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SANDRA
BROWN

A NOVEL

OUT OF
NOWHERE

OUT OF NOWHERE

**SANDRA
BROWN**



GRAND
CENTRAL

NEW YORK BOSTON

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Author's Note



Out of Nowhere isn't a story about death. It's a story about survival.

The destinies of two strangers collide in an instant of unthinkable tragedy. If not for that unpredictable, inexplicable occurrence, it's unlikely that Elle and Calder ever would have met. But because of a caprice of physics, their fates became intertwined.

I didn't particularly want to write a story that begins with a mass shooting. In fact, it's a subject I would ordinarily avoid. I react, as I'm sure you do—as we *all* do—to hearing of another shooting with dismay, repugnance, and abject sadness. Caught in a situation of such incomprehensible ruthlessness, I can't even imagine the terror one experiences.

But, as storytellers are wont to do, I did. Imagined, that is.

I tried to imagine how one copes after surviving such a horrifying, traumatic event. How does one pick up where one's life left off and attempt to rebuild it, reshape it into some form of normalcy when pieces of it are now fractured or missing?

I confess that even as I was writing this story, I knew my words were inadequate to describe the rending of heart and spirit that Elle and Calder were suffering.

To anyone reading it who has come even close to an experience such as that of my characters, I apologize for presuming that I know what it's like. I don't. But I did my best, with as much authenticity and empathy as I could, to portray the struggle of staying afloat in the wake of a catastrophe.

In news reports, “another mass shooting” has become such a familiar refrain that it's far too easy to tune it out, to forget the name of that school, that town, that place of worship, that shopping mall or entertainment venue

or office building where lives were lost and others shattered. We as a society, as individual human beings, must never become inured.

So, back to what motivated me to write this story? I suppose it was to honor the casualties. I rank the survivors among them.

Sandra Brown

Prologue



For the record...

In the unlikely event they catch me, it will be assumed that I am mad.

That will be correct, but only if people are using the word *mad* as a synonym for angry.

To do such a thing as what I'm planning, one doesn't have to be mentally unstable. I'm quite sane. I'm rational. I don't appear or act like a crazed individual, because I'm not.

Irate is what I am.

Fury roils inside me. It has for a while now. Others with a purpose similar to mine make the stupidest blunder possible by announcing to the world what they intend to do before they do it. They air their grievances on social media. They entrust so-called friends with their most morbid thoughts. They commit their maniacal fantasies to paper, drawing ghastly depictions of death and destruction. They fill notebooks with pages of scribbled nonsense that, afterward, psychiatrists and FBI profilers try to decipher in order to pinpoint a motive for their deed, which is usually described as "senseless."

But what's senseless is the analyzing. It's a waste of time and tax revenue. The individual who committed the act wasn't necessarily insane, or afflicted with a personality-altering brain tumor, or suffering a rare chemical imbalance, or cursed from conception with a domineering id.

No. Chances are he was simply pissed off.

That's me. I'm pissed off but good. And I'm going to vent my anger in a way that will be remembered and lamented. But I'm not going to make the mistake of advertising it first. Those other morons who don't exercise

patience get captured, or annihilated by SWAT team bullets, or take their own lives.

I have no intention of any of that happening to me. I'm confident that I'll get away with it.

I'll use this gun. It's untraceable. I made sure of that. It's never been used in the commission of a crime. It's portable and easily concealed but no less deadly than an AR-15 rifle.

See? I've thought this through.

There's only one catch, a single, slightly worrisome hitch: I don't know when or where my plan will be implemented. Out of necessity, I'll have to go with the situation, whatever it is, when it presents itself.

But I'm no fool. If the setting doesn't feel right, or there's a large police presence, or any other unfavorable factor, I'll know to scrub the assault and save it for another day.

I've been disappointed by several postponements. The circumstances would seem at first to be ideal, and I would think, *This is it!* Then something would happen that would prevent me from acting. Once it was a thunderstorm. Another time, where otherwise the conditions were ideal, an old man suffered a stroke. Wouldn't you know it? Security guards and EMTs swarmed. I would have been a fool to proceed.

