

CHAPTER ONE

The only thing more terrifying than fighting for your life is fighting for someone else's.

Especially when you're losing the battle.

On my knees in the warm sand, I gouged at the reluctant earth with a driftwood shovel, with both hands and my every breath. And the more I burrowed, the more the sides of the hole folded in quietly to meet the void. I knew then, gritted in the face of defeat, that there was only one way this was going to end.

Badly.

Pig-headed, I ploughed on, seeing nothing but the next scoop of sand that rushed in, mocking, to fill the last insignificant hollow. Dig, twist, throw. *Dig, twist, throw.* Up and out into the coastal wind, over and over, while my mind stamped and cursed and wailed silently inside my head.

How could you let them take you? Why didn't you run? Why didn't you fight? And – more bitter, more self-

indulgent – an almost childish cry: *Don't you think I have enough damn blood on my hands?*

I'd lost a principal two winters previously, had watched her die, helpless, only metres away. Might as well have been light years, for all the use I'd been to her then. But that was better than this agony of grim expectation, of not knowing life from death one way or the other. I was overwhelmed by a sense of waste and dread, so strong I feared the stink would always linger.

Dig, twist, throw.

Just ahead of me, one end of the shallow pit was marked by an upright length of pipe. Ordinary grey soil pipe, about forty mil in diameter, like any plumber would install for the drain of a sink or a shower. Before I'd begun my ragged excavation, it had stuck a hand's breadth out of the ground, protected from the elements by an upturned plastic bucket. Now I could see half a metre or more before the pipe disappeared into the sand beneath.

I stopped digging and scraped around it carefully with cupped hands, creating a protective moat and driving granules deep under my broken nails as I did so. And, all the while, I had visions of someone watching this frantic rescue from a safe distance and laughing at my attempt to exhume what might so easily turn out to be nothing more than a false thread laid into empty ground. I resisted the temptation to grab and rive, just to make sure the other end really was attached to something. Because if it was, and I yanked it free . . .

To come this far and face failure, so close to the finish, would be worse than never finding the bloody burial site in the first place.

I heard the swish of footsteps approaching fast across the loose surface behind me, but didn't stop, didn't turn.

Dig, twist, throw.

'Charlie!' Parker's voice, hoarse against the ocean breeze rippling up the beach. I glanced over my shoulder then, in time to see him rip off his jacket and tie, bunching himself to jump down into the hole.

'Don't,' I said, gasping with the effort of speech. 'We don't know what the box is made out of – how much extra weight it will take – and I'm lighter.'

Parker must have seen the desperation in my eyes. To his credit, he didn't point out that he was stronger, fresher, and could probably clear the grave a hell of a lot faster than I could.

Instead, he squatted near the open end of the tube, cocked his ear close for any sound of movement below, any sign that we were not too late. I could have told him I'd already tried that and hadn't come away reassured, but I saved what little breath I had left for the ground.

'Hang on in there,' he shouted downwards, paused. Silence. 'If you can hear me, we got you. Help's coming.'

I kept my head down and my thoughts to myself.

Dig, twist, throw.

'They should have thought of this hours ago,' I muttered. 'Where the hell *are* they?'

'On their way,' Parker said, but his face was white.

He scrambled round to the side of the pit and began clearing the sand I'd already raised, levelling the ground, kicking it away to stop it sucking back into the hole. It suddenly seemed that I'd made much less progress than I'd thought.

I prayed our gravedigger hadn't favoured the traditional depth of six feet under. By my reckoning, every extra foot was another half a ton of fill to shift. I'd attended enough funerals over here to know that the modern American trend was to go down only four feet, then encase the coffin in concrete to make it solid enough to be driven over, and not rise in a flood or be raided by scavengers.

If that was the case, we were all fucked.

Dig, twist, throw.

And then, at last, I thudded into something solid yet strangely hollow, jarring my arms hard enough to make me grunt. I dropped the driftwood and scrabbled at the sand, fingers meeting roughened timber. I battered down to the surface, found cheap chipboard, like you'd use to board up a derelict house.

A spurt of renewed anger flushed through me at this crude vulgarity, as though bird's-eye maple with rosewood inlay would have made it any better. I snatched up my driftwood again and attacked the remaining sand, sending it up and out of the hole like flung hail. Even Parker stepped back in the face of it.

