

Flee  
the  
Night



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*Flee the Night*

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## Chapter 1

THE PAST COULDN'T have picked a worse time to find her.

Trapped in seat 15A on an Amtrak Texas Eagle chugging through the Ozarks at four on a Sunday morning, Lacey . . . Galloway . . . Montgomery—what was her current last name?—tightened her leg lock around the computer bag at her feet. She dug her fingers through the cotton knit of her daughter's sweater as she watched the newest passenger to their car find his seat. Lanky, with olive skin and dark eyes framed in wire-rimmed glasses, it had to be Syrian assassin Ishmael Shavik who sat down, fidgeted with his leather jacket, then impaled her with a dark glance.

She couldn't stifle the shiver that rattled clear to her toes. Why hadn't she listened to divine wisdom fifteen-some years ago and stayed at home instead of running after adventure? Lacey forced breath through her constricting chest. She hadn't hoped to outrun her mistakes forever, but why today with Emily watching?

Lacey pried her fingers out of Emily's sweater and laced her hands together in her lap, cringing at her weakness. She'd been taught not to give away emotions, liabilities, secrets. But she'd die before she'd let them harm a hair on Em's head.

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If only she'd possessed such an impulse seven years ago.

Tightening her jaw, she stared out the window. The Amtrak hustled north in the murky dawn, the Missouri oak, red buckeye, and hickory trees flanking the tracks—gray, silent sentries to her ill fate.

*Oh, please, not here. Not now.* She and Emily were so close to finding peace. Now that the Ex-6 program had met National Security Agency (NSA) approval, the nightmare seemed to be over. After this little time-out and escape with her daughter to Chicago, Lacey would fine-tune the encryption/decryption program, then hand it over with a sigh of relief and the sense that she'd finally found a way to atone for her mistakes. Never again would the field agents be without a way to secure their communications. No more ambushes due to intercepted messages. No more corrupted information.

Lives—and national secrets—safe.

And finally, too, a safe home for Emily. *Please.*

She didn't know to whom she might be addressing her plea. God in heaven hadn't looked her way for over a decade—not that she blamed Him. She was wretchedly on her own.

Around her, innocents slept—families, singles, the petite bourgeoisie voyaging to Chicago or beyond. Wealthy romantics above her were in compartments, perhaps for nostalgia or novelty. Lacey didn't have a romantic bone left in her body, despite the aroma of a dining car, the charisma of faux leather seats, or even the hypnotic locomotive pulse. She didn't have the energy or time for it, even if the errant inclination to be held in a man's arms haunted her in the lonely hours of the predawn. Then again, it wasn't just any man's embrace that haunted her.

Lacey rubbed her forehead and considered her options. It hadn't been so long ago that she'd memorized the exits and the

players of every room she entered, but hope had smudged her reflexes. Ishmael sat two seats away, smack-dab in the middle of the car, blocking a desperate sprint down the aisle. The forest hurtled by at breakneck speed, discouraging a flying dismount.

Lacey stuck her hand in her pocket to rifle for her switchblade and brushed against Emily's worn Beanie bear and only confidant that she named Boppy. Lacey had sent the child the Beanie Baby from Seattle—she still remembered the neon lights striping her hotel room, mocking her as she wrote a note to her toddler daughter, secreted in Aunt Janie's care.

Life wasn't fair.

She found the knife and tucked it under her thigh as she stole another glance at her killer. It sent a decade-old threat through her head: *You can't run from me.*

She blew out a breath and fought her climbing pulse as she clung to her training. Surprise. Focus. Determination. These things would help her flee, keep her alive.

What about Em? She longed to run her fingers across her daughter's face, over the smattering of freckles on her high cheekbones, then through the short curly blonde hair that, like John's, simply refused to obey a brush or a comb. Emily smelled of the fabric softener her aunt Janie used in the laundry and of soap from her predeparture bath. Curled into the fetal position, the six-year-old leaned her head against the dark pane, drooling on the pillow tucked under her shoulder. Her breathing seemed shallow, uneven, as if she were caught in the throes of a nightmare. But it was only the consequences of a desperate and fatal mistake—one for which Lacey could never, ever forgive herself.

Forgiveness wouldn't help her now, anyway. Not when her murderer stared at her like a slit-eyed wolf.

The air felt weighted with the slumber of passengers—some stirring, others in full collapse. The quiet pressed Lacey

into her seat, made her heartbeat thunder in her ears. Fatigue played with her fear, pitting it against hope. Perhaps the man who had boarded this train wasn't the same one who had threatened to slit her throat from ear to ear. Frank Hillman's long arm of revenge.

