

CHAPTER ONE

The roller coaster thundered high above them in the mall and people screamed. Vivi Vincent's son's blue eyes widened with wonder as he watched with obvious delight. He grabbed her sleeve and grinned like any normal eight-year-old boy.

The bright colors of the rides and glaring sunshine through the glass roof made her eyes water. That's what she told herself. It had nothing to do with the disastrous meeting they'd had first thing this morning with Dr. Hinkle.

She patted Michael's hand, and he caught her gaze. The intelligence that shone in his eyes took her breath; as if all the secrets of the universe were locked up inside that bright, young mind.

He kept tugging her arm, trying to get her to go on the ride, but her stomach was too jumbled to even think about going on a roller coaster right now. And no way would she let him go alone—if something went wrong who knew what could happen? She'd never forgive herself if he got hurt just because she was too chicken to go on an amusement park ride.

"Want to visit the toy store?" she suggested instead.

He nodded and smiled, but she knew he was disappointed from the look of yearning he sent to the seventy foot monstrosity behind them. They headed past old-fashioned carousels and giant mushroom-shaped swings—much more her speed. The Minneapolis Mall, a smaller cousin to the Mall of America a few miles across the city, was a kid's paradise.

She straightened her shoulders. Michael would enjoy this outing today, even if she had to subject herself to the terror of going on that thing. It would hopefully make up for his being poked and prodded by Dr. Hinkle this morning, then patronized within an inch of sanity by a local TV reporter doing a feature on the famous psychiatric neuroscientist's research program. The woman had interviewed them about Michael's "issues" and drawing ability. Hopefully it wasn't a slow news day in the twin cities.

Michael spotted the intricate green serpent who guarded the entrance of the toy store and any lingering disappointment in his expression vanished. They stood in silent fascination for several long minutes as they took in the display that clambered up and over the shop. There was a teddy bear in cowboy gear riding a horse, a dinosaur on a motorcycle, and above it all a giant clown that made Vivi distinctly uneasy. What was it about clowns?

"OK, let's go inside. You can choose one thing from the store, and then we'll go find something to eat. Later we'll hit the rides."

He grinned and ran inside. Vivi hid a smile. She took a step after him only to collide with someone massive and bulky who knocked her on her ass. She ended up sprawled on the floor as the man kept on walking. Her jaw dropped at his rudeness, and she climbed awkwardly to her knees, cradling her wrist, which hurt from the unexpected impact with the floor.

"Need some help?" A man crouched beside her. He had short, black hair and rich, brown eyes that crinkled attractively at the outer edges. His fingers were strong and firm as he eased her to her feet, holding onto her good arm.

"Thank you."

She gripped him for balance as she slipped her shoe back on. He had a straight nose, full bottom lip and a cleft in his chin. Those dark eyes ran over her critically as if assessing her injuries, then something changed and they warmed with frank male approval. She let go of his hand, and her knees wobbled. She blamed it on the high heels she so rarely wore.

Another round of screams from the people on the roller coaster broke through her reverie.

“Thank you, again. I’d better go find my son.” She nodded toward the toy store. It had become automatic to use Michael as a barrier, and the habit was starting to wear on her nerves. Maybe one day she’d get over the trust issues her ex had instilled in her.

Maybe.

One day.

“Good luck getting him out of there.” The handsome stranger held up a plastic bag with the distinctive logo on the side. It looked incongruous against his smart business clothes—a black suit, blue shirt, purple tie. How someone carried themselves revealed a lot about a person—his posture suggested a military background—and maybe some sort of law enforcement. He also exuded an air of competence and authority she recognized from her days working at the UN. The last guy who’d affected her this way had taught her that a handsome face and commanding manner were no substitute for compassion or morals. Still, it was nice to look at.

“I got my fix buying for a friend’s kid.” For a split-second a shadow passed across his features then disappeared. Maybe she imagined it. He took a step away. “If you’re sure you’re OK?”

She nodded and he smiled back and then strode away.

Gone. Vivi blinked.

It had been a long time since a man had looked at her like she was anything except a frazzled, single mom over thirty. The sensation of being a flesh and blood woman slid over her body like a skintight dress, rekindling a part of herself she’d forgotten existed. Great, another thing to add to her list of frustrations.

