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LIFE LESSONS FROM A
SECRET SERVICE AGENT

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ICON

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Prologue

Nothing is, everything is becoming.

—HERACLITUS

September 11, 2001

It sounded like a garbage truck had dropped out of the sky. The rattling of a thousand pieces of metal and glass and concrete reverberated around us, piercing a hole into the quiet September morning. But neither I nor my colleagues in the United States Secret Service's (USSS) New York Field Office had any idea of what was about to happen.

The Secret Service occupied the 9th and 10th floors of the forty-seven-story building that was World Trade Center 7. I had gone into work early that day to meet with our United States Customs Service liaison, Lenny, who I hoped would be able to help me apprehend a Frenchman I was pursuing for a fraud investigation. When the first plane hit the tower, truth be told, I was so focused on getting Lenny to agree to put my suspect on a watch list that I didn't even glance up at the sound. "Hey, Lenny! Focus," I said when his head started to turn toward that distant boom. "This is important."

Then there were gasps. Everyone around us, all the others who had come into the office early that day, slowly stood up or jumped to their feet. When we noticed everyone moving toward the windows, our conversation automatically paused. We got up and followed them.

As we gazed out at the World Trade Center's Twin Towers, the fire was incomprehensibly massive. Its flames poured upward from the gaping hole, engulfing the top of the building entirely. Unable to reconcile the sound we had heard with the destruction confronting us, my mind immediately sought out a mundane explanation. *Maybe it's an electrical fire*, I thought.

A voice came over the building's PA system, calm and authoritative. "We are evacuating the building. Please head toward the nearest exit or stairwell."

No reason was given, no mention of the fire in the adjacent tower or the noise we had heard. As one, we all headed for the stairwell.

An eerie sort of silence hovered over everyone on the walk down. There were no voices, no anxious questions asked—just the sound of hundreds of footsteps descending through the building, and emerging into the crowded lobby on the ground floor. One by one we paused in front of the lobby's floor-to-ceiling windows. The scene that unfolded before us was like a disaster movie playing out in full color, surreal to the point of seeming fake. Car-sized chunks of burning metal rained down from above, detonating like bombs where they crashed into the ground. Toxic smoke and flames poured out of the gaping hole in the tower looming over us. The wreckage falling from the sky made escape through the main entrance of our building impossible, and so the security staff were directing everyone to the emergency exits.

My gun and my badge—the only two things I made sure to take with me—were useless at that moment. I didn't know that a plane had been hijacked and flown into the World Trade Center's North Tower between the 93rd and 99th floors. I didn't know that the second plane would soon strike the second tower, or anything else that would happen that day. I knew only that as a Special Agent, I needed to help, however I could.

As people streamed toward the emergency exits, I immediately started looking around for my fellow agents. I found some of them deliberating in a small group by one of the stairwells and rushed over. "What are we doing?" I asked.

"Let's get the FAT kits," one agent said. FAT kits were the first aid trauma kits we kept in the field office, and which would undoubtedly be

needed by anyone trying to escape the fire raging in Tower 1. Without hesitating, we ran back up the ten flights to retrieve them. The kits contained oxygen tanks, bandages, and a vast array of medical supplies and trauma necessities for helping people in the field—essentially, an ambulance in a bag—but at about twenty-six pounds, the kits were *heavy*. I picked up my kit, knowing it would be a challenge to get these supplies to the people who needed them most, and looked at the others. "There were six of us total. With more than two hundred agents, we were the largest field office in the country, but I had no idea where everyone else was. We headed back down to the ground floor, the cumbersome kits dragging down our shoulders and cutting into our hands.

Since there was no way to get out through the front doors, we used the side doors and ran as fast as we could toward the main entrance of the North Tower as burning metal relentlessly thundered down from above.

That's when I heard it. A sound distinctly out of place, especially this close to the epicenter of New York with its high-rise office buildings and skyscrapers. Among the cacophony of destruction already unfolding—of twisting steel and shattering glass—came what I only later understood to be the engines of a Boeing 767 revving for maximum impact. A moment later, United Airlines Flight 175 flew into the South Tower.

And then hell got even hotter.

The force of its impact between floors 77 and 85 of Tower 2 instantaneously turned what was already unfathomable into Armageddon. As fire and heat and massive chunks of metal fell toward the earth from hundreds of feet overhead, I felt a strong hand grab my wrist and yank me back. It was my colleague Michael. I hadn't even seen the plane, but he had. We were out in the open and completely exposed. We knew we needed cover, so we broke out into a full sprint back toward our building.

There was confusion everywhere I looked. Some people were running. Others were walking. Some just stood there, frozen in disbelief. As I ran, I saw a man motionless, staring at the destruction above when something large fell on top of him. And then he was gone. Just gone. It still hadn't registered to me that it was now two planes that had flown into two towers, or how that was even possible, or what it meant. All I knew was we had to get to the people who needed help.

