

Prologue

It was a Tuesday like any other for Robert Hannigan. He woke to the irritating, incessant buzz of his cheap, but effective alarm clock. He hit snooze twice and dragged himself from his bed, hobbling across the hardwood floor to the cold ceramic tiles of the bathroom. His joints were stiff and aching, and had been every morning for years. As he looked into the mirror above the sink, he swore to himself that he would soon start exercising, repeating a promise repeatedly made, but never fulfilled.

After concluding his morning routine he found himself standing at his apartment doorway, conducting his final inspection before leaving for work. Assured that all his buttons were buttoned, zippers zipped, and shoelaces tied, he left and headed for the elevator. Having lived alone since graduating college, there was no need for good-byes, kisses, or see you tonights. Just him, alone with his thoughts, often replaying the previous night's game. His team had won the first match of their playoff series, so he had a little extra bounce in his step.

Out the front door of the building, a left turn, then a short, block and a half walk to his favorite coffee shop where he would grab some breakfast to go. He found this easier than

preparing something in his apartment and having to clean up before he left.

He bought and paid for his egg and sausage sandwich and left the building. It was then that his day would take a detour from the routine that had been a consistent, steadfast rock for the past five years.

Twenty seven years ago, almost to the day but not close enough to be any sort of coincidence, repairs to the building that housed Robert Hannigan's favorite coffee shop began. The decision to replace all of the windows of the upper ten floors had been made two years prior to beginning the project.

The owners of the building, flirting with the line that separates cheap and thrifty, decided to use an inexpensive bracket that held the window to the bricks surrounding the opening. They bought these fasteners from a company in Southeast Asia where they were produced six years before the decision to use them. The company that made them also wanted to save on cost and regularly mixed small amounts of impurities into their steel in an attempt to stretch out their materials. As such, the steel was significantly weaker in the fasteners used to replace the windows on the floors above the small restaurant.

Consequences inevitably follow decisions. Upon installation, the weight of the pane of glass immediately caused

an imperceptible hairline fracture in the bottom of one of the fasteners. Over the years the crack slowly widened, the window shifting slightly to the side as time wore on.

It was on that regular and uneventful Tuesday that the fastener finally expanded enough for the glass to slide too far, putting too much pressure on the others that were holding it in place. Unable to handle the additional weight, they snapped, causing the one-inch thick sheet of glass to free fall over thirty stories straight down.

By the time the glass reached street level it was travelling at an incredible speed. Robert Hannigan didn't see it coming. He didn't feel it slice through him. He didn't know that his life was ending. Until that moment he was content, smiling as he headed to work with his breakfast in one hand and a coffee in the other.

Robert's demise made page three of the next day's newspaper and was only briefly mentioned on the evening news. It was not unlike countless tragedies that happen daily all over the planet. The events that caused him to die were set into motion years before, and the outcome could not have been predicted.

Robert Hannigan's death was an accident. It wasn't anyone's fault. Just like every other accidental death in the history of the human race, no one knew it was going to happen.

Except Declan Darby.

He knew.

1

Dangling from a thin nylon rope, swaying gently in the light breeze that streamed along the side of the building, Declan Darby couldn't help but think about dying. He looked down the forty six floors below him and, for a moment, visualized falling. The rush of weightlessness that would accompany the drop, and the inevitable, violent collision with the ground. He wondered if it would be the last time he would die. If he would come back from that one. He didn't want to find out. Closing his eyes, he took some deep breaths, and tried to refocus. When he opened them he looked straight ahead and what he saw didn't help to ease the tension.

Staring at his reflection in the office window, a black, featureless silhouette set against a dimly lit night sky, he didn't see himself. Instead, a demon looked back at him. Its horns were small and pointed straight up, and it had with a tail that was long, slender, and curved.

Considering his history with the afterlife, he thought he should have a better knowledge of the existence of anything that

would show up to consume a soul of the departed. In reality, however, he knew little more than the average person. He knew there was more than just the physical life that humanity is aware of, but past that he was as mystified as everyone else. Still, the devil in front of him silently stared back.

A silhouette can be deceiving. The horns on the top of his head were actually the night vision goggles that he had propped up on the uppermost part of his forehead, and the tail was the length of rope that flowed from the end of his climbing gear. There wouldn't have been much of a reflection anyways, as he was entirely clothed in black, including a thin balaclava style mask he wore over his face. He'd been hanging there for exactly three minutes and forty seven seconds, an eternity in his line of work.

