



Legends: Jackson

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Category: Romance

Description: REAGAN Reagan Bell lives in a world of mystery and murder, all woven in her imagination. Her career as a crime novelist is pushing her toward success, but her life is derailed with the news her father is fighting for his life. Reagan is forced into the world of English Barlowe and quickly learns her father has secrets that belong more in fiction than the real world. His career as the former CIA operative Legend has danger lurking around every corner, threatening those he holds dear, including Reagan and the group of adopted boys she never knew existed.

JACKSON Jackson Moore leads the new generation of Legends — boys rescued from dangerous circumstances and raised to become vigilantes. Their skills come in handy when helping those in need. Now that danger has struck close to home, they'll face their toughest case yet, finding the ones responsible for almost killing the man who raised them. But with English in a coma, Jackson is faced with more questions than answers — including why his hero would keep his daughter a secret and why would English give his power of attorney to the daughter who disowned him instead of the boys who carried on his legacy.

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Chapter One

Last call. It was both the favorite and the worst part of English Barlowe's day.

When the bar was full of customers, when the conversations and music overlapped into a loud, indistinguishable din, English found peace. Surrounded by people, busy with filling drink and food orders, keeping any troublemakers under control, he could forget who he was and the demons that chased him. In those moments, he was only a bar owner. Nothing more, nothing less.

Tonight, most of his regulars had cleared out already. Those lagging behind were the ones not wanting to call it a night. They were looking to get drunk or laid or both, and English didn't have the energy to kick them out.

The task was taken out of his hands when his son came through the swinging door leading from the kitchen.

"Last call, folks. Settle your tabs, call your Ubers and get the hell out."

Jackson Moore — or Jacky as English always called him — was many things. Subtle wasn't one of them. He could get away with his gruff attitude thanks to his sizeable build that was all bulk and muscle and height. At the Fire Bar and Grille, Jackson's word was law, and everyone knew better than to resist.

Jackson's brother, Easton Hargrove, chuckled as he dried the newly washed shot glasses and returned them to their spot behind the bar. "Hey, Jackson, why don't you chase everyone out with a baseball bat? It would probably be nicer than yelling at

them to go home.”

No one but Easton laughed at his joke, but he probably didn't expect anything from this slim crowd. A couple of the women presented him with flirtatious smiles as they stumbled out the door on the arm of the first guy willing to take them home or to a motel for the night. Putting Easton behind the bar had been one of the best decisions English ever made. The boy — as English always thought of his sons no matter how old they were — was full of charm. He knew what to say, when to say it, and who to say it to, and the gift served him well in coaxing customers to happily spend more money. He drew women to the bar like a magnet, and the women brought the men. It made for a thriving business, even if English had to make sure Easton didn't get carried away.

Polar opposites. That described Jackson and Easton as well as anything could, but it was their close bond which made them the perfect team to run the bar. He raised his sons to respect and be there for each other. It didn't matter they weren't related by blood. They were a family now.

And they were English's salvation.

Jackson only glared at Easton's teasing as he shuffled the last of the customers out the door. It was like this most evenings. English usually ignored their ball-busting, but tonight, he was ready for them to go home. The urge to be alone pulled at him like a strong riptide he was too tired to resist.

When the door slammed closed after the last customer, Jackson secured the lock and joined Easton in the clean-up. The ritual gave them time to wind down from the hectic night at the bar. English wanted to help, so the job would be done faster. But fatigue weighed on him, and he settled on a bar stool to watch his sons work. Easton shut off the music, leaving them in deafening silence. Jackson grabbed a broom from the supply closet to pull across the floor, the swish of the bristles grating on English's

nerves.

He was unsettled. Restless. He was familiar with the feeling and wished he could ignore it. It always meant trouble, and he was getting too old to deal with that kind of trouble. But he couldn't let it go, not when it come mean problems for his boys.

"Anyone hear from Ben?" He hoped the question about another chosen son sounded like an afterthought. The last thing he wanted to do was alert the boys to his melancholy. They would refuse to go home, and he couldn't have that. Not tonight.

"He called. About an hour ago." Jackson never paused in his work, so he didn't notice the breath of relief English released.

"All good?"

"He'll be back tomorrow. He has it all taken care of."

English nodded. He had no doubts that Ben had taken care of his job. His boys were solid, highly capable, and dependable. It wasn't their work that had him on edge, not that he could put a finger on what did cause his unease. But his concern centered on his boys' well-being, and it fueled his foreboding.

Having accounted for three of his four boys, he needed a reason to ask after Luke, who hadn't made an appearance at the bar tonight. He didn't have a habit of showing up every night, but English had hoped to see him to know he was okay. He couldn't settle his unease until he did.

"Luke just texted. His date was a bust. He wants to know if we want to hang." Easton called across the bar to Jackson, answering the question English didn't know how to ask.

Jackson nodded. "I'm game if you are."

"Sounds good to me," Easton readily agreed.

"You boys go ahead and get out of here. Clean-up can wait until tomorrow." English stood and rounded the bar to try and push Easton out the door. "It's been a long evening. Go meet up with Luke."

"We're almost done here." Jackson kept sweeping as if English hadn't spoken.

"Yeah, I still have to take the trash to the dumpster." Easton stepped toward the kitchen as if to do the task, but English blocked his path.

"I'm giving you guys a break. Take advantage of it. Who knows when I'll be in a mood to do it again?"

His bark must have had some bite because his sons exchanged a look as if he wasn't there to see it. Easton settled his gaze on English, his keen eyes assessing.

"You okay, Gish?"

The shortened version of his name had been coined by Ben when he came to stay with English and the other boys as a six-year-old with a speech impediment. Ben couldn't say English, so he'd developed the nickname which was soon picked up by the others. Though his boys were adults, they still called him Gish and remained the only ones to do so.

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“I’m tired.” English rarely admitted to any weakness, but he needed an explanation for wanting his boys gone which wouldn’t spark more questions. He had overheard them a couple of days ago discussing how much longer his age would allow him to continue with his daily grind, so playing the old man card served his purpose for now, even if it was far from the truth.

Jackson only took a moment to consider his mentor’s offer. “Yeah, it’s been a long day. We could all use a restful night. I’ll come in earlier tomorrow to finish the clean-up. East, take out the garbage, and then we’ll head out.”

Jackson was the oldest of English’s boys by a year, and he’d been the first one to come to stay with English. By default, he was the one the others looked to for direction. He wore the role of older brother well, and though Easton seemed reluctant to leave, he followed Jackson’s direction.

“I’ll get the trash. You two lock up as you head out,” English told Easton as Jackson returned his broom to the storage closet.

English disappeared into the kitchen before his boys changed their minds. He waited until he heard them switch off the lights and secure the front door behind them. In the quiet of the bar, English felt every day of his sixty-four years.

Maybe his boys were right in assuming he was too old to keep up with the life he’d built for himself. He could step down from the business. His sons were more than capable of running the show, but he didn’t know what else he would do. Nothing appealed to him, and he never wanted to stop feeling useful.

Once his boys started taking over his “errands,” he had taken a step back from that part of his life, focusing more on his other business interests. They helped him with those as well. The Fire Bar and Grille, the Barlowe Auto Shop and the Fire Creek Hardware provided legitimate cover to shield his boys. Their work outside those businesses wasn’t well-publicized, which is the way he preferred it. The less people who knew the truth about them, the better. Instead, their work lived within tall tales and legends which were often exaggerated so far from reality, no one believed them.

He’d never wanted to expose his family to his former life. He’d taken great pains to keep it separate from those he cared about. He could still remember the day the boys approached him about his past. The four of them were solemn and a little afraid. He could see it in their eyes, and it gutted him. So when they asked about his disappearances, his mysterious meetings, and his ability to take down drunks in the bar without breaking a sweat, he couldn’t lie to them.

The town considered him some type of saint, taking in his boys when they had no one else. English had never qualified for sainthood a day in his life. Taking in the boys had been his cover story for a life no one knew about, not even the government to which he once dedicated his life.

Jackson had been the first to cross his doorstep at the age of thirteen. Other than his name, Jackson had refused to tell English anything about himself. But English had seen the faded bruises on the teenager’s arms, the scars of healing cigarette burns, and the skittishness often possessed by abuse victims. He’d made discreet inquiries while allowing Jackson to stay at his apartment above the bar. English had tracked down Jackson’s parents, both meth addicts who treated their son like a slave. English couldn’t blame Jackson for hitting the road as soon as he could. His parents didn’t report him missing. No one came looking for him.

His other boys had similar stories. Easton ran away from so many foster homes, he was called Rabbit by the Department of Human Resources. No matter how many

placements they made for him, he took off at the first opportunity. Some of the homes weren't pleasant, but others were fine. In the boy's experience, people left, and Easton wanted to be the one doing the leaving instead of being the one left behind. He came to English at sixteen looking for work, and this time, he stuck around.

Jackson brought Luke to him when Jackson was seventeen and Luke was sixteen. Luke's father had killed his mother before turning the gun on himself. Luke had no other family, and Jackson talked English into taking the boy, so he didn't get shuffled through the system the way Easton had. English blamed Luke for his gray hair and aching bones. The boy had caused more trouble than he was worth, but English couldn't turn him away.

When Ben crossed his path, English swore there would be no more. But the child had been dropped off at the bar after closing. English hadn't known he was there until he found Ben curled up on the ground in front of the door the next morning. Dirty and malnourished, his speech impediment making him choose to be silent to avoid others' ridicule, Ben had been afraid of English and the other boys. He kept to himself and did his best not to draw attention.

No one knew Ben's family or where the boy came from. The entire town considered Ben one of English's boys long before English acknowledged it. It had taken years before Ben shared his story of a father who left him before he was born and a mother who prostituted herself while her young son was in the apartment. His mother eventually overdosed on heroin, leaving Ben an orphan. A neighbor heard Ben crying and, knowing English took in wayward boys, dropped Ben off at the bar and left.

English had tracked down the neighbor and considered confronting him for leaving the child out in the elements all night because he didn't want to get involved. English had decided to leave the coward alone. What was done was done.

English shook himself out of his trip down memory lane. Closing the bag of kitchen

trash, English shoved open the back door and stepped out into the alley. The dumpster was a few short steps away, and though the alley was dark, he navigated the path without a stumble. He tossed the bag inside, ignoring the rancid smell wafting from the dumpster, and turned.

English squinted, certain the shadows played tricks on his tired eyes. No, there was a figure standing by the door he'd just exited. The size of the person resembled Luke's form, but he knew his son would have spoken to keep him from being alarmed. This person was a stranger, and considering the late hour, the stranger's intent was probably more criminal than friendly.

"The safe is time locked. It won't open for anyone until the morning. I can't give you money, but I have food and booze. Take what you want and get the hell out of here." English kept his tone neutral. The last thing he wanted was to spark a confrontation or to appear afraid.

"I'm not here to rob you."

The figure stepped closer to him. He didn't recognize the deep voice and couldn't see any features to identify the man.

"So what do you need, friend?"

The stranger's voice was cool enough to freeze the autumn air around them. "We're not friends. I'm here for payback. Legend."

The switch flipped. In less than a second, English slipped back to the man he once was. He straightened his shoulders, drew himself up to his full height, and pulled strength from the adrenaline pumping through his veins. His hands flexed, anticipating the fight which was to come.

“Am I supposed to know what debt you think I owe you?” English’s question was more of a challenge.

“It doesn’t matter as long as you pay with your life.”

“If you plan to make that happen, I hope you brought an army with you.”

As if English’s words opened a magic portal, three more figures stepped from the shadows. They were of varying heights and builds, but one thing was certain — English was screwed. In Fire Creek, Alabama, activity slowed down when the bar closed, so there was no one to pass by and notice him being cornered in the alley. His sons were long gone and had no reason to return. It was just him and the strangers.

His personal best was fighting off five at once. He’d been younger then. Though he was still fit and a fierce fighter, his age had taken a toll on his agility. All day he’d been worried for his boys when his foreboding was a warning for himself.

English widened his stance and braced himself for the fight. “You’re making a mistake, friend.”

“You made the mistake, Legend.”

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The men circled him, and English started ticking off their flaws in his head. The one who moved behind him had a slight limp, likely a weak knee. The one who flanked his left was light on his feet, but he was at a height disadvantage compared to English. He could use that. The one who flanked his right was bulkier with a heavier step, and English could use it against him. Then there was the instigator, the man he didn't know but had obviously crossed paths with during his career. For the man to hold such a deep-seated vengeance, he should have been someone English remembered. He couldn't recall the details of all of his jobs, but he remembered the ones who counted — the truly vile criminals who deserved everything English dished out.

The man behind him made the first move. English's senses alerted him to the attack. He spun out of the way, his arm whipping up to catch the assailant in the gut and his boot ramming down on the man's knee. The man dropped as the one to English's left rushed forward, the glint of a knife catching the pale moonlight. English sidestepped to use the guy on the ground as a shield as the other sliced the knife through the air, catching his buddy in the side. Before English could disarm him, the other to his right joined the party. The instigator stood by and watched the foray. English gave as good as he got, and for a moment, he thought he might actually come out the victor.

Then the leader took his shot, a kick which connected to the groin and forced him to his knees. The stranger gripped his hair and jerked his head back, making English's teeth rattle. Then came the second kick to his midsection by one of the others. He fell to the ground, and another kicked his temple. Then the last one to his ribs, snapping them and chasing his breath away.

The punches and kicks continued. English's arms went up to protect his head as much

as possible. The pain was sharp, but he soon became numb. He didn't know how much more he would have to endure, and English doubted he'd be able to last much longer.

Then the abuse stopped. English detected a siren piercing the air, and for the noise to penetrate the fog clawing at his consciousness, it had to be close by. He heard steps running, and he hoped he'd maybe escaped death with the help of the local police. Then a shadow knelt next to him, and the voice of the ringleader addressed him with a cool, steely tone which had his blood turning icy in his veins.

“This isn't over, Legend. I'm coming for you and yours. Everything you thought was hidden is mine to destroy. You deserve this and far worse for what you've done to me.”

The man plunged a knife into English's side before standing and walking away with slow steps that echoed in English's ears long after the man disappeared. The pain was blinding. English laid in the alley, his blood pooling underneath him. The man's words rolled in English's mind, a never-ending torture as he tried to figure out the man's identity and his intentions.

The sirens passed him by, and he was alone with no hope of being discovered. He prayed for unconsciousness. Just as he started to slip into the blackness, clarity struck him. A memory took him back to another time when he was a broken man who made an impossible choice. The consequences of his decision reared up to destroy him after all of these years.

His last waking thought was of the one person to ever break his heart. The name left his lips on a gasp that English believed would be his last.

“Ray...”

Then his world went black.

Chapter Two

He stood over her, watching the life leave her bright eyes. A faint sigh – a death rattle – escaped her plump red lips. Blood pooled around her head. He crossed his beefy arms across his chest, relishing his handiwork. This moment, the quiet hanging in the air after a life was lost, was the moment he yearned for. He craved it, much as an addict craved a steady fix of methamphetamine. Only his addiction was more satisfying. He held her life in his hands. He determined her fate. In no small way, he was like God – only with a more sinister motive.

Vzzzzt...vzzzzt....

Reagan Bell held her fingers poised over her keyboard and allowed her eyes to dart from the computer screen to her phone. With one glance, she balled her hands and slammed them against the desk on either side of her laptop. The number was unknown, but she recognized the area code. She rejected the call only to have the number flash again almost instantly.

She loathed disruptions to her writing time, but when the disruption came from the one person she never wanted to speak to again, her anger shot from loathing to murderous.

Her editor kept telling her to turn her phone off when she worked on a book, especially when she was in danger of missing a publication deadline. Reagan couldn't do it. She would walk away from the career she loved as a mystery novelist before she would make herself unreachable should her mother ever need her.

But this call wasn't her mother or anyone else she desired to speak with. For the first time, she considered following her editor's advice.