Walking toward the store she fingered her sore wrist and decided it was nothing more than a mild sprain. She’d ice it when they got back to the hotel later tonight.

A loud boom erupted from the center of the atrium. She jumped and spun around. Screams grew louder and for a moment she thought the roller coaster was malfunctioning. Then a weird noise peppered the air, one that sounded familiar but she couldn’t identify at first. Then she did. Gunfire. People started running. A man standing beside the candy store dropped to the floor, and the glass from the window shattered and rained down on him as a wide pool of blood spread around his body.

Oh, dear God.

There was a shooter in the mall.

Michael!

She spun and ran inside the toy store, searching frantically. People were rushing around desperately looking for children and loved ones. A display crashed to the floor, and a model disintegrated into a thousand pieces. She skidded on the tiny bits, but righted herself before she fell. A woman rammed a stroller into Vivi’s ankles in her determination to get to her toddler, who was wandering off to the front entrance. Vivi grabbed the kid and thrust him back into his mother’s arms.

“Thank you.” The woman’s face was white with terror. She had a baby and a toddler to deal with, along with masses of shopping bags.

“Leave the stroller. Grab the children and get out of the mall as fast as possible,” Vivi told her. That’s what she intended to do. She scanned the store for the carrot-topped head of the most important person in her world. There. She pushed her way through people milling around in confusion.

Michael was starting to get agitated and stood silent and shaking. She got to him and cradled his precious face with one hand, pushed back his hair with the other. She had to calm him down if they hoped to get out of there alive. “I’m here, Michael. I’ll look after you, but you have to listen to me and you have to concentrate, OK?” Please don’t freak out.

Blue eyes cleared and focused. Her incredibly brave son squared his shoulders and nodded, taking her hand and squeezing tight. He knew they were in danger. Love for him swelled inside her so enormous it wanted to burst through her skin. The terror was bigger. It wanted to crawl through her veins and eat her alive.

She would do anything to protect this child. Anything.

One of the cashiers was on the phone, presumably talking to security. Another cashier yelled, “Cops are telling us to sit tight while they assess the situation.”

Sit tight? No way in hell.

The sound of gunfire was getting louder now; bullets blasted glass and concrete. Metal hit metal and she could hear the ricochets whizzing around the structure, turning the mall into a deadly pinball machine. Gunpowder was growing thicker in the air, clogging her throat. Then more shots, but these sounded much closer, on the other side of the store. Her mouth went dry.

Two shooters.

And she and Michael, and all the other customers and employees, were trapped between them.

She walked quickly to one of the doors at the back of the shop and peered out cautiously. A man at the far end of the corridor stood holding a large automatic weapon. The same man who’d knocked her to the ground earlier. Thank God he hadn’t stopped. He was facing the other direction, scanning the area, then pausing and squeezing off rapid bursts of gunfire. Screams rose, some of which were cut horrifically short.

Bullets rained down from the balconies above and the over-sized model creations on the roof of the store shattered.

The sweat on her skin went cold. There were at least three shooters. They were in the middle of a war zone.

Vivi looked back over her shoulder and froze. A gunman was winding through the rides toward the stores. His face was covered, but his gait was relaxed, almost indolent. This was a man who’d killed before and would show no mercy. She’d worked with this sort of man, at the White House, at the UN. What the hell could she do? The second gunman was too close in the corridor behind the store and they were trapped. Others spotted the approaching danger and started pouring out the back of the shop screaming, including the woman with her two children, still pushing the stroller and clutching her shopping bags. Michael tried to follow them but Vivi pulled him back and pressed his face into her stomach as the people who’d run were mowed down.

Bodies fell. Contorted in agony. Blood smeared the floor. The woman with the stroller crashed atop the toddler, but the little boy's leg kept twisting as if he were trying to get free.

Stay still!

Her gut twisted and bile rose up her throat. The bright, white halls of the shopping mall were being turned into a butcher's shop.

Michael shook in her arms. She hugged him closer. "I won't let them hurt you," she whispered. But she had no clue how to stop them. She kept one eye on the man approaching through the amusement park rides and peeked out to see where the other shooter was. He was about six stores down, looking into the store windows. Unless he turned around and moved off, he'd spot them as soon as they made a run for it. If it was just her she could maybe slip past him, but dragging an eight-year-old through a rain of bullets? Was it even worth making a break for it in that direction or should they head toward the bus and metro station? But looking at how organized these terrorists were—and what else could they be except terrorists?—she figured they'd have the main entrances covered. The shops then? Some of them must connect to the outside world through back exits but she didn't know which ones.