These delays are frustrating and infuriating and leave a bitter taste in my mouth.

But while being unable to choose my time and place is a drawback, immediacy could work to my advantage. I won't give myself away by a slip of the tongue, no accidental tip-off that would alert someone to my intentions or arouse curiosity.

Another benefit to acting in the moment is that when the opportunity does present itself and I realize that all systems are go, I won't have time to get nervous and overthink it. I'll have to act purposefully and without hesitation.

Which is why I stay constantly prepared. I'm vigilant. At the drop of a hat, I'll be ready. When the time is right, I'll know it. And I'll do it.

And the best part? No one will suspect me.

Chapter 1



You claimed to be the best, and, by damn, you are.” Beaming a smile, the CEO of John Zimmerman Industries handed over a bank receipt. “As of an hour ago, your fee plus the bonuses you chalked up were deposited into your account.”

“Thank you.” Calder Hudson checked the receipt for accuracy. The account number was correct, and the amount in front of the decimal point was on the rosy side of six figures.

“Everything seems to be in order.” Calder folded the receipt and slid it into the breast pocket of his bespoke suit coat, smiling at the group of upper-management personnel clustered around him. “It’s been my pleasure, ladies and gentlemen. May I use JZI as a reference?”

The CEO replied on behalf of those assembled. “Of course, of course. We’ll provide a glowing review.”

Calder raised an eyebrow. “With an emphasis on discretion.”

There was a ripple of chuckles.

“Goes without saying,” said the CEO.

Calder nodded with satisfaction, thanked them as a group, then, with the bearing of a cleric doling out blessings, went around the circle shaking hands with each. He wished them a good evening, picked up his briefcase, and left the conference room.

As he made his way to the elevator, he kept his stride and carriage deceptively casual, but inside his head, it was *Mardi Gras, baby!* and he was grand marshal of the parade.

It was a long ride down from the top floor of the steel and glass Dallas skyscraper to the subterranean parking garage, but Calder’s blood was still

fizzing with self-congratulations as he stepped off the elevator and gave himself a fist pump. His whoop echoed through the near-empty concrete cavern.

As prearranged, his Jaguar had been left in a first-row, VIP parking slot. For three months and change, he'd been tooling around in a rental car and was ever so glad to have his sleek sports model back.

He kissed his fingertips, then tapped them against the roof of the car. "Hello, sweetheart. Miss me?" He shrugged out of his coat and set it and his briefcase in the passenger seat, then started the motor, thrilling to the aggressive growl he'd sorely missed.

He backed out, and, as he took the sharp curves on his climb up the parking levels to the exit, his tires screeched menacingly. "Badass at the wheel," he whispered through a smug grin as he shot out of the garage and onto the city street.

It was after business hours; rush-hour traffic had abated. But no other motorist would have dared to get in his way. Not today. He blew through yellow lights at several downtown intersections before taking a ramp onto the freeway.

He slid on his sunglasses against the blood orange-red streaks painted across the sky by the setting sun, then accessed his phone from the steering wheel.

Shauna answered on the second ring and said, "Helloooo there, handsome."

"Helloooo, beautiful."

"How'd it go?"

"Well, can't say the same for some, but *I* had a great day."

"I can hear it in your voice. It's oozing conceit."

"I'm trying my best to suppress it, but, you know..."

"Yes, I do know. I've heard it before, and it's insufferable."

He grinned. "You suffer it, though, don't you?"

"Don't be smug. Where are you?"

"Headed home. What about you?"

"Home? You're supposed to be on your way here."

Calder's elation dimmed several watts as he now remembered that Shauna had to work this evening. Damned if he could remember what she had scheduled. "You're still at the studio?"

“No, on location at the fair. I’m killing time in the van while the crew sets up for the interview.” She huffed with exasperation. “You forgot, didn’t you? Honestly, Calder. You said you’d come.”

A fair. Right. “I said I would think about it.” He hadn’t had to think about it. He’d known when he’d told her he would that he wouldn’t. He wasn’t going to any county fair. “How long will you be?”

