that big plane behind you? I fly that.” Mark reached into his pocket and handed the boy a set of plastic pilot wings. “Here you go. You have to have wings if you want to fly one of those when you get bigger.”

The boy held the prized wings right up to his father’s face. “Wow, cool! Look, Dad!”

Mark joked with the boy. “Say, if my copilot doesn’t show up tonight, can your dad help me fly my plane?”

“No, he’d better not,” the boy responded, in all seriousness.

Mark cocked his head. “Why’s that?”

In the type of honesty that only springs from the young, the boy blurted out, “My mom said if he gets one more speeding ticket, she’s going to—”

The embarrassed father jumped in. “OK! Let the pilot get back to his duties, Son.” He quickly maneuvered his offspring toward the exit with a hand on each shoulder. Before moving on, the father leaned over toward Mark. “Thanks for taking the time sir. You made his day.”

“Happy to do it. I was that age once.” Mark smiled as he recalled his own infatuation with airplanes as a boy.

The boy looked back as he was led away and waved at Mark with a big toothless grin.

Chapter 3

Evening had fallen, and the public was long gone. The stage and flamboyant decorations had been removed and the hangar reverted to its normal grimy state.

Three mechanics in dirty coveralls rolled portable boarding stairs up to the Tech-Liner's passenger door. In a nod to the region known for cutting-edge technology (as well as Google Glasses), *Spirit of Silicon Valley* was proudly painted on the side of the nose.

Maintenance Supervisor Tony Russo led his team up the stairs. Short, stocky, and olive-skinned, he was the poster boy for a Brooklyn Italian.

Following the boss was Marvin Timmons. After hauling his 320-pound frame up the stairs, Timmons stopped to catch his breath. Between gasps for air, he looked back down the stairs and barked, "Hurry up, rookie."

Bringing up the rear was the junior man on the team, Ahmed Harris. Ahmed lagged as he dutifully lugged a heavy tool box up the stairs.

The mechanics walked into the passenger cabin and were met with that distinctive new car smell, albeit that of an extraordinarily expensive new car. Every inch of the posh interior was perfect. The virgin airliner would never look as pristine or smell this good again. But start earning its keep, it must. Still, it was almost a shame to let tank-top- and flip-flop-wearing passengers mess it up.

The mechanics walked past widely spaced rows of plush seats covered in soft, cream-colored leather and trimmed with gold. Each first-class seat was its own luxury retreat with every creature comfort imaginable: HD video screens, built-in massage, heat, and the ability to fold down into a comfy twin-size bed. The spacious cabin was arranged with one seat next to each window and two seats between the double aisles. No need to worry about bruised kneecaps from the seat in front on this flight.

Russo looked around and said in his thick Brooklyn accent, "She's a beauty, ain't she?"

Timmons frowned, then grumbled. "Better be. The damned company paid for it with *our* money, that they stole from *our* friggin' pensions."

Russo tried to reason with him. "Move on, man. Yeah, we got hosed. The pricks took my pension, too. But the bankruptcy was five years ago. Let it go."

Timmons resented having his retirement dreams stolen by the greedy bastards. “I’ll move on when those crooks get put in the slammer!”

Russo shook his head and walked off. “Good luck with that.”

The wrench benders entered the roomy, futuristic cockpit. The “front office” of the Tech-Liner was anything but a typical airliner cockpit. It looked like a cross between the cockpit of the Space Shuttle and the bridge of the Starship Enterprise. Three multifunction touch screens were mounted side by side, spanning the entire width of the instrument panel. The normal jungle of buttons, switches, indicator lights, and “steam” gauges that covered every inch of older airliner cockpits were gone. On the Tech-Liner most were represented virtually on the screens. And unlike most airliners, there was no control yoke that extended up from the floor in front of each pilot. When the pilots wanted to hand-fly the plane, they used a computer game-style joystick located on the outboard panels under each side window.

Russo slipped into the clean captain’s seat in his dirty overalls. He slid a work table out from under the bottom of the instrument panel and locked it in front of himself. Russo needled Timmons before getting started with his preflight duties. “How ’bout that game last week? My Giants kicked your Cowboys’ asses. Pay up, loser.”

Searching for a way to welch on his bet, Timmons whined, “Puh-leeze, they got lucky. The refs were in the tank the whole game.”