By the time it was half cleared, the outline spoke for itself. Not a simple rectangular box but a long taper towards the end furthest from the pipe. Parker, higher up, realised the significance first. He began to swear, soft and vicious under his breath.

I have utterly no concept of what it's like to be put underground in something that's so obviously shaped like a coffin, still alive and scared out of your wits.

Still alive? I bloody well hope so . . . or why bother with the pipe?

I swept the last film of sand away and stopped, panting. The lid was held down with screws around the outer edge, already beginning to corrode with the salt. They were spaced at irregular intervals, as if whoever had built this monstrosity had been in a hurry, and careless about the details.

I fumbled in my pocket for my Swiss Army knife, wrenched out the screwdriver attachment and went down on my knees, hand slapping hard onto the surface.

‘Hold on,’ I yelled in a voice not quite my own. ‘Hold on!’

Parker slithered down behind me, his own pocket knife out. I met his eyes and saw my own tightly clamped emotion reflected right back at me. Then I was bending close to the first screw head, blowing away the grit so the tool would bite hard enough to turn.

A faint scuffle of noise reached my ears and stopped my breath. I froze, glanced up at Parker, hope flaring until I saw his eyes. He shook his head, and I realised it was just a clump of sand dropping back into the pit to scatter with cruel deception across the exposed wood.

A sudden image reared up, vivid enough to stun, of another reaching out to me, unable to make himself heard or gain anyone’s attention, trapped in a soundless, wordless, motionless nightmare. Everything seemed to lurch under me. I put a hand up onto the damp sand to steady myself.

‘You OK?’

I blinked. The vision was gone. Parker’s gaze was concerned, but his voice was tight. He understood, empathised even, but this was not the time to start unravelling on him.

‘Yeah,’ I said, and bent to the task.

We went as fast as we dared, which must have seemed appallingly slow if you’re trapped in your own premature grave waiting for release. I worked along one side, Parker along the other, from the head down, clambering over ourselves in the confined space like some macabre game of Twister. One screw loosened after another until my forearms and wrists were screaming and the blisters bled.

The lid was too thick to bend – thick enough to take the weight of both of us without a bounce. We probably could have driven over it, even without a concrete casing.

‘That’s the last of them,’ Parker said. ‘Get clear. I’ll do this.’

‘No chance.’ I shoved the knife back in my pocket, stilled when he caught my arm.

‘Charlie,’ he said quietly, ‘you’ve done enough.’

But I hadn’t, and we both knew it.

Expressionless, he nodded as if I’d spoken, released me and stepped back. We grasped the lid together, braced ourselves, and heaved.

Dig deep, twist, throw . . .

CHAPTER TWO

I liked the Willners right from the off, and in some ways that made it all so much worse. Far easier to protect a principal if you can be objective about the exercise – ambivalent, even. Dedication to duty is one thing, but emotional investment is the way madness lies. And if not that, then certainly a spectacular burnout.

Still, by the start of that summer I was probably heading for both.

It was the first week in May when Parker Armstrong drove me out to Long Island for our initial consultation with the formidable Caroline Willner. I remember her fixing me with a piercing eye and asking the million-dollar question.

‘So, Ms Fox, are you prepared to die to keep my daughter safe?’

Despite the intensity of her gaze, her voice was little more than calmly curious.

My answer mattered to her, of course it did. But her

attempt to hide that fact behind a cool facade was revealing. It made me more deliberate in my choice of words than I might otherwise have been, facing a wealthy potential client for the first time.

‘If it comes down to it, yes,’ I said. ‘But I’d rather we didn’t have to find out.’

She raised an eyebrow at that, lifting her teacup. Beside me on the sleek leather sofa, my boss twitched in sympathetic response.

We were sitting in the huge living area on the top floor of the Willners’ ultramodern house in the Hamptons, with plate glass windows offering a widescreen view of the shoreline. Below us, beyond a stark white security wall, the Atlantic surf rolled in all the way from North Africa. Caroline Willner had been sitting with her back to the glass when we were shown in to meet her, leaving us to be overawed by the open vista. She clearly did not share our concerns about the potentially uninterrupted field of fire.

‘What Charlie means, ma’am,’ Parker said smoothly, ‘is that close protection is all about anticipating trouble – keeping the principal out of danger in the first place. Dying on the job is considered a failure in our line of work.’