“I’m doing the interview an hour before the concert starts. I want to capture some of his backstage energy before his performance. I don’t have to stay for the entire thing, but I’ll be here for a while yet.”

None of what she’d said sat well with him. “I just completed my biggest contract. I’m over a hundred grand richer, and the bigwigs were practically kissing me over the privilege of paying me. I’m ready to get the party started.”

“We’ll party. It’ll just start a few hours later.”

A few *hours*?

She was saying, “... because at the last minute, the producer squeezed the interview into tonight’s ten o’clock newscast.”

“Who’s that important? Is the president in town?”

“Better. Bryce Conrad.”

“Who’s that?”

“Only the brightest rising star in country music,” she said, not even trying to conceal her excitement.

“Never heard of him.”

“You have so! I told you that he’s generally camera shy but that he’d granted *me* an interview. You and I talked about it for ten minutes.” A pause, then, “But I knew you weren’t paying attention.”

“Give me a break, okay? I’ve been focused on work. This was a high-stakes week for me.”

“For me, too, Calder,” she snapped. “If you’d been listening, you’d know that my getting a one-on-one with Bryce Conrad was a coup. A big one. *Entertainment Tonight* called this afternoon. They’re doing a feature on him over the weekend and may add some sound bites from my interview to it. So, you’re not the only one who had a great day, okay? By the way, thank you for asking.”

If they continued in this vein, the high he was on would crash and burn. He really didn’t want to lose the good buzz he had going to a quarrel over

some Johnny-come-lately country singer.

He'd play nice. "Look, I'm sorry. I should have paid closer attention. That's great about *ET*."

Mollified, she said, "Even if they don't air any of this interview, I'm at least on their radar."

"All the more reason for us to celebrate tonight. What's your ETA at home? I'll have the champagne chilled."

"Won't you please come here as planned?"

"To that fair?" He snorted. "Shauna, get serious."

"It's a bit of a drive, but—"

"It's practically in freakin' Oklahoma."

"It's forty-five minutes if you use the express lanes. Please. It'll be fun."

"Compared to what? A colonoscopy? Besides, you'll be working, which will leave me a hanger-on, standing around and playing pocket pool."

"By the time you get here, I'll probably be finished with the interview. Come on. It's a beautiful evening."

"Shauna—"

"I'll leave a pass for you at the north gate. There's reserved parking there, too. Text when you get here, and I'll tell you where to find me. We'll stay through a few songs and then leave. I promise."

"I can't think of anything I feel less like doing tonight than going to a county fair. Good luck with the interview. I'll see you at home. Bye."

Calder clicked off. Anger and resentment had deflated his buoyant mood. He punched up the volume of his car radio, then, irritated by the song selection, switched it off altogether.

Having felt flush with success, he'd anticipated Shauna's hot body and cold champagne to be waiting for him between silk sheets when he got home. A crowded, gritty fairground was as far removed from that fantasy as you could get. He had every right to be pissed.

But after covering a mile or two on the freeway, he eased off the accelerator and grudgingly acknowledged that it was his fault he'd forgotten her commitment tonight. Obviously getting this interview was important to the furtherance of her career, and she was all about that escalation.

When she did get home, she would be sulky if not silent. He'd get the deep-freeze treatment. Forget about sex. Out of the question.

On the other hand, what if he showed up at the fairground unexpectedly

and surprised her? He would say, *I acted like an ass. I'm sorry.* Which he wouldn't mean in the depths of his soul, but the apology would, in all probability, create a thaw sufficient to get him laid tonight, which was a priority.

All things considered...

He whipped in front of an eighteen-wheeler, whose driver blasted him with his horn. Calder gave him the finger, gunned the Jag, and aimed it toward the exit.



“Charlie, Charlie, look here. Look at Mommy.”

Using her cell phone camera, Elle managed to capture a slobbery, toothy grin as her son glided past her on the mini carousel. On the next revolution, she got several seconds of video of him waving to her, coached to do so by her friend Glenda, who had graciously offered to take a turn on the ride since this was Charlie's fifth time.

