

POWER HUNGER

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Power Hunger

A Novel

Charles B. Hampton



Mystery Mansion Books
Brea, CA

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*To my loving wife and
Deryl, Charles, Chandra and John.
To our bright new puppy, Tinkerbelle,
To our sweet departed Snoopy Girl,
Who is gone now, but not forgotten.*

*I am sculptor, I am clay.
What shall I make of myself today?
Charles Hampton Bush*

ONE

A MECHANISM in Marine Lieutenant David Lee Hunter's brain froze. He stopped thinking. He stopped feeling. He stopped breathing. He stood mesmerized, watching the battered alarm clock next to his bed tick, tick, tick. Its bent second hand clicked its way around its face going nowhere except back to the beginning. He gasped for air and sucked in a breath. "What the—!"

He shifted his gaze to a small cardboard box sitting on the bed beside his leg. A clutter of useless junk from his DINFOS office desk at Fort Meade stared back at him. Pencils, rubber bands, plastic paper clips, letter opener, flashlight. Junk.

David's brain began to function again. He frowned and ticked off the events of the last two days. Yesterday, he taught his last journalism class. Today, Saturday, he spent most of the day visiting and saying goodbye to old friends. Two hours ago, he cleaned out his desk and ran a few errands. Now this.

Puzzled by his brief mental lapse, he studied the clock. Why was it important? It was a relic that for twelve years had traveled everywhere with him, including the middle east three times, southeast Asia twice, the Fiji Islands and Okinawa once. The clock was the most familiar object he owned.

And then the truth hit him. It was the same truth that had lurked un-

recognized on the fringes of his awareness for the past week. He patted the old clock's rounded top.

"Not your fault, buddy," he said. "Just me."

The clock had been his lifeline companion, saving his butt from being late many times in the last ten years. Now, as of five o'clock today, it was irrelevant. He didn't need it to wake him at six A.M. every morning. He no longer had anywhere to go. No more staff meetings. No more classes at Fort Meade. No more inspections. Nothing.

One hour ago he became a civilian. He was no longer a respected instructor at the world's finest journalism school. He no longer belonged to the greatest fighting force in the world. His lifelong goal of keeping his country safe had vanished. Sixty minutes ago he had become a nobody without friends or family. He belonged nowhere. Unless—

David's heart leapt. He spun on his heel and hurried out of the cramped studio apartment. Outside the door, he turned right along the hallway and then hurried down the stairs. At the lobby, he rushed to his mail slot which resided among others against one wall. His habit was to get his mail on the way into his apartment, but today his hands had been full. Maybe—

With trembling fingers he opened slot 203. Three envelopes. He grabbed them. One was a bill from the power company. One was junk mail from a used-car dealer. The third was what he had been waiting for, an answer from the Virginia Weekly News Herald where he had applied for a job as reporter.

Resisting the urge to rip open the envelope, he calmed himself. He would open it in the apartment over a shot of Johnny Walker.

"Mr. Hunter?"

David turned toward the lobby door. Two men in gray suits stood studying him. One was tall and lean and the other was shorter and stocky.

"Yes. May I help you?"

"We'd like you to come with us, sir," the tall one said. He lifted his right hand. It pointed an old army forty-five automatic at David.

David stuffed the mail back in the slot and closed the door. He turned to face the two men. "May I ask why?" he asked in a calm tone. "Who are you?"

"We're with the Glen Burnie police, sir. We've been ordered to take you in for questioning."

David moved toward them. Something wasn't right. They didn't look like cops. They looked too nervous. And, cops didn't pull their weapons without a reason. He stopped two feet from the man with the weapon. "Do

you have identification? Can you tell me what this is about?" he asked. "I'll go with you, but I'd like to see your badges first, if you don't mind."

The tall man glanced at his partner. David stepped forward, grabbed the forty-five near the butt and twisted. It came out of the man's hand with ease. Eyes wide in shock, both men raised their hands. David noticed they wore identical rings that looked like wedding bands made of some kind of dark metal. Odd. Maybe they were married.

"That's better," David said. "Show me your badges, please."

"We can't," the short one said. "We—we're not cops. That was a lie."

David suppressed a laugh. "What's this about? Tell me, and I won't hurt you. Maybe I should hold you and call the real cops."

The men blanched and looked at each other. "Mr. Hunter, please. Don't call the police. We're sorry. We don't know what it's about. We were told to take you to a place on the other side of Glen Burnie. There's a man there who wants to talk to you. He asked us to come get you."

"Did he tell you to pull a gun on me?"

"No, sir. That was my stupid idea. I didn't think you would come if I didn't. I'm sorry, sir. We weren't going to hurt you. Please don't kill us."

"Kill you? Why the hell would I do that? Tell me who sent you, and I'll let you go."