She spotted the cupboard beneath the cashier's stand and an idea took hold. "Michael," she whispered in his ear. "We're going to play a game of hide and seek. Only this is a very serious game because these people want to hurt us, so you mustn't give yourself away. Understand?" He nodded, those blue eyes of his wide with fear, but also total understanding. He wasn't stupid the way some people assumed, but his intelligence wouldn't matter a damn if one of these monsters put a bullet in him.

If anything happened to him, she'd die too.

She hugged him fiercely, then sank to her haunches and made him follow her as she crawled to the register. She slid one cupboard door quietly open. It was full of supplies. Staplers, receipt rolls, plastic bags. She shoved it all to one end of the cupboard and urged him inside. He lay there, curled up, shaking, eyes wide and frightened.

"You have to stay here and not make a sound." She laughed a little hysterically at that. "Don't thump your head or hands and feet against the sides, or else they'll hear you, understand?"

He nodded but grabbed her hand in a desperate plea.

"I'm going to run to those two shops over there." He rapidly shook his head. He'd seen what had happened to the others who'd tried to run. "I'll wait for the bad men to look the other way before I go. I'm a fast runner." She slipped off her heels, squeezed his fingers. "I swear I will come back for you, but whatever happens you have to promise not to move from here. Not to make a sound. Promise?" She held him so tight he winced, but he nodded even as tears started to roll. She held his fingers to her lips and then kissed his warm cheek. "I'll be back, Michael. I won't let them hurt you. You trust me, right?"

He nodded.

"And I trust you because I know how smart you are." Tears blurred her vision but she blinked them away and a solid wave of determination moved through her. She kissed him again. "No moving from here until I come get you. No matter how long it takes." She held his gaze. "I'll be back as soon as I can. I promise."

FBI Special Agent Jed Brennan did not spend a lot of time hanging around malls—especially not during the run up to Christmas. He'd rather have a root canal.

Officially he was off duty from the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit-4, taking some long-overdue vacation days. Unofficially things were a little more complicated.

His boss had insisted he take some time after using excessive force on a suspect. That's what you got for punching a wealthy serial killer in the face when you arrested the fucker. No matter Miles Brandon had smacked him so hard his skull still buzzed, or that the guy had tried to slip a slender blade between his ribs. Let alone what he'd done to his unsuspecting pick-ups from DC gay bars. Didn't matter. Breaking the asshole's nose was against the rules.

It was a fine line he'd crossed and he doubted ASAC Lincoln Frazer—newly promoted after the old unit leader had unexpectedly retired last week—would have done things different.

Thankfully, he and Frazer were old friends, going back more than a decade to when Jed had been stationed at the Kandahar Air Force Base and had called in the FBI to investigate a suspected serial murderer. The young soldier, together with the inexperienced FBI Special Agent, had caught the killer, but Jed had been too late to save Mia, the woman he loved. The case had made Frazer a media superstar, but the guy was a solid investigator who'd devoted his entire life to the BAU.

Friend or no friend, Frazer had the power to not only bench him, but to put him out of the game permanently if he wanted.

There were plenty other federal agents eager to fill Jed's size eleven boots. So, he'd wait his boss out. He had cases to work on his own time. He'd make the most of his enforced vacation and visit his family during the festive season. The holidays made humanity's general bat-shit craziness worse so it was usually hard to take a break then. The world was full of whackos and sadists with nothing better to do than figure out new ways to hurt people. It was his job to keep a lid on the insanity although some days he thought his own head would burst from the horror of it all.

Hell, maybe his boss was right. Maybe he could use some downtime in one of the quietest, most peaceful places on earth—the Northwoods of Wisconsin. The fact he'd have to visit Bobby's widow and young son was beside the point. He should have done it months ago.

Last night he'd visited an old Army buddy he hadn't seen in a couple of years—Jack Donovan—who was a homicide detective with Minneapolis PD. Today he was hitting the road for the much shorter drive to America's Dairyland. It was close enough to Christmas he could nail all his family holiday obligations in one relatively painless swoop. Hence, the mall.

