



R. M. A. SPEARS

ARMOR OF GLASS
A NOVEL

CHAPTER 1

A somber ashen tomb of leftover snow and ice, the Missouri January matched the way I felt. The urgent snow turned to icy shards, reprimanding. The gods were pissed. The small ranch house I had raised a family for fifteen years was dark and empty, past. Whatever belongings were not packed in the hitched trailer or car had been sold in the classifieds to scrape together cash. I wouldn't need a trampoline or a trumpet where I was going.

The least of expectations was for average—college, a job, a two-by-two family. The bar set barely off the floor and should have taken little effort to step over. I didn't want a lot, not millions, a Mercedes, or oceanfront property in Malibu. Love and war, I learned, were synonymous.

Men. We don't do emotions well. We love indifferently, waiting. Passionately placid. We carve shallow pits, toss the feelings in, then skim it with dirt. At least I should have. Gaping holes in my shield exposed raw tips of sheared nerves that needed to be cauterized to stem feeling. I should have used a backhoe instead of a shovel.

Returning to familiar structure, to regimentation, I was returning to active duty. Civilian life had been experimented, tormenting. I couldn't hack it. I couldn't be normal.

Approaching my brimming car, my shoes filled with cindery ice water, hastening my departure. My dear brother was in the driveway, sobbing. Daughter Izzy said it was the worst day of her life. I wanted to agree, but I had known worse.

I couldn't look back.

CHAPTER 2

Years Later
Bush Turnpike Station

The next ex-Mrs. Me will be a gorgeous deaf mute. The yakking over my shoulder focused my steps to the pickup. Under the halogen umbrella, where the truck was parked, I unlocked the doors, swung the bags into the backseat. One, a physical training, or PT, bag, hiding lunch, I've been running close to forty years, since they invented it. The other, a green flight or helmet bag was a combat briefcase of sorts, I'd bought it ten years earlier in Seoul. Most soldiers and Marines had their names and rank stitched on the bag, chances were slim to none I would be promoted.

I opted against having the less-than-endearing call-sign "Grumpy" embossed on it. You don't get to pick your call-sign; they smack them on you. I didn't know that character, thought I was getting better. I couldn't shake it, the exposure of its meaning. A lieutenant colonel once warned me I was brutally honest. I considered myself a realist, not a skeptic or cynic. What I thought to be brash and bold, many took as ass and a hole. I think not, therefore I am not.

I settled on my first nickname, Brick, telltale enough, as it turns out. Things were not always miserable, and they won't be again—someday. I repeated aloud to myself, "I am happy, I am rich, and I am successful."

Climbed in and it was on. Engine- check, mirror view- check, and seatbelt ignored- check. The clock on the dash read 0607. On time. The

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window was 0603 and 0608. Had it been later, I would have had to step on it to maintain my lead. Yawning, I slapped myself to reinforce I was awake.

Our brick foursquare hunkered between nooks of golf course greens at the end of a cul-de-sac, tucked in the middle of a drive-by subdivision. Yanking the steering wheel left, a wide sweep to get out, I waved to the current wife. A couple of rights and lefts later, I exited the middle-class hood via a side street, bypassing the traffic signal and accessing the main road, saving half a minute. No light here. The route did not mess up the practiced timeline. This pace shaved seconds off the daily haste.

Pulling up to Renner Street, one of the feeder roads to the interstate, I looked left and right, as one is supposed to, then left and right again for double assurance, and pulled out. It was a mile-drive to the Bush Turnpike parking lot canopied by the toll way and the intersection with I-75. Sweeping under the bridge, I whipped past the umbrella plants I liked so much I'd planted some myself but in the wrong place and then had to change their origin to spare them the brutal Texas summer heat.

Once I reached the lot, I scanned the random cars parked there to see if my normal space was vacant. I skirted the mostly empty lot and turned the truck in a big loop another hundred feet to the exact slot—mine. Everyone has their fave, the most convenient, the habit-formed comfortable one, the *one*, like the many inconsequential things that people assume as theirs, one of their assumed rights, almost. It had not been available since gas prices went through the roof. I wasn't used to the truck's lack of turning radius. I backed up and lined it up to take only the precise space allocated by the lines. My spot from a year ago was actually open.

