



Prologue

The acrid taste of ash was gritty on her tongue. Heat trapped her like a burning timber on her chest. The one thing missing was the shriek of the smoke detector. It sat silent above, the unlit light a dull red through the smoke. There would be no alarms, no quick response of fire engines. They would have made sure. And yet, despite that, Megan Riggs felt an almost giddy sense of relief. It was over. They had come and now she tested the plan she had mapped out day by day and week by week. The only thing causing the dense thinking in her chest as she rolled off the bed and onto the floor was Ryan. She had to get to Ryan.

She waved at the smoke that clouded her vision. She focused on movement, letting her mind roll over the realities.

She refused to die. For Ryan's sake, for Mark's sake, she wouldn't give up. Sweat already beading on her lip, she swallowed another mouthful of thick, smoky air and pushed forward. She pulled the gun from the spot between the mattress and the old rotting box spring and checked that it was loaded. Then she towed herself along the floor with her moist hands, wiping them on her side as she went. In the distance, she heard the wail of the Devereaux's baby downstairs and the commanding shouts of Jack directing his family out of the lower level of the house. She couldn't go out the main door. That would make it too easy for them.

She quickly tied a discarded T-shirt from the floor over her face to ease her breathing and moved like a choking lizard. She and Ryan needed to be long gone before the fire department got here.

Flames had begun to eat her blue-and-yellow floral wallpaper on the far side of her bedroom, and she scrambled faster to escape the chunks of fiery plaster falling from the ceiling. Heat singed her leg as a flame caught the pant leg of her sweats. She spun around and pounded the fire out with a shoe from the ground, breathless and shaking.

Pressing forward, her fingers found the backpack she'd prepared for such an occasion under her dresser, and she yanked it toward her, continuing across the room on her stomach. Ryan. She had to get Ryan.

Her hands were black from soot and it was already clinging in her throat and nose. The smoke seemed to sink lower with each motion, and she knew it wouldn't be long before it smothered her. She reached for the doorknob and prayed the heat hadn't warped the door.

It was cooler than she'd expected. The fire must have been started in the living room. Tucked in the small bedroom at the back of the house by the bathroom, Ryan would be safe. He would be okay. Losing Mark had been bad enough. She couldn't bear to lose them both.

Curving her fingers along the underside of the door, she pulled it open. The door stuck and then released as a rush of smoke covered her. She guarded her nose and mouth with the T-shirt, coughing, and pushed herself onward.

Closing the door behind her to slow the spread of fire, she scrambled on her hands and knees down the short hallway. The heat scalded her skin and face.

She couldn't take any risks. She had the training for this sort of situation. It'd been fifteen years since she trained to be an agent--fifteen years since she'd been made to shoot and run and swim and complete the obstacle course, but she had been convinced it would all just come back. And it had.

The smoke's dark clouds were illuminated by the flames, which were beginning to lick the floor beneath the bedroom door behind her. The heat and smoke made it hard to see shapes, so she followed the floor with her palms. The thought of her five-year old son sitting in his bedroom, terrified, made her almost desperate to scream out to him. But she wouldn't. She wouldn't risk letting someone know that she was alive. "I'm coming, baby," she whispered instead.

She longed to hear him whimpering in the distance, awakened from one of his terrible dreams. His room was too far. She had always hated how the two bedrooms were laid out at opposite ends. But of the apartments she'd seen, this had been the best. Her meager salary didn't afford her much in the way of choice. She'd anticipated this moment, needing to get to him in an emergency. She would do it.

She reached Ryan's room and saw him, facedown on the floor.

"No," she said in a sob, pulling him toward her. "Ryan." She turned him over and lifted his head onto her lap and felt for the pulse in his throat. It was there, strong and solid. Thank God. He'd fallen from the bed, maybe passed out from the smoke, but he was alive. Now she needed to get them out of here.

She paused, wondering if her plan would work. She caught herself and forced the doubt from her mind. She'd practiced this from start to finish dozens of times. Only she'd never had Ryan with her.

She moved them toward the small balcony that was supposed to be a monument to the French in old New Orleans. She'd warned Ryan never to go out there. She hadn't been sure it would hold them both. Now she knew it was their only chance.

Taking Ryan with one arm, Megan sucked in a deep breath and slid them along the floor to the window. Her eyes closed against the fierce heat and smoke, she moved cautiously until she felt the wall against her outstretched hand. She dropped her face and sucked in a deep breath and then forced air into Ryan's lungs with CPR.

"Hang in there, buddy. We're going to make it." They had to survive.

She found the handle to the old balcony door and pulled off the two-by-four she'd used to block Ryan from climbing out. On the far side of the balcony was a small ledge. Beyond that, there was a narrow stretch of roof that would get them to the building next door. From there, they could traverse to the building farther down where the car was parked.

The window's glass was cool against her fingertips and she could almost feel the fresh air outside. Using the edge of Ryan's blanket, she cranked down the latch and pushed the old window out. The hinges squeaked but released. She stepped out first, testing the balcony before pulling Ryan out with her.

He was heavy and her biceps ached immediately from the weight of him, but there wasn't time to adjust the load. Instead she pushed the window shut again, and, gripping Ryan with one arm and the ledge with the other hand, she made her way across the narrow landing. She could hear the steady rasp of Ryan's breathing in her ear, and it was all she needed to push her onward. Her body pressed to the wall, she crept until she could feel the old ladder to the roof against her shoulder.

From the direction of a window in the building across the street, she heard the rough tones of male voices. She pressed herself against the building, fighting the tremors in her legs and hands.