Even as he spoke, he realised what lay beneath and behind the words. His eyes flickered across to mine.

Charlie, I’m sorry . . .

Forget it.

If Caroline Willner noticed this silent apology, she gave no sign of it. The woman opposite was no doubt used to people hesitating around her. She had the steely demeanour of someone who took no prisoners, suffered no fools. The crow’s feet radiating from her eyes and the lines ringing

her neck showed she had the self-confidence to reject surgical intervention as the years advanced. Her hair was unashamedly silvered, but cut in a style as severely modern as her home.

An interesting mix of defiance and pride that would not, I noted, make her accept advice easily, particularly when it came to matters of personal safety. Such people tended to confuse caution with cowardice, and react accordingly.

Parker had given me the background on the drive out from the office in midtown Manhattan. That she was rich went without saying. You don't own beachfront property in Suffolk County and scrape by on your uppers. The money came from investment banking and was largely of her own making. Since her divorce from some minor branch of the German aristocracy, though, she was no longer entitled to call herself Countess. I took in Caroline Willner's fiercely upright posture and wondered if that rankled.

'And have *you* ever failed?' she asked now. She spoke with that New York old-money clip I'd come to recognise.

'Yes.'

The baldness of my answer – or perhaps the truth of it – surprised her. She covered by taking another sip of tea from a cup so delicate it was almost translucent. There was a smear of lipstick on the gilt rim, but none seemed to have come away from her mouth. It wouldn't dare.

Her pale-blue eyes held mine with a certain arrogance, awaiting my elaboration. I said nothing.

'But you didn't die.'

I returned her stare blandly. 'Not entirely.'

She nodded, disengaging for a moment as if checking with some internal database, nodded again slowly as the

figures tallied when she hadn't quite expected them to.

So, she had done her homework on us.

Or on me . . .

Parker and I sat side by side, holding our own cups in which the liquid had already cooled beyond comfort. We waited, unfazed by her brief silence and not rushing to break it. Clients of Caroline Willner's status moved at their own speed. When it came to judging the pace of their mood, Parker was an expert.

He was a quiet man, not overly tall, not overly muscled, a chameleon who blended perfectly with whatever company he kept, without ever losing the essence of himself in the process. His prematurely grey hair gave him an air of maturity that inspired confidence in any client, belying a face that could turn surprisingly youthful when he smiled. And sitting here, in this exceptional house, he looked relaxed and quite at home.

Eventually, Caroline Willner said, 'Dina came late in my life. By that time, both my husband and I did not expect to be blessed, and then . . . we were.' A brief smile, almost rueful, but affectionate. Then she glanced up and it was gone. 'An unfortunate side effect is that I have always felt a generation removed from my daughter, Mr Armstrong. My focus has been on my work and I regret that while Dina was growing up I probably did not pay her as much attention as I should have. We are not as . . . close as I would like.'

Caroline Willner sat very still as she talked, only her face showing animation. She looked from one to the other of us closely, checking for censure. We were careful to show her none.

Her hands were folded in her lap and now she straightened

her fingers, absently inspecting the rings on her right hand. Habit rather than vanity, although I'd escorted enough precious gem couriers to know that the emeralds she wore must have cost well over twenty thousand dollars.

'Has she been in any trouble?' Parker asked, neutral.

'No!' Caroline Willner's head snapped up, but her gaze slid on past. 'Just a few foolish games. Drinking, partying, that kind of thing. She's young and she's fallen in with a crowd who are something of a bad influence. I never know where she is or who she's with.' Her eyes settled on mine again, more resolute. 'I'm hoping that is something Ms Fox's presence will rectify.'

A flutter of movement beyond the glass caught my eye. A girl on a big muscular white horse came bounding along the surf line, the horse's gait snatchy through the knee-high water, neck flexed against taut reins. I had the impression he was more than a handful, and his rider's decision to go paddling had been taken more in an attempt to regain control than for pleasure.

'If I'm to take this job,' I said mildly, 'it will be on the understanding that I am not the girl's gaoler, nor your spy. I can only suggest, not enforce. And I can't protect her if she doesn't trust me.'

Parker shot me a warning glance, but if anything Caroline Willner looked faintly gratified, as if having someone who would stand up for her daughter – against any detractor, regardless – was a personal vindication in her eyes. Proof that she had made the right choice.