Root canal. Maybe even a flesh wound.

The woman with the bright red hair and intriguing eyes was an unexpected bonus. The asshole who'd knocked her over was oblivious to the damage he'd left in his wake. Jed had been torn between going after him and helping the woman up off the floor. The protective streak he and his brothers had inherited from their father was too ingrained to just abandon her.

He'd been knocked off balance, too, by her beauty. Plus, she had that innate poise and confidence that totally did it for him. He shrugged off a moment of regret that he'd never see her again. He loved women. It was relationships he avoided at all costs. His job wasn't exactly nine-to-five, and since losing

Mia in Afghanistan all those years ago he'd put a firm guard around his heart. Which was exactly how he liked it.

Still, it didn't hurt to look.

A hunting store caught his eye. Thousands of knives of every size and color. Oh, yeah. He went inside and started looking for new knives for his dad and two brothers and a pocket knife with lots of handy gadgets for his mom. Two shops and he'd be done.

Happy Christmas.

BOOM!

An explosion reverberated from the amusement park rides. What the...? Then the sound of shots being fired. Terrorists or heist? Jed reached for his gun, swore when he realized he wasn't wearing it. He'd left the SIG locked in the car because he'd wanted to take a whirl on the roller coaster for old times' sake—something him and Bobby and Liam had always done as teenagers. He hadn't wanted to be armed with a deadly weapon while experiencing g-force.

He flashed his shield at the store's security guy. "Call 911 and mall security. Any way out back there?" He pointed to the hidden door at the rear of the shop.

The guy nodded even as he held his cell to his ear. They made their way toward the back of the store. A woman in a black suit, probably the manager, put a key in the lock.

"Hang on. Got any hunting knives behind the counter?" Who knew what lay behind that door? He wanted a weapon. Jed's car was in the parking lot on the opposite side of the mall, otherwise he'd have gone for his SIG. He eyed the glass cases on the walls. He could smash one open but didn't want to draw that much attention to himself or the other people hiding here.

The security guy looked at him uncertainly.

Jed thrust his badge closer to the guy's face. "Off duty FBI Agent. Get me a damn knife...now!" A blade wasn't much against a sub-machine-gun but it beat the hell out of the plastic toy he currently held. He placed the box on the floor. He'd pick it up later. Hopefully.

Bullets sprayed along the corridor outside, and more sounded from levels above them. People crouched in terrified silence. Piercing screams told him civilians were dying and he was ill-prepared to save any of them until he could get a gun. The security guard hustled behind the desk and handed Jed a knife with a six-inch blade. Better.

"What do you want me to do?" the guy asked.

"The mall has its own security, correct?"

The guy nodded but looked uncertain. "Security Center is on this floor. Over near where that first explosion came from. No one answered when I tried to call them."

Crap. If these guys took out the security nerve center before they attacked they were highly organized and deadly serious about doing as much damage as possible. Or stealing a massive amount of money with total disregard for public safety.

Jed ran his eyes over the ten or so people milling around uncertainly. "Get them out of here and tell the cops outside what you know. Which other stores along this block have rear exits?"

"Just us and the restaurant at the end of the row. Once you're in the corridor, there are exits to the parking garages and the loading bays used for deliveries."

Jed nodded. "Leave the premises ASAP but watch for shooters on the outside. Tell cops there's an—" he tested the point of the knife with his thumb—"almost unarmed FBI agent inside."

He pulled out his cell phone and dialed the local FBI office. Busy signal. He texted his boss instead and shoved the cell back in his pocket. So much for R&R.

They cautiously unlocked the door at the back of the shop and checked the corridor—clear. The security guard took the lead. Civilians started to pour out, hopefully on their way to safety.

A black shadow passed the front of the store and Jed held his breath. It was the asshole who'd knocked over the pretty redhead. Everyone in the shop froze and then started hustling faster as the guy slowly turned toward them, shouldering an assault rifle and aiming it right between Jed's eyes. Jed had no choice. He threw himself through the door after the others. He slammed it shut as bullets tore through the walls beside him.

"Run." He waved the others frantically in the opposite direction. Held his position as he listened closely for footsteps. He'd switched into attack mode and he'd done this sort of drill a million times over. He'd just never done it armed with nothing except a blade, and surrounded by potentially thousands of innocent civilians who could get caught in the crossfire.