She knew the harsh Russian accent. She could picture the faces. She'd been waiting for this for two years. And finally, they were here to finish off the business Oskar Kirov had threatened.

You will pay. You and your son will pay for my son's death. I don't care how long it takes.

Forcing herself forward, she lifted Ryan up over her left shoulder and stepped onto the first rung of the fire escape toward the roof. Down below, she could hear the fire engines arrive. She could now see two men standing in a window across the street, pretending to watch the fire. Megan recognized their light hair and angular faces. They were Oskar Kirov's sons. The building cool on her back, she forced a deep breath. The small balcony outside Ryan's room was hidden from their view, but it wouldn't be long before they realized she wasn't inside her apartment. She only wished the engines had been slower to arrive.

Moving more quickly, she pulled them up the ladder, rung by rung. Her hands were soot-covered and slipped against the old iron. Her arm and back muscles burned, and she tucked her elbow under one of the rungs to leverage her back strength and continue upward. She heard the ladder make a deep moaning sound beneath her and she blinked hard, praying it would hold. It moaned again and she pulled them up another rung. She looked up. Two more. Ryan coughed and she felt his head lift off her shoulder. "Mom?"

Afraid he would look down and yell, Megan hurried to push herself off the last step and sprang for the edge of the roof. She laid Ryan down on the gravel-covered surface of the roof.

His face was covered with soot, but she kissed his cheek and whispered to him, "Come on, buddy."

Ryan opened his eyes and coughed again and Megan helped him sit up. "Are they here to get us, Mom?"

As he opened his mouth to talk, Megan pulled him close and hugged him. "We're going to be fine."

He looked around and rubbed his eyes. "They found us, didn't they?"

She nodded. "We can't talk now, baby. We need to change our clothes and get out of here. Remember the plan we talked about?"

Ryan looked around the roof. "Are they going to kill us like Daddy?"

She shook her head and touched his hair, his beautiful blondish brown hair. "No way, baby. Not us. But we have to be quiet now. Okay?"

The resignation in his face made Megan want to cry. "Okay, Ryan," she said, pulling a change of clothes from her pack. "Put these on."

Megan took jeans from the backpack for herself and lay on her back, pulling off her sweatpants and replacing them with jeans. She lifted her dirty shirt over her head and dropped it on the roof, pulling on a plain gray sweatshirt and tucking the gun into her pants. She added a Gap ball cap and turned to help Ryan. He was already dressed. He was too grown-up for

five. She tied his shoelaces and looked at his dirty face. Using the edge of her sleeve, she cleaned him up as much as possible.

Then, stuffing their nightclothes back in the bag, she took his hand and pulled him across the roof.

She had money tucked away in a safe-deposit box at a bank thirty miles outside of town under a new name, a name that had been chosen for her years before by Mark, just in case. Once she had that, they were leaving Louisiana. The FBI had hidden Ryan and her, given them new names, a new home. James, they'd called Ryan. And she'd been Mary. Mary and James Hall. Friends she'd trained with, worked with, had sworn they'd be safe. Three months had passed before she'd started to feel Kirov--watching her, waiting.

Paranoid, she'd told herself. Delusional. Tired and worn down from the hours of secretarial work at Tulane University, of trying to help her then three-year-old son understand why he couldn't use his real name, why his daddy didn't come home, why he would never come home again.

At the edge of the first building, she lifted Ryan across the two-foot gap. "Don't look down," she told him. With her holding on, he reached the other side and pulled himself over without ever looking down. She jumped across and quickly scanned the roof for assailants. Finding none, she rushed onward, Ryan in tow.

"Good job, baby. You're doing great."

Ryan looked behind them again and kept moving.

Just then she heard the distant sounds of breaking glass and curses in the familiar language. She thought the sounds came from the balcony of her apartment.

Ryan was shaking, but she put an iron fist to her own fear. "It's okay," she whispered, pushing him ahead. She led them to the door at the center of the third roof, tucking Ryan to her side to guard him against any other attacks. Pulling out her lock-picking tools, she put them in the lock of the door to the roof access and worked them around as she'd done fifty times before in preparation for this night. The lock clicked open with ease. Pulling the door open, she helped Ryan through and locked the door from the inside.

On the ground floor, she entered the main corridor, looking in both directions before stepping out and opening the door to the basement garage. She took the last flight of stairs, knowing the most difficult part started now.

Inside the garage, she found the 1988 Toyota Corolla that she'd bought for a thousand dollars and kept unregistered in this garage. She

never drove it except to let the engine run so it wouldn't be dead when they needed it. She ran her hand along the bumper until she felt the small magnetic box that held the key. She opened the back door first and squeezed Ryan's hand. "Remember how we practiced?"

"Are they coming after us, Mommy? The men who killed Daddy?"

Megan blinked. "No, baby. We're going to be fine. You trust me?"

Ryan nodded silently and curled into a ball in the car, pulling the blanket from the floor over himself.

Megan smiled. "Perfect. We're almost done."

From under the front seat, she pulled out a small bag and dumped the contents on the seat beside her. She put on the gray wig and Irish golf hat and pressed the mustache and beard against her mouth as she had in each practice. Then, making sure her own hair was hidden under the wig, she started the engine.

"You okay back there, buddy?"

"Yeah," came the muffled reply. "Good luck, Mommy."

Megan blinked hard. "Here we go. I'll let you know when the coast is clear."

Ryan didn't respond. For some kids, this would have been a fun game. For Ryan, fear had become his existence. He knew this was how he'd lost his father. Enough of that. The FBI had failed her, but Megan would create her own witness protection program. Ryan would never have to go through anything like this again. She would make sure of it.