Of course, it was Thursday. Not as many people worked on Thursdays. I always did. The world was off and the parking lot emptier. Mondays were the busiest, with volume dropping each successive day. Fridays were ghostly light compared to Mondays, as parking lots indicated. I'd half expected sluggish zombies plodding to work in their dull-eyed trances. *Perhaps I'm one*, stifling another yawn, writhing to enliven my body.

I was too early by DART time, the Dallas Area Rapid Transit. The train before mine had not come through. I poked the radio button for a dash of conservative talk radio. More of my kind of radio was available here than in Washington, DC, Los Angeles, Miami, or even back home in the Midwest. They had a firearms program on Saturday mornings. Good. NPR sucked. Reminded me of Goody Two-shoes and pansies.

The reflection of a train's lights on its hovering power lines flashed in the rearview mirror. The southbound Red Line rose over the pass, north of the parking lot, and under the Bush Turnpike toward the station. I collected the requisite transit trash of coffee cup from its holder and the helmet bag and PT gym bag from the backseat. Off to the right, I detected an obvious competitor. The man acted like I didn't know he was there. Walking at a fast pace, the man was trying to get ahead of me and hijack my standing spot, the best spot to wait for the next leg of this course to stage himself for claiming my seat. He knew where I stood, and I knew where he normally ended up.

He had too much of a head start. At the station's waiting ports, a probable illegal was handing out the daily paper. The *Slick* was the local left-leaning, pop rag trying to pass as hip, a waggish, crap-alogical chronicler of propaganda passing for news. Everyone grabbed a copy before they boarded, whether they read them or left them on the floor as litter. I read it to know what the fanciful clueless thought and talked about and what I'd fight or bitch about later to someone who shared my colors. The other pretending-not-to-be-racing non-racer accepted a paper as I crossed over to his side of the track, having caught up. Snatching my copy of a *Slick*, I noticed the guy had assumed the silver-medal position for his wait, but he had not figured it out. Smirking, he was content with whatever position he received. His target had been one car length ahead of mine, the chap obviously into frivolous spontaneity with regards to his travel plans. *Amateur*.

My real and only competition was the older bald guy, not with a bald spot but the ring thing. Think Homer Simpson's boss, Mr. Burns. He and I were the only two who knew what the best time was and where to plant our toes to wait the train and execute the exacting moves

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to attain the sweet spot. The seat that each of us thought of as ours was the seat on the train affording the least number of interlopers as possible for the trudge of a journey downtown. The crème de la crème of seats was not too close to the front, not too close to the rear, and shy of the middle. Out of hundreds of travelers, only Burns and I had it successfully calibrated, except Blue Hair, but thankfully, she was not here anymore. She knew what she was doing. The grande dame would stroll up to me at the last minute and strike up a friendly conversation, ensuring her place in line in front of me. Most certainly, I had to let her go in front, even if I'd stood there fifteen minutes prior.

They're like that; they know what they are doing the whole time pretending the contrary. Now, don't get me wrong. I love women—make mine blonde. They want it all but don't know they already have it. Men are brutish, vulgar, judgmental, and competitive, but what you see is what you get. Men know they can't have it all and that sacrifices have to be made.

Off to my left rear, a quickened pace signaled Burns' approach. Burns used to stand in the spot that I now commanded. By tweaking the schedule, I arrived as the last train departed. He passed behind me to take his mellow game to the on-deck circle, where he would enter the same car I did but enter from the front, aiming for my seat. From that position, we both knew it added a second to his approach.

The 0624 train was the golden window in the morning commuter surge. Don't get me started on the afternoon goat rope. DART newbies' inexperience was a hindrance, but the timeline remained the same, despite working around them. When gas was two dollars a gallon, few rode the DART. At three dollars, there was no change, but when it finally reached four bucks a gallon, everybody grew infinitely wiser and flooded the DART system. I rode grudgingly for years to save hundreds of dollars per year. I didn't ride the DART for the environment or for convenience, I did it for the money. Unspent money is the easiest to come by.

The hint of a breeze raked the hair on my forearms, tripping my mind into thinking about fall. *Silly*. For the past two months, days

had been near or over a hundred degrees. Someone on TV said there had been sixteen days in a row over a hundred. A little hint of cool and mentally, I shifted a season. Perspective is a kaleidoscope. No two ever see the same.

Train crossing bells clanged; the flashing striped arms dropped.

I grabbed my bags and armored coffee before the train pulled into the station. Ready. Weird to lean forward at the same moment the train arrived. It would be effortless to kill someone, an accidental nudge to eternal sleep. A lady was killed a couple of months ago at another station. I wonder if it *was* the accident they claimed it was. Hard to tell.