"We don't know who he is," the stocky one said. "Honest. He said he'll give us five hundred bucks each to bring you to him. Let us go, please. We won't bother you again."

"Why are you so frightened?"

"We've never done anything like this before. We had no choice. Please, let us go. We're sorry."

David relaxed. He was tired, and neither man seemed threatening. He calculated his chances of getting information from them. Oddly enough, he believed their story. He made a decision. "I'll let you go," he said, "on one condition."

"What?" the tall one asked.

"You go back and tell whoever sent you that if he wants to chat with me, he knows where I live. Tell him I answer the telephone and the door bell. Can do?"

"Yes."

"Then get out of here before I change my mind."

"My gun?" the tall one said.

"You must be joking. Beat it."

"We'll go, Mr. Hunter, but you should know. He won't give up. He'll

send someone else.”

They scrambled out the door and hurried off toward the apartment parking area. David opened the door and stepped out to see where they went. A minute later, a black Ford Escort took off down the street. He couldn't see the license number.

“He won't give up,” the tall one said. Give up what? What the hell had just happened? Two nervous hens had tried to kidnap him and failed miserably. Why?

“Weird,” he muttered. He looked at the forty-five. He tucked it in his belt and returned to his mail slot. He got his mail and headed upstairs to his apartment.

In the kitchen he flipped the junk mail into a trash can under the sink. He dropped the power-company bill on the counter. He held the third envelope up to the light to examine it. It was opaque, but it was the one he was waiting for from the Virginia Weekly News Herald. He tossed it beside the bill and poured himself a stiff shot of Johnny Walker. He gulped that one, exhaled and poured another. The first wallop hit his stomach like a napalm bomb.

He lifted the forty-five and examined it. It was an old one, probably World War I vintage. The bluing was gone in spots. He ejected the clip and the shell from the chamber and put them on the counter. The shell chamber had rust in it. The serial number had been ground off the side.

He considered calling the real cops, but what would he tell them? A couple of scared chickens had tried to kidnap him with a rusty old gun? He had taken their weapon away from them? The cops would come, question him. How long would that take? An hour? Two? And then what would they do? “Call us if it happens again, Mr. Hunter, or if you think of anything useful.” He put the gun down again.

Calling the police would be a useless exercise. Right now he wanted to read the letter from the newspaper. He needed a job, and that was more important.

TWO

DAVID TOOK HIS DRINK and the letter to the living room and sat on a peeling Naugahyde sofa that had come with the apartment. He switched on a floor lamp and eyed the letter. Was this the one? He set the whiskey on a glass-topped coffee table in front of him and studied the envelope. To hell with it, he thought. He ripped it open. It was either good news or bad news. Procrastination couldn't change that.

The letter was hand written in dark blue ink. In a neat and concise penmanship, it said:

November 4, 20__

Dear Mr. Hunter,

Thank you for your recent application for a job with our paper. Your record of service as a Marine combat correspondent is very impressive as are your years teaching journalism at the Defense Information School at Fort Meade. Unfortunately, your qualifications are more than we require at this time. We have a small budget for this position, which means we most likely will hire a young journalism trainee.

All of us at the Virginia Weekly News Herald want to thank you for your years of service to our country and to wish you the best of

luck in whatever endeavor you choose to pursue in the future.

Sincerely,

Alfred E. Guff, Managing Editor

“Yeah, right.”

David wadded the letter into a ball and tossed it across the room and over the kitchen counter. The letter’s tone was warm and fuzzy, but it was identical to the previous ten rejections he had received. Dear Mr. Hunter. Thanks, but no thanks. Sincerely. The truth was that editors didn’t consider his combat ribbons relevant. And, why would they hire a retired combat correspondent when nice, predictable J-school graduates worked for peanuts? The last eleven letters he received said they wouldn’t.

David remembered his whiskey. He lifted it toward the ceiling and spoke to it. “Now what?” he said. “What do we drink to? Hey, I’ve got it. Here’s to a dumb jarhead who thought he could make it as a civilian.”

David raised the drink again, but stopped himself. That was a loser’s attitude. He had lost nothing yet. He just needed a new approach to getting a job. He had enough money saved to keep him going for a year, longer if he was frugal. In a year, he knew if he worked at it, he could find a decent job.

He relaxed and proposed a different toast. “Here’s to future success,” he said to the ceiling and tossed off the shot. This time it sent a warm, friendly glow down his throat. “Whoa!” he said.

Glad to be rid of the doldrums that had plagued him for a week, he grabbed the TV remote and aimed it at the set which was in a corner next to the kitchen counter. The set came on to a local news station showing an anorexic-looking male anchor with greasy black hair, a phony smile and wearing a dark blue suit and a blue dress shirt.