“Leave me alone!” She grumbled as if the caller could hear her, and though she knew he couldn’t, she felt better saying the words.

Her cell stopped vibrating. She stared at the open document on her laptop screen, trying to regain her writing inspiration which drew her into a world of danger and whodunits until she tuned out all else. She failed.

She didn’t have to wait long before the call came through again. He wasn’t going to leave her alone. He was stubborn that way. It was the one trait she inherited from him — the only one she would admit to anyway.

With a frustrated sigh, she answered the call. “Now’s not a good time. Whatever it is—”

“Reagan? Is this Reagan Barlowe?”

She hadn’t been a Barlowe for a long time and really wished she had never been. The feminine voice on the other end of the line wasn’t familiar to her, but the fact this woman knew anything about her past life was enough to make her end this call.

“You have the wrong number.”

“No, please! Wait, Reagan. It is you, isn’t it?”

The woman sounded desperate. If she was in any way associated with Reagan’s father, she probably was desperate. And she had to be associated with him for her to call Reagan by his last name.

“I don’t know who you are, but tell him nothing’s changed. You and he need to forget me completely.”

“He needs you. We all do.”

“We? I don’t know you. If he needs anything from me, tell him to ask me himself.”

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“He’s in a coma. He can’t ask you. That’s why I’m calling. He’s at Trinity Medical Center in Fire Creek. He’s in bad shape. You need to come.”

Another protest died on her lips. Reagan had imagined receiving a phone call similar to this, only then she pictured learning her father had died. As morbid as the daydream was, it was the only reason she could think of for someone to reach out to her about the old man. She always thought she’d feel a measure of relief, knowing this unpleasant part of her past was laid to rest. This was different. She didn’t expect the lurch in the pit of her stomach or the tightness in her chest to hear her father was hurt.

She swallowed the lump lodged in her throat. “Who are you? How do you know him?”

“I don’t have a lot of time to explain. My name is Becky Lathan. I’m a...friend of your dad’s. I found him this morning in the alley outside his bar. He’d been attacked, beaten, and stabbed. He’s critical.”

“He’s not my dad. He’s never earned the title.”

The response fell from her lips easily. She’d spent years denying her connection to English Barlowe. The only father she’d ever called “dad” was the man her mother eventually married, when Reagan was eight years old. English was nothing more than a sperm donor who chose to ignore her and her mother unless it suited him to do otherwise.

Becky sighed. “I know about your relationship with him. Whatever your feelings are

doesn't change what's going on now. He needs you."

"He's never needed me. It sounds like he's exactly where he should be. The doctors and nurses can do more for him than I can at this point. You must think I'm a horrible person, but I don't wish any ill will toward him. I only want to be left alone."

"You don't understand, Reagan. You have to come. Decisions have to be made about his care, and you have his medical power of attorney."

Reagan's eyes bulged, and her mouth gaped open. "What are you talking about?"

"I know this is a lot to take in, but it's true. I swear it's not a trick. You have no reason to trust me, but I'm hoping you'll believe me when I tell you this. The butterfly necklace you wear around your neck? The one with the diamonds at the corner of each wing? You got it for your sixteenth birthday. There wasn't a card or anything to tell you where it was from. It was wrapped in pale pink paper with happy birthday written on it in yellow. The bow was silver and gauzy. It was pretty, but the gift looked like it had been wrapped by a child."

Reagan's hand touched the butterfly pendant resting against her throat. "What are you saying?"

"English insisted on picking the gift out and wrapping it himself. He knew the wrapping looked terrible, but he wanted to do it for you. He hasn't always shown it, but he loves you, Reagan."

She closed her hand around the pendant, fighting against the urge to yank it from her neck. She'd never considered the necklace a gift from English, but she somehow knew Ms. Lathan spoke the truth. He'd found a way to be a part of her life despite knowing she never wanted him to be.

“I can’t do this now. I need time to think.”

Ms. Lathan sighed again, and Reagan felt an odd twinge of guilt that she was disappointing this unknown woman. “There’s no time. I’m sorry, but the doctors need to talk with his next of kin. They refuse to speak to us without your permission. There’s more you should know, but it’s too much to get into over the phone. Please come. It’s a matter of life and death, and not just your father’s.”

Reagan felt the tug of indecision. Her stepfather would tell her to stay, because she owed English nothing and his life was not her responsibility. Her mother, though, would tell her to go. Despite everything, her mother still had a soft spot where English was concerned. Reagan never understood it, but then her mother was never inclined to explain it. The situation was too surreal to be believed. If she was writing this as a plot twist in one of her books, this would be the hook luring the heroine into danger. She knew the difference between fiction and reality, but she couldn’t help herself. She had to know if she was being set up.

“If you are friends with him, did he ever tell you the last thing he ever said to me?”

The phone line was silent. Reagan was ready to end the call, but Becky exhaled slowly as if hating what she was about to say.

“One day, you’ll understand.”

Tears pricked Reagan’s eyes, and she angrily blinked them away. “That day never came, Ms. Lathan. That’s why I can’t come now.”

“You have to, Reagan. Not only for English’s sake, but for your own safety. English was attacked. We think they’re coming after you to get back at him. I know this doesn’t make sense. We’re still trying to sort it out ourselves. But English would want us to do everything in our power to keep you safe. That’s why I sent one of the

boys to bring you here.”

“Boys? What are you talking about? Why would anyone think English wants anything to do with me? I’m nobody to him.”

“That’s just it, Reagan. English had to separate himself from you and your mother because you’re everything to him. I swear, what I’m saying is the truth. It’s not safe for you there. One of the boys is coming. He should be there any minute. His name...”

The knock on the front door startled Reagan. She pulled the phone from her ear and missed most of what Becky said. She stood and walked from her office into the kitchen. Peering out one of the windows with her head tilted at the right angle, she could see who stood on her porch without the person realizing he or she was being watched.

He was considered a boy? The man wore jeans and a blue button-up shirt, the hem untucked and falling to his hips. He wore dark glasses to hide his eyes, but his face was handsome in a rugged way. He had to be six feet tall, give or take an inch or two. His frame was average, but his hands were large enough to do some damage if someone threatened him. He looked like one of the heroes from her books, the rogue police detective bent on catching the murderer no matter the cost.

She realized Becky’s voice had risen to a panicked shout. She stepped back from the window and returned the phone to her ear.

“Your boy is here. I’ll come, but only to get the truth about what’s going on. That’s all I can promise. I’ll drive myself because I want to be free to leave whenever I’ve had enough.”

“But, Reagan, wait. I need—”

Reagan didn't want to hear anymore. She ended the call, not caring if she was being rude. She'd agreed to the woman's terms with a slight variation for her own peace of mind. Heaven help her, but she believed what little information Becky Lathan told her. The woman might be the one person in the world who could explain her father to her. She didn't want to care, but she craved answers. The little girl in her who had been devastated to learn her father was never coming back deserved the explanation which was more than twenty years overdue.

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She threw open the front door as the man had raised his fist to knock again. Feeling absurdly satisfied with the shocked expression on his face, she turned to traipse through her living room to where her slip-on canvas shoes rested on the floor by her favorite, oversized armchair.

“I talked to Ms. Lathan. I’m going, but I’m driving myself. You can wait and leave with me, but I have to pack some things first.”

She heard a click and froze. It couldn’t be what it sounded like, but as she raised her gaze to land on the stranger, she wasn’t surprised to see him pointing a Glock in her direction.

“Change of plans, Miss Barlowe. You’re coming with me.”

“Bell. My name is Bell. There’s no Barlowe here. You have the wrong house.”

He knew better. She could see in his arrogant expression that he knew exactly where he was and who he was holding at gunpoint.

“Don’t waste my time. Let’s go. After you.”

She’d never been good at processing change. Her eyes narrowed as she watched the man, trying to decide if his gun was real and if he was truly here to harm her. She finally pursed her lips when the truth sucker-punched her in the gut.

“You’re not one of the boys, are you?”

He leered at her, turning her stomach at the innuendo dripping from his smile. “As much as I would like to show you, I’m not a boy and very much a man, my boss is waiting for us.”

Too many thoughts rushed through her mind. She was about to be killed, and she was wearing old clothes and probably the most unattractive underwear she owned. On writing days, she was more about comfort than style, but if she’d known the turn her day would take, she may have rethought his wardrobe.

She was about to be murdered, and all she’d had to eat was a granola bar for breakfast and microwaved sesame chicken which had been left over from her dinner the night before. She would draw her last breath without finishing her book, and this one was shaping up to be a good one. Her editor would be pissed. Hell, she was pissed.

She was going to die today, and she hadn’t told her mother and stepfather goodbye or that she loved them or that she was proud to have had them in her life. She was about to lose her life without having any answers from her father. If Ms. Lathan was to be believed, English was the reason she was being held at gunpoint, and she would die without knowing what he’d done to put her life in danger.

“Please hurry, Miss Barlowe. We have somewhere to be.”

Her heart pounded in her chest, and she couldn’t bring herself to move. Don’t anger the armed stranger, Ray. She wasn’t trying to goad her captor, but she’d been hit with a lot in a short amount of time.

Her feet felt like lead as she forced them to move toward the door. The man was right behind her. The barrel of the gun wasn’t touching her back, but she could almost feel it there. She’d written a scene like this many times. Imagining the scenario was different from experiencing it. If she happened to live through her situation, which right now didn’t seem likely, she may have to rethink the genre she wrote. Reality

mirroring a scene out of a murder mystery wasn't as fun her mind playing out the fantasy. Maybe a sweet romance or women's fiction should be more her focus.

"I would move faster, Ms. Barlowe. Moving at a snail's pace won't rescue you from your fate."

She shivered at the sinister tone to his voice and jerked violently when his beefy hand pinched her bottom. When she whirled around, her glare was hot enough to reduce a lesser man to ash.

"Do not touch me." Her words were slow, measured, and full of her rage. She pushed her luck with the man holding the gun, but she refused to let any man touch her without her consent. Not without a fight.

His hand flew out before she could react. The back cracked her jaw with a force that tossed her head to the side, tweaking her neck. She stumbled backward through the doorway, stopping short of losing her balance and falling on her ass onto the porch. Pain flashed like stars in her eyes, and her hand flew up to cradle her battered cheek. He raised his gun until the barrel was lined up with the center of her forehead. His smile was gone, his face morphing into an unforgiving granite.

"Let's be clear about something. I can do whatever the hell I want to you."

He could. He was bigger and armed, but Reagan wouldn't be pushed around. No matter what trouble had found her or what fate awaited her, she never backed down. She was stubborn like that. Just like...

Nope, don't go there, Ray. Now's not the time to be thinking of the man who got you in this mess.

She squared off against the gunman. "You can try, but I wouldn't count on walking

away without some bruises of your own.”

He cocked the gun, and fear almost knocked her legs from under her. “You little bitch.”

She held her ground and braced herself for what was to come. Except she wasn’t expecting the force suddenly hitting her from the side, pushing her down to roll along the porch. She screamed as she fell off the edge to land on the ground. Breath left her lungs in a painfulwhoosh, and she did a quick inventory of her body, hoping her injuries were minor ones.

Not feeling anything broken but noting a lot of bruised and sore spots, she sat up, ignoring the dizziness in her head and achiness in her back. When she put her weight on her right foot, her ankle protested, but she managed to balance gingerly on it. The sprain was painful but nothing she couldn’t suffer through. What immobilized her was the action taking place on her porch.

Her captor was in a struggle with an unknown man. The man was broader and taller, and from the way her captor’s body spun and stumbled, the new guy packed quite a punch. Did this guy shove her out of the way before going after her captor? Hearing a car door slam, she had little time to consider her question because she saw a third man running toward her house. But he wasn’t running to the foray which was drawing her neighbors’ attention. He was running toward her.

Releasing a shrill scream, Reagan whirled around and set off on a half hobble, half run across the yard. She focused on her breathing and not on the pain in her ankle. She didn’t have to run fast. She just had to outrun the guy chasing her long enough for her neighbors to call in reinforcements. And she would, despite her sprained ankle. She had a feeling her life depended on it.

Chapter Three

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Jackson Moore lunged for the gun the assailant dropped, but the man tackled him before he could touch it. He flipped the man. Using his legs to pin the man down against the porch, Jackson placed his hands on either side of the man's face and slammed his head against the planks until he passed out.

The scream had him jumping to his feet. He took in the situation in a span of a few seconds and lunged off the porch to tackle his assailant's back-up before the guy could grab Reagan Barlowe. They rolled from the impact before scrambling to their feet and squaring off against each other. The man swung a fist, but Jackson sidestepped. He grabbed the man's arm and swung him around to bang him against the side of the house. The man stumbled backward, disoriented, and Jackson took advantage. He wrapped his arms around the man's head and applied pressure until the man blacked out and slumped to the ground.

Sirens sounded in the distance, rapidly growing louder as the authorities got closer to his location. He stared off in the direction Reagan had run and whirled around to scan the neighborhood. Other than a lot of looky-loo neighbors watching him warily, he couldn't see anything else. She was gone, and he was left with a mess on his hands.

Pulling his cell from his pocket, he dialed a familiar number while securing the weapons from the two assailants.

Ben Weston answered on the first ring. "You got her?"

"No. I got here in time to prevent two guys from kidnapping her though. She ran off during the fight. The targets are down and disarmed, but the LEOs are going to be on this place quick. Are you close enough to run interference?"

After hearing of English's attack, Ben had been breaking every speed limit in a rush to get back from his assignment. Jackson hated to sidetrack him, but he needed his brother's help on this one. Ben was the brother closest to his location, and his skills for grifting would be useful.

"Yeah. I can handle it. Think my FBI cover would work?"

"Perfect," Jackson agreed. "There are a lot of noisy neighbors who are going to ID me."

"Copy that. You go after the girl, and I'll smooth things over with the LEOs. Did the targets have ID?"

Jackson hated to waste any more time. Reagan slipped further away the longer he lingered, but these guys could be the key to finding out what was going on. So far he and his brothers had no clue, and the questions brewing among them were almost unbearable. They were used to finding answers and not hitting dead ends at every turn.

"Hold on." He searched the guy on the ground first and pulled a wallet from the man's back pocket. He opened it as he crossed to the porch, jumped up on the side, and searched the second guy. Other than a fake badge, the second guy had nothing to identify him.

"Only one of them has ID. The name on his license is John Jones from Birmingham, Alabama."

"Sounds like an alias," Ben surmised.

"Yeah, I think so too. Look, I've got to bail. Those sirens are getting too close for comfort."

“Go. I got this. I’ll check in once I smooth things over and see what kind of intel I can gather. Find the girl.”

“I will.”

Jackson sprinted back to his truck. He’d parked it down the street when he’d first arrived after spotting the dark sedan parked outside Reagan’s house. His gut had told him then to be sneaky in his approach. He and his brothers had suspected whoever put English in the hospital was also coming after his daughter — once they learned English had a daughter — and now they had confirmation their suspicions were accurate.

Jackson scowled as he sped down the street, certain the older man in the house next door to Reagan’s was copying his license plate number. It didn’t matter. Ben would spin a tale which would prevent the local law enforcement officers from digging any deeper. He’d used his FBI cover many times when he worked a case and needed intel, and he could work a con like none other.

He drove the quiet streets around the neighborhood more than once, but Reagan Barlowe had disappeared. She must have sought refuge with a neighbor and was laying low. He couldn’t risk drawing attention by going door to door asking about her. He needed help tracking her, and his brother Luke was his go-to resource. He wasn’t sure Luke could be of much help since he was at the hospital watching over English and Becky, but Jackson was running out of options.

“How’s Gish?” Jackson barely gave his brother time to say hello.

“No change. The surgeon has been back, and I told him next of kin was on the way. What’s your ETA?”

“About that. I lost her.”

Luke didn't respond for several seconds, and Jackson could almost picture the anger on his brother's face. Luke's temper was renowned, and he was exceptionally scary when he got quiet. It was usually the quiet before the shitstorm.