When we finally reached World Trade Center 7, Michael slammed me against the brick wall, forcing the breath out of my lungs as he tried to shield me with his body from the fire and fuel and glass and metal crashing to the ground. It felt like an eternity as we waited for the insanity of the massive explosion to slow. Our path now blocked, Michael and I zigzagged our way through the obstacle course of debris, trying to find our other colleagues and another way into the towers. We ran into a group of about fifteen agents and a supervisor huddled together.

"Listen, I'm going in there to help," the supervisor said as the towers blazed behind him. "Obviously this isn't like anything we've ever seen before. You don't have to go. No one's going to think badly of you if you don't. So whoever wants to come, come with me, and whoever wants to turn around and go, please do."

We all fell into silence for a moment. I looked over toward the towers, at all of the people streaming out of them, some shouting or crying, some expressionless with shock, and then I stepped forward, as did several others.

At the same time, someone nearby started screaming, then I heard a sharp gasp. "Oh my God," someone said. "They're jumping!"

I looked up, but at first I couldn't process what I was seeing: It was a man in a white shirt, his tie blowing back behind him as he fell through the air. His tie looked purple, or maybe blue. He had a mustache. His expression was blank when he hit the roof of one of the smaller buildings surrounding the Twin Towers and disappeared.

Countless more followed, maybe even hundreds. It was incomprehensible. It was raining people. Then I understood. All those people were choosing death on their own terms. Instead of burning, they chose to jump.

I looked over at my colleague Keven, who was standing next to me. There was a gash in his arm with blood trailing down. "Keven, we have to do something," I said. "We have to help."

Keven's voice was quiet when he answered me. His eyes remained fixated on the burning towers. "What can we possibly do to stop that?" he asked.

I remember feeling angry at what he said. The idea that we should just stand there while something so horrifying unfolded in front of us was enraging. But the fact is he was right. There was nothing we could do—nothing but witness all of those people falling to their death.

Never in my entire life have I ever felt more helpless than I did in that moment.

"Okay," our supervisor said. "Let's go."

I didn't look to see who chose to leave and who stayed. It didn't matter. All that mattered was helping everyone we could.

By now my hands were cut and blistering from the weight of carrying the FAT kit by its flimsy nylon handles. The barrage of falling destruction made it impossible to make our way in, so we set up a triage by the West Side Highway near the base of Tower 2. Ambulances had begun pulling up to the curb.

"Go to the water," we told the survivors who could walk on their own, pointing them toward the Hudson River. We guided those who needed immediate medical help into the ambulances—treating what injuries we could on our own. There were still so many people trapped in those buildings that we couldn't reach. It was awful, infuriating that we couldn't get to them, but we tried to focus on helping who we could.

One woman who came to us was having trouble breathing. When I tried to use the oxygen tank to give her air, I couldn't get it to work—it had been a long while since I had used one. I knelt next to it, laser-focused and cursing myself for not being able to get it to function. I was so fixated on connecting the tubes that I didn't notice when everything around me went quiet.

It was only when I looked up that I realized everyone had disappeared.

And then, from high above, there was the eerie, unmistakable wail of bending steel.

It happened slowly, just a metallic echo resounding through the air at first, followed by the grinding, groaning sound that precedes total destruction. Something awful was about to happen.

I wasn't afraid, exactly—mostly because I didn't know what I should be afraid of. I had no idea that the tower was going to fall. Based on that

terrible rending sound, I guessed that the roof or some other type of massive debris was about to slide off of one of the towers. Whatever the cause, I knew that I needed to find shelter fast.

My mind went into autopilot, every second stretching out endlessly. The 110-story building loomed overhead. There was likely no cover that could shield me from the chunks of steel that were about to come down, and the nearness and sheer magnitude of the tower meant that I couldn't outrun it. So I did what I could to ensure my survival. I spotted a concrete wall at the base of the closest building and sprinted toward it, grabbing one of the bottles of water we had been using to clean out people's eyes and mouths; if I was going to be buried alive, I knew I would need water. I rushed through the patio of an abandoned Au Bon Pain restaurant and paused just long enough to take hold of one of the metal tables crowding the patio space. One thing you learn in explosives training with the Secret Service is that glass can kill you just as easily as bullets can. My adrenaline spiked as I dragged that brutally heavy table over to the building, hoping that it would protect me from falling debris and provide me with a pocket of air to shelter under should I be buried. I pushed it against the wall, crawled underneath, and pulled my knees to my chest to make myself into a smaller target.

The deafening groan of steel bending crescendoed as the tower broke apart, thousands of windows simultaneously shattering as the structure of the building finally failed.

And then the tower fell.