Although dangerous, this was exactly the environment that Declan preferred. Completely alone. A long time sufferer of social anxiety, he was constantly terrified of human touch. Large crowds were almost unmanageable, and he did his best to avoid them.

"How's the buzzer coming?" he asked as he touched the small plastic device embedded in his left ear. He was speaking to Dover, his partner and only close friend, who was on the ground on a nearby park bench. Buzzer was their word for alarm, and

being paranoid about someone listening to their conversation was justified. "I've been hanging here exposed for a long time," the impatience in his voice beginning to seep through.

"Another thirty three seconds," came the response to his question. "The scoreboard had some penalty minutes up that needed to be removed. Almost got them down." He understood what Dover was saying. There were some extra securities installed in the system and he needed to work around them. For the past six months they had used sports lingo as code to mislead an eavesdropping ear. Over the four years the two of them had been working together they had changed their theme twice, partly to keep things fresh and fun, but also to throw anyone off that could possibly be listening. No sense in taking any extra chances.

This particular job was considerably more dangerous than the ones he usually took. Normally, he and Dover would spend at least a month preparing, studying the blueprints of whatever building they were breaking into, going over the schematics of the different security systems, and observing the habits of the security guards, committing them to memory. He had accepted this one only a week before, leaving little time to get ready, and that made Declan nervous.

The process for receiving and accepting work was simple. He had a secure email address known only to a select few and passed on to only the most trustworthy. Generally the people that hired him were extremely wealthy businessmen looking obtain something that wasn't theirs, or perhaps was and they had been relieved of it. In his time as a professional cat-burglar he had managed to steal trade secrets, artwork, priceless artifacts, and even once found himself removing a hairless cat from the home of a well-known celebrity. That was an interesting experience.

The contact for this job had paid extra and he had been provided with all the details he needed right away. He had discussed it with Dover who, in his usual exuberant youthful way, declared that he was on board with anything Declan wanted to do. Declan reluctantly accepted, preparing as thoroughly as time allowed. The plan was detailed and laid out well enough, but both Declan and Dover agreed that they would abort at the first sign of trouble.

While he was waiting he envisioned his next few minutes. First he was going to cut through an inch and a half of mirrored glass that separated himself from the office he was planning on entering. The laser glass cutter was much like those used in movies, with a suction cup on one end, roughly the size of a softball, a telescopic steel arm that extended two feet and spun

in a circle, and an industrial strength laser attached to the end. Even with the extreme heat and precision of the laser, it would take three passes to cut through the glass.

Once the piece was free from the rest of the window he could push it through and lower it slowly to the floor inside. For this he had attached two handles on either side of the cutter, both with suction cups as well, but these were activated electronically to provide a better grip. By pushing a button on the handle, the air would be sucked out of the space between the cup and the glass, creating a permanent hold on the piece. This would only be released when a second button was pressed to open a valve.

He had a wide assortment of tools, some of which, like the glass handles, he clipped to his belt, while others he carried in different compartments attached to it. He liked to think of it as a utility belt and often imagined himself as Batman, without the cape or crime fighting mentality.

At this point he would be able to slide through the hole and into the room. He would make his way to the far side, and after locating the large desk, he would look for the painting hanging on the wall behind it. As cliché as it could possibly be, he would move the painting, hung on the wall by hinges, and find the safe behind it.

According to the information provided, the safe was a state of the art Bendrix 2500 biometric fingerprint scanner. As its title implied, it used the fingerprint of the owner to secure the items inside. Usually extremely secure, this particular safe also measured the temperature of the finger and must be within range of normal body temperature to open. This made for an effective scanner as it was difficult to fake a fingerprint as well as maintain the necessary heat. For this hurdle, Declan had obtained a print from a cognac carafe provided by one of the custodians of the building. He removed it from the carafe and copied it onto a polycarbonate sheet so thin that it would be indistinguishable to the skin of his hand. It also conducted heat remarkably well which made it the perfect tool for the scanner.

Once the safe was open he would remove the contents, a small black metal box containing something he didn't care to know about. Considering the office building was owned by a company that was a parent to multiple smaller companies that made a wide variety of goods sold to the general public, he assumed it would be along the lines of a recipe for the latest potato chip flavour, or a design for new water bottle. He really didn't care. He was hired to do the job and he would. Questions only caused trouble.