"What do you mean you lost her? Gish is dying, and they need her here as his medical proxy. Dammit, Jackson. You're supposed to be watching out for her and getting her here."

"I didn't have a choice. They beat me to her."

"Who?" Luke demanded.

"Two guys. One was waiting in the car. The other was inside, holding her at gunpoint, when I got here. I got her out of the way and took him down. She ran off when his buddy decided to join the party, and by the time I took the second one out, she was gone."

"Shit! What did you do with the targets?"

"Searched them. Found their fake IDs. Then left to hunt for the girl. Ben is going to work the local LEOs, so we can figure out who the targets are and why they're after Reagan and Gish. I can't blame the girl for running, but I've got a feeling this is far from over. I need to find her for her own safety as much as for Gish. I know you're at the hospital, but I was hoping you could find a way to track her cell. I've tried looking through the neighborhood, but no luck."

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“Yeah. Easton’s here too, so he can watch Gish and Becky while I get my laptop. I should still have her number saved from when we tracked her earlier.”

Earlier. When their whole world turned upside down. When they learned the man who’d raised them, cared for them and taught them everything he knew possessed secrets he never thought to tell them. Secrets like he had a family he never had anything to do with. He had a daughter he never spoke of. The daughter who was the last person on his mind as he slipped into a coma, lying in a pool of his blood in a dark, smelly alley, after being stabbed and beaten to within an inch of his life.

He didn’t worry about any of the boys whom he’d raised and trained to carry on his legacy. Nor about the woman who watched after him and those boys for years in the hope English would return her affection. No, he worried for a daughter he hadn’t seen in years, though he cared about her enough to give her his power of attorney.

Jackson was lost in his own thoughts and almost missed what Luke said after a few minutes of silence.

“Sorry, man. You’re out of luck. Her phone has been powered off. The last signal I can track was when it was at her house.”

Jackson slammed his fist against the steering wheel. “Shit! What now? Ben can intercept her if she checks in with the police, but I don’t think she’s there. She was on foot when she ran, so she couldn’t have gotten far. Think Becky knows where this girl could have gone?”

“Considering Gish kept Reagan Barlowe a secret all these years, I’m surprised Becky

knew about her at all. I doubt she knows enough to give us a lead. Just come back here, and we'll regroup once Ben gets intel from the LEOs."

Jackson braked at a stop sign, and he sat there, feeling like he let his family down.

"Why wouldn't he tell us?" He couldn't stop himself from voicing the question.

Luke sighed. "I wish I knew. I've thought about it all day. The best I came up with was he didn't want us to think bad about him. We all came from rotten homes, and we probably would have looked at him differently if we knew he had abandoned his family."

"I don't think she knows." Jackson had been mulling over the possibility on the ride to Reagan's house, and he wondered if his brother would agree.

"You don't think she knows what?"

"I don't think Reagan knows about Gish's life. About his work as Legend. About us and how he trained us to take his place. It makes sense he would want to protect her from it."

"I guess," Luke reluctantly agreed. "It doesn't make sense why he didn't tell us about her, though. I've tracked down her mom too. If they came after the daughter, they could go after the mom. She's remarried and living at the beach in Gulf Shores. Easton said he would go and make sure she's safe. Her new husband is a retired cop, so Easton said he may loop the man in on what's going on in case he has contacts to help with a protection detail."

"I'm not sure it's a good idea to tell more people unless we absolutely have to. Gish lived his life off the grid for a reason. There aren't many people who would know where to find him or to come after his daughter for that matter. Hell, whoever did this

knew to wait until we left Gish alone to make their move. For all we know, the new husband could have orchestrated this. Being a retired cop, he could have connections to come after Gish on some sort of revenge mission or something.”

“That’s a reach, don’t you think?” Luke countered.

“Probably, but at this point, we can’t take anything for granted. We need to play this close to the vest until we get a handle on what’s going on.”

Jackson waited for Luke to mull over the situation.

“Yeah, okay,” Luke agreed. “I’ll tell Easton about the change in plans. I’ll also see if I can work traffic or security cams in the area to get a bead on the daughter. I’ll call if I find anything.”

“I’ll do the same. She can’t be too hard to find.”

Luke chuckled. “I don’t know, man. She’s Gish’s daughter. Even if she wasn’t raised by him, she could still take after him in some ways. She managed to get away from you and the two targets.”

“Damn. A woman with English Barlowe’s stubbornness and knack for attracting trouble combined with all the drama women seem to love? We’re in deep shit.”

“No shit. I’ll see you when you get back.”

“Later,” Jackson said before ending the call.

The drive back to Fire Creek wasn’t long, which was good for Jackson. He didn’t have much time to dwell on the turn his life had taken in a few short hours. His mind kept remembering English as he had left his old man last night.

English had seemed off the whole night. He was usually chatting up the regulars and laying bets with the newcomers that he could guess their drink of choice on the first try. After years of running a bar, he rarely guessed wrong. Last night, though, he had been more subdued, as if he was distracted. He and Easton both noticed, and they even mentioned it to Luke last night over beers and pizza.

None of them considered asking English about his odd demeanor or even calling last night or first thing this morning to check on him. English had his moods, and they were usually caused by ghosts from his past. His life as Legend hadn't been easy. Being a clean-up man for the Central Intelligence Agency, being the one they called because he always got the job done no matter what it took, he had many memories rearing up at the oddest times, plaguing him with the consequences of the things he'd done or choices he'd made. He preferred to deal with them in his own way, and the boys had learned to let him be.

In this case, if they had checked on him to make sure he was okay, then he wouldn't have spent the night in the alley, his life slowly slipping away. They could have helped him sooner. They could have preserved the scene for evidence later instead of the paramedics and Becky trampling it in their haste to care for English. Maybe if they had stuck around instead of leaving to shoot the shit with each other, they could have saved English and caught the people responsible.

English would smack the back of Jackson's head if he knew his Jacky was chasing "what ifs." He would say only the here and now mattered. The present was all a person could control, and they lost their control the more time they spent questioning the past. The advice was the closest to waxing poetic that English Barlowe ever got. Most of the time he got his point across with head smacks, arm punches or hand towel snaps. For four rambunctious boys who'd never had conventional parenting to guide them, the actions worked better than words.

As much as Jackson wanted to follow English's advice, he couldn't. The man was

their family, the only family they cared to claim. Jackson's childhood home was bad enough for him to walk away when he was thirteen. He was ready to make a life on the streets than live with the neglect and abuse he suffered because of his parents. Then English found him sleeping in the alley by the bar.

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Their relationship began with English giving him food, then a place to sleep, then a shower and clean clothes. Eventually, Jackson slept inside English's apartment over the bar more than he slept outside. He earned money by doing odd jobs around the bar. Then English pushed him back into school and insisted he graduate. English became his guardian before he realized it was happening.

Jackson and the others had similar stories. They owed English their lives. The time had come for them to make it up to the man who raised them, the man who groomed them to take his place as someone who looked out for the underdog, who helped those who couldn't help themselves. English had taught them everything they would need to know to be the next and better generation of Legends.

Jackson couldn't shake the feeling this might be one mission that would tax the Legends to their limit.

Chapter Four

Reagan couldn't believe she was at Trinity Medical Center. She'd spent her whole life convincing herself she didn't care about English Barlowe or anything he did. It was a lie. She owed this man nothing, but she still came. She needed answers, so she could move on.

"Excuse me." She spoke to the nurse behind the desk in the Intensive Care Unit. She'd been directed there by the volunteer who manned the information center at the front entrance.

The nurse glanced up from behind a computer. Her round face softened with a

friendly countenance, her blue eyes carrying the gleam of her friendly smile. Reagan wanted to smile back, but she couldn't bring herself to make the small gesture.

"I received a call that my father was here, and his doctor needed to see me."

She managed not to wince when she uttered the words "my father." She wasn't used to talking about him, much less acknowledging him with the phrase. From the moment Randall Dunlap married her mother, he'd fulfilled the role of father in her life, to the point that she never thought to add the "step" in front of his moniker when she talked about him. She felt like she betrayed all he'd done for her by calling someone else father.

"His name?" The nurse typed on her keyboard as Reagan answered her question. "And your name?"

"He's English Barlowe. I'm Reagan Bell. The volunteer downstairs said he was in the ICU, but I don't know what room or anything."

The nurse read something on the screen before nodding. "Dr. Briggs will want to talk with you, but he's in surgery with another patient now. It may be an hour before he's available. Visiting hours haven't started yet, but the doctor has been making exceptions for Mr. Barlowe. Please limit the number of people in the room with him to no more than two at a time. I think your stepmother is in with him now."

Reagan's brain skittered at the word stepmother. It seemed today was the day for unpleasant surprises from English. He had a wife. So why had his friend been the one to call her and not the wife? Was English dangling two women from the hook, having his cake and eating it too? It fit with the impression she had of him.

"He's in room eight, around the corner," the nurse continued. "You may want to prepare yourself. His attackers did a number on him. His condition is very serious."

Dr. Briggs will be able to tell you more.”

Reagan nodded as she allowed the information to sink in. “Thank you.”

She turned in the direction the nurse indicated, but her feet refused to move. Her adrenaline had worn off. When she’d been at her house, the sight of the strangers fighting to get to her freaked her out. Once she had gotten away from them, she ran until her legs were too weak to continue. That put her in front of her neighbor’s house, and fortunately, she was a neighbor Reagan knew. Since she’d left her cell behind, the neighbor had been only too happy to offer her phone for Reagan to use. Her call was to her business manager, whom she sent to sort out the mess at her house and retrieve her car, an overnight bag full of essentials, her purse and her cell phone.

The police encouraged her business manager to have her come in to complete a report about the ruckus. She tried to convince Reagan, but she decided to hit the road instead and drove straight to Fire Creek.

The ruckus...somehow giving the situation a silly name made it less scary. The man who held her at gunpoint, the man waiting outside her door, the fight which ensued, the man chasing her, and then the second fight which ensued. It was tied to English and the reason he was fighting for his life. Trouble followed him, and now it touched her.

“It’s alright.”

Reagan looked back at the nurse, hating the sympathy in her eyes. “I’m sorry?”

“It’s alright. To take a minute. It’s a lot to process.”

“You have no idea.”

Reagan turned and moved down the hall. She found English's room easily. The curtain was drawn, so she couldn't see inside. Her only view was of the edge of his bed with the covers tucked in tight around his feet. The nurse warned her to brace herself, but she didn't think she could ever prepare for what she would see. Years had passed since the last time she put eyes on English Barlowe, and then, with all the viciousness an eight-year-old could manage, she told him never to reach out to her again. She should have guessed he wouldn't heed her wishes.

"Reagan?"

She jerked, her eyes swinging around to see the woman standing only a couple of feet away, her hand holding to a Styrofoam cup, steam billowing from the top. Her silver hair was clipped short in a pixie cut, the front spiked in a chic, messy fashion. Her dark eyes watched Reagan's with surprise and uncertainty. She was about Reagan's height, her full figure clad in jeans and a loose shirt. Lines etched the skin around her eyes and mouth, evidence of how often she smiled. She took a step closer, and Reagan instinctually moved back.

"You are Reagan, aren't you? You look a little different from your picture, but I was sure it was you."

She had no idea what picture the woman referred to, but she nodded.

"Yes, I'm Reagan Bell."

For a moment, Reagan thought she detected disappointment in the woman's eyes, but the emotion evaporated before she could be sure.

"Of course. I wasn't sure you were coming. When the boys told me they lost you, I worried you wouldn't be here in time. I should have known better than to doubt Jackson. When it comes to English, the boy would move heaven and earth to get

anything the man needed.”

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“I don’t know who you’re talking about.” Reagan hated the coolness of her tone, but she needed to wear aloofness like a suit of armor. She had no idea what she was walking into — obviously some sort of parallel universe where English Barlowe was adored — and she wanted to remain cautious and protective of her own fragile emotions.

“I came alone,” Reagan added.

“Oh.” Shock froze the woman’s expression into a wide-eyed, oval-mouthed mask. “Oh, my dear. Are you alright? Jackson said you were—”

“Held at gunpoint? Almost kidnapped? Caught in the middle of a brawl right in front of my house? I don’t know who Jackson is, but he would be right. All of that happened. What I came here to find out is why it happened and why to me.”

The woman’s lips stretched into a thin line. “So you didn’t come for your father?”

Reagan pierced her with a direct stare. “You must be the person who called me. Becky, was it? You seem to know more about me and English than even I do, so this shouldn’t come as a surprise to you. I did come to fulfil my responsibility as his medical proxy, though why he would want me in charge of his life-or-death decisions, I can’t imagine. I also came here for answers. I did not come to try and have a relationship with a man who doesn’t deserve to be called my father. Once I get what I want, I don’t plan to stay for him either. He lost the right to be my father a long time ago when he walked out on us.”

Becky looked crestfallen. Reagan immediately regretted her harsh words. This

woman wasn't the cause of her broken relationship with English, so she didn't deserve Reagan's ire. Whatever her relationship with English was, Becky obviously cared for him and wanted to do right by him. Reagan could respect that, even if it was more than English deserved. She started to apologize when she felt a presence behind her, and then a deep voice spoke.

"Becky, everything alright?"

Reagan turned to note the tall man watching her with a hawk-like gaze. The blue eyes were beautiful if a bit intense. His nose was a touch too wide to be considered classic, but it didn't detract from his good looks. He was pretty, like a boy next door whom all the parents loved because they had no idea how he would corrupt their young daughters.

Becky nodded. "Of course. We're fine. Luke, this is Reagan Barlowe. I'm sorry. I mean, Reagan Bell. She's English's daughter."

The man circled around Reagan to stand by Becky's side, his hand resting protectively at the woman's back. "The prodigal daughter has come. 'Bout time. We've been searching for you."

Reagan stiffened at his judgmental tone. "That's what I hear. The nurse said the doctor would come speak to me once he was out of surgery, but why don't you two fill me in on English's condition? What happened to him?"

Becky attempted another smile and motioned toward his room. "I was about to check on him. Would you like to come in? The nurses have been great to let us visit outside of the designated hours. Once you see him, we can sit in the waiting room and talk."

Reagan didn't want to see him. The nurse made it sound as if he was a poor sight to behold, and she didn't want to feel an ounce of sympathy for his plight. But she

couldn't put off the inevitable, so she finally nodded. Since she was seeing him for the first time in years, she hoped facing him while he was unconscious and unaware of her presence would be easier on her raw emotions.

"I'll be right out here," Luke murmured to Becky before eyeing Reagan like a mall security guard following a shoplifter.

English must have woven one hell of a spell on these people for them to regard her as the bad guy. He left her and her mom long before any of these people were in his life. They can think her heartless, but it would only be a matter of time before they saw English for what he was — a selfish man who used people and walked away, leaving only damage and heartbreak behind.

Reagan hardened her expression as she moved ahead to English's room. She couldn't let these people get under her skin. She was only here for answers, and then she would be gone, never to see them again. Stepping around the curtain, she stopped with as much distance between her and the hospital bed as she could get. Her eyes swept the room before studying the figure in the bed. The beeping of a heart monitor grated on her frazzled nerves.

The lines around his eyes, mouth and cheeks were more pronounced than she remembered. His lush head of hair and full beard were stark white, his skin deeply tanned in contrast. His frame was still broad but trim, and yet, lying in the bed, he'd lost some of the larger-than-life façade she'd always associated with him. She didn't try to trace all of the tubes running from his body to the various monitors, IV bags and machines in the room. She did note the damage to his face and arms. The skin around his eyes was the color of overripe grapes, the tissue puffy with swelling. Tiny cuts marred his nose, forehead and jaw, and his bottom lip was cut and repaired with liquid adhesive. His arms rested on top of the covers, showcasing the numerous bruises and abrasions which had Reagan wincing.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was sleeping.” Becky had stepped in beside her, her eyes fixated on English.