The cataclysm of noise and devastation that swept over me was unlike anything I've ever experienced. It was like sitting in the center of a volcano during an eruption. The heat and toxic dust filled the air so densely that I could hardly breathe. Cement and steel and shards of glass crashed all around me and the ground thundered with the continuous impacts, growing more deafening by the second. It quickly became clear that this was going to be beyond anything I had imagined. Day turned to night. The earth beneath me roared so deeply that I thought it was going to open up and swallow me whole. It seems pointless now, but I began shaking the table as hard as I could, feebly hoping that I could keep it from accumulating debris that would bury

me. It was the only thing I could think to do, the only way I could try to fight. I still had no idea what was happening, but as the devastation continued unabated, the realization came to me, both fast and slow, that I was going to die.

I remember that I didn't feel afraid—only sad that I was going to die alone, and that when all was said and done, I'd be pulverized. Annihilated. There would be nothing left of me. No body to send back to my parents. I had been prepared for death, but I had never been prepared for a death such as this. This was the end. My end. The sorts of worries and preoccupations that took up so much attention in my daily life cleared away, leaving me only with this thought: *Had I done enough? Had I helped enough? Had I lived enough?* I thought of my fellow agents and all the people we had been trying to save. I hoped they were safe, or if it were the end for them, too, then I wished them a painless death. As I waited for death to claim me, I hoped that I had been a good enough person, that my family knew how much I loved them. That I had somehow somewhere made a difference in someone's life.

Then I started to pray aloud.

"Our Father who art in Heaven,

Hallowed be thy name . . ."

I prayed in Greek, as I'd been taught growing up in the Greek Orthodox Church. I kept my eyes open as the world around me split apart. I wanted to see death coming for me. I knew I had no choice in my death, but I could choose how I faced it. Even when I could no longer hear the sound of my own voice, even when my face and mouth filled with dust and ash, I kept my eyes open and prayed. As the tower collapsed above me, strange as it might sound, I felt a peculiar peace spreading through me. No longer able to speak, I prayed silently in my mind as the force of the blast slammed me back against the concrete wall of the building. Smoke and metal and cement and grit shot into my throat and into my ears and into my eyes, burning me.

And then, somehow, at some point, it stopped. The destruction fell to stillness. I realized that it was over only when I heard the quiet—the most deafening silence. Now there was nothing but a void of blackness as dense as the dust-choked air in my lungs.

The only indication that I was still alive was the pain. My mouth and throat were on fire. My eyes and nose burned. I didn't know that I was covered in a toxic mix of chemicals and building materials and God knows what else. I raised my hand in front of my face, but I could see nothing. Had I been buried alive after all?

I cautiously probed around me. Nothing. No molten metal or twisted beams of steel encasing me inside a metal tomb. With my arms stretched out, I began to crawl from underneath the table and stood only after feeling the certainty of a brick wall to my left. That terrible stillness was all I could hear. *Oh my God*, I thought. *Everyone must be dead*. Though my eyes were scorched with ash, I forced them to open wider and focused on what I thought was a distant shimmer of light.

I moved toward it. If I was alive, the light was a good thing. If I were dead, I figured the light would still be a good thing. The glow was like the soft haze of a candle, and I followed it until I finally heard a voice. I recognized it at once—my friend and colleague Gabriel, calling out for me.

I don't think I can adequately express the relief of hearing a familiar voice after thinking the world had just ended.

I tried to shout out, but my voice couldn't get through all the chalky debris in my mouth and throat. I spit some of it out and tried again. "Gabriel, is that you? Gabriel, I can't see."

"Stay where you are!" he yelled. "I'm coming to you."

I stopped moving and waited until he found me. As he led me through the wreckage, my eyes slowly began to clear. I faintly watched two firefighters heading in another direction. They looked like they were coming from battle. One was holding up the other, who was still grasping his ax, dragging it across the ground. There was blood streaming down his face. The world looked like the set of an apocalyptic movie, impossible to make sense of.

We continued to stumble through the near-darkness and then practically collided with two other agents.

"Genie?" Michael said (my nickname was Genie at the time, short for Evyenia). "My God, is that you?"

I heard that same relief in his voice—I knew exactly how he felt.

"It's me."

Together we walked into the lobby of a nearby building. Inside there were about a dozen or so people, who had managed to escape the worst of the blast of the first tower falling. I stood there, my eyes shut tight, the burning worsening as I tried to get my bearings. Looking back on it now, I thought that I had been brave by keeping my eyes open and facing death head-on, but in hindsight it probably wasn't the smartest idea, exposing myself to all that heat and ash.

A moment later, I felt someone begin wiping at my eyes with a wet cloth. I flinched at the sudden contact, but gradually relaxed as the burning diminished. "Better now?" asked a man's voice with a thick Spanish accent. I opened my eyes and saw the building super cleaning the ash from my face. I nodded and thanked him.

