

FALLING STAR

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Three helicopters burst into view around the crest of Topaz Bay. Two large, militaristic-looking machines flanked a smaller civilian craft. The choppers swayed and spun out across the water, the noise from their engines reverberating in a low hum off the high coastal rise. Their waspish dance went on for several minutes as they jockeyed for position, until the center craft abruptly swooped lower and a dark, compact figure dropped out of it and plummeted into the ocean below.

Solley Rayner's chicken wing froze halfway to her mouth as she joined in the collective gasp of the family members around her. What just happened? Had they all just witnessed a horrific accident in the middle of their picnic? And on the very first day of their vacation? Concerned that her three children had inadvertently experienced an awful, psychologically damaging event, she was stunned when her sister Janie began to whoop and clap. The kids were jumping up and down, apparently thrilled that someone had fallen out of a helicopter and, splat, into the ocean. Even Nelson, the Irish red setter, barked himself senseless.

Janie's partner, Marsha, said their new pup had a brain the size of a pea, which didn't speak highly of Solley's IQ since the animal obviously knew something she didn't.

“You go, girl,” Janie cried as the small figure swilling around in the water reached for the extended hoist lowered from the chopper above and was hauled slowly upward.

“You’re kidding me. That’s a movie stunt?” Solley finally caught on. She felt incredibly stupid; after all, they had come down to the beach to watch the filming. It was just that she hadn’t expected, well...*that*.

“That’s a water bomb,” her son Jed said with relish. “You hit the water at about forty-five miles per vertical yard. If you don’t hit it just right, you can break your back like a matchstick.”

Solley thought about upping the parental locks on the home computer. Too much of the wrong sort of information seemed to be seeping into her older boy’s head.

“Is she going to do it again?” her younger son Will asked.

“Again and again and again until Gin’s happy it’s perfect,” Marsha said. “This could take all afternoon. I’ve even seen this type of thing carry over to the next day.”

“Gin?” Solley queried.

“Yeah. Gin Ito, the stuntwoman,” Marsha replied. “She’s my best bud.”

“Gin Ito?” Jed was wide-eyed. “Aunt Marsha, do you really know her?”

Bemused by her son’s ardent response to this woman’s name, Solley asked, “Who’s Gin Ito?”

Jed reacted with the scorn reserved by small boys for their imbecilic mothers. “Only the most awesome woman in the world.” He returned his attention to Marsha. “It’s so cool you know her, Aunt Marsha.”

“Can we meet her?” Will got straight to the point, as usual.

“You’ll be sharing the house with her.”

“No way!” the boys gasped in astonished unison.

“She’s filming in this very bay for the next two weeks,” Marsha said. “And I’m not letting her sleep in a trailer when we only live half a mile up the beach.”

Jed and Will stared, slack-jawed, at the scene before them. The famous Gin Ito, doing stunts right here under their noses. Staying at their aunts’ home. Obviously this was huge.

“Yup.” Marsha read their faces with amusement. “They’re filming *Red Revenge 2* here. And,” she produced the ace card that would make her the coolest living family member *ever* in the boys’ eyes, “I’ve got the job of doubling for Kelly Rose.”

“Kelly Rose?” Solley felt painfully out of the loop. She recalled a particularly busty actress who starred in lame chick flicks. “Will she be here, too?”

“Well, not actually in the flesh,” Janie said. “But you’ll have a representation of her. Namely my beloved in a stuffed bra and big blond wig leaping about on a Jet Ski.” She gave Marsha a teasing look. “Kelly will be shooting down at the studios while all the aqua-stunts are filmed on location, here at La Sirena Verde.”

“Cool,” Jed breathed. “This is gonna be the best vacation ever.”

So much for peace and quiet, Solley thought. But at least the kids would be kept entertained, even if it wasn’t in the way she’d imagined. “Janie, you should have said you had other guests. We could have come anytime in the next few weeks. I feel terrible that we’re cramping you.”

“No, you’re not. We wanted you and the kids here more than ever. There’s plenty of room for all.” Janie plunked herself down on another huge towel a couple of feet away.

“Okay, if you’re sure.”

“You’re my sister. Enough said.”

They both watched Marsha and the kids wander away

along the sun-drenched beach toward the small crane Solley had seen erected earlier that morning. It stood sentinel over the movie camp that had sprouted from the dunes in mere hours and would be the home of the film crew for the next few weeks.

“How come Marsha’s back in the saddle, so to speak?” she asked.

“Gin got her onboard. She suggested this place to the director as a good locale for the open-shot stunt scenes. I think she was kinda hoping Marsha’s name would pop into his mind for a few of the aqua-stunts. Then she landed the stunt coordinator’s job as well as stunt lead, so she put Marsha forward for the Jet Ski stuff.”