Lacey *had* been careful. So careful she'd lost herself years ago in the torrent of aliases and the blur of constant movement. She often wondered if she would ever, even if the nightmare ended, find her way home.

Who was she kidding? She couldn't go home when her mistakes branded her like an ugly, festering *T* for *traitor* on her forehead. But if she somehow escaped the stigma of being an accused murderer, she might return to the family farm, a place that still held secrets and hopes. She'd start over with Emily and build a new life. A peaceful life. An absolved life.

Yeah, right. If she kept supposing, she might as well dream that she hadn't derailed her life seven years ago on a similar Sunday morning in an armpit country south of Russia . . . hadn't ignored the urgings of God or whatever impulse had made her pause briefly in the hotel as John loaded his Ruger pistol.

"I want you to stay here," he'd said. "And trust no one." John Montgomery always had the bluest eyes, even in memory. Ocean blue, with flecks of pure sunshine that melted her into a senseless puddle. She'd fallen for those magnetic eyes first and his idealism second.

"No," she'd said, shaking free of the hesitation, propelled by that same naive zeal that made the couple famous in the company. John and Lacey Montgomery, dynamic duo, spies of the spectacular new era when industrial espionage reigned in the vacuum of cold-war intrigues. "I'm coming with you."

He hadn't argued; she often blamed him for that omission. It seemed easier somehow. *Why didn't you stop me?*

There were moments, ethereal seconds, when she imagined spinning back in time, past the mistakes in Kazakhstan, past the choices in Iraq, the years at MIT, past even the wedding of the century in Ashleyville, Kentucky. It reeled back to an October day in high school twenty-two years ago, when she'd tripped off the football bleachers, clarinet in her grip, and fell into the oh-so-ample embrace of the wide receiver for the Ashleyville Eagles.

Jim Micah.

In those seconds when her future loomed blank and glorious before her, life scrolled differently. She chose more wisely, with her heart instead of her adrenaline. In this future, she stayed in Micah's arms. She clung to his steadiness, his rock-solid emotions that seemed firm footing in the face of danger. She would learn to read the emotions in his eyes and take a chance on heartbreak. And she'd never, ever let another man woo her away with the tease of a tastier, more vivid life.

Then the nano-dreams would vanish and she'd return to whatever bus, train, or airplane she'd landed on, head bumping against the seat, wondering how long it would take for the NSA to advance her a few more bucks.

She swept her attention casually across the travelers opposite the aisle. Asians. A family of overseas tourists, judging by the way they clutched their bags to their chests and eyed the other passengers. She connected with an elderly man, his gray hair in high-and-tight spikes around his round wrinkled face. He looked at her with such disdain, she wondered if he could see through her to her ugly past and abhor her for her mistakes.

He wouldn't be the only one.

Ishmael chose that moment to clear his throat, as if hoping to arrest her attention.

Lacey stiffened and forced her gaze to the carpeted floor.

Maybe she should throw her body over Emily and beg for their lives in Arabic. Or grab Ex-6—the one thing that could redeem her lost soul—tuck Emily under her arm, and bolt.

Instead, what if she left Emily in the safe hands of the gentleman sitting across from her? No one but Lacey knew that the little girl belonged to her. With the fake name on Em's ticket not even remotely similar to her real name, the six-year-old blonde could be anyone's daughter. The man appeared to care for her daughter, the way his eyes darted to her, a worried knot in his wide brow, as if he were some sort of private body-guard. He'd even purchased Emily an ice-cream cone at the station in Little Rock. Still, with the crazies out there on the prowl for innocents like Emily, it might be safer to attempt a flying leap into the forest with the train going 50 mph. Suddenly the ice-cream-cone treat felt downright . . . creepy.

What about a conductor? She could give him Emily's backpack, along with Janie's address and telephone number. Then Janie would become Mama again—a thousand times better than any mama Lacey had ever been.

Lacey winced. She was a horrible mother to be plotting her daughter's abandonment. Bitterness lined her throat at the injustice of having to relive her mistakes in a million private sacrifices. But Emily would be better off alive and in the arms of Lacey's sister than watching her mother be murdered. Or dying as a victim in the tussle. Lacey would do anything to make sure she didn't cost any more lives.

She always knew she'd lose Emily to pay penance for her foolishness. Somehow it seemed heart-wrenchingly fair.