“And now for a real exclusive,” he said in a throaty announcer’s voice. “Earlier today, our political correspondent, Jill Breland, caught up with President-elect John Carlyle just outside the Russell Senate office building. Word is she had inside information on the soon-to-be President’s itinerary because she was the only reporter

on the scene. Great scoop, Jill. Here's what happened."

The picture cut to Jill Breland, a skinny young woman holding a microphone, hurrying up the Senate office-building steps. Above her, a tall, dark-haired man in his late forties, wearing a beige overcoat and surrounded by six huge bodyguards was just starting down the steps.

Seeing the reporter, the two guards in front of the President-elect moved to intervene, but their boss waved for them to let her pass.

The reporter, shoving her mike before her like the bow ornament on a Viking long ship, called out, "Senator, President-elect Carlyle! Jill Breland. May we have a moment? Please!"

John Carlyle stopped walking and waited for the girl to climb a little closer. His face was thin, his nose sharp, his eyes were deep set and squinted, his thin lips were pinched in amusement. He tilted his head back and watched the reporter struggle to keep her balance. As he breathed, he blew puffs of steam from his mouth. It was cold for late November. When Jill Breland stopped, he smiled into the camera, then turned his attention to her.

"I know you, Miss Breland," Carlyle said. "How may I help you?"

The girl, breathless and puffing steam from her rapid climb, steadied herself and said, "Sir, our viewers would like to know how you feel about your landslide election last week. This is your first run for office, yet you were elected in what amounts to the greatest landslide ever. How do you account for such a huge victory, sir?"

Carlyle's tight smile exploded into a grin. "We expected it to be a big win," he said, "but we didn't realize just how big it would be. The people of this country are sick and tired of their wishes being ignored by Washington politicians and bureaucrats, and they spoke out loud and clear. They wanted a President who owed nothing to anyone, except the people themselves. As you know, my net worth is north of fifty billion dollars, and I self-funded my campaign. I refused to accept financial aid from anyone. I'm beholden to no one but the voters. The American people like that." Carlyle's smile vanished. His face became serious, hawkish. "Broadcast this to the people, Jill. I've been given a historic mandate, so I'm giving both

parties fair warning. When I make a promise, I keep it. Corruption in this town is a spreading cancer. Once I'm sworn in, Washington will change whether the power brokers and lobbyists like it or not. The congress and the huge bureaucracies will work with me or they will pay a huge price for non-cooperation."

"Senator, what does that mean? What price will they pay? That sounds, well, menacing." The reporter obviously was discombobulated, but maintained her smile.

John Carlyle's own smile returned. "You'll just have to wait and see along with everyone else," he said. "Now, I'm sure you'll excuse me, I have a tight schedule."

"Wait, please, one last question. During your campaign, you said you intended to be the real education President. Could you elaborate on that for our viewers?"

"Sorry, Jill. Not now, but I will say this. I promised to deliver a million or more computers to public and private schools at the lowest price possible. And, as I said, I keep my promises. I'm sure you've heard me say that under my Presidency there will be an end to ignorance in this country. An ignorant electorate is a serious danger to our constitutional government and to our freedom."

"But how will you do that, sir? Others have made such promises and failed. What will be—"

"Sorry, Jill. I have to go. I have another appointment. No, wait." He handed her a business card. "I like you, Jill. You've got gump-tion. Call me for another interview."

John Carlyle motioned to his guards, and the two men in front, one big and black and one even bigger and white, moved to usher the diminutive girl away. Her head seesawed between watching her feet and the approaching wall of men.

"Senator, thank you!" she called. "I'll phone you. Thank you." The screen cut to the studio.

"Well, that was a very interesting bit of reporting," the anchor said, smiling straight into the camera. His co-anchor, a woman with long, flowing blond hair said, "It sure was, Sean. "John Carlyle strikes me as a very determined man. What do you suppose he meant by saying Washington will change whether they like it or not?"

A loud bang on the apartment door startled David. He hit the mute button and rose. Who could it be at this hour?

Thought for a minute you forgot your ol' Sarge." His voice was still strong and deep though now raspy. "I hear you're a butter bar now. Should I salute you or kick your ass?"

David laughed. Butter bar was a derogatory term for second lieutenants and ensigns. "Forget that, Sarge. We're civilians now. Grab a seat. How about a drink?"

"Thought you'd never ask." The Sarge plopped down on the sofa. "Whaddaya got?"

"Well, we got Johnny Walker straight and warm and Johnny Walker on the rocks. Name your poison."

"Straight and warm. My bones ache, and I'm freezing my ass off. Looks like we're in for a rotten winter."

David hurried into the kitchen to pour drinks. He couldn't stop grinning. The Sarge, for gosh sakes! He couldn't believe it. He wasn't alone after all.