“Do you think Marsha wants to get back into stunts full time?”

Janie and her partner were well into their sixth year of togetherness, and it crossed Solley’s mind that Marsha might be expressing her upcoming seven-year itch by revisiting her daredevil roots. She and Janie had met on a movie set, much like the one farther down the beach. At the time, Janie was working as a computer consultant in special effects. Marsha Bren, as stuntwoman, was the fall guy for every female member of cast. Off script, she fell for Janie, and for her, love seemed to be a bottomless pit. Solley couldn’t imagine how that worked. In her experience, falling in love meant the ground rushed up to meet her far too soon, threatening to smash her into a million pieces.

“God, I hope she isn’t tempted to get back into that lifestyle.” Janie’s blond brows drew together. “I used to hate her forever traveling all over the world. I didn’t get to see her for months on end. And then she would suddenly reappear, black and blue and aching all over, looking for love and attention and endless massages.”

“I remember.” Solley used to wonder what it must be like to have such an exciting life. Bringing up three children, more or less single-handedly, had anesthetized any desire for unexpected excitement. She needed order and stability. And support, a little support, would be a novelty.

“She’s psyched at getting this job, of course,” Janie mused. “It’s been ages since she did any stunt stuff and she misses the thrill, but for the moment she’s enjoying the steady studio work. Personal training pays well, and we’re planning some changes so I need her close by.”

“What changes?” Solley fully expected her sister to reel off a list of improvements to her already fabulous home. “Perhaps a helipad, servants’ quarters, or maybe an east wing?”

Although she jibed, she was proud of her younger sister’s successes. Janie was a shrewd businesswoman and a hard worker, and had done well for herself. Sometimes it was hard to believe they were sisters. They were quite different, physically. Solley was flame-haired and tall at 5’9”, while Janie was a petite, vibrant blonde. They’d each inherited stunning green eyes and a quick-fire temper from their much-missed Irish mother. Solley would have been the first to admit that Janie had grabbed all the gray matter. She’d built a solid career and now had a small but strategic consultancy business of her own. A handful of lucrative contracts had helped her acquire the comfortable lifestyle she shared with Marsha.

Janie’s wise choices and successes contrasted sharply against the battered backdrop of Solley’s achievements. She worked in an office part time, preferring to be home after school for the kids, and her marriage was not so much on the rocks as sunk without trace. Solley didn’t resent Janie’s solid relationship and professional success. In fact, her sister’s contentment and security gave her hope that good things were possible, that happiness and love and companionship could be

found, if not now then perhaps at some future time. In Solley's world of cinders and broken hearts, Janie's happy-ever-after fairytale was the life the forlorn-yet-hopeful dream of.

"Come on," she prompted. "What are you planning now?"

Janie's eyes danced. "How about a nursery?"

"You're planning a baby?" Solley felt a slow smile of delight opening up her face.

"Yes," Janie admitted somewhat shyly. "It's something we both want, and it seems like the time is right. Well, as right as it can be, I suppose."

"Oh, Janie, I can't think of a better home improvement." Solley leaned into her and gave her a huge, warm hug. "I'm happy for you both. You'll be wonderful parents. And my kids will have a little cousin to grow up with."

"The studio gave us a pretty lucrative deal for using our land, so we can afford for me to take a year out and get knocked up." Janie smiled ruefully. "Of course, the other payoff is that Marsha gets a last fling throwing herself off moving objects for loads of hard cash before nesting with me for all eternity."

"Well, this is the perfect nest," Solley said. "I'm so delighted, sweetheart."

Janie owned La Sirena Verde, the private beach on Topaz Bay, where the film crew had set up camp. Solley was glad Marsha's studio connections had bought them the opportunity to plan for a family. Janie was right, there couldn't be a better time or place. Solley sighed and gazed out into the bay. Gulls swooped and soared idly in the lazy heat of the late afternoon, their haunting cries carried away on the wind. The peace and tranquility of the area raised her hopes for the quiet respite she so desperately needed.

I'm doing the right thing, she told herself for the umpteenth

time. The kids needed this break away from the fighting between her and her partner, Danielle. Sinking back onto her beach towel, she let her mind clear and tried to concentrate on her innermost feelings. Slowly she felt her body relax, the tightness in her face and shoulders gradually melting away with the soothing ocean sounds. Beyond the love of her children and the comfort of her sister's home, she reached out timorously to touch the ever-present core of fear and sadness deep within. At the end of her long journey to this time and place, she was still an unloved, lonely woman.

Dan, you're such an ass. I don't want to start over with someone new. I'm too old to start over. I wish we could work this out. I wish you'd try harder for the kids' sake.