I looked around the lobby and my gaze fell on a little boy of about seven who was looking back at me. He was holding a bottle of peach Snapple as he and his mother walked over. "For your mouth," said his mother when her son offered the bottle to me. "Rinse your mouth out."

I accepted the bottle, took a big swig, and spat it out. I wanted more, but I didn't want to take any more of the little boy's drink in case he might need it.

I still didn't completely understand what was happening, or what might still be coming.

The one thing we did know was that it wasn't over. We probably had only minutes or seconds before the second tower fell, and we needed to evacuate as quickly as possible. We used our badges to show everyone we were law enforcement agents and convince them, forcefully but calmly, that they needed to get as far away as possible—right now. "Everybody out and head toward the water," we told them. "You all need to get out of the area."

We pushed them as far from the vicinity as we could. When the North Tower started coming down seconds later, everyone began to run. Even when the cloud of dust spread out from Ground Zero and engulfed us, we kept moving, sprinting away from the explosion, grabbing people, pulling them toward safety, carrying people too injured to run. At one point I saw a man in a truck stop in the middle of the street, get out, and gaze up at the mountain of debris where the towers once stood.

I immediately ran over to him. “Hey, you’ve got to get out of here,” I told him. “It isn’t safe.”

“My cousin, she works there,” the man said in a thick Polish accent, still staring up, immobilized and helpless. I knew what he was feeling. I had friends and colleagues in those towers, too.

“Listen,” I said. “There’s nothing you can do to help her right now. You’ve got to get yourself to safety.”

He started to weep and put his arms around me, the two of us standing there, hugging in the middle of the West Side Highway as people stampeded down the sidewalks on either side of us. Fire trucks were tearing down the road away from the destruction, their sirens screaming, firefighters shouting through their loudspeakers that a gas line had broken and everyone needed to run for their lives. It was pandemonium. The other agents kept yelling my name, calling me back, but I couldn’t leave the driver as he sobbed and held on to me. Finally, I helped him back into his truck and watched as he drove off before I returned to my colleagues to help the other survivors.

I spent the next couple of weeks as a part of the search-and-rescue effort. I sifted through the rubble of Tower 7 for sensitive intelligence from the Secret Service as well as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), whose office had been in the same building as ours. I canvassed the surrounding area for human remains, which we then sent to the labs so that grieving families could identify their loved ones.

It was three days in when my friend Sofia called me, distraught. “They can’t find Joanna,” she said. “What do we do?”

Joanna was a friend I had known for many years from the community of Greek girls I’d grown up with. She was kind, bubbly, always laughing. And she had worked at Cantor Fitzgerald, which occupied the 101st through 105th floors of Tower 1, only a few floors above where the first plane hit. With the initial smash of glass and metal we heard that morning, Joanna’s life had probably ended, along with so many others.

Later, when Joanna’s sister, Effie, called me, I was racked with guilt over the fact that I was alive and Joanna probably wasn’t. I told her that I needed Joanna’s DNA—hair from a hairbrush—and cheek swabs from family members.

There was a long silence on the line. “Okay,” she said.

Seven months later the search team found a small fragment of Joanna’s right arm, which meant that her family was finally able to put her to rest. In the aftermath of 9/11, going to Joanna’s memorial service was one of the hardest things I had to do. My survivor’s guilt became so overwhelming that I left the church midway through. While her family and friends honored her inside, I sat on the front steps of the Greek church, huddled over and heartbroken.

About twelve months later, my supervisor called me into his office to say that the Secret Service was awarding me and the other agents who had stayed to help on September 11 the Valor Award—a medal of the highest honor within the Service. He told me the day of the ceremony and that Jerry Parr, the agent who had saved Ronald Reagan’s life after he had been shot, had been given that same honor. But as he spoke, a knot formed in my stomach.

“I’m sorry, sir,” I said. “I will be overseas, visiting family. Can someone else accept it on my behalf?”

He agreed, somewhat reluctantly, and I left his office.

That night, I went home and booked my flight to Greece for the date of the ceremony. It’s not that I was insensible to the importance of being awarded an honor rarely given, particularly one that so few in the Service have ever received. But I just couldn’t bear the thought of being given a medal for living when so many others had perished.

And after all, I’d done only what I was supposed to do—help. The same thing that every police officer, firefighter, paramedic, and first responder had done. The same thing that civilians had done, like the building super who cleaned the ash from my eyes. The little boy who gave me his Snapple to rinse my mouth. The man in the truck who might have run into a collapsed burning building to save someone he loved. They didn’t need any specialized training to look out for people who were hurt and scared, nor did they choose to help in the hope of being awarded medals or recognition. They helped because it was the only thing they could do. Because, without being told, they already knew that when it seems like the world is ending, being willing to help others is the antidote to fear.

And that is the first step toward becoming bulletproof.