Reagan didn’t reply. Noting the paleness under his tan, she thought he already looked dead and not only sleeping. The thought unsettled her.

Becky sighed. “When I saw him in the alley, my heart stopped. I’d never seen him hurt like this before. He’s always seemed invincible. Almost untouchable.”

Becky spoke aloud but more to herself. Reagan wondered if Becky had forgotten she was in the room, but Reagan jumped on the opportunity to find out more.

“You have no idea what happened to him?”

Becky shook her head. “The boys are investigating, but I haven’t asked them what they found out. All I can tell you is I stopped by the bar to bring English some breakfast. When I couldn’t find him, I stepped out into the alley, and there he was, on the ground. I thought he was d—”

Her voice caught over the word “dead,” and she didn’t bother trying to say it again before she continued. “I don’t know how long he’d been there. The boys saw him when they closed the bar last night, and he said nothing about leaving. He must have been taking the trash to the dumpster after they locked up, so he could have been laying there all night. If he’d only let the boys take care of the trash, he wouldn’t have...”

Reagan saw the tears building in Becky’s eyes, and she averted her gaze back to the man in the bed. She expected to feel hatred toward him the moment she saw him again, but she only felt pity and sadness. And anger. He’d obviously touched Becky and the boys she kept talking about. From what Reagan could discern, they loved him, and she suspected Becky was in love with him, much as her mother had been

years ago.

Reagan's bitterness mounted. Why couldn't she have known English the way Becky and the boys did? What made them special for him to choose them over her and her mother?

A young nurse stepped in dressed in scrubs the color of sherbet. She smiled at them with what she probably considered a socially acceptable amount of pity, telling Reagan what no one had managed to confirm so far. English's prognosis wasn't good. No one believed he would survive, and Reagan would be the one left to handle his affairs. It was like he was abandoning her all over again.

"Miss Barlowe," the nurse spoke to her quietly. "Your father's doctor is available to speak with you now. I can show you to the private waiting room where you can meet with him."

"My last name is Bell, actually," she corrected the nurse automatically, ignoring the sharp look Becky sent her way.

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Reagan stepped from the room and paused to draw in a couple of deep breaths before following the nurse down the hall.

Chapter Five

Jackson Moore was rarely surprised by people. His life had thrown him enough curveballs for him to learn to be cautious of everything, suspicious of everyone and prepared for anything.

Reagan Barlowe surprised him.

When she stepped from English's room, she immediately captured Jackson's attention. He'd not gotten a close look at her while he was at her house. He'd been too preoccupied with fighting off the men who'd come to abduct her. From where he stood now, he was able to study her without being noticed.

She closed her eyes to breathe deeply, and he could almost feel the tension tightening her muscles. She was unnerved by being at the hospital. He just didn't think it was for the same reasons the rest of them had.

When her eyes popped open, the irises matched her dark, arching brows and long sable hair. Her face had sharp angles which were oddly attractive — high cheekbones, square jaw and sloping nose. Her top lip curved like a bow over her full bottom one, giving her a sexy pout.

When she turned to follow the nurse down the hall, he appreciated her lithe form, her slender curves underneath the clothes, the shapely legs which moved with long

strides, the graceful sway of her hips, and the determined swing of her arms. She was slim enough to make him wonder if she was an athlete — a runner, perhaps, or one of those pretentious women who enjoyed twisting their bodies like pretzels during their weekly yoga class. Maybe a dancer with years of training to hone her elegant movements.

She wasn't even close to being his type. He preferred his women with generous curves and an approachable, down-home demeanor. This woman was too haughty and rigid for his taste, but Jackson was unable to look away.

One thing he had to admit was Reagan Barlowe was a smart one. Back at her house, once she saw an opening, she didn't hesitate to make tracks away from danger. She didn't cower and wait to see what would happen, nor did she wait for the police to arrive to sort out the mess. He would have expected any of those scenarios to be her plan once she left the scene.

But no, Reagan Barlowe showed up at Trinity Medical. She didn't bother to call to let any of them know she was coming. She just appeared. The life of his mentor was in her hands, and damn, if he could get a handle on what she would do with the responsibility.

“What's your read on her?”

Luke occupied one of the uncomfortable seats in the waiting area, his laptop propped open in his lap. He eyed Jackson as he stood at the door, looking out through the rectangular window into the hallway.

Jackson didn't ask how his brother knew he was watching Reagan. It was how they worked, the four of them. He and his brothers could sense what was going on with each other even when they weren't together. The connection between them was eerie, especially since they weren't blood relations, but they'd learned to accept it and use it

to their advantage.

“She hates him.”

Luke nodded. “She doesn’t bother to hide it. Can’t say I blame Gish for not wanting her around when she feels like that.”

Reagan disappeared from his view, so Jackson faced his brother. “I have a feeling there’s more to it. Gish would want us to protect her even if she hates him. One of us needs to shadow her at all times until we know more about what happened. You hear from Ben?”

Luke nodded. “He’s on his way back. He’s anxious to see Gish.”

“Did he get us some intel?”

“The two guys were low-level muscle for hire. They didn’t know who hired them. Ben sent me the arrest reports, and I ran background checks on the guys. There was nothing to give us a lead. Ben fed the cops a line that the guys were known to work for a high-profile criminal on the FBI’s radar. He told them Reagan was a potential witness, and the FBI has put her in Witness Protection. He said it worked to keep them from getting into our business or trying to find her. Ben made sure her house was clear and secure. The cops said they would increase patrols and notify him if they come across anything suspicious. He did say some lady came by while he was there. She had proof she was Reagan’s business manager, so the cops let her get Reagan’s purse and cell phone. Ben would have followed her, but he thought it was better if he stayed to get intel on the guys.”

“So we still have nothing,” Jackson mused, his mouth twisting into a frown.

“I think it’s because we’re looking in the wrong place.”

Jackson's thoughts had been running along the same lines. "What are you thinking?"

"English has never told us about Reagan. The only reason Becky knew was because she stumbled over an old picture of her in English's things and asked him about it. He swore Becky to secrecy. If he went to all the trouble to make sure no one connected him to Reagan, why would he say her name right before he slipped into a coma?"

Jackson recalled the image from the bar's security footage. The camera equipment captured English's beating and the conversation between him and the instigator. They were able to watch English's last conscious moments. The video was burned into Jackson's brain, especially when English's last word was not the name of any of his boys but of the daughter he had nothing to do with.

If they had not installed state-of-the-art security equipment around the bar, they would never have known about Reagan. English had called them fools to go through the trouble for the dive bar, but with their work as Legends, they believed the security measures necessary for all of their businesses. They never imagined the security system would be their only link to finding the truth about English and his attack.

"English suspected whoever came for him would come for her too." Jackson spoke absently, almost forgetting he wasn't alone.

"Right," Luke confirmed. "He believed Reagan's in danger, and he knew we'd protect her. The thing is...if the assailant knew about Reagan and probably her mother, he has to be someone from Gish's past. Like the long-time-ago, pre-us past."

Jackson nodded. "From his CIA days."

"Has to be. We need to find someone from then who can give us some leads on who this assailant might be."

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Easier said than done. Jackson kept the thought to himself, though he figured Luke had the same one. They grew up with English, and the old man taught them everything he knew about helping those in need while keeping a low, almost covert, profile. They eventually learned about his involvement with the CIA, operating under the moniker Legend, but he never shared the details of his work. Either he was bound by Agency confidentiality, or he didn't want to relive that time of his life. Jackson was never sure of the reason for his secrecy, but they respected his privacy enough not to push him to share.

“Easton is on his way to Reagan's mother's house, right?”

Luke nodded. “He's going to check in once he makes sure she's alright.”

“Good. I think he should question her about her relationship with Gish. I doubt he shared with her what he was doing, but they were close enough to create a daughter together. She may know more than we realize.”

“Her name is Traci Dunlap. She was Traci Bell at the time of Reagan's birth. Reagan's original birth certificate lists her as a Barlowe, but she legally changed her name to Bell when she was eighteen. Traci married Randall Dunlap when Reagan was eight years old. There was a petition filed for Randall to formally adopt Reagan, but it was withdrawn not long after.”

“Gish probably put a stop to it. Even if Reagan doesn't want anything to do with him, I doubt he'd be on board with another man becoming her father. But if he was trying to shield them from his life as Legend, why not let her be adopted or why let her have his name?” Jackson started to pace as he ran through scenarios in his mind.

“And why the annulment?”

Jackson skidded to a stop, his eyes piercing his brother. “What are you talking about?”

“English and Traci were married after Reagan was born, but about six years later, they had the marriage annulled. There’s no record of him having anything to do with them after that. Two years later, Traci marries Dunlap. He was a beat cop up until he retired. His background check is clean. Commendations and promotions. If English had to choose a man to raise his daughter in his absence, Dunlap seems to be a good one.”

“So Gish ended the marriage and walked away, but he wasn’t ready to give up on Reagan completely. Why? If she was important to him, why not tell us about her? And why cut all contact with her?”

“That’s what I would like to know.” Reagan stood in the waiting room doorway. She looked like a warrior with her eyes sparking in anger and her fists resting on her hips. “I don’t appreciate you two talking about me or my mother like we’re suspects in a criminal case. If there’s something you want to know, then ask. Otherwise, mind your own business.”

Reagan whirled around on her heel and stormed out of the room, leaving Jackson surprised again. He’d never heard her enter, and he had no idea how much of their conversation she’d heard. Not many people had the ability to sneak up on him and Luke. If this wasn’t one time he wished she hadn’t overheard them, he would have been impressed.

“What do we do now?” Luke asked.

Jackson stared at the door as if he could still see Reagan making her dramatic exit.

“You and the boys keep on with the investigation. I’ll take care of damage control.”

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Reagan closed her eyes and sighed as her call went straight to her mother’s voicemail. She waited for Traci Dunlap’s voice to chirp her greeting and instructions for the caller. Reagan was almost ready to hang up when she heard the beep signaling her to leave a message.

“Mom, call me when you get this. I’m fine, but I need to talk to you. I don’t want to go into it over voicemail. It’s too crazy for you to believe, but...I don’t know what to do or...Mom, call when as soon as you can. Tell Dad I love him. I love you, too.”

Ending the call and pocketing her cell, she paced the green space outside the hospital. The sign identified it as a meditation garden, but she was too keyed up to appreciate it. There wasn’t enough meditation time in a day to could make her calm right now. She felt as if her body was torn along a perforated line right down the middle. Part of her wanted to demand answers and not back down until she got them. The other part wanted to run and hide. If she couldn’t be found, someone else would have to step up to do what these strangers were asking her to do.

She needed to talk it out like when she was figuring out a plot point for a book, and her mother was usually her sounding board. The “boys” — she felt ridiculous calling them that in her head when they obviously had outgrown the boy stage long ago — thought her mother had answers, but she didn’t want to believe it. It would mean her mother had kept something very important from her. She’d managed to deal with English’s betrayal. She couldn’t bear it if her mother had deceived her too.

From what she’d overheard, the so-called boys were confused by English’s actions too. Only they didn’t seem as bitter as she was, and they were more in the loop. They may have questions of their own, but she was certain they could answer most of hers.

She had a feeling they wouldn't tell her anything though. They didn't trust her. They were keeping an eye on her for a reason, and it had to do with more than her medical proxy for English.

She shoved her hands roughly through her hair and held the tangled strands from her face. A sudden thought stopped her pacing. So far, she'd taken everything coming from Becky and the boys at face value. What if they were the ones she couldn't trust? What if they were the reasons English was attacked? If this was a book she was writing, it's the type of twist she would add to the plot, but that was fiction. This was real life, even if it felt more like a scene from a TV crime drama.

"We're not going to hurt you."

She spun around, her heart leaping into her throat. He was one of the men she'd caught talking about her, the same one who fought the men at her house. Even if she hadn't seen firsthand how well he could handle himself, she would have no doubt he could do battle with anyone and come out unscathed. Insanely tall, muscular and intimidating, he was someone she would rather have as an ally than an enemy.

His narrow eyes watched her intently. He probably hoped to put her at ease with his words, but his stance and countenance achieved the opposite.

She studied him intently. "I think maybe it's time you tell me your name."

"Jackson Moore. Becky said you'd already met my brother Luke, though I don't think you were properly introduced. I have two more brothers. Easton and Ben. You'll likely meet them later. I know you have no reason to trust us, but we have no intention of hurting you."

"Why were you at my house?" She already knew the answer, but she wanted to see how much he would tell her.

“To protect you.”

“Right. Because English told you to. Only he’s in a coma, so forgive me if I’m struggling with how it happened.”

“He left us a message before he slipped into a coma. Our security cameras caught it. My brothers and I didn’t know what it meant, but Becky knew. It’s how we came to look for you and how I came to your house.”

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Reagan kept hoping to catch him in a lie, and she was annoyed that she believed him. “Who were the other guys at my house?”

The lines of his face deepened into a scowl. “No one of importance. They were low level muscle sent to kidnap you.”

“Why?” she demanded.

“We don’t know.”

“But you do. Or you have an idea. You believe it has something to do with English. I want to know what you’re thinking. I deserve to know how I ended up in the middle of all of this.”

“We don’t know for sure. We’re guessing at this point.”

She was suddenly tired of the conversation. Fueled by anger mixing with frustration, she marched up to him, drawing herself up as tall as she could. Even then, she tilted her neck back until it ached to look in his face.

“You’re lying. You know more than you’re saying. Those guys — they don’t know he cut off all ties to me and my mother a long time ago, do they? They don’t know that we offer no leverage when it comes to him. I’m right, aren’t I? Either you tell me what the hell is going on, or I’m on the road heading back to my house.”

“You can’t leave.” His tone was low, his dark eyes swirling as they watched her.

“What are you going to do to stop me?”

His large hands encircled her upper arms as his head snapped up suddenly. “Nothing. But they are.”

With one quick jerk, he shoved her to the ground, his heavy body collapsing on top of her, knocking the wind from her lungs. The sound of ping, ping pierced her eardrums, loosening dirt and grass as the stream of bullets connected with the ground around her. Her scream clogged her throat as she struggled to breathe. She wiggled her body to try and pull free, but she was unable to escape the man pinning her.

He pulled a cell phone from his pocket while holding her immobile. She couldn’t understand why he chose to make a call now, but he shouted loud enough into the receiver for his voice to ring in her ears. “Shots fired. Garden. South side. Need back-up. Now!”

Then he covered her from head to toe, his beefy arms wrapping around her head in a protective cocoon. With no other option, Reagan clutched his shirt, buried her face against his chest and prayed for the gunshots to end.

Chapter Six

The meditation garden offered little protection from the gunfire. It contained nothing but green bushes and grass with two cement benches affixed to the ground, so his only option was to scoop Reagan in his arms and half-carry, half-drag her over to the weak cover of the bushes. Her body shook against him, and he could hear her teeth chattering.

The door to the garden burst open behind him, but he didn’t have to turn to know it was Luke coming to his aid. The door opening triggered another round of gunfire, so his brother dived to the ground beside him, his gun drawn.

“What the hell?” Luke shouted. “The nurses are calling 911 and security to lock down the hospital. They’re leaving this door open for us to get back inside.”

“Then take her. Hide her somewhere. I’ll cover you.”

“Stop talking about me like I’m not here.”

The brothers silenced her with a look. Luke ducked back, staring at his brother incredulously.

“I’m not leaving you out here without back-up.”

Jackson looked over at Reagan who watched their exchange with wide eyes. Her face had paled to a scary white, and her body continued to shake violently. He turned back to Luke, satisfied his brother saw what he did.

“She’s the priority. Get her inside.”

Ping, ping, ping.

Luke scooted closer to Reagan. His hand cupped her chin and lifted her face until she looked in his eyes.

“No one’s going to hurt you. If they try, I’ll stop them before they can. You have my word. Do you understand?”