Solley hated the emotional mugging her kids were going through, but she was powerless to change the chain of events that had led to the current crisis. A parental split was harsh for children, no matter what age they were. Sadness clouded her gaze as she thought of her children's confusion. Jed, at eight years, was outgoing and boisterous. He excelled at sports, so he was popular at school and had no shortage of friends and adventures. Yet he always had time for his little brother and sister and was fiercely protective of them.

Will was six and much quieter. He might have been shyer, socially, but he was just as gifted at sports as his brother, especially in swimming. He could move through the water like a baby otter. He was a very loving child but, being naturally reserved, he seemed to quietly observe the interactions of his family instead of taking center stage. That role unquestionably belonged to his twin, Della, who was bright and artistic and currently passionate about anything pink. A baby diva waiting to explode, she had Will and Jed wrapped around her little finger. Solley privately felt sorry for the objects of her

daughter's future affections. Having Della's attention was like being hit by a truck, then reversed over, only Della showed less mercy.

Drowsily watching the white surf break onto the shore, she hoped the vacation at La Sirena Verde would give the children a summer to remember for happier reasons than their parents splitting up.



"So, tell me about Gin Ito," Solley asked a few hours later as she and Janie sliced celery and cucumber for a dinner salad. "I have no real idea who she is. Does that make me as lame as Jed and Will seem to think?"

"No, staying all those years with Dan makes you lame."

"Cheap shot."

"Well, you really go all the way down when you go slumming, don't you?"

"Considering she's an ex of yours, isn't that a bit rich?" Solley shot back, riled.

"Yeah, but I chose Marsha. I saw Dan for what she was and I warned you over and over. Crazy that two cousins could be so different."

"So, you've finally been proved right. Good for you, sis. Congratulations. My relationship is the crock of crud you always predicted. That's some set of crystal balls you got there." Solley turned toward the kitchen door, but Janie caught her arm.

"Look, I'm sorry. I just hate to see you hurting."

"Please, let's just drop it. I'm well aware of your opinion. I pulled the short straw, okay? Can we change the subject? It's getting old."

"Okay, I'll tell you everything about Gin Ito. How's that?"

“I can hardly wait.” Why not discuss another high-achieving woman? Could she feel any worse about herself?

“She’s Japanese American, and she’s Marsha’s best friend. They go way, way back, almost Jurassic...by that I mean college. I bet you’ve probably seen Gin in more movies than Kelly Rose.”

“I don’t think so.” Solley had trouble noticing anyone else who starred alongside Kelly Rose’s breasts.

“I know the name doesn’t mean anything to you, but nearly every female stunt scene you’ve witnessed on screen in the past seven years or so probably starred Gin or she directed. She’s the hottest stunt practitioner and engineer around.”

“God, what a strange career choice.”

“Imagine what I had to live with until my big beefcake came to her senses, under my subtle direction of course. She’d be a pancake at the bottom of a cliff by now if it wasn’t for me—Ms. Floats Like a Butterfly, Drowns Like a Bee. I saved her life. That’s why I own her.”

They both smiled, then looked up at the crunch of tires on the gravel driveway out front. A few seconds later, footsteps crossed the deck at the rear of the house, moving toward the kitchen door.

“Hey, Janie.” A warm voice carried through the open doorway into the shadowy kitchen. A slim figure, framed in sunlight, stood poised on the threshold.

“Talk of the sweet devil. You got here in double time.” Janie wiped off her hands and rushed to hug the new arrival. “Marsha’s down at your trailer waiting for you.”

“I really need a shower, and if I went down there first, I’d get caught up in conversation with the crew and never get away.” A dark, piercing gaze spilled past Janie to Solley, and the new arrival gave a charming grin. “Hi. Don’t tell me, Janie’s sister?”

“Sorry.” Janie sidestepped. “Yes, this is Solley.”

“Hi, Solley. I’ve heard a lot about you.” Gin reached out her hand.

Solley was pleasantly surprised at the warm, solid handshake from the light grasp. “Ditto. My kids have been raving about you since we arrived and they found out you’d be filming locally.”

Gin was not what she had expected of a famous stunt artist. Not that she was sure what to expect, but she’d assumed a big, strapping Amazon like Marsha, not the compact woman now before her. Gin was closer in height to Janie, around five feet two. Otherwise they were total opposites, one with short, inky hair and almond eyes the color of midnight, the other a honeyed blonde. With her height advantage, auburn hair, and freckles, Solley felt about as dainty as a giant redwood standing beside them.

Gin’s well-honed body vibrated with health and vitality, almost in contrast to the stillness of her demeanor. Her eyes, swimming with sunlight, flicked to Solley before quickly darting away as if Gin felt self-conscious. Solley could swear there was a glint of happy mischievousness in their depths, and she felt herself warm to this woman immediately. Positive energy seemed to flow off her in waves. Solley had actually felt an electric tingle all over her body when their hands touched.