'You're close to Dina's age,' she said. I was nearer thirty than twenty, but naturally I let that flattery pass. 'And you're British, well-spoken. It gives you, if you'll forgive

me for saying so, my dear, a sophistication not often found in someone of your . . . professional background. I hope she will take note of you, at least.'

I considered telling her that if she was looking for a role model for her daughter, she had best look elsewhere. My own parents had been at times both shocked and disappointed by the way I'd turned out. But then Parker asked, 'Is Dina close to her father?' and the moment passed.

Caroline Willner shrugged beneath her beautifully cut jacket. My own black wool business suit – the most expensive thing in my wardrobe that didn't contain Kevlar – suddenly seemed like peasant garb by comparison. So much for my worldly air.

'My husband and I separated when my daughter was eight,' she said tightly, as if forced into group therapy against her will. 'He returned to Europe after the divorce. There has been no . . . regular contact since.'

She rose, turning away from us and smoothing down her dress with an unconscious gesture that reminded me of my mother. Dignity at all costs. There was a large canvas on the wall to my left, a huge bold splodge of abstract colour exploding diagonally across it like multicoloured blood spatter. She moved over towards it and, after a moment's apparent absorption with the brushwork, twisted back, poise almost masking the tension.

'So, can you protect her?'

Parker put down his cup. 'We can certainly do our best – and our best is pretty good,' he said with a faint smile. 'But you have to appreciate, ma'am, that preventing kidnappers who are well prepared, well financed and highly motivated is almost impossible without the kind of restrictions on

your daughter's lifestyle that she would find unacceptable. All we can do is minimise the threat – make your daughter no longer seem like a soft target.'

'Make them look elsewhere, you mean?' She gave another quick frown, not liking the idea of passing the buck.

'If we can liaise with the authorities, study the reports on the previous kidnappings, and get a handle on the way these people operate, maybe we . . .' His voice trailed off, then turned sharp. 'Mrs Willner?'

'The authorities know nothing of any of this.' Another stern stare. 'I was assured that the discretion of Armstrong-Meyer could be relied upon absolutely.'

'It can.' Parker stilled, eyes narrowing. He knew as well as I did that only around one in ten kidnappings were ever reported, but that didn't mean he had to like it. 'You should be aware that there has been considerable success in apprehending kidnapers inside the United States – far better than in many other countries around the world,' he said flatly. 'I would strongly advise full cooperation with local and federal law enforcement agencies.'

Caroline Willner inclined her head, almost graceful. 'What I feel about the matter is irrelevant at this point, Mr Armstrong. My family is personally unaffected.' She aimed a level stare. 'I should very much like that state of affairs to continue.'

'Nevertheless, a number of young people have been kidnapped – young people of extremely wealthy parents with homes on Long Island – over the past year,' Parker pointed out. 'Keeping it under wraps can only make things worse.'

'Nobody likes admitting that they gave in to extortion,'

I agreed. ‘And if the victims were not precious, they would not have been taken.’

Caroline Willner did not appreciate being ganged up on. Her spine stiffened. ‘In the kind of social circles in which I move, involving the authorities would generate bad publicity that is something to be avoided at *all* costs.’ She glanced at me again, something calculating in her face now. ‘If word of this had gotten out, it would be open season.’

‘There have been – what? Three so far, I believe you said?’ I asked dryly. ‘The first of which was the middle of last summer and the last was only a few months ago. I rather think it already is.’

‘I am not saying I condone the decision of the people involved to handle things without the intervention of the authorities, Ms Fox, only that I can understand the reasons behind it.’ Faint colour lit her cheekbones. ‘That is why I am taking these steps to avoid the same fate befalling my daughter.’

‘Of course,’ Parker said. ‘The final decision in such an eventuality would be yours to take.’

She straightened, regal, her voice remote as if this was a business deal in which she only had marginal interest. ‘So, do we have an agreement?’

Parker glanced across at me, but I shook my head. ‘That’s up to your daughter,’ I said. ‘I can only protect a principal with their willing participation. If she’s against the idea, or obstructive, and refuses to take sensible precautions, then I can’t hope to do my job.’

Caroline Willner flipped back the sleeve of her jacket and consulted a wafer-thin wristwatch. ‘Dina should be back momentarily,’ she said. ‘Why don’t you ask her yourself?’