Jackson felt relief when Reagan nodded in response.

“Good,” Luke continued. “I have to get you to safety. Can you run on your own, or do I need to carry you?”

“I can run.”

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“Good,” Luke repeated before sharing a knowing look with his brother. “The minute I give you the signal, I want you to run as fast as you can toward the door. No matter what happens, do not look behind you. Only look at the door and don’t stop until you get inside.”

She nodded, and Jackson felt comfortable enough to turn his back to her and focus on the shooter. He heard Luke yell for Reagan to run, and Jackson raised his gun to fire, careful to make sure no bystanders were within range of his shots. He paused when he heard the hospital door slam closed and decided to make his move. Jackson broke cover and charged toward the car where he’d spotted the glint of the gun barrel. He was vulnerable to gunfire, but being shot would be worth it if he discovered a lead on who was targeting his family.

The car’s engine roared to life, and the car shot out into the traffic surrounding the hospital as sirens sounded in the distance. Jackson slowed to a stop, his chest heaving with the exertion.

“Dammit!” He’d been too far away to read the license plate, so he was left with nothing but a general description of a car that was so basic, most of the residents of Fire Creek probably drove one like it.

He turned to walk through the garden. He only had a few minutes before the cops would take over the scene and detain him for questioning. With an eye for noticing minute details, he scanned the area, noting the spots riddled with bullets. It wasn’t adding up. The shooter had come close to hitting his mark, but he’d hit all around Jackson and Reagan instead of taking out his target. Jackson could almost see an outline of where he’d lain over Reagan on the ground.

An ominous chill snaked down Jackson's spine. He resisted the urge to bolt back into the hospital to make sure Reagan, Becky, English and his brothers were alright. He couldn't shake the suspicion that the gunman was sent not to kill him or Reagan but to scare or distract them.

Pulling his cell from his pocket, he dialed his brother's number and wasn't surprised when Luke picked up on the first ring.

"We're safe. I have Becky and Reagan in with Gish, and I'm standing watch out in the hall. Ben's here, but he's stuck outside since we're in lockdown. He's trying to lay low."

Jackson scowled. "Probably a good idea. I don't like the fact these bastards have put us on the local police's radar twice today. I wish I could lay low, but considering the hospital's security cameras caught me and Reagan in the garden, we won't be able to avoid giving a statement to the cops."

"I took care of it. I've already wiped the footage, so it looks like the recorder went down this morning. I copied it to our system, so we can review it later for leads on the shooter."

"Good work. How's Gish?"

"No change, man. Becky is sitting by his bedside. Reagan is restless being in there, but the gunfire freaked her out enough to stay put like I told her to."

"I didn't have a chance to ask her what the doctor said to her."

Jackson felt a familiar frustration building within him. It was a rare kind of emotion he'd formed as a kid before he came to stay with English, and it was one he avoided at all costs. He never liked feeling out of control, and this situation had quickly taken

a turn he never saw happening. So far, their target was several steps ahead of him, and he was ready to go on the offensive.

“Becky’s talking to her. If anyone can get Reagan to open up, it would be her,” Luke said.

Jackson nodded. Becky came into their lives when Jackson was a senior in high school, preparing to enlist in the Army after graduation. She was the reason he and his brothers learned about Legend and English’s work behind the scenes to help those in need. Becky had been a fixture in their lives ever since. Jackson suspected she was in love with English, but their age difference and English’s loner life kept him from encouraging her attention.

It seemed unfair to him for English to keep her at arm’s length when she’d shown unwavering devotion, but Jackson could understand English’s reservations. Their lives were not meant to be shared with someone who had the potential to be a vulnerability. Since finding out English had tried it with Reagan’s mother once and how it came back to haunt him after all these years, Jackson thought English had the right idea to keep Becky at arm’s length.

He hadn’t realized he’d fallen silent for a time until Luke spoke.

“What’s our next move?”

Jackson released a long breath. “Think you can keep the women there for a while? You’ll be on your own since the hospital is on lockdown.”

“I can handle it. I’ll check in with Easton to bring him up to date too.”

“Good. I need to take care of a couple of things, and then we’ll regroup. This bastard keeps changing the rules on us, so it’s time we turn the tables.”

“Damn straight,” Luke responded. “What about Ben?”

“I’m calling him next. We need someone monitoring the police’s investigation and keeping watch around the perimeter.”

“I’ll call him. You do what you’ve got to do. And Jackson? Be careful, man. This bastard’s playing for keeps.”

Jackson paused. “I’m always careful. But this guy came after our family. We’re taking him down.”

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When it came to problem solving, Jackson Moore was a first-things-first kind of guy. It’s why when he walked away from the pandemonium at Trinity Medical Center, he wound up outside a deli during the lunch hour rush. Despite the line of customers waiting to order and claim one of the few open tables, Jackson walked inside and made a direct path toward a table in a private corner of the deli. He slid onto the hard vinyl seat and rested his arms on the tabletop.

Alex Crandell sank his teeth into his club sandwich, chewing the bite as he regarded his old friend with narrow eyes. Alex was Jackson’s closest friend outside his own brothers. They’d served in the Army together, having hit it off on day one of basic training and continuing to grow their friendship after they were assigned to the same unit.

Alex was one of the few people who knew about Jackson and his brothers’ work as Legends, so Jackson knew he could be trusted. Though Alex operated a security company, employing a tight-knit group of professionals, he never shared with them about Jackson or the others. Even if there never was a reason to tell his team, Alex wouldn’t put Jackson and his brothers at risk by doing so.

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Jackson knew his friend's expression as well as he knew his own birthday. Alex was irritated at having his solitary lunch interrupted, even by an old friend, but he was curious enough about the reason behind Jackson's sudden appearance that he would tolerate the interruption.

Jackson wasted no time. "I need to hire you."

Alex's raised brow was the only indication that he heard his old Army buddy. Otherwise, he continued to eat his sandwich as if he was the only one at the table.

"I need to hire all of you."

This got Alex's attention. He returned his sandwich to the wax paper-lined basket in the open spot next to his stack of potato chips. Chewing slowly, he fixed a hard stare on his friend.

Alex operated Atlas Security, one of the top security firms in the country. His crew of professionals were highly sought after by celebrities, politicians and anyone with the money to cover their hefty fee. Their services cost a pretty penny, but with their training and experience, the Atlas guys were worth it. Alex employed close to ten professionals, so to hire out his entire crew carried a significant price tag.

Alex's hands moved to form the signs for "tell me." Having his vocal cords damaged during his military service, Alex was unable to speak above a whisper, so he'd learned American Sign Language as a means to communicate without using his voice. Those closest to him had learned ASL as well, Jackson being one of them.

“Someone came after English. He’s in the hospital in a coma. Now they’re coming after the people he cares about. It’s been a mess, and it’s brought more attention to us than I’m comfortable with.”

Jackson’s hasty explanation left out a lot of details, but they were in too public a place for him to share everything. He provided enough intel to ensure his friend would agree to help.

“What do you need?” Alex signed.

“Coordinate with hospital security to be English’s protection detail. Run interference with the local LEOs when our investigation puts us on their radar. I need you guys to be our cover while my brothers and I get to the bottom of this.”

“Just your dad?” Alex signed, and Jackson never batted an eye at Alex’s reference. Though Jackson and his brothers never called English that, they all thought of him as their father.

“Well, probably Becky too. Becky Lathan is a family friend. She won’t leave English’s side.”

“Girlfriend?”

Jackson shook his head. “Nah. She wants to be, but English won’t let get to that point. He helped her out a long time ago, and she’s been around ever since. She could be a target, but she’s not going to leave English.”

“What else?”

Jackson wasn’t surprised Alex sensed there was more than he was saying. Alex had a creepy ability to read people, almost like he could see what they were thinking.

“Not here.”

“Why hire all of us?”

“The target shot up the hospital trying to get at us. He’s good, and he has intel on us no one does. I can’t take anything for granted. It may be overkill, but this guy and his hired men are three steps ahead of us. I need someone covering our backs while we go after them.”

Alex nodded. “We’re in. After lunch.”

He picked up his sandwich, effectively dismissing his friend. Jackson smirked, stood, and left the deli. Time to get everyone together to put their plan into play.

Chapter Seven

Acrow perched on the power line outside the hospital window, its inky feathers glinting in the sun. Its beady eyes peered through the pane directly into Reagan’s, and she swore the bird mocked her. Like he knew something she didn’t. Like he was warning her to be prepared because just when she thought her life couldn’t turn any stranger, something else even weirder loomed on the horizon.

A shiver snaked down her spine as the crow flew away.

“I’m sorry.”

Reagan closed her eyes, taking a moment to school her features before she turned to face Becky. The woman clung to her father’s hand as if it was her lifeline, though right now English couldn’t be anything to anyone, not while he was relying on the machines and tubes to cling to his life.

His prognosis wasn't good. That much the doctor could tell her. His one hope rested in a risky procedure to reduce the swelling on his brain, otherwise the pressure could cause a stroke which his battered body would not likely survive. But the risk of him dying on the operating table was strong, as was the possibility he would wake from the procedure with irreparable brain damage.

It was an impossible choice for her to make in the midst of an outside threat to her life and possibly her mother's.

To make matters worse, the boys only offered her protection out of obligatio. There was clear distrust in their eyes, and she felt the same toward them.

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Then there was Becky, who regarded her as if she was the savior there to take away everyone's pain. So far, Reagan hadn't shared the doctor's news with any of them, so they had no idea the likelihood of taking away anyone's pain didn't exist.

"There's no need for you to apologize," Reagan responded to Becky, focusing on the mattress where the woman's delicate hand grasped English's weathered one.

"Someone should. You didn't ask for this."

"No, but that's how life works, right? I try to look at it as sources of inspiration for my books." Reagan wanted to lighten the mood, but her attempt at humor came out more caustic than she intended.

To her credit, Becky managed a small smile. "Is that where your ideas come from? I always wondered. I love your books. There are so many twists and turns. I can never guess the ending, and I try."

Reagan jerked her head up in surprise. "You've read my books? As in more than one?"

Becky nodded, a lock of her silver hair bouncing against her forehead. "All of them. English loaned them to me. Though I have to say my favorites are the first series you published. This new series is good, but it's darker than I usually read. No offense."

Reagan's mind stumbled over the knowledge her father owned copies of her books. "None taken," she managed to say. "How is it you know English?"

Becky sighed as she looked down at English's sleeping form. "He probably wouldn't want me to tell you, but I've never thought it was fair to you or your mother. I met English at the bar. My boyfriend dragged me there for a night out with some of his friends. I was a mess then. My boyfriend, Bo, kept me high on meth, and he loved to get me stoned and drunk and share me with his friends. I hated my life, but I didn't know how to escape it.

"Bo and his friends caused a scene at the bar, and English stepped in. He took them all on and won. They were drunk, but it was still damn impressive to see. He kicked them out and told me he'd help me get back on my feet if I wanted. He drove me to a rehab center far enough away where Bo couldn't find me. When I got sober, English put me to work at the bar and helped me find a safe place to live. I was always afraid I'd run into Bo, but I never did. It's like he had disappeared from my life entirely."

"And English told you about me?"

Becky nodded. "Eventually. I found a picture of you and your mother when I was helping him clean out some things in his apartment to make room for Easton when he came along. I asked him about it, and he wouldn't tell me at first. But during dinner, he drank too much beer and started talking. Being apart from you and your mother was one of the hardest things he ever had to do."

Reagan swallowed an angry retort. She couldn't fault Becky her feelings for English, not when he did so much for her. Hell, even her mother had fallen in love with English at one point, so she had known he had some redeeming qualities. But she had a hard time not feeling resentful of the people who saw a kinder, softer side to her father that she never had a chance to see.

"What about the...boys? How did they end up with English?"

"They all have their own stories which are theirs to tell. But English helped them at a

time when they needed it. They were young with no other options. We still call them boys, but they've grown up to be good men. They're hardworking, and they care about people. You can trust them, Reagan. I know you're struggling with that since you don't know us. You don't even know your father like we do. It has to be strange for you."

You have no idea, she thought. She stared at English, lying very still, his skin pale under his tan.

"Why?" The question escaped her lips before she could stop it, but once she voiced it, she gave into the need for answers. "Why would he put me in charge of his health when he has all of you?"

She heard a noise and glanced over to see Becky crying. The woman used her free hand to wipe the tears from her cheeks.

"Because we're not family. Not really. No matter how close we are, we all knew we were second in his life, behind you and your mother."

"I don't know. He chose to have you in his life. He left me and my mother behind."

Becky turned forlorn eyes in Reagan's direction. "He was protecting you. You couldn't have known it at the time, but he did what he thought he had to in order for you to be safe. The same as now. It's on the security tape. Your name was the last word he spoke before he went into a coma. He did that knowing his boys would protect you. That's not the action of someone who doesn't care."

"I wish I could believe you."

Reagan was relieved to hear a knock at the entrance to the room until she turned to see Jackson and Luke step inside. Two more men followed behind, and Reagan had

to wondered what was in the water in Fire Creek. The men were broad and tall and intimidating and good looking as hell. She struggled to resist the urge to step back, but she ended up adding distance between her and them anyway.

“Sorry to interrupt.” Jackson spoke to Becky, barely acknowledging Reagan was in the room.

Becky stood, uncertainty clouding her expression. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s okay. After what happened today, I called in back-up to protect you and Gish. I trust these guys. They’re some of the very best, and their only job is keeping you safe.”

“If you trust them, so do I, but what about Reagan?”

Jackson finally turned to her, their gazes locking with each other. Reagan’s breath caught in her throat. She had a feeling she was going to hate the words coming from his mouth next, and the thought had her zeroing in on his lips. The corners tipped downward in an almost pouty shape, the fullness of his bottom lip enticing. She had a sudden image of her teeth nipping at the flesh, adding color to the dark pink of his lip. The image startled her, and she dropped her eyes so he couldn’t see how flustered she’d become.

“We’re taking her with us. She’s the main target, so the farther she’s away from you and Gish, the better.”

“No.” The word left Reagan’s throat with more force than she meant for it to, but if it drove her point home, so be it. She came here to get answers from her father, and she couldn’t get them if she wasn’t here when he came out of his coma. If he came out of his coma...

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“She’s right, Jackson. She needs to be here to consult with the doctors.” Becky’s eyes pleaded with him, and Reagan believed he would cave to Becky’s request. They seemed to care for each other like a family, so she couldn’t imagine him ignoring Becky’s pleas.

“The doctors only need her for one decision now. She can talk to them before we leave. As long as she’s accessible by phone and she sets up an ID verification before we leave, the doctor said he could check in with her about Gish’s condition and needs regularly. He would rather have the gunfire moved away from the hospital,” Jackson explained.

“What? One decision?” Becky fixed those worried eyes on her, and Reagan suddenly wished she could leave so she wouldn’t have to explain to Becky the impossible choice she had.

“About whether or not to approve surgery for English. It’s a complicated decision, and the doctor assured me I could take a little time to make it.”

Jackson crossed his muscular arms over his chest, a move meant to intimidate. Reagan drew herself up to her full height, her jaw set stubbornly and her anger shining through her eyes. She was not easily intimidated.

“What’s to think about? Your answer is yes to the surgery. He needs it.”

“It’s risky,” she argued.

“Not having surgery is riskier.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you had a medical degree which qualified you to make such a determination.”

She thought she detected a smirk on Luke’s face, but the man standing behind Jackson grinned outright at her sarcasm. Their reactions fueled her confidence in standing up to Jackson.

“I won’t be forced to make a decision by an unknown gunman who can’t get to me inside the hospital anyway. I don’t even know what English would want. I don’t know anything about him. I didn’t even know he had built a second family. This is all a shock to me, so forgive me if I need a minute to decide the right thing to do.”

Jackson looked ready to explode, but when he spoke, his voice was calm. “I’m not trying to force you to do anything in haste. I’m worried for Gish, but I’m also responsible for your safety. I have to consider every angle, and this is the best solution we have right now to keep everyone safe and stop whoever is targeting you.”