I must have some static in the attic, she mused to herself, surprised at her physical reaction to the handshake. Perhaps her poor mind was cracking under the stress of her situation. As Gin hoisted her heavy sports bag onto her shoulder in one easy move, muscles rippled up her arm and torso. *Lordy, somebody works out*. Solley blinked, slightly shocked at the lusty thoughts that suddenly buzzed through her mind.

“Sol and the kids are here for a few weeks’ vacation,” Janie explained. “And believe me, you couldn’t have a more

solid fan base than those little tykes. It'll be like residing at a fan convention for the next few weeks, you'll be so adored."

"Then I'd better get cleaned up. I smell far from adorable. Sea salt and sweat are not the best of colognes. It's one of the downsides of plummeting into the ocean twenty times in a row." Gin smiled directly at Solley and her shy reserve seemed to melt away. "But I'd love to meet your kids."

Solley smiled back. "They're dying to meet you. Thank you for being so kind, I'm sure you're exhausted after all that...plummeting."

"You're in the guest suite at the front," Janie told Gin. "Go grab a quick shower before Marsha and the kids get back."

"Yes, prepare to have your peace and tranquility forever shattered," Solley said dryly.

"Oh, and to keep things really restful we've got a red setter pup," Janie added cheerfully. "He's called Nelson and he's as dumb as driftwood. I think he's Marsha's totem animal." She rolled her eyes.

With a parting grin, Gin moved toward the back stairwell, obviously very familiar with the layout of the Rayner-Bren home. Solley was amazed that she'd never met Gin or even heard her name mentioned. Apparently they were both regular guests, even if Solley didn't manage to visit as often as she had in the past. She suppressed the suspicious thought that her sister had deliberately kept this old friend of Marsha's in a separate sphere. What did she imagine—that Gin wouldn't be safe around an unhappy, frustrated Rayner woman?

An elbow landed in Solley's ribs. "You're totally checking out her butt."

"I am not."

Janie slapped a cucumber into Solley's hand. "Here, think about something else."

Solley stared down at the long, hard vegetable and blinked. *I can't believe I'm ogling my sister's houseguest and eroticizing a salad item. Is this what my sex life has finally come to?*



The moon hung low and the shore was quiet as Gin and Marsha wandered along the receding waterline.

"I really want this job to be my last," Gin said.

"I know, I know. You're getting old, Grandma. You need to retire so you can spend all those millions."

"Hey, I'm four months younger than you, Granny-pants."

"Granny-pants! You sure know how to hurt a girl. Cuts right to the heart."

They both giggled.

"Well, one day Junior will grow up and make you and Janie grandmas. I think it's obligatory to wear the panties. Right up to here." Gin indicated her armpits.

"Junior." Marsha savored the word. "Junior M. That sounds about right. Did you ever think you'd see the day I'd be a mommy?"

Gin's eyes shone with affection. "I can easily see the day. And I wish you joy. Janie is a beautiful person. I couldn't wish you anything better in life than a partner like her and the hope of a family."

"Not too sure if she'll go with the Junior M moniker, though." Marsha got a warm one-armed hug in response. Glancing sideways at Gin, she said cautiously, "I know this must be strange for you—"

"No, not at all. Life goes on and I must find my place in it. I've done my grieving and I really want to move out from under this cloud of depression. I'm desperate for a fresh start,"

Gin said. “When I see you and Janie...the happiness in others, I know I’m ready for it, too.”

Her expression was earnest yet vulnerable, as if she knew the remedy but not the ingredients. They strolled on for a few more paces before Marsha broke the silence with a lighter topic. “Solley’s kids sure can’t get enough of you.”

“She’s nice and they’re great kids. You’ll have your work cut out for you if Junior M is a chip off the Rayner block.”

Marsha smiled. “I love Sol and her little monsters. It’s hard for them with the breakup and everything.” She shrugged disconsolately. “It’s gonna get messy. Dan’s new girlfriend seems keen on grabbing the kids. Knowing Dan, it’ll be a low-down and dirty fight.”

“That sounds harsh.”

“Yeah, it’s such a fuckup. Sol doesn’t care about alimony, or the house, or anything. Just the kids.” Marsha gazed up at the starlit night. “She’s a good mom. I wish she’d find someone special.”

Stargazing and inner contemplation never took up too much of Marsha’s time. Just as suddenly as she’d stopped to admire the heavens, she turned to Gin, buzzing with new energy, her thoughts sparking off in a million directions.

“Let’s head back and you can tell me some more about this stunt school idea of yours. I might have a little money and whole lot of time to invest in a project like that.”