The draft from the train splashed the waiting herd as the seated engineer whooshed by. The snooty-looking chick on my left started moving away, indicating Snot wouldn't oblige me to be the gentlemen and would just butt in front of me. Of course, I would feign gracious allowance, even though I would not want to. Snot might have been the spoiler in my quotidian scramble.

Lean forward but don't appear to.

The doors paused, beckoning their entries in unison. The alarm would announce the gates unlatching, much like a starter's pistol sharp pop.

Wait.

Opening... Wait for them to fully open.

Clang-bump. All doors opened, front to back, welcoming the programmed throng. The Pavlovian herd spilled into various cars, scurried about, checking fore- and aft-facing seats and unwanted port-and starboard-staring benches. The assembled creatures flurried about the spoils of seats and picked their poison for the downtown launch. With collected belongings in hand, I bounded into the car, hurdling over the bottom step to the middle. Elongating steps as I turned, I leaned forward and right to speed the reach. With three stretched steps and swinging my PT bag in front to chocker-block Burns, I turned into *the* seat, the second one from the rear on the left, not counting the seats facing each other.

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Aha, I win. Burns is the putz, I silently regaled though trifling, and cared more than I would admit. Burns pretended it was no bother but couldn't help scowling. He and I knew better it mattered. He took the seat in front of me, summarily guaranteeing a guest would sit with him to sour him more. *Hope it isn't a talker.* They have been known to inhabit the trains, and both the talker and Burns would be too close.

Time, days, months, weather, seasons, holidays, people, traffic, sports, astrology, and schedules factored, *the* seat, my seat, was the premier point, tabulated to be the precise spot to ride, minimizing annoyance in the daily travel drudgery.

Once upon the throne, the PT gear was nested under the seat in front of me and the helmet bag propped between my feet. After a last drink of my coffee from my non-spill, non-crushable cup, I tucked it into the helmet bag. Rebel that I am, this was the extent of my hippie coming through—food or drink wasn't allowed on the DART, but I had to have my coffee, a gallon a day before lunch. On hot days, I can't drink hot liquids after lunch but need all the caffeine I can get to tolerate the boredom. It is Groundhog Day number four hundred or five hundred something. In the Marines, we said, "Same shit, different day." *I am happy, I am rich, and I am successful. Okay, maybe not today.*

No urban wayfarer consciously ogled. Avoid eye contact, but assess the assemblage, forward to behind, watch without appearing to do so. Peripheral circumspection was sufficient to survey the assembled lot. Opaque reflections from the windows of the shuttling bubble enabled deduction and judgment without committal. Have to be conscious of my surroundings, everything within sight and sound, as trained, and to elicit her eyes hunting mine, if there.

I didn't think of her all the time, but burrowed parts of me never stopped. She had to be okay, had to get back to me. Her smile would be my confirmation. I wanted things *not* to be as they were. The crowded train offered no such composure.

The black gal two seats up had nice hair. I mused, *Can't think or say "black," like no one can see her.* Everyone was prejudiced in silence. The minorities tended to be the most so, or so said a headline of a

recent ABC News-Rasmussen poll that was crumpled in the aisle under imprints of shoes. In a race-relations class at The Basic School, we had a black lieutenant who said that “prejudice” meant whitey putting down blacks. The class tone changed to educate him on precise definitions, and in doing so, a prejudice could be favorable. We are all prejudiced; it just depends on how we deal with it.

I had a black friend once. We did everything together for months. Thought we were close until one day in conversation, I mentioned I’d had a black friend in high school, as part of establishing greater depth in dialogue with him. He thought *that* comment was racist and replied, “Here we go.” We never talked again.

Upon my further undetectable inspection of my fellow passengers, I noted that attractive hair didn’t delude her idiocy—the ditz. Manners ordained that the first one to sit should scrunch against the window, allowing room for another on our downtown cruise to whack-a-mole land. But Ditz was sitting alone on the aisle side. Her shit was piled on her seat, like she owned it, and projected her unwillingness to share—the selfish, arrogant, ditz-bitch!