“I’m not your responsibility. I never asked you to protect me.”

He lifted his chin in English’s direction. “He did though. So you’re my responsibility whether you want to be or not.”

Before she could reply, he turned back to Becky and motioned to the two strangers behind him and Luke.

“This is Alex Crandall. He’s a good friend and served in my Army unit.”

Alex smiled kindly as he moved his hands to sign words Reagan recognized. She cried out softly in surprise, not expecting the bodyguard to be deaf or hearing impaired. Her cry drew everyone’s attention, but she only spoke to Alex using what little American Sign Language she knew.

“Nice to meet you. Do you read lips?”

“I’m mute, not deaf,” was his reply. “You can speak to me or use sign. Do you know someone who’s deaf?”

She smiled and shook her head. “I learned a little ASL for a book I wrote.”

“What kind of books do you write?”

Her smile widened as it often did when she spoke about her job. “Mystery.”

Jackson chose that moment to sign to Alex, surprising her again with the fact he was fluent in ASL. She didn’t catch all the words, but she thought he accused Alex of flirting with her. Alex grinned as the man behind him chuckled.

“I don’t understand,” Becky said as gaze between them all, trying to figure out what they were saying. “I don’t know sign language. How will I know what’s going on?”

“That’s what I’m here for, Ms. Lathan.” The man with Alex stepped forward to shake Becky’s hand. “Alex and I work together, ma’am. I’m Turner Drake. Alex can hear everything you say, but if he needs to tell you something, I can interpret. I promise you, we’re the best at what we do. There are others who work with our company who will be helping out, but you’ll meet them later. For now, Alex and I are on the protection detail. All we ask is for you to listen to us, do exactly what we say as soon as we say it, and trust us to keep you safe. If you need anything while we’re here, all you have to do is ask.”

Turner may look scary, but his gentle demeanor as he spoke to Becky put everyone at ease. Reagan wondered if she could request Alex and his company to protect her instead of Jackson and the other boys.

Becky released Turner's hand with a tired smile. "Any friend of Jackson's is considered family to us. Thank you for this. I hope we're overreacting about the threat against us, but since I don't think we are, I'm glad you're here."

"I still don't understand why I need to leave when you have Alex and Turner here. They can protect me as well as you can, right?"

Reagan couldn't resist challenging Jackson's plan. She'd never liked men who bossed women around as if they had every right to control their actions. She'd been taking care of herself too long to believe she needed a man now.

Jackson breathed heavy through his nose, as if he needed a minute to compose himself. "Our plan is to draw the gunfire and attacks away from the hospital. We can't do that if we don't get you away from here."

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Reagan tried not to feel proud at having touched a nerve, but the satisfaction puffed her chest up all the same.

“Fine. I’ll come. But I want to talk to the doctor myself before I leave. And I want to know what you’re doing to protect my mother in case the threat lands on her doorstep.”

“I can tell you Easton made to their house. Your parents are safe, and he’s explaining everything to your stepfather. We’re hoping he can help us watch out for your mom. With his law enforcement background, we figured he could be an ally for us.”

Reagan wanted to believe what he said, but she couldn’t shake the unease clenching her heart to think someone might hurt her parents.

“If they’re safe, why hasn’t my mother called me back? I left a message for her before the shooting. It’s not like her not to check in when I’ve called.”

“You may want to check your phone.”

She instantly pulled her cell from her pocket and felt her face flush to see she had a missed call and voicemail from her mother. Tapping the notification, she placed the phone against her ear, relieved to hear her mother’s voice.

“Reagan, I got your message, and I hope you’re okay. Your friend is here, and he told us what’s going on. I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine what you must be feeling to be at your father’s bedside making decisions for him after all this time. Sweetheart, you’ll make the right decision. Even with all of the anger you have against your father, you

will fight through it to figure out the right thing to do. Trust yourself, Reagan. I have faith in you, and English does, too, or he would have never put you in a position to have to do this. Call when you can, and be careful, honey. Be safe. I love you.”

Reagan blinked against the tears pricking the back of her eyes. She lowered her phone and hardened her gaze before she pierced Jackson with a stare. “I’ll come with you, but I insist on talking to the doctor first.”

Jackson nodded. “I’ll take care of it. It needs to be quick. The longer we stay here, the greater the risk of another attack.”

“I don’t need a lot of time. I know what I have to do.”

Chapter Eight

Reagan stood in the middle of the room, her body rotating in a slow circle as her eyes took in her surroundings. Of all the places she expected the boys to bring her when they left the hospital, a studio apartment over a bar wasn’t even on the list.

They had stashed their vehicles behind the building, but instead of going through the back door, they ushered her down the side of the building to come in the front. The three of them surrounded her in a shield of muscle and testosterone while they were outside. With the hour so late and not a glimmer of light anywhere, she doubted anyone noticed them even if there had been anyone around. She had a hard enough time knowing where to step in the dark area with them shielding her the way they did.

It wasn’t until she stepped through the door and heard the lock slide into place that she realized where they were and why they hurried her inside before she had a chance to look around. She likely wouldn’t have seen anything in the dark, but she’d written many crime scenes to have a visual of what was in the alley. The image caused a shiver to wrack her body, and she wrapped her arms across her chest as if she could

stop the chill dimpling her skin.

Ben and Luke disappeared, but Jackson walked behind the bar and poured whiskey in a shot glass. He pushed the glass toward her and motioned for her to take it. Her head shook instantly.

“I don’t drink. You take it. You probably need it more. It’s been a long day for me, so I can only imagine what it’s been like for you.”

He quirked an eyebrow in her direction before snatching the shot glass from the bar. With one quick toss of his head, he swallowed the whiskey as if he had taken a swig of tap water.

“Aren’t you afraid whoever ambushed English will come looking for us here?”

The question had nagged at her since she realized where they were, and when her curiosity bothered her, she couldn’t be settled until she figured things out. When she was researching a new book, she could fall down a web search rabbit hole faster than a race car running a competitive track.

“We won’t be here long. I thought you might want to freshen up and rest a little.”

She blinked at the unexpected show of consideration for her needs. Rest sounded heavenly, but she doubted she could slow her mind enough to sleep.

“You should have let me bring my car. My overnight bag is still in it.”

Jackson had insisted she ride with him when they left the hospital, and she’d been too exhausted to protest. The need to be away from Trinity Medical burned strong. Between being someone’s target practice and making decisions for English’s care, she had no fondness for the hospital. She’d started to feel suffocated, and

surprisingly, once she was in Jackson's truck, her anxiousness eased as did some of her fatigue.

"Luke and Ben moved your car to the garage we own."

"But they never asked for my keys. How did they move it?"

As soon as the question left her lips, she realized how naïve she sounded. Obviously these guys had no problem gaining access to anything, and for all she knew, they'd learned to break into cars at the same time they were potty trained. "Why would you take my car to the garage? Did someone damage it or something?"

Jackson shook his head and spoke as if he was explaining to a child why the sky was blue. "It's a secure location to hide your car. You won't need it until we're sure we've neutralized the threat against you. Until then, you'll need to be with one of us at all times."

Reagan moved over to the bar. "That doesn't change the fact I need some things from my overnight bag."

Jackson pierced her with a stare which she figured he used to establish his control. Only she wasn't afraid of him. If anything, his attempt to make her cower only angered her.

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“Look, I get you don’t want me here. I’m sure you have your feelings hurt because English chose me to be his medical proxy over you. But none of this is my fault, so you can stop punishing me for things that are beyond my control.”

“Your bag is upstairs in Gish’s apartment. Ben brought it after he dropped your car off at the garage. If there’s something else you need, tell me or one of the others.”

So many more questions swirled in her brain, but before she could voice them, Jackson jerked open a door beside the bar and stomped up a staircase, leaving her alone. Guessing they were the stairs leading to English’s apartment, she followed.

The stairs led to an open room that screamed bachelor pad. Scratched and worn wooden floors were streaked with dust, and the furniture was sparse. A wide recliner sat with a direct view of a big screen TV, but it leaned a little to the left and the cushions permanently dipped in the shape of the person who sat in it. A foldable TV tray was set up beside the recliner with an old cigar resting in an ashtray on top. A small kitchenette was on one side equipped with a refrigerator, two-burner stove and oven. It had limited cabinet space and counter space, which was eaten up by the presence of a coffee pot and toaster. On the other side was a king size bed with a fitted sheet stretched over the mattress, a blanket bunched up at the bottom, and a pillow at the head.

“Bathroom’s there.” Jackson pointed to a door across from the bed, and Reagan had to admit to herself she half-expected the bathroom to also be an open floor plan like the rest of the apartment.

“Your stuff’s by the door,” he added before dropping his frame to the recliner and

pulling his phone from his jeans pocket.

Reagan rolled her eyes before snatching the duffel bag from the floor and carrying it over to the bed. Pulling out a toiletry bag and change of clothes, she stepped into the bathroom and closed the door.

She fixated on her reflection in the mirror over the sink — or rather the simple piece of glass affixed to the wall without a frame or decorative border. The dark circles under her eyes matched her thick lashes and brought focus to the fatigue shadowing her dark eyes. Her skin was tinted with rosy splotches because she'd left without a stitch of makeup on her face, which also meant her high cheekbones and full lips were more pronounced without the contouring and coverage of concealer. Little tendrils of smooth ebony hair sprang out around her forehead and temple while the rest hung down her back in a tangled mess.

She'd left her home several hours ago, but it might as well have been days considering how mentally and physically exhausted she felt. She longed to talk with her mother and stepfather, to be reassured they were alright. Jackson had told her his brother said all was well with them, but she wanted to know for herself.

She rummaged through the toiletry bag and found a brush, chapstick, deodorant, a toothbrush and travel toothpaste she wanted. She guided the brush through the long strands until her hair fell in shiny waves over her shoulder. She brushed the strands up into her hand and secured them in a ponytail.

She changed from her tunic and leggings into jeans and a simple T-shirt. It felt good to be in something fresh which didn't carry the antiseptic smell of a hospital.

Her final move was to run the cold water into the sink and splash the refreshing liquid on her face. As she dried her skin, she peered over the hand towel she used into the mirror. Instead of seeing her reflection, her mind transported her back. She felt like

she was staring at six-year-old Reagan Barlowe with her perpetual loose ponytail and skinned knees. More tomboy than little girl, she had looked at her father with adoration.

English was larger than life in her innocent eyes. His hair had been dark and not the shocking white it was now. His eyes sparkled when they watched her, and she fancied they were actually more gold than hazel. He told her stories of adventures and excitement until she believed she would grow up to have those experiences herself. Hell, his stories may be the reason she wrote fiction today, but she refused to give him too much credit. Not when she had woken one cool morning, donned her jeans with holes in the knees and were too short on her lean frame, and went in search of English so they could go fishing.

But Traci was the only one there, her eyes bloodshot and watery, her lips quivering and her face splotchy from the tears she'd already shed. When she broke the news to her daughter that English had left, Reagan reacted in anger. She screamed at her mother, calling her a liar, saying she hated her. None of it was true, but her father was her hero and someone she wouldn't take her anger out on. Her mother bore the brunt of it as a result.

In the years since, her mother had always been there in her corner, and with each missed birthday and Christmas and softball game, Reagan's regard for her father shattered until she wanted nothing to do with his memory.

But the memories were there, hovering in her psyche like a spirit haunting her. She never allowed herself to mourn the lost time because she convince herself English didn't deserve her grief or her tears. He didn't deserve a damn thing from her.

And yet the six-year-old inside of her felt the burden of the last twenty-four hours on her shoulders. Her father still thought of her. Her father still had a glimmer of good inside of him. But he was dying. If she had made the wrong choice, she would be the

one to blame for killing him, and the past would forever choke her with regret.

The tears flowed. First only a drop or two slid down her cheeks. Then pools of salty tears flooded her eyes, and the sobs soon followed, wracking her body with a force she was unprepared for. She dropped to her knees, buried her face in her hands, and allowed the grief to escape. Her emotions spilled out in a prism of anger, sadness, longing, and remorse.

The tile was hard and cold, causing her knees to ache. Her head started to pound, and strands of her hair were dampened by her tears and clung to her skin like a web.

As she started to wonder how long the tears would run, a pounding on the bathroom door halted her sobs. She stared at the wooden rectangle wondering if someone was about to burst inside. Instead the deep voice screamed through the door with an urgency that had her raw emotions running to hide.

“Reagan! We need to move! Now!”

She pushed to her feet and rushed to the door. When she jerked it open, Jackson was no longer on the other side. She stepped out and saw him shoving items into a backpack.

“What’s wrong? Did the hospital call?”

“Grab your stuff. We’ve got to go.”

Something about his voice and the stiff way he held himself had Reagan moving first and saving her questions for later. She grabbed her things from the bathroom, shoved them back in the duffle, and zipped it as she hurried to the door where Jackson impatiently waited. With the pack hanging on his back, he swung open the door, and she was startled to see Luke standing at the other side.

“Front, alley and rooftop to the east. We’re surrounded,” he explained to Jackson, completely ignoring Reagan.

An icy chill crept down her spine. Those few words were enough for her to realize the person out to get her had found them.

“We should call the police. If these are the ones who attacked English, the cops need to arrest them. We can hide until they come.”

The men shot her a withering look which had Reagan clamping her lips tightly together.

“Ben?” Jackson barked out his absent brother’s name.

“Waiting.”

“Let’s go,” Jackson ordered.

His large hand closed over hers and pulled her into a run behind him. His free hand held a gun pointed toward the ground. Luke cleared the way also with his gun drawn. Reagan focused on her feet, trying not to trip as she struggled to keep pace with the boys.

“Where are we going?” she shouted, her voice breathy from her run down the steps back into the bar.

The boys ignored her as they rounded the corner on the other side of the bar where Ben waited with a door open. As she drew close, she saw the door led to a storeroom where they kept everything from napkins to booze. Once inside, Ben closed the door and secured it from the inside. Reagan started to believe the boys were planning to hide until the police came. But then Luke popped open a trap door on the floor. He hurried down the steps, and Jackson nudged her to follow his brother. She stared down and noted the steps led into darkness. Suddenly, she wasn’t ready to follow these men wherever they took her, despite their vows to protect her.

“What are we doing? Where are we going?”

Jackson gently gripped her chin and lifted her head until she looked him in the eye. “We’re keeping you safe. Gish built this tunnel for situations like this. The men who hurt him are here for you. We will take them down, but first, we’re getting you the hell out of here. Follow Luke. Ben and I are right behind you.”

A loud bang and what sounded like shattering wood caused Reagan to jump. She scrambled down the steps, praying she didn't trip as she went. Once she reached the bottom, she was surprised to see fluorescent lights illuminating the path. Luke barely spared her a glance before he took off down the path, leaving Reagan to follow.

When they reached the end, she wasn't surprised to see a ladder leading up to another trap door. What surprised her was how far away from the bar they were when they emerged. Luke moved along the side of a building and peered around the corner. He looked for only a moment before his already stoic expression hardened in displeasure.

Knowing Jackson and Ben were close behind her, she moved before Luke could stop her and peered around the same corner, careful to keep her body shielded from sight.

Two dark SUVs were parked outside the bar with shadowy figures milling around. She caught the glint of moonlight bouncing off metal, and her blood froze in her veins. Men dressed all in black carrying guns scrambled around to search for her with the intent to kill her. Seeing for herself, not just hearing it from the boys, was enough to terrify her.

A hand gripped her arm to pull her back, but she twisted out of the grasp. A door to one of the SUVs popped open, the car's interior light beaming like the sun against the dark night. That and the lone streetlamp casting an eerie glow fell on the face of the man who emerged.

Dressed in a suit, his dark hair slicked back from his forehead, his deeply tanned skin and broad frame feeling familiar, Reagan's breath caught in her throat when he turned his face briefly into the light.

