

Chapter 1

I didn't want to be the next one to die. But here I was, staring down the barrel of a gun. And it was my first day at work.

"Hey! Are you listening to me?"

My eyes snapped to the face behind the gun, and I found myself thinking, *This can't happen in little Quincy, Illinois, for heaven's sake!*

"I said, I wanna talk to Rich!" the gunman repeated.

Rich? Who? My thoughts were slower than cold oatmeal. Oh yeah, my brother who I was working for. "Rich, uh, Rich isn't here." I blinked a couple of times, trying to clear my mind.

"Call him!" The man's voice held a note of desperation. As I dialed and held the ringing phone, I decided that this was too scary and I never wanted it to happen again.

Rich's voicemail answered. "Rich, call the office now!" I set the phone down with shaky hands, wondering what the gunman was going to do.

He had barged into the office with a determined, angry stride. His eyes were wide and glassed-over, and I wondered if he was high. The gun came out before I could even open

my mouth to greet him. After the gun, everything blanked out.

Now I saw that his mop of black, greasy hair looked like he hadn't combed it in days. His jeans and T-shirt were wrinkled, food-smudged and untidy. He was clearly a man who didn't want to wait for anything.

I needed to get some control over this situation. My life depended on it. "Look sir, Rich will call back any second now. I know he will. I won't do anything, I promise. I don't want to get shot."

The man nodded at me. "Okay. Don't do anythin'."

"Why don't you sit down?" He hesitated and glanced over his shoulder.

The reception area of the office was small, containing only the front desk with one chair in front of it, a couch on the side wall, and a small refrigerator.

I was desperately hoping that someone—anyone—passing by would see us and call the cops, but I couldn't hang all my hopes on that.

The guy took two steps backward and then sat down on the edge of the couch. The gun was still out and pointing at me.

"Who are you anyway? Where's Pam?" he asked. He licked his lips again and ran a hand through his tangled hair.

"Pam's on maternity leave. I'm just filling in until she gets back. I'm Mel Addison."

The man stopped combing his hair with his fingers and scratched his scalp. "Rich's little sister?" His tone wasn't quite as desperate.

I managed a weak smile for him. He no longer seemed quite as threatening. "That's me."

"I thought you lived in Maryland." He adjusted the grip on his gun.

"I did. I moved back." *This is good, get a rapport going.* "What's your name? So I can tell Rich when he calls."

"Eddie Baker. He knows me." Eddie relaxed a little more.

I studied the gun for the first time. It was a Hi-Power Browning nine millimeter. Single-action. The hammer needed to be cocked in order to fire the gun, if I remembered correctly, and it wasn't. Plus, the safety was on.

"Call again." Without hesitation, I did. Still no answer. Eddie tugged at his T-shirt and he licked his lips again.

A plan popped into my head. "Eddie?" I waited until his eyes rolled around and met mine. "You look thirsty. Can

I get you a soda or something while we wait for Rich to call? The fridge is right there." I pointed. "I promise, I won't do anything. I don't want to get shot." That was the absolute truth.

Eddie's eyes lingered on the fridge as he licked his lips again. "Okay, but go slow."

I moved to the fridge as though I was walking through water, and grabbed Rich's coke with my left hand, leaving my dominant right hand free. As I turned back, I studied Eddie's position on the couch. *I can do this.*

"See?" I held out the bottle as I approached. One more step. Eddie focused on the bottle.

I passed his outstretched hand. The bottle connected with the gun, pushing the barrel away from me. I pivoted, hooking my right arm around Eddie. My momentum threw both of us to the floor—a modified hip throw. We went down in a heap, with me on top. The gun clattered to the middle of the room.

Now that I had the upper hand, I needed to keep it. I grabbed his thumbs and slammed him into the floor again. Eddie swore as he hit.

This is not good. Eddie not only outweighed me, but I knew he could easily out-muscle me if we stayed this way for more than a couple of seconds. He struggled under me.

This would be over too quickly, ending with me dead, an impulsive, stupid corpse.

I immediately switched holds on him, going for a choke hold. At this point, I didn't care if Eddie lived or died; it was him or me. He clawed at my arms around his neck, frantic. I grimaced, tightening my hold. *Come on!* His body arched beneath me in what had to be a last-ditch effort. After what seemed like hours, Eddie collapsed, a deadweight in my arms. I released my hold on him and took several deep breaths in relief. My arms ached.

As I looked at him, lying there motionless, it suddenly hit me. *What have I done?* What if I had killed Eddie? It was certainly possible. My heart seemed to stop. I felt for a pulse on his neck. *Please don't let him be dead.* I had never done anything like this before, never used any of my judo training anywhere except in the dojo. A nice, steady beat thumped under my fingers. *Thank you, God!*

I untwined our bodies, pushing Eddie away from me. As I sat there on the floor next to my assailant, catching my breath, I thought about what a stupid thing I had done. This feeling wasn't anything new—it was déjà vu from my teen years, but I hadn't felt this way in a long time. My life had been so routine since leaving home—until six months ago. When a careless truck driver took my only son

and husband from me. Nothing was the same since. Then I felt the tears welling in my eyes. For these last six months, I had been on a roller coaster of emotions, never knowing when I would cry, get angry, or be depressed.

I narrowed my eyes even as I wiped the tears away. I stepped over Eddie, then kicked the gun under the desk as I headed for the phone to call the police. As I grabbed the receiver, it rang.

