

FIRST TEN PAGES

SPLINTER

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DEDICATION

for Lici
a gift from God,
a fresh breath of life and
a ray of sunshine in my world

and for my family
a constant support in love and prayer

I wouldn't be here today without both of you.

CHAPTER

1

I took off at a dead sprint and leapt like Batman off the hotel rooftop terrace. For a brief second, my arms extended over my head as though I were diving into a pool of liquid darkness, time seemed to stall. I could feel the wind in the night against my face, my fear of heights driving my heart into my mouth. Momentarily suspended, it still felt like the pavement below was screaming up to flatten me, breaking every bone in my body. Then, suddenly, my descent started over the edge and my arms started flailing wildly like a drunken marionette, until my hands finally grabbed a hold of the rope tied around my waist, the other end tied to an air vent on the roof.

I'm afraid of very few things, most of which are completely irrational fears. I'm afraid of being stranded in the Arctic in nothing but my underwear and slowly freezing to death. Or falling overboard in the middle of the Atlantic and having to tread water for hours while awaiting certain death by shark. Or falling off a building in the middle of the night while a bomb detonates above me. Never in a million years did I actually think I'd be jumping off a hotel on my own volition.

Thankfully, my momentum off the side of the building was at an angle, the vent above me about thirty degrees to my right, so my feet hit the side of

the building and my sneakers skimmed across the glass façade at lightning speed. Sideways was right side up, the cinched rope tightening around my waist. Falling in a pendulum-like, semi-circle swing like an acrobat in a circus, I could feel the floor-to-ceiling windows of the hotel rooms crack slightly under the weight of my feet like a thin sheet of ice.

My ears suddenly turned muffled at the noise of an explosion, shaking the roof. The side of the building slowly rippled, like a tsunami broke loose inside the hotel. The blast shook the building and the windows disappeared from under my feet, instantly shattering. I could feel the tiny glass shards slice through my pants and into my calves. My freefall reached the lowest point of the swing. I was too far from the pavement and swinging too fast to cut my rope and hope for a safe fall to the sidewalk beneath. The city lights below blurred in my retinas, the speed of my swing heightened by adrenaline pumping into every fiber of my body as though it would burst through my skin.

No sooner had the swinging rope started to carry me back up the side of the hotel than another detonation rocked the building. This time, the air vent gave way, the one that was securing the other end of my line. The screeching of metal on the rooftop sounded like a two-ton truck slamming on its breaks. The rope slackened and my upward swing changed to a free fall. I looked down frantically and noticed a banner announcing the upcoming Independence Day Parade. Below that

was gridlock, drivers stepping out of their cars and looking up at the hotel. I was about four stories up and the brief pause of the upward swing, like the top of a bungee cord jump, gave me a split second to assess my options. I would land either face-first into the pavement below or catch the cord of the banner. I grabbed the FGX blade from my ankle holder and sliced the rope. At that point, my descent was underway. Four stories to life or death. Forty feet. The banner was three stories up. I'd know in ten feet if I was going to live or die.

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*Langley, Virginia
2 weeks earlier*

"You *do* understand that I have a lot riding on this, Peter."

Peter shifted in his seat, uncomfortable in the leather-bound chair that threatened to swallow him whole. "Yes, of course."

"I'm only the second female director of a U.S. intelligence agency. And the first put in charge of the CID."

"I understand that, but – "

"That's the most important branch of the CIA. And what did I find when I came here, into your *boy's club*?"

"It's not *my* boy's club – "

“I came here and found out that there’s a mole in leadership that could come all the way up through the VP ranks.”

Peter let her stop for a breath. He hadn’t seen her this worked up before, but then again, she had only been in charge for a few months. He was sure the responsibility of being in charge of the largest covert branch of the CIA must weigh on her. “You say that like it’s my fault, Alex.”

“I can’t fail at this. This is my first test.”

“Out of the frying pan and into the fire.”

“Exactly.”

Peter folded his hands, looking at his chewed fingernails. “And we can’t simply handle this internally? Put one of our agents on this?”

“We don’t know how deep the tunnel goes. You know that. I can’t take a risk that the one agent we tap might be compromised. That would derail the whole investigation.” Alexandra stopped twirling the pen in her hands and stood up. She sighed and walked over to the window. The brightness of the sun was blocked by the bomb-proof, smart-shading the glass window offered. “I need her, Peter.”

“She’s out of the agency. She’d kill me if – “

Alexandra turned to him. “She wouldn’t find out.”

“She’s smart, Alex. And that’s not just my pride talking. Her street smarts are only paralleled by her on-paper IQ.”

“112.”

“What?”