"Oh my God!"

The whispered words barely escaped her lips before she was jerked back and

propelled forward to a waiting truck. With Jackson behind the wheel, Ben and Luke pushed her into the passenger seat and gave Jackson the signal to speed from the bar before she could tell the boys what she saw.

Chapter Nine

I'm putting this in a book.

The random thought skittered across her brain, almost making her laugh aloud. Even in danger and running for her life with her estranged father having a dangerous surgery, she was working. The story ideas never stopped coming.

The safe house Jackson had driven her to resembled one she would describe a serial killer living in: a wooden shack with a front porch that looked too fragile to hold their weight, shutters hiding the windows, and a yard which was more dirt than grass. The safe house sat on a steep hill at the end of a winding driveway which appeared more like a walking trail than something for motor vehicles. Towering pine trees lined the driveway, creating a spooky vibe fit for a haunted house at Halloween.

When she saw the shack, her imagination conjured up pictures of rats competing with bugs to overtake the inside, rustic furniture covered in sheets of dust which could never be swiped away, and water that ran from the faucet in sporadic rivulets of rust and mud.

Why am I trusting these people when they keep bringing me to places like this?

Jackson parked and stepped from the truck, but Reagan wasn't ready to get out. The drive to the shack had been long, and she had zoned out. She couldn't recall any of the routes or turns they'd taken. She hadn't noticed any landmarks. She wouldn't be able to find her way back to Trinity Medical Center without help from a GPS. She was alone with a man she'd known less than twenty-four hours, and he happened to

be the chosen son of the father who abandoned her. She should be frightened. She should be trying to escape.

Instead she sat very still. She replayed what happened at the bar in her mind over and over. After a while, she questioned whether she was sure about what she saw. She wondered if she should tell Jackson but couldn't bring herself to do it. One thing was certain — there was more going on here than she knew, and it was time she was brought out of the dark.

Jackson stomped onto the porch before turning in her direction. She could feel his stare piercing through the dark, questioning why she didn't follow him. If he could read her mind, he wouldn't want her to follow. As late as it was, it was time for Jackson to give her answers, whether he wanted to or not.

She emerged from the truck deliberately. Taking her time, she slid the strap of the duffel over her shoulder. She adjusted her shirt and made a show of smoothing the jeans which were rumpled from the drive. She could almost feel his annoyance at how slow she moved, and she had to bite back a satisfied smile. She wanted him to be annoyed. She wanted to be the reason his control of the situation was shaken.

By the time she joined him by the door, his hands had curled into fists, and his right foot tapped an uneven rhythm against the wooden planks of the porch. She stared at him expectedly, her gaze flitting from him to the door.

“Well?” She paused. “Are we going inside, or aren't we?”

He glared. She grinned. The moment was just what she wanted. If he was annoyed with her now, he would be more so when she started her questioning. He had made a point to tell her only what she needed to know, but that was going to change. She was getting her answers, even if it meant pushing him to the fringes of his control.

Jackson shoved a key into the doorknob first and then the dead bolt. She heard the locks release before he stepped to the right, motioning for her to move inside. Reagan crossed the threshold and jerked to a stop, her jaw dropping.

For all of the dilapidated signs she noticed outside, none of it translated to the interior of what she had thought was a shack. Shiny hardwood floors, luxurious seating, and brilliant lighting made her feel as if she'd crossed the threshold into a parallel universe.

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“It’s beautiful,” she breathed, unaware she’d spoken aloud.

Jackson stomped past her. “Your room is around the corner. Might as well settle and get some sleep while you can. This place is equipped with a top-of-the-line security system. You’re safe here.”

She was actually tempted to find her room and see if it was as extravagant as the rest of the so-called shack. But she couldn’t lose sight of her mission. There would be time to tour the house. The time for answers had run out. Stepping further into the great room, she tossed her duffle onto the coffee table which was a clear, bevel-edged glass atop a hand carved wooden base with curved legs. It was a beautiful table, but she kept herself from taking a few moments to appreciate the craftsmanship.

Jackson had stopped by the large windows, but she got the impression he wasn’t enjoying the view of the stars that were more brilliant than she’d ever seen them. He was checking out the property, looking for signs of trouble though he’d assured her they were safe.

She dropped her duffle and moved closer to him. “I don’t want to sleep. I want to talk. Or rather, I want you to talk.”

He didn’t even turn to face her. “I have to do a perimeter sweep, make sure everything is secure, and touch base with my brothers. Sorry I can’t keep you entertained.”

“You just said we’re safe here. That the security system has us protected. You can’t run from me, Jackson. I will have my questions answered.”

He scowled at her. “I am not running from you. And I don’t have to answer a damn thing.”

Reagan returned his fierce look. “I deserve to know the truth, and you know it. You’ve appointed yourself my protector. You could easily have had one of the others bring me here, but you did. Like it or not, you’re the one, Jackson. You’re it. You’re here, so you have to tell me what’s going on. My life is the one in danger, and if you want me to trust you, it’s time you bring me up to speed. Tell me everything, not just what you think I need to know.”

She held his gaze, refusing to look away from the intense dark eyes that were guarded and unreadable. Jackson was a man used to having everyone bow to his authority. She’d met his type before, so she knew she could stand up to the challenge.

“Ask me.”

Reagan sat on a chair and almost sighed at how the cushions molded to her body. “We can start with an easy one. Where are we?”

“It’s a safe house. Whenever we are helping someone and they need a temporary place to stay, we bring them here. Gish had it built. He purposely left the outside looking like it was neglected and not worth much, but he wanted the inside to be as nice and comfortable as he could possibly make it. We’ve all used this place from time to time as a getaway.”

“When you’re helping someone,” she repeated. “How often does that happen?”

“Every now and then.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “That’s not an answer.”

“It’s all I can give you. Are we done here?”

Reagan scoffed. “Far from it. When did you come to live with English?”

He exhaled loudly and shifted his weight between his feet. “Twenty years ago, give or take. I was thirteen.”

Twenty years. She had been twelve and had been without her father for six years. Her mother had remarried by then, and she had hoped to be adopted by Randall so she would no longer have an absentee father.

And at the same time, English was starting a new family with a son who was her age and lived not too far from where his first family resided. Reagan expected to feel angry, but instead her heart was hurt at learning the truth.

“Why would he take you in? Did he know your parents?”

“I didn’t give him a choice. I was sleeping in the alley behind the bar. Once after last call, I sneaked inside and hid in the bathroom until they closed up. Then I raided the fridge for food and slipped out the back. I did that for a few days before Gish found me in the alley. That was before we had the security system installed.”

“And he decided to let you stay and to be your dad?” Reagan heard the bitterness lacing her voice and winced. “I mean, I’m surprised he didn’t call Social Services.”

“If he had, they would have placed me back with my family, and I couldn’t go back. But he wasn’t a dad. He was my boss. I washed dishes to earn my keep.”

“And no one reported him for having a thirteen-year-old working in the bar? Or having a teenager who wasn’t his relative living there?”

Jackson's gaze grew steely. "No one. Because they knew where I came from. I was better there than where I was living. There's a reason why I ran away. If I hadn't, I would be dead now."

Reagan suddenly understood what Jackson wasn't saying. "You were abused, and Social Services did nothing about it?"

"They did. They sent me to a group home until they decided my parents weren't so bad. They put me back with them. I repeated the cycle twice before I decided I was done with the bruises and broken bones and cigarette burns. I don't know what the hell has gone on with you and Gish to make you hate him, but he saved my life. I owe him to find out who tried to take his."

His eyes flashed, and his jaw hardened. With his tall frame and imposing demeanor, he could intimidate anyone. All Reagan saw in that moment was the little boy who had never been treated kindly by those who should have loved him.

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She couldn't reconcile his version of who English was with what she knew her father to be like. The conversation wasn't going as she had played out in her mind, and she didn't know where to go from here.

"I want to know the truth." She wasn't even aware she said the words out loud until Jackson sat down across from her.

"I get it. I have a lot of questions too."

"He never told you about me."

Jackson stood back up suddenly and paced the room. She could sense his inner struggle because she felt it was oddly similar to hers. They were both deceived by the same man, a man they considered a father. But they weren't the same. The English he knew was not the man who abandoned her and her mother. So which version was the real man? And why did only one of them know who English really was?

A strange beeping shattered the intense moment. Jackson withdrew his phone from his pocket, checked the screen and answered. His voice had lowered enough to make his words indistinguishable. Reagan tried to hide her frustration. Jackson had only just started talking to her, and the interruption shattered the moment. He would likely shut down and retreat from her.

He turned around, and she met his gaze, already guarded and unreadable. Extending his arm, he waved the phone at her.

"Take it."

Thinking Becky must be calling from the hospital, Reagan snatched the phone from his hand. “Hello?”

“Reagan.”

The soft lift of her mother’s voice brought tears to her eyes. “Mom. Are you alright?”

“Oh, honey, we’re fine. Are you alright?”

She turned her back to Jackson, not wanting him to see her so emotional. She heard the sound of his boots against the floor as he crossed the room. The sound of a door closing told her he had stepped outside.

“I don’t know,” she finally responded. “I can hardly believe what’s happening.”

“Your friend, Easton, explained to us. I’m sorry, honey. I can’t believe you have to see English again under these circumstances. How is he?”

“Not good. He’s in surgery. They’re trying to relieve pressure to his brain. They hope it’ll be enough for him to regain consciousness, but they can’t be sure he won’t have permanent damage. I don’t understand any of this. Mom, did you know he has this whole other family here? Easton is not my friend, Mom. He’s English’s son. Sort of. He has four of them. I don’t think he’s ever adopted them, but he claims them as his sons.”

“No, I had no idea. I’m sorry you’re having to deal with this, but you don’t have to do this alone. Your father and I are coming to Fire Creek. We’re leaving first thing in the morning.”

Reagan sighed. “You don’t have to. Hearing your voice is all I needed. These guys have me scared that whoever put English in the hospital is coming after you guys too.

You're probably safer there."

Traci Dunlap paused for longer than was appropriate, and Reagan tensed, recognizing her mother's sign that she was about to deliver unpleasant news.

"Randall doesn't think so. It seems he's noticed a strange car parked in the neighborhood, and he's seen the car following us a couple of times. Nothing has happened, but with what Easton told us, he thinks it's better if we're all together. He wanted me to tell you to trust English's boys to keep you safe. We figured you were being stubborn and giving them a hard time, but this is one time you don't need to be so independent. We want you to stay safe."

"Dad trusts them? Does he know them? Does he know what's going on?"

With Randall Dunlap's career as a cop, he had connections and instincts which had served as inspiration for many characters in her novels. She wouldn't be surprised if he had known about English's secret life all along, but she would be surprised if he had known and not said a word to them.

"No, honey. I promise you we didn't know where English was or that he'd taken in the boys, but Reagan, he's not the monster you believe him to be. Easton said you're with one of his brothers. You should ask him about English."

"I tried. He told me a little bit, but he's not exactly into sharing. He's more interested in finding English's attacker. But, Mom, there's something else. We were at this bar English owns. We had to sneak out because these guys came for me. They were bad news, according to what the boys said, but I got a good look at one of them. Mom..."

The door opened, and Jackson stomped back inside. Reagan stopped talking. She'd decided not to tell him what she saw until she had a chance to ask her parents about it. Randall may trust the boys, and though she trusted Randall's judgment, she

couldn't bring herself to let her guard down around Jackson and the others.

"Maybe we should talk later," Reagan ended up telling her mother.

"We will. Stay safe. I love you, honey. Stay strong."

"Love you, too, mom."

She ended the call and handed the phone back to Jackson. "Your brother is escorting my parents to Fire Creek tomorrow. Looks like you're going to have all of us here to protect."

He shrugged. "Alex's guys will help us out with that. There's plenty of room here for everyone."

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She watched him head down the hallway. “Wait a minute. Where are you going now?”

He stopped with his back to her. “To bed. It’s been a long day. Don’t worry. Everything’s clear outside. The security system’s activated. My room is at the end of the hall. You can settle in any of the other ones. You should have everything you need.”

“Oh, no. I’m not going to bed now, and neither are you. We’re not done talking.”

He turned around on his heel. “We are done talking. It’s late. It’s been a long day. We both need sleep.”

Reagan didn’t realize her mouth gaped until after she heard him stomp down the hallway and close a door behind him. She snapped her mouth closed, her fury skyrocketing. Of all the rude, inconsiderate moves, he walked away as if she didn’t matter. She figured he resented the fact he had to protect her, but it wasn’t her fault or her choice. He had no right to disrespect her.

If he thought retreating to the bedroom meant he’d have an uninterrupted night of slumber, he had another think coming. Because no way was she going to let that happen.

Chapter Ten

As fatigue weighed heavy on his limbs, his tumultuous thoughts pressed on his mind. Jackson shed his boots, socks, and shirt as soon as the bedroom door closed behind

him. He padded on bare feet to the adjoining bathroom and started a steaming spray of water in the shower. Catching his reflection in the mirror, he noted the dark circles and deepened lines around his eyes. Dark stubble appeared along his jaw and darkened his upper lip.

He was used to working long days, either at the bar or on a mission. Today, though, had felt even longer. A familiar tightening in his chest had him rubbing a fist along his sternum. He hadn't felt anxiety much as an adult, but he had never forgotten it. It was a mixture of fear and dread that built when he knew his parents were on a rampage. They would accuse him of something ridiculous, and they used the made-up offence as an excuse to take out their misery on him. He'd been locked in closets, beaten with belts, burned with cigarettes, slapped with the backs of hands, punched with hard fists, and suffered broken bones, black eyes, and bruised ribs.

When he was a kid, he believed he actually was at fault, and no matter how much he tried to behave and meet their unrealistic standards, he'd always failed to escape their wrath.

The older he got, the more he realized his parents were broken and evil. That's when he started to plot ways to disappear when they were at their worst. He would make his way to the mall or to a park or to a treehouse tucked high up a sturdy tree on the outskirts of his neighbor's property. If they had figured out he camped there, they never said a word.

He hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his jeans, ready to shuck them and his underwear off in one quick maneuver, when the pounding on his bedroom door had his body stiffening. He wanted to ignore the intrusion, the warmth of the shower calling to him like a siren luring a sailor. The incessant knocking was grinding his nerves until he readjusted his jeans and stomped over to throw open the door.

"We're not done." Reagan stormed passed him, her silky hair fanning out to brush

against his chest.

He rubbed his sternum again, this time because of the tingle he felt on his skin instead of any anxiousness building inside him.

Jackson's hands landed on his hips as he regarded Reagan. Her cheeks were flushed with her fury, and her eyes had turned a fathomless black. Her clothes hung on her slender frame, and he figured if she didn't calm down soon, her pants might actually slide down her trim hips.

He would likely get a view of her long legs before she realized. She would bend down to retrieve them, giving him a look at her firm ass. She wasn't his type, but even he could appreciate a round, squeezable ass.

"I know it's late. I know we're tired. It's been a long day, but tomorrow we're going to be bombarded with people. Plans have to be made to identify the threat against English and me and to protect us and my parents. Before we do any of it, I need the truth. I need to know English as the man he is now and not the one who walked out on me and my mom. You're the only one I can ask. So you're going to have to hold out a little longer because I need answers."

She finally stopped pacing and turned to face him. From the shock radiating her expression, she hadn't expected him to be half-dressed. Her gaze flitted to the bathroom, where the shower water beat against the tile stall, and a deep blush tinted her cheeks and snaked down to her neck.

The instant color fascinated him, and he wondered how deep the blush went. If she undressed, would other parts of her body be the same shade of red?

"Oh, um, I didn't...I mean...I, um, I can...Oh, um..."

Jackson couldn't stop his grin at how disconcerted she was . It was the first time all day he found a reason to be amused. He closed the distance between them and enjoyed watching her eyes widen. He lowered his head until his lips hovered near the shell of her ear.