In her defense, Ditz was not the only unrepentant. Several others surmised their own importance was grander than sharing. Provoked by one of these grander ones, leftovers would be coerced into squatting next to me, with my indication of selfless seat assignment, despite curdling misgivings to do the contrary. Everyone preferred sitting alone. Thursday’s and Friday’s travels were best, as all traveling workers were in seats solitary, and unknown to each other, the greatest extent of their sharing was their equal sentiments for unencumbered seating selections.

I didn’t want to be discovered or tethered, to flinch at the violation of my sphere, my space, my person, my personal-ness but couldn’t appear to fether about either. Didn’t want to be noticed, or readable, or appear unhinged or bothered, either and both. Didn’t want them to know me.

Ditz was plugged into another world, commanding her cockpit in time with the latest musical convention—one she probably could ill afford. All her other superficial stuff, a big purse and ten-gallon,

open-top luggable, full of her essential girl-crap, magnified her elevated stature, one that deserved a whole seat for her whole bitch self. As they say, “All hat, no cattle.”

My brain ping-ponged relevant thoughts with those that were not. I listened to the sound of my thoughts instead of to iPods, MP-3 players, or music in general—or those iPhones, or whatever “Facepage” and “Tooter” were. I guess I never got up caught up in trends or liberal, social attachments and contraptions. It could be why I had few friends. I had a career to make, a life not to live but to lead. I had no stereo equipment or CDs, or in times past, the odd cassette tape, eight-track, or LP. It was a waste of money; plus, I didn’t even know the names of the songs I did like or who sang them—except for Pink Floyd and the *Dark Side of the Moon* album and some Electric Light Orchestra eight-tracks back when.

Still, initial interest could become obsessive, and then I would fall prey, like the rest of the lemmings. I didn’t do music or logos, if I could help it. High-priced fancy clothing with the embroidered horse or croc or kangaroo on it or some bozo’s name like DeLauren or Hans Polo was meaningless hype. It seemed silly to waste money hiding in someone else’s clothes with their name on them.

I wanted to emblazon my shirt with “JUST” on the breast, so when asked “Who is that?” I could say—just—me. I alone am responsible for the guy in this shirt, to accept or deny the faults and guilts, to decide whether he laughs or cries; the one that has to live with him.

Was I unconventional and out of norm? I’d always had this tit-for-tat Q&A in my head. Too busy working, I had no time for the extracurricular immersion and familiar distractions. I studied and trained how to survive the battlefield, to live and breathe and bleed, and to kill or be killed. Yet the wrong one was dead.

I covered my gaping mouth and yawned again—a big one. *Damn. I have to quit waking in the middle of the night.*

To disappear, I read a lot more than I used to. I needed to retract into my own oblivion for this diurnal excursion, invisible, to tarry away the time from the bustle. From my helmet bag, I took out this week’s

travel log. Having read several hundred books over the last couple of years, I knew I'd have to order more after checking the wish list on Amazon. I switched my book list around—a topical book, a novel, limited sci-fi, self-help, financial independence, history, biographies, or an anointed twentieth-century classic that I was supposed to have read in high school but didn't care then; I didn't like better now. I started appreciating fiction and futuristic science fiction. Romance—gag!

Bought used, if I could; new anything was rarely worth the increased cost, including women. The current model wife had been married four times previously. She was more practical than one new to the marriage gambit, with no required break-in period.

Transcending time and predicament, I opened my portal at the bookmark to step into another world, rereading a high school English lit requirement.

I rocked my head back and stretched, arching my head from side to side. I rolled my head on its socket. *Easy*, the skeletal pops and snaps warned. *Don't want to entice the old injury from the fight*. Aging is not kind. Most injuries heal in time, but guilt is a cancer that knows where to hide.

A face appeared. Dark red pores bored into me, projected from beyond the blackened windshield fore me.

I froze.

Memories flooded.

No.

I was not responsible.

The sardonic sneer brightened in disagreement. Shuddering, I turned to face the one in the train who was accusing me. All heads were down, compliant and passive. No one around matched the emblazoned image that was presented.

I hesitantly turned forward to face him.

One orb started blinking.

Then white ones appeared. I glanced out the windows for answers.

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Stealing forward again, I saw nothing familiar in the image. Multiple red and white reflections darted. Yellow and green ones emerged. It must have been traffic lights.

I couldn't run away from myself.

Images rose from the dead and danced in my head. *Too tired*, I thought, daring to settle my eyelids. *I'll shut down for a second*. The reels continued to spin in specter-vision. I was forced to watch these episodes, repeats of a canceled drama—no escaping my role.