"Hey, kid, you didn't answer me. What's with gun? You in some kind of trouble?"

"No trouble, Sarge. Had a couple of weird visitors a few minutes ago. Wanted to take me to meet someone."

"Meet who?"

"I don't know, but they changed their minds when I took that piece away from them. Pretty weird."

"You mean they tried to kidnap you?"

"That was the idea, I think. They were like scared kittens. I sent them packing."

"How'd you get their gun?"

"I reached out and took it."

"You're right. Weird. Did you call the cops?"

"And tell them what? Two men in suits tried to take me to see a man whose name they didn't know, for a reason they didn't know. And, then they allowed me to reach out and take their gun?" David chuckled. "What do you think the cops would say?"

"They'd probably laugh at you."

"My thoughts, too. Let's forget them, Sarge." David walked around the counter with the drinks. "You're looking pretty fit for an old jarhead living the life of luxury for the last nine years. What

have you been doing with yourself?”

“Mostly being bored to death, Lieutenant. But that’ll change now. I got a job. Which is why I’m here. I—” Jack Murphy stopped to take the drink David offered.

David pulled a cane-bottomed chair from against a wall and sat across from him. He hoisted his drink and said, “To old wars and old friends.”

“I’ll drink to that, kid.”

They both sipped their whiskey, and then David said, “Sarge, seriously, what are you doing here? I’m glad to see you, but you were the last person I expected.”

“Yeah, I can believe that.” The sergeant swigged the rest of his drink. “I’ll be honest with you, David. I came here for two reasons. When I learned today was your separation day, I thought you might need a friend. Some guys like me think things will be great when they get out, only to face a big letdown. You spend most of your life in the corps, then you’re an orphan with no buddies, and, in my case, no family. I stayed drunk for a week when I separated.”

David nodded. “Sarge, I’ve felt that, too. It hit me hard when I realized I’m nothing but driftwood until I can find something useful to do. And, I’ve had doubts about being able to cut it in the civilian world.”

The sergeant growled in disbelief. “You gotta be kiddin’ me, Lieutenant. You joined up when you were seventeen, and now twelve years later you’re a decorated officer in the world’s greatest fighting force. And you’re telling me you’re worried about making it? Maybe you’re not as smart as I thought.”

David smiled. “Relax, Murph, I’m okay now, except—”

“What?”

“Well, I thought I’d have a job by now, but it seems combat correspondents aren’t in much demand by the press these days.” David shrugged. “I’m not worried though. I’ll find something. I’m a determined cuss.”

Jack Murphy laughed. “Yeah, which is why I still count you as the best reporter I ever trained. If you got orders to take a hill, you took it. You came back with the story, too. I checked your record.

You deserve that butter bar. I'm glad you're handling separation okay. It can be tough."

Unused to such praise, David reddened. "You said you have two reasons for this visit. What's number two?"

"Right. What do you know about General Ramsay McKay?"

"The Ram? I've heard of him, of course. What marine hasn't? But I've never met him. He was a legend."

"Not was. Is. He's still alive and kicking. How'd you like to meet him?"

David stifled a laugh. Murphy was serious. "That's the wrong question, Sarge. The real question is why would he want to meet me? I'm just a dumb grunt with a gold bar. Come on, what's this all about?"

Jack Murphy's face spread into a big Irish grin. "Told you I have a job now. I'm a gopher for the general. He sent me to get you. He wants to meet you, Lieutenant."

"Why?"

"Above my pay grade, kid. Generals aren't in the habit of telling their plans to lowly sergeants. But he hired me, so I do what he says."

David took the Sarge's glass and went for refills.

"Better belay that, son. The general wants to see you tonight. You don't want to show up drunk." The sergeant glanced at his watch. "Six-forty. If we leave now, we can be there by eight o'clock. What say?"

"Eight! You're serious, aren't you?" David stored the whiskey away under the counter. His thoughts were spinning. "That's a long drive. Where does he live?"

"Little jerkwater town called Potomac, Maryland. Quite a place."

David rinsed the glasses and shoved them into the dishwasher. "Why tonight? What's the rush?"

"You got me, bud. All I know is he wants both of us to join him for dinner at eight."

"Whose idea was that?"

"His. I'm just his gopher, remember?"

"Yeah, you said that." David stood immobile for a moment.

What could the most famous living marine general want with him? It made no sense.

“Sarge...”

“Lieutenant, I can’t tell you anything. He wants to do that himself. It’s a take it or leave it deal. If you’re going, I suggest you shave and change your clothes. He lives in a pretty swanky joint.” The old sergeant paused and raised his eyebrows. “What’s it gonna be?”

“Hell, I’m in,” David said. “Give me ten minutes.”

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