Russo should have known better than to expect his bitter coworker to make good. “Yeah, yeah, blame the refs. You still owe me two Gs. Just gimme the computer, ya loser.”

Timmons opened a gray metal case labeled CONTROLLED ITEM, BRAIN KIT #1 in bold red letters. He removed a laptop computer from the protective foam and handed it to his supervisor. Russo laid it on the work table and turned it on. The computer clicked and whirred to life. He typed in the maintenance department password then logged in to the plane’s Wi-Fi network.

The other piece of equipment in the case was an electronic module the size of a cigarette pack—the “Brain.”

Timmons carefully lifted the module from the foam cutout, walked to the back of the cockpit, and opened a small hatch door on the floor.

Before Timmons could start down the opening, Ahmed snatched the Brain out of his hand. “Gimme that thing. You’ll never fit your fat ass through the hatch.” He quickly descended the ladder before his coworker could stop him.

Thinking Ahmed might be right, but loath to admit it, Timmons threatened, “Watch it, punk, or I’ll lock your ass down there for good!”

The hot, cramped electronics compartment under the cockpit was a maze of computers, power supplies, and black boxes with their functions stenciled in white letters on the front. The acrid, metallic smell of hot circuit boards filled the air.

Ahmed could barely squeeze his way along a narrow walkway between the racks of equipment. Safely away from his abusive coworker, he summoned up the courage to yell, “See, I was right! Fat ass.” Ahmed opened a clear plastic cover on the face of a computer and plugged the Brain into a recessed slot. As soon as a connection was made, indicator lights on the end of the module rapidly blinked. “OK, go ahead!” he yelled back toward the hatch.

Russo pulled up an aircraft preflight test program on the laptop. What used to take a team of mechanics an hour—checking over all the systems on a plane before each flight—now took one minute. After clicking EXECUTE, a virtual representation of the three cockpit screens came up on the laptop. The cockpit instrumentation displayed on the virtual screens simulated the plane being airborne at thirty-five thousand feet. The same picture popped up on the actual cockpit screens. The laptop program automatically cycled the systems on the plane through various tests: communication, navigation, flight controls, engines. The throttles moved full forward, then back to idle. Both pilots’ joysticks moved by themselves, as if possessed. The fly-by-wire computer system instantly sensed the stick movements. On the outside of the plane, the ailerons, rudder, and elevators moved full travel in each direction.

A green TEST SUCCESSFUL banner popped up on the laptop screen. Russo typed a few more entries into the laptop then yelled, "All right, Ahmed, it passed!" He closed the laptop and handed it back to his coworker.

Timmons carefully placed the laptop back in the protective foam. "You gonna sign off the logbook?"

"Yep. She's good to go."

Timmons passed Russo a thick aircraft logbook containing records of all maintenance performed on the plane since it was built. Until the maintenance supervisor signed it off as safe to fly, the plane was nothing more than a very expensive paperweight in the regulatory eyes of the FAA. Russo scribbled his approval in the logbook page then ripped out the carbon copy below.

Ahmed poked his head out of the hatch, holding the Brain.

Timmons got even by snatching it back. "I'll take that, punk."

Russo and Ahmed gathered their things and started to leave the cockpit while Timmons returned the Brain to the protective case.

Russo turned back. "I gotta go enter the logbook page in the computer. You gonna sign the Brain Kit back in to the parts department?"

"Yeah, yeah, get outta here. I got it." Timmons waved them away. "And I ain't paying you no money; the game was rigged." Pointing to Ahmed, he said, his voice dripping with jealousy, "Why don't you try hitting up trust fund baby here for the money?"

Ahmed's dark eyes narrowed as he thrust his finger in his tormenter's face. "Screw you, Timmons! I don't want any of my dad's tainted, capitalist pig money."

Seeing he had gotten under Ahmed's skin, Timmons gladly turned the knife. "Funny, that don't stop you from driving Daddy's Porsche, though. Friggin' ingrate."

Russo stepped between the two men before they came to blows. "Don't pay no attention to him, Ahmed. He's just jealous." As he ushered Ahmed out of the cockpit, Russo turned, raised his middle finger, and gave Timmons the New York salute. "Ya big looser!"