"Yeah?"

"`Yeah?' You're supposed to answer it, 'Security Investigations,' Mel. You called?"

Rich. Anger surged in me. Zero to sixty miles per hour in a nanosecond. My anger is legendary. I think it's gotten better as I've gotten older, but most people would probably disagree with me. "Yeah, I called! You leave me all alone here, this guy barges in!" I spluttered in a high-pitched voice.

"What the ...?" Rich interrupted, obviously confused by my tone.

I took a deep breath to calm myself. "`Just a piece of cake', you said. 'Answer some phones, run the computer.'"

He chuckled. "Did a problem crop up?"

"You might say so. A man walked in here and pointed a gun at me. I was just calling the police."

"Are you okay? Is he still there?" Rich sounded frightened.

"I'm fine. His name is Eddie Baker."

"Eddie? What would he—Is he still there?"

"Yeah. He's unconscious on the floor," I said, and took a deep breath to calm myself. "Let me call you back after I call the po—"

"No. Don't call the police, Mel. Eddie's not a bad guy. I want to—Just wait on calling the cops. I'll be there in five minutes or less. Are you sure you're okay?"

I took a deep breath. I trusted Rich. I had to; he was my oldest brother. "Yeah, okay, I'll wait for you. But I have to say, this is one heck of a way to start a new job."

"Ha, ha, Mel. Are you sure he's unconscious so he can't hurt you?"

"Of course. Just get here before he wakes up or I might do permanent damage."

"If it looks like he's waking up, hightail it out of there. Got it?"

"Yeah."

"I'm on my way."

I waited for Rich to show up, staring at Eddie on the floor, my thoughts wandering. Finally, Rich scurried into the room. He took a look at Eddie, then me—then he smiled.

Brothers can be so annoying. "Are you sure that you're okay?"

"I'm fine. Who is he?" I asked. I interlaced my shaking hands to calm them, and leaned my elbows on the desk.

"He's an old informant. I have no idea what he wants. Did he say anything to you?"

"Just that he wanted to talk to you or John. He might have been on something." I shrugged. "His gun is under here." I gingerly scooted the gun out with my foot.

Rich picked it up and unloaded it. He smiled once more at me. "How'd you do it?"

I told him, a little pride sneaking in. Now that Eddie couldn't hurt me, I felt pretty good about my plan.

Rich nodded in approval. "Guess that money wasn't poorly spent like Mom used to think."

I chuckled and relaxed. Mom hadn't wanted me to take judo lessons when I was a kid, or later, when I was married. It just wasn't the ladylike thing to do—but I never did do anything ladylike when I was younger. I was always the tomboy, unlike my older sister Teresa. "I also used the move that you taught me when I was still in high school, you know, that thumb-hold thing."

"I'm impressed that you still remembered it Mel," Rich said. "How long has he been out?"

"About five minutes. He should be coming around anytime now," I said, studying Eddie.

Rich sighed as he sat in the chair in front of Pam's desk. "Eddie used to give me information when I was still on the force. He's an okay guy. Maybe a little shady at times, does a little coke. He works at a manufacturing plant on the other side of town. I wonder why he threatened you with a gun. Why does he even have one?"

Just then, Eddie groaned, then slowly opened his eyes. He looked around and saw the two of us watching him. He slowly lifted his head.

"Hi Eddie. I see you've met Mel. I don't like my little sister being threatened. You've got some explaining to do." Rich's face was stern.

Eddie glanced at me, then back at Rich. "Sorry. Can I get up, Rich?"

"Are you going to behave?"

"Yeah." Eddie looked at me with new respect.

"Get up. Sit on the couch." Rich watched him closely. After Eddie sat, Rich pointed at him. "Talk."

Eddie stared at me for just a second, rubbing his neck, then turned his attention back to Rich. "My brother

Wally was shot dead three days ago. Didja know that?" Rich nodded with a serious look on his face. "Then the next day I get a call from a man sayin' that I need to return 'it.' I hang up on him, 'cause I don't gotta clue what he's talkin' about. That night my car's windows get shot out— with me in it."

Rich frowned. "Did you call the police?"

Eddie nodded. "Nothin' came of it. Then last night I get home from work, and these guys are in my house. When I walk in, they start shootin' at me—I barely got outta there alive. I head to my car and they shoot it up worse than before. So I took off runnin'. Been runnin' all night. Every time I settle down somewhere, they seem to find me. I gotta piece to protect myself. I didn't know where else to go, Rich." Finally he looked at me. "Sorry about the gun. I didn't know you and I guess I'm runnin' on low over here."

I waved that it was okay, even though I was still unnerved by the incident.

Rich was watching him. "What do you want from me?"

"Help."

"How?"

"I need to find out who these guys are and what they're after." Rich looked down at the floor. "Look, I can't really pay you, but I'll do my best to come up with

somethin' and ya know I'm good for future information and stuff." Eddie sounded desperate. "I'll make payments or something. Please! I need help."

Rich looked up at him. "Okay, Eddie. We'll work something out." My brother glanced at me. "Do you want to press charges, Mel?"

I studied Eddie. "Are you going to pull a gun on me again?"

"No, ma'am," Eddie said sheepishly.

"Then no, I won't press charges." I smiled at Eddie. "Sorry about choking you."

"That's okay, Mel. I understand." Eddie smiled back, then looked at Rich.

Rich nodded. "Come on, Eddie. Come into my office and we'll see what can be done."