“I am going to take a shower and go to bed. You're welcome to join me. Otherwise, your questions will have to wait until tomorrow.”

He strode to the bathroom without waiting for her response. Purposely leaving the door open, he shucked the rest of his clothes and tossed them into the other room to tease her. He stepped under the spray of the shower, the pulse and heat of the water easing the tension of his muscles.

“I thought they were happy — English and my mom.”

Reagan's voice reached him with enough clarity to make him think she'd followed him into the bathroom. When he looked through the clouded glass of the shower stall, he saw he was alone. She must have stood just outside the bathroom, out of his line of sight. He half-expected her to retreat after what he'd said, but he was quickly learning she wasn't one to give up easily.

“He was gone a lot, but I believed my mom when she said he was gone for work. I never knew what he did, and it never occurred to me to ask. Whenever it was me and my mom, we stayed busy with dance and tee ball and whatever else I was active in. When he came home, we always did special things, like going to the zoo or hiking in the woods or spending all day at the fair. I was too young to understand none of it was normal for a traditional family.”

He added shampoo to his hair from the bottle that stayed in the shower. His motions were automatic because his attention was fixed on her. Or on her voice, rather. The husky lilt spoken in a low tone was soothing. Her story was hard to hear, but her

voice was something else altogether.

His tension melted away more from her than the hot water. He wanted to enfold her in his arms to feel the timbre of her voice reverberate against his chest. He imagined falling asleep to the sound. The words wouldn't matter as long as her tone was like this — soft, sweet, unguarded.

He shouldn't find her voice so calming, not with the pain lingering below the surface. English had hurt her. She wanted Jackson to know that, and all he could think of was the comfort and calm he felt listening to her.

“Of course, my friends asked me all the time where my dad was. I told them he was an astronaut. He was exploring space to find places where people could live other than Earth. I saw it once on a cartoon, and it made perfect sense to me. I mean if he was in space, he couldn't exactly pop back to Earth in time for my recitals. It explained why we did so many special things when he was around, because we had to make the most of our time together in case he had to stay in space permanently.”

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Jackson stood under the spray of water. The streams flowed from his head in all directions, sliding down his body, and he stayed that way as he listened.

“He missed my sixth birthday, but he came home two days after. He brought me the best presents. A new softball glove, a princess dress up kit, a painter’s easel with all the supplies I could want, a stuffed dog as big as I was — I named him Pluto, like the Disney character but also an homage to my dad the astronaut. He took us to my favorite restaurant, and they brought me a big piece of chocolate cake with vanilla ice cream. We shared it, and I remember laughing so hard. I don’t remember what was funny, but it was the best time of my life.”

She had a gift for storytelling, which explained why she was a good writer. The fact that this story was real made his heart squeeze in his chest. He wanted her to continue talking, but he wanted this story to stop. There was a reason she was telling him this, and his gut churned as he waited for her to say what it was.

“The next day, I woke up early, all excited about what we were going to do. I had school, but I was sure he was going to let me skip so we could go fishing. I mean, our time together was so rare we couldn’t let school interfere, you know? I sneaked into my parents’ bedroom wanting to surprise them, but English was already gone. I shouldn’t have been surprised because he was in and out of my life so much that I had come to expect it. But I could feel something was different this time. And not a good different.”

The water cooled, and Jackson shut off the shower. He reached for a fluffy black towel to dry off before wrapping the terry cloth around his waist where it rested low on his hips. With a swipe of his hand across the glass, he cleared the steam from the

mirror to see his reflection. But he wasn't seeing it, not when his mind's eye pictured a sweet little six-year-old afraid for something she didn't understand.

"My mom told me he left for good. I didn't believe her. I was so mean to her. I was too young to realize she was as sad as I was, probably more so. The more she insisted English wasn't coming back, the more I denied what I was hearing. I never saw English again. Not until I came to the hospital."

Jackson had not brought clothes to change into after his shower, so he stepped from the bathroom in only his towel. His gaze fell to Reagan where she leaned against the wall to his right, one leg folded with her foot resting against the wall. Her head was downcast, her eyes fixed on a spot on the floor directly in front of her. Her cheeks were stained with a rosy tint, so he knew she watched him out of the corner of her eye. His state of undress made her uncomfortable, but she was doing her damndest not to show it.

Jackson wasn't sure why he started to speak, but once the words fell from his mouth, he didn't bother to stop them. "My dad was always around. When he could find some sucker to hire him, he would work long enough to earn liquor money, but he'd do something stupid like show up to work drunk. He'd get fired. He'd come home and yell and beat my mom. She would be strung out on whatever drug she could get for selling out her body. She would either pass out during the beating, or she'd go crazy and fight back. Eventually, they'd get tired of beating each other and start beating me. If they could find me, that is."

A tear dripped from her eye and slipped down her cheek. "I'm sorry. I'm glad you were able to find a safe place with English. It's hard for me to think of him as a protector of children when he abandoned me."

"He wasn't. A protector of children. Not then. He was cold and angry. But he never took it out on me. I was a pain in his ass, but I had nowhere else to go. He never

wanted me or my brothers, or so he made us believe.”

Her head snapped up, her eyes too wide in her face and too shiny with unshed tears. “Why are you so loyal to him? Why continue to work for him after you grew up?”

He was startled to realize how easy it would be to tell her. The truth hovered on the tip of his tongue, but years of holding on to a secret formed a habit he couldn’t break.

Stomping away from her, he pulled a pair of jeans from the closet and slid them on under his towel. Once they were buttoned and zipped, he whipped off the towel and dropped it on the floor. He was aware of her eyes on him, studying his every move as if the answers she sought would reveal themselves.

“We stayed because English taught us how to survive. He taught us that we had the skills to keep others from living lives similar to the ones we escaped. I don’t blame you for wanting to know why English left you. The problem is that English’s story is not mine to tell.”

“Only he can’t tell me. He may never be able to tell me if he doesn’t wake from his coma. He could die on the operating table, and I would never have answers. Whoever beat him may kill me, and I will never know the truth. How is that fair? How can I have a glimpse into his life but never understand what I’m seeing? I can ask the other boys, but they won’t help me. They’ll take their cue from you. You are it, Jackson. You’re the only one who can put me out of my misery, and if you refuse to tell me the truth, you’re not the good man people keep telling me you are.”

The anger and hurt marring her lovely face mirrored his own raging emotions. English lied to him too. He never spoke of the daughter he abandoned. Jackson thought he knew all there was to know about English’s past, but in the last twenty-four hours, his belief had shattered. He wanted answers as much as Reagan did. So why did telling her the truth feel just as wrong as it did right?

“Shit!” Jackson slid his hands down his face before catching her gaze again. Damn, those eyes were hypnotic. He’d never had a problem resisting a woman before, but Reagan had a way about her which drew him in even when she outwardly pushed him away. She was a walking contradiction, and he was too tired to try and figure her out anymore.

“What happens when I tell you the truth and you don’t believe me? You’ll probably think I’m lying to you to shut you up.”

She pushed off the wall and closed the distance between them. Stopping directly in front of him, she tilted her head back to stare at him. Her scent wafted around him in a feminine, sexy cloud.

“I’ll know if you’re lying.”

He didn’t have the heart to tell her that with his training, no one could figure out when he was lying, not even English and his brothers. She believed she’d played him. She tore at his heartstrings, so she could manipulate him. It was the oldest trick in the book when it came to the games women played with him. Usually, he never indulged them. This time, he wanted her to see her ploy backfire.

“Your father is a former CIA operative known as Legend. I believe he left you and your mother to protect you both from his life with the Agency, and I think someone from his former life is using you and your mother to seek revenge against him. When I met him, he’d already left the CIA, but he continued to contract his services to people who found themselves in trouble with no way out. When my brothers and I were old enough to understand, he trained us to take up his work as the new Legends. We help those who can’t help themselves.”

He didn’t wait to see her reaction. He’d reached his limit of what he could endure from this day. Turning on his heel, he left a slack-jawed Reagan alone in his bedroom

while he hurried to the kitchen for the cold beer waiting for him in the refrigerator.

Chapter Eleven

He was messing with her.

Reagan couldn't prove it, but with the tall tale he had spun, she didn't need evidence. He played her, but it backfired. Oh, he did shut her up, which she suspected was his ulterior motive, but he didn't deter her. She was more convinced than ever that English had a reason for keeping her in the dark, and Jackson knew exactly what the reason was and why someone was using it to justify coming after her.

This is why she couldn't bring herself to trust them with what she saw at the bar. If Jackson had leveled with her, she would have shared what she knew. But instead, she was on her own until her mother and stepfather arrived. But they wouldn't arrive until morning.

After Jackson stormed out of the room, she seethed and stormed into one of the guest bedrooms. She hadn't come out since. Sleep eluded her, but she forced herself to crawl under the covers and rest even if her eyes wouldn't close. The mattress molded to her frame like a cushioned cocoon, and the pillow formed the perfect contour to support her neck and cradle her head. Her foot, however, rotated back and forth, bunching the covers around her legs. The nervous twitch was the only outward indication of the jumble of thoughts which refused to let her be.

Her stomach rumbled. She rolled her eyes and turned to her side. The growl sounded again from deep in her gut, telling her it would not be ignored. She reached over to where her phone rested on the side table and tapped the screen, stifling a groan as the digital numbers announced it was 3:30 in the morning. Too late for dinner. Too early for breakfast. Too close to either for a snack. But the rumbling wouldn't be quieted. She needed to eat.

She hadn't heard Jackson moving around in a while, so maybe she could sneak a bite from the kitchen and avoid him altogether. As she slipped from beneath the covers, she stopped long enough to dress before venturing out into the dark house. She bumped into the wall twice trying to navigate her unfamiliar surroundings in the dark, and she wished she had brought her cell phone to use for illumination. Fortunately, an eerie light streamed through the slats of the blinds covering the living room windows. The light held too much of a bluish glow to be from the moon or stars...security lights, maybe. It didn't matter. Once she stepped into the room, the light lit her path and allowed her to catch the movement of a shadowy figure at one of the windows.

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A scream tore through Reagan's thoughts, but when she opened her mouth, only a faint gasp escaped. Her heart stopped a moment before beating a frantic staccato against her chest.

"What are you doing up?"

She instantly recognized Jackson's voice. Her knees threatened to buckle, so she clung to the back of the first chair she came to.

"You scared me," she finally managed to say. "I thought you were asleep."

He stepped closer to her, the shadows slipping away to allow the light to illuminate his face. "I was. I don't need much sleep."

"Must be nice," she said sardonically. "I like to get my full eight hours, but it wasn't happening tonight."

"So go back to bed."

Her stomach chose that moment to let loose a growl to rival a grizzly bear's, and she was thankful for the low light to hide her flushed cheeks. She thought his lips curled in the slightest of smiles, but she couldn't be sure.

"Kitchen's stocked. Feel free to flip on the light switch as you go."

She doubted he could see her glare, but she felt better shooting one at him. She hadn't made it farther than a few steps when she paused and turned back in his direction. He

stood in the same spot watching her leave. She might regret pushing his buttons later, but she couldn't let this opportunity pass.

“You didn't have to lie. I know I pushed you for answers, but making up a story wasn't necessary. I just wanted the truth. If I understand more about English and what's going on, I could be some help to you and your brothers. You'd be surprised at all of the random knowledge I have from the researching a book and at how much reasoning it takes to work out the plot to a mystery novel. I could be a great resource for you.”

She didn't expect him to reply. Having said her peace, she was already heading into the kitchen when he spoke. The quiet, gentle tone was one she hadn't heard from him. It enveloped her like a warm hug, and the dim light and quietness of the house added an intimate feel and caused goose bumps to pop up on her skin.

“I didn't lie. Not a lot of people know anything about what I told you, but you can ask Becky. She'll confirm it's all true.”

Her eyes slid closed, and she couldn't bring herself to turn around and confront him. “So, you're saying my father was a spy, and he raised you, Luke, Easton and Ben to be what? More spies or vigilantes or something?”

“Vigilantes is close, but we've never liked the word. That's why we decided to name ourselves after Gish.”

“Right. The Legends...isn't that what you said? People called him Legend. Well what kind of legend abandons his wife and daughter without an explanation?”

“The kind who wants to protect his wife and daughter from the danger he faced with his job. It takes courage to do what he did.”

She whirled around, her hair slapping her cheek with the sudden move. “Courage? You’ve described him as some big, bad spy who had such a stellar reputation that he earned a one-of-a-kind nickname. So what couldn’t the big, bad spy protect us himself? Why didn’t he come back after he retired? Why did he decide to raise boys in a crummy bar instead of being with his daughter who adored him and wished she could have an adventure with him one more time? That’s not courage, Jackson. That’s cowardice.”

She wasn’t sure what she expected from him. Anger at her accusation. Sympathy for her pain. Anything except him completely ignoring her rant.

“Gish is out of surgery.”

She blinked at the sudden change in subject. “How do you know? How is he?”

“Becky called. He’s critical, and they won’t know for a while if the surgery helped or hurt.”

“Why didn’t you come and get me when she called?”

“I thought you were sleeping. I figured I could update you in the morning. There’s nothing more you can do now anyway. It’s a waiting game.”

“That’s not the point. I needed to know he made it out of surgery. His life is in my hands, and I’ve been...afraid I made the wrong choice. And you decided I would rather sleep than know my father didn’t die on the operating table. I mean...I just...I can’t...”

Reagan angrily swiped at the tears that started to fall, but she hated the sobs wracking her body. She wasn’t one to cave into her emotions, but this wave took over, violently shaking her body. She couldn’t have Jackson witness her show of weakness, not if

she wanted him to take her seriously. Whirling around, she was ready to run back to her room when a firm grip on her arm stopped her. She was gently spun around and enveloped in a strong, warm embrace. Her body stiffened until a hand smoothed her hair from her face and pushed her head forward to rest against a broad chest.

The steady rhythm of Jackson's heartbeat thumped in her ear. She started to pull away, but his arms held her steady. Unable to stop herself, she collapsed against him and gave in to the tears. She cried as if she was releasing years of grief and hurt through her tears. Her sobs raged against the unfairness, not caring that this stranger was witnessing her vulnerability. Eventually her life would return to normal, and this man, his brothers and her father would cease to be a part of her world.

The tears seemed unending, but eventually her sobs eased into sniffles and hiccups. The force of the tears lessened, but she didn't pull away. She told herself it was because she didn't want to face him after her outburst. She imagined derision on his face at having to deal with a hysterical woman.

"I was eighteen before I found out about Legend. I had a hard time believing him too. I left for basic training the next day hating him. I guess that's why he decided not to tell me about you. The only reason Becky knew was she happened to be with him when he was drunk and started reminiscing. He told her that leaving you and your mom was his greatest regret, but he couldn't risk the danger of his job touching either of you. Keeping secrets is what kept him alive, and I guess he'd gotten so used to it, he never could bring himself to tell the truth to those closest to him. At least, that's Becky's theory."

Reagan suspected Becky was right, but she wasn't ready to be understanding. English hurt her when he walked away, and God help her, she wanted him to be the one to ask her for forgiveness.

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“You don’t seem to hate him now. You don’t even act angry.” She mumbled the words against his shirt, so she wasn’t sure he understood her until he responded.

“I had time to think while I was away. I’m not sure when I stopped being angry, but I do remember being curious. I wanted to know more about what he did and how he served. Being in the Army made me realize I wanted to serve, but I wasn’t cut out to be a lifer in the military.”

A sudden realization had her pulling away. She took several steps back so she could look him in the eye without straining her neck.

“You’re CIA too?”

“No. Gish made a lot of sacrifices because of the CIA, and the Agency screwed him over. It’s not the life I wanted either. That’s when I found out how he was still helping people, just on his own. I came up with the idea of him training me and the others to take up his work. It’s hard to believe, but there it is. The truth you wanted.”

She shifted her gaze to stare unseeingly at a point beyond him. “The truth