When the carousel slowed to a stop, Glenda managed to dismount while maintaining her hold on the squirming two-year-old, who was intent on remaining astride the painted pony. She carried him over to Elle, who relieved her of him.

“Thanks for doing that,” Elle said. “If I'd gone one more round, I think I would have barfed.”

Glenda laughed. “Over the spinning or the music?”

“Right. Days from now, I'll still have an earworm of calliope jingles.”

“Me too, but I wouldn't have missed going for a ride with my favorite cowboy.” Glenda patted Charlie on the cheek. It was sticky with cotton candy residue, but she laughed off Elle's apology. “No matter, but I do need to take off. One of the gals texted. They're here, waiting for me in the beer garden with a pitcher of frozen margaritas that they swear is calling my name.”

“Go,” Elle said as she wrestled Charlie into his stroller. He'd bowed his back and wasn't cooperating. “I didn't count on staying this long, but I think I'm on borrowed time. I feel an exhausted-child meltdown coming on.”

She fished Bun, Charlie's flop-eared rabbit, from the compartment on the back of the stroller and passed it down to him. He tucked the stuffed animal under his arm, momentarily pacified.

Frowning, Glenda said, "I wish you could join us girls and stay for the concert."

"Ah, well, me too. But this was a spontaneous excursion. Babysitters are hard to come by on short notice."

That morning, after catching up on laundry and light housekeeping, she'd settled into her home office to work while simultaneously keeping Charlie occupied with toys, books, and his library of *Paw Patrol* videos.

But as the afternoon wore on, he'd turned whiny, demanding her attention, which he'd deserved for being cooped up all day. So, although she'd been on a creative roll, she'd shut down her computer, lifted her son into her lap, and between pecking kisses onto his face asked if he would like to call Glenda. "This is the last day of the fair. Let's see if she wants to go."

Even though he'd only understood "Glenda" and "go," Elle hadn't had to ask twice.

Glenda had welcomed the chance to leave her real estate agency early. "This works out great. A group of friends from my Pilates class is having a girls' night out. We're going to the concert this evening. I'll join you and Charlie, then hook up with them later."

They'd set a time and place to meet just inside the north gate. Glenda, president and CEO of Foster Real Estate, had arrived looking like a model for an upscale western clothing store, wearing a long denim skirt, cowboy boots studded with silver, a fringed leather jacket, and ropes of turquoise beads.

"You make me feel underdressed," Elle had remarked with a self-deprecating smile. "And very mom-ish."

Glenda had eyed her up and down. "If you'd wear one size jeans smaller, your ass would be smokin'."

"Hardly."

"I would trade my butt for yours any day of the week. And don't get me started on your hair. It's just not fair. However, the T-shirt needs an upgrade, and you could use some spangle."

Elle laughed. "Spangle so suits my lifestyle."

For the next two hours, the friends had taken turns maneuvering Charlie's stroller through the crowd. They'd visited the petting zoo, the Christmas market, and various exhibits, leaving the midway for last just as the sun went down and the sky turned a deep violet.

Flashing colored lights on the rides had begun to come on, dazzling Charlie. He and Elle had ridden several rides in the kiddie area while Glenda took snapshots on her phone to text to Elle later. Hands down, the carousel had been his favorite ride. It was a good note to end on.

Now, as Elle hugged her friend goodbye, Glenda said, "I've spotted lots of cute guys around. Put yourself out there, Elle."

"I already have a cute guy," she said as she bent down and ruffled Charlie's dark curls.

"There's no disputing that," Glenda said. "He is a darlin'. Be careful going home. Love you."

"Call me tomorrow and tell me about the concert."

"Will do." Glenda blew them a kiss as she began weaving through the crowd in the general direction of the beer garden.

Elle experienced a twinge of jealousy over her friend's independence and having a Friday night out. But three years ago she'd made a choice, and she hadn't had a moment's regret over it.

When she looked down at Charlie, who was yawning hugely, her heart swelled with pure joy. She bent down and nuzzled his neck. "Mommy loves you bunches and bunches. Ready to go home?"