“Her IQ is 112, Peter. You don’t think I do my homework?”

He turned in his chair to look outside. Not that there was much of a view. The paved parking lot with a sea of cars was outside. Not exactly breathtaking scenery. “She wouldn’t do it, anyway.”

“I’m not counting on *her* doing it. I’m counting on *him*. Of all the CIA applicants which didn’t make it, no one has turned down the offer.”

“Yeah, and none have succeeded. You think that’s a coincidence? They didn’t cut the muster for a reason. You sure that picking CIA rejects is the best idea?”

“I’ve only picked the cream of the crop. Those who didn’t make it in missed it by a technicality. The bar we set is high.”

“And they’re all dead.”

“Dead because they failed. He won’t. He’ll have *her*.”

Peter stood and walked over to Director Alexandra’s desk, spinning the stack of folders to face him. He opened Chris Whittaker’s file.

Now was the time for her to push her point. “Take a good long look, Peter. He scored off the charts in his physical tests and was above par with the intelligence tests as well. The only thing he lacked was a fluent second language.”

“He was rejected for his color-blindness,” Peter stated, reading the file.

“Hell, I would have waived that if someone came to me with his file.” Alexandra leaned back against the window, watching Peter continue to read Chris Whittaker’s dossier, one finger keeping place as he read, the other hand rubbing the back of his neck. “He’s the one. We need him. If he comes on board, we both know she’ll come to help him out.”

“That’s what I’m worried about.” Peter sighed.

“Are you worried about her coming back, for her safety? Or are you worried about her finding out you had a hand in all this and never speaking to you again?” She watched his face carefully, wondering if she should have just gone ahead with the plan without bringing him up to speed. No, he had to be included. He was the only person she knew she could trust. “Peter, between the two of them, they’ll find our mole.”

Peter carefully closed the file, placing his hand over the cover delicately, like he was laying flowers on a tombstone.

“Okay.”

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Cape Cod, Massachusetts

I sat on the deck at the Waterfront Bar and Grill, one of those rare restaurants named “waterfront” that was actually on the waterfront. Seems those types of places either have a view of

the water if you lean far enough out that someone has to hold onto your underwear so you don't fall off the balcony or the waves crash on the rocks close enough so that ocean spray gets in your food. This one was the latter, and that was okay with me. Ocean spray gave me just enough salt on my fries.

"So, have you figured out what to do with your life yet?" Kate asked. She gave me my Bass Ale and wiped her hands on her apron.

"Nope. But maybe inspiration will strike me today."

"Well, maybe it will lead to something exciting. You can't just whittle away your days relaxing on your porch and coming here for lunch."

"Don't forget my runs along the beach and drinking. I do those too, you know!"

"Yes, of course," she said, laughing. "My, how you fit all those into one day, I will never know!"

"You're just jealous 'cause you still have to work!"

"Careful. The cook likes me. If I bat my eyelashes he'll spit in your food for me."

I laughed as I watched her walk over to her other tables. I couldn't imagine anyone not liking her. She was funny, charismatic, engaging and, well, she had long, tanned legs. The only downside is that she was probably smarter than me. This was only her part time gig until she could find something more promising. But the part time gig had slowly turned into a full time job over the past few months and whatever she had hoped to do

with her life she was slowly losing sight of. I had met her first at the restaurant and our friendship had taken off from there. Her house sat on the beach next to mine and we would often have a beer together in the evenings on my porch and chat until the stars rose. Sometimes we'd still be talking when they started to fall.

My early retirement at the ripe age of 35 was delivered only by the online success of my blog. It started off as emotional catharsis from the tragedy that I thought ended every dream I had for my life, ripping away my love and my only child. Single parents started reading, others who lost loves latched on to my words, and my little blog became a growing support group. I eventually decided that we collectively needed to get healthy, so my daily writings changed from the abysmal to hope, to new beginnings. And now, all I had to do was be witty once a day, post a photo now and again and the revenue poured in through the ads.

"Whatcha' got there?" Kate asked.

I looked up from the envelope in my hands. "Well, I got this in the mail yesterday. It doesn't have my name on it, but it has my address. Debating whether I should open it."

"It's illegal to open someone else's mail."

"Yeah, yeah. I've done worse things," I said, smiling.

Kate took the envelope from my hands for a closer inspection. "Hmm...James Kirkpatrick," she read. She flipped it over as if there might be some

hidden secret to the contents on the other side of the envelope, then handed it back to me. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Open it!"

"Okay, okay," I said, dipping my finger into the crease where the envelope folds down and tearing along the edge. I pulled the letter out, looking up, but Kate was gone. I opened up the letter and read

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