If only Micah were here. That thought drilled a hole so deep through Lacey's chest she nearly gasped. Yeah, right. He'd be lining up behind Ishmael for kill rights.

Movement, a sigh from the nemesis in seat 13D.

Lacey's heart lodged in her throat as she fingered the six-inch blade hidden under her leg. Habit dictated its presence. The metal handle pinched the bunched flesh of her fingers.

Ishmael rose, glanced past her, as if trying to mentally distance himself from his prey, then staggered down the aisle. Lacey's other hand clenched the armrest.

Ishmael had filled out in presence, if not in girth, and added gusto to his swagger. His gaunt face betrayed more lines, his eyes harder as he stared forward, as if he didn't recognize the woman he'd framed for murder. Lacey froze, her instincts draining from her body.

He bumped down the aisle. . . .

She eased the knife out, hid it in her palm. Held her breath.

He passed by her without even a nod.

Her breath drained, her heart crammed between her ribs. So maybe she'd been imagining—

The train shuddered, a ripple of pain along the body of steel, then a gut-twisting squeal of metal on metal. Lacey grabbed the seat rests. The passageway lights strobed and died. "What—!"

Her heart bucked as the car lurched, jumped. She reached for Emily but snared thin air as momentum yanked Lacey from her seat. Her body wrestled with gravity and a visceral scream. The computer bag walloped her on the chin. Blood filled her mouth.

"Em!" She slammed against bodies, hitting her hip hard, arms flailing. "Em!" Around her, terror-filled voices competed for significance. Explosions pummeled the compartment. Lacey instinctively covered her head. "Emily!"

Metal screeched against forest or perhaps rail. Smoke. As she pitched through the twisting carriage, Lacey groped for purchase on anything—an armrest, a seat cushion, her daughter.

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She landed with a bone-jarring slap. Hot pain exploded up her arm and into her brain. She sprawled broken, breathless, cocooned in bodies. “Emily.” The stench of fear filled her nose, choking her. Her breath came like fire.

Then darkness.



“You have to trust me, Brian. I promise I won’t drop you.” If anything, Jim Micah kept his promises. They’d have to pry his rigor-mortised grip from the kid before he would let him fall, even if every muscle in his body begged for reprieve.

So maybe Micah wasn’t 100 percent recovered from the scalpel and loss of a few organs. He wasn’t going to let his battle with the six-letter silent killer—cancer—cause him to endanger this kid’s life. Not while he still had breath in his scarred lungs.

“Hold on to my neck,” he said, and Brian’s scrawny arms tightened around him. Micah felt the panic-driven heartbeat of a twelve-year-old pound against his chest. “Hey, buddy, calm down. Slow your breathing. You’re going to be fine.”

Buried deep in the Pit—a wild, uncharted cave redolent of clammy basement and bat guano, sunk in the hills of eastern Tennessee—Micah tried to believe his own words. But Brian and his two fellow campers had been trapped here for the better part of twelve hours with nothing more than T-shirts and shorts and a fifty-five degree hypothermic slumber. As the darkness ate the flimsy light from their lithium-lit helmets and turned time into knots, Micah didn’t want to guess which side might be winning.

Sarah Nation, a tall NYC paramedic, worked silently beside him, fixing the splint on Brian’s leg where the fifteen-

foot fall had resulted in an ugly landing. Micah cringed at Brian's scream when Sarah moved the limb to immobilize it.

On a ledge above them, Alaskan climber and helicopter pilot Andee MacLeod worked to warm the two other spelunkers. She'd layered the boy in every blanket and extra stitch of clothing she could find. Right now, she huddled in a sleeping bag and wrapped the girl in a 98.6-degree clench.

"Help me move him, Micah." Sarah grabbed the Sked litter, an inflatable cot designed for cave rescue. It wrapped around a patient's body, providing a smooth sled to maneuver through the cave's labyrinth. She'd already snapped on a C-collar, checked for a head injury, and strapped him onto a waist board.

They slid Brian onto the Sked. Sarah inflated and secured the litter while Micah affixed the Gibbs ascenders to the rope.

"I'll climb to the top, then haul him up while you follow and steady him," Micah said.

As Micah climbed, he grieved the loss these kids would have at enjoying the subterranean world. He'd wager his next meal that they would never set foot in a cave again. They'd miss out on so many treasures—calcite straws dangling like teardrops from the ceiling; stalactites, drips of rock frozen in time; snow-white, selenite crystals blooming like ferns; egg-sized cave pearls; and pools of clear water that reflected like mirrors. All because their camp counselor—now warm and safe in the company of Micah's search and rescue (SAR) compatriots—decided to lead with his sense of adventure instead of his common sense.