Dover's voice broke his train of thought. "Penalties are down. Good to go," he said. With this, Declan started cutting. Three passes weren't quite enough and he required a fourth, putting him twenty-two seconds behind schedule. He always accounted for things to go a little slower than expected so he was still well within his timeframe. With the glass free, he lowered it to the floor of the office, slipped through, removed the handles, and made his way across the room. The ceiling had pot lights scattered throughout, some of which provided a faint glow, negating the need for the goggles.

The painting was exactly where it was supposed to be and swung open as expected. He removed the glove from his right hand and pulled the polycarbonate fingerprint from one of the compartments on his belt. Attaching it, he pressed his finger to the biometric scanner on the safe and heard faint click. He pulled the door open, saw the box, and removed it from its holder.

What happened next was unexpected. As soon as he removed the box, a thin beam of light penetrated the darkness of the safe, shining upward from the bottom to the top. It looked like a hologram of a pencil, six sided, with no end or beginning, save for the bottom and top of the safe. On the top of the enclosure, which he hadn't noticed until the light illuminated

it, was a small glass dome, also hexagonal in shape, which protruded slightly. The moment he saw it he knew.

"Aw, shit," spilled involuntarily from his lips.

2

Tapping his finger to his ear he said, "Dover, we have an unanticipated buzzer. Can you get a fix on it?" After replacing the glove on his hand, he put the box into a satchel that he had pulled from one of the compartments on his belt, looping one strap over his shoulder, and securing it to his waist with another.

"Give me a sec," Dover replied, sounding anxious. He heard the faint click of buttons being pressed, something banged, and he could hear Dover muttering something inaudible. "I can't see it anywhere on the team list. It must be wireless, connecting to someone's phone. My guess is that the referees already have your number and are headed your way."

The team list was the entire security system schematic that Dover had access to on his laptop and tablet, both of which he was using on the bench. The alarm that Declan had just tripped wasn't on the copy that Dover had. Meaning that it was only known by the person whose office he was standing in, and perhaps a few select others. Someone had gone to great lengths to secure

whatever was in the box he had in his hand. The buzzer couldn't be shut off, but it was too late anyways. The message had already been sent and security would be on their way. Optimistically, he had about sixty seconds to get out of the office and a few minutes to get to safety.

He turned and sprinted across the room to the window. Looking through the opening he had made, his heart sank as a horrifying realization struck him. In the few minutes since coming through the hole in the glass the wind had picked up, and now, where the rope had hung, there was only black space. He could see the line flapping several feet to his left, too far to jump.

On instinct he bolted for the door, the only other way out. As he grabbed the handle and began to turn it he heard a loud rumbling on the other side. It sounded as if a landslide of boulders were bouncing down the hallway. Footsteps. And they were getting closer. Quickly he reached for the lock and turned it.

A fraction of a second later the handle rattled. He heard shouting through the solid wood. "Someone's in there! This door shouldn't be locked! Anderson, get over here with those keys!"

He backed away from the door and looked around the room. There was no other option. The ceiling was done in stucco,

uncommon for an office building, with small, inaccessible vents. *Nice touch*, he thought, then shook his head to refocus on the problem at hand. In moments the security guards would be through the door and, knowing that they would likely be armed and hopped up on adrenaline, something very bad was going to happen to him.

He turned back to the window, his only salvation. Running to the two foot wide circle, a memory of an ice fishing trip he had once gone on with his dad flashed into his mind. The hole, although bigger than the one they had cut through the ice, looked identical.

"Focus," he told himself as he reached the window. He looked out and saw the rope, only three feet away now, but whipping around like a snake that just lost its own head. He climbed through and crouched with his hands on the inside of the glass. Taking a deep breath he tried to calculate the distance and how much force he would have to put into the jump, concerned that his legs would push him too far away from the side of the building, and out into the abyss.

He took one last look back, just in time to see the door burst open and three guards rush through. There may have been more, probably was, but he turned and leapt into the darkness. His hands were outstretched, fingers wide in the hopes that he would clasp the threaded nylon as he flew through the air. He

realized all too quickly that he had misjudged the distance, or perhaps his strength, and began to fall.