He kicked against the footrest of his stroller. "Go."

"I'm afraid it'll be slow going." She turned the stroller around as deftly as she could without bumping into anyone.

The crowd grew thicker as they neared the north gate through which they'd entered. Though there were separate turnstiles for entering and exiting, where those who were coming in and those leaving converged, they formed two throngs moving in opposition. Elle and Charlie were swimming upstream of those entering, and eventually their progress was limited to gaining only inches at a time.

"Looks like they're gonna have a good crowd tonight."

The speaker was a gentleman who was shuffling along beside her. He had a round and ruddy face. A horseshoe of gray hair delineated his wide, shiny bald spot. Bridging his nose was a pair of wire-rimmed eyeglasses,

the lenses of which reflected the spinning Ferris wheel. At a time when he could have been cranky and complaining, he'd spoken with good humor.

Elle smiled at him. "Bryce Conrad is a big draw."

"Yeah." He winked at her. "I think we're escaping just in time."

She returned his mischievous smile, but her attention was returned to Charlie, who was trying to climb out of his stroller.

"No, Charlie. No, you can't get out."

He resisted her attempts to push him back down into the seat and was having no part of her explanation as to why he had to remain confined. Eventually, she won the battle and straightened up, looking with hope toward the exit and gauging how much longer she could hold out before Charlie had a full-blown tantrum.

"Excuse me."

The irritated mumble came from Elle's other side as someone going in the opposite direction bumped into her. She turned to respond, but he had already moved past. He stood out from everyone else because he was dressed in slacks and a dress shirt. An executive sort, she thought.

That was Elle's last thought before the bang.

It was abrupt and loud.

At first, she thought it was a sound effect coming from one of the thrill rides. When it was repeated, she thought perhaps it was fireworks going off. But they weren't scheduled to start until after the concert.

Confused, she turned to the older man with whom she'd been talking. His hand was at his throat. Blood was spouting from between his fingers. A geyser of it splashed onto Elle.

He staggered, falling hard against her and causing her to reel backward. She caught the push bar of the stroller with her left hand and put out her right to try to break her fall. But on impact with the blacktop, her elbow gave way. Her landing was so jarring, she bit her tongue and tasted blood. She lost her left-handed grip on the stroller.

The older man's momentum caused him to fall against the stroller and propel it forward. It began to roll, knocking into people who were now madly scattering.

Someone shouted, "Shooter, shooter."

It took only a split second for Elle to register that the unthinkable was actually happening. "*Charlie!*"

She lunged forward, reaching out in a frantic effort to get a handhold on any part of the stroller, but it was already beyond her reach and rolling farther away from her. Between her and it was the older man, who had fallen facedown and was now still, a pool of blood spreading beneath him.

In a remote area of her mind that was still functioning, Elle realized that he was dead. But without thinking, without an instant of hesitancy, she crawled over his prone form, her hands and sneakers slipping on his blood. She couldn't gain purchase. Something was wrong with her right arm.

The stroller was being buffeted by the stampede of terrified people. The distance between it and Elle was widening, and she couldn't get to it, to Charlie, to her baby.

Directly in front of her, a man fell, his leg shot out from under him. He bellowed in pain as he went down. Her screams couldn't be differentiated from those of others who were equally panicked and mortally afraid. But she could distinguish those of her child. He was wailing.

"Charlie, I'm coming! Mommy's coming! Char-lie!"

A fleeing man wearing a ball cap ran into the stroller, striking the side of it with his knees.

Elle watched in helpless terror as the stroller tipped onto two wheels.

The executive type who'd bumped into her lurched into Elle's peripheral vision, reached out for the stroller, and managed to get a grasp on the bar.

But inertia sent the carriage onto its side and took the man down with it.

He fell atop it.

Elle screamed hysterically.

She heard the raw, primal screams of others. The ground vibrated with the tramping of hundreds of feet.

For Elle Portman, pandemonium turned into a horror movie played out in slow motion.

Which was why she was cursed afterward with remembering everything with such stark and brutal clarity.