A memory scurried across Micah's mind—nearly translucent so as to deny its presence but real enough to make him flinch. "*C'mon, it'll be fun.*" John Montgomery had said as his curiosity led them into a deserted Kentucky coal mine. Adventure, *right*. In the end, adventure had been John's demise.

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*Adventure and his unlucky Penny.* Micah didn't know what was worse—that he'd introduced his best friend to the woman who took his life, or that he, Jim Micah, had loved her first. If love was blind, he'd also been knocked deaf, dumb, and brainless the day Lacey Galloway literally fell from the bleachers into his outstretched arms. Her chagrined smile snared him, and right then a bittersweet love/hate affair birthed. One that had yet to die.

How quickly his “Penny” invaded his head—her lips against his, light, laughing, tasting of cherry punch; her copper hair, as unruly as her spirit, twining between his fingers. He'd spent too many lonely nights wondering if their children would have had her infectious smile or been cursed with his impatience and bullheadedness.

Micah swallowed a choke hold of grief. A smart man would expunge her the second she started tunneling through the soft tissue of his emotions. Thankfully, his brain wasn't nearly as fickle as his heart.

He'd been praying for righteous justice for seven years, and if it was up to him, he'd figure out a way to send Lacey Galloway to the slammer for life and the hereafter if he got her in his sights again. That was a promise.

Micah reached the ledge, checked on Andee and the two kids fighting sleep, and rigged the Sked's ascent. Brian cried the fifteen feet to the top, too exhausted to feign courage. His screams echoed against the rutted limestone.

The crawl out of the Pit took eight hours, twice the time it had taken to locate the cavers. Micah dragged the Sked through Amoeba Alley and hauled it over Pouter's Lip; then he and Sarah ferried it through Popcorn Cavern, dodging stalagmites and calcite formations on the wall that resembled the late-night movie snack. Micah kept Brian awake, telling him unclassified

stories of adventure overseas, originated from his years of clandestine missions as a Green Beret. Missions that just might be old history if he didn't figure out a way to get himself reinstated to the active duty list.

*Please, God, one more miracle?* According to his latest blood work, his cancer had vanished. He hoped God was paying attention. Time to go back to work. Even with Senator Ramey plugging for him, Micah knew he'd need God's intervention if he hoped to join his Special Forces team anytime soon. He'd spent serious time on his knees over the past year, hoping that God had bigger plans for him than just a swift discharge and a floundering plunge into the private sector.

Thankfully, his medical-leave status gave him the opportunity to hang out with the few outdoor athletes he'd befriended over the years—Conner, Sarah, Andee, and occasionally Dannette, Andee's former roommate. They'd met more than a few weekends over the past year and volunteered their skills to the local SAR teams on opportune occasions. He'd discovered that the hope of finding lost souls ignited his adrenaline in a way that his years as a warrior never had.

Micah chose not to dwell on that realization. Explorations into his feelings usually ended up breaching old wounds and laying bare his mistakes. There was a reason he was called Iceman, and right now he needed all the ice he could get to keep memories from burning a hole in his heart.

So he stuck to the Gulf War stories, especially when Brian asked, "What war?"

Micah groaned when the kid couldn't name the presidents before Reagan. Glancing at Sarah, he gave her a look that asked, "What do they teach kids these days in school?"

She shrugged, and the fact that she could smile through the grime streaking her face made him realize how lucky they

all were to be laughing at Brian's bewilderment. Behind them, Andee was tethered to the two youngsters. She kept them going with horrendous renditions of "Fried Ham," a camp song without end. Micah finally bartered a year's worth of ice cream for silence.

They reached the twilight zone, the near exit to the cave where lichen and moss grew, hinting at life and sunlight. The hint of real air fumigated the smell of subterranean mud and dirt. Micah made out spotlights, heard the crackle of radios, and braced himself. *Media*. He lumped them with the liars and connivers, with people like Lacey. And he hated them most when they exploited kids.

He stopped, turned, and smiled at Brian. "You okay, kid?"

When Brian nodded, relief poured through Micah. For the first time in twelve hours he felt the coil of dread around his chest begin to loosen. Fighting the burn of emotion, he breathed deeply, composed himself, and stepped out into the circus.

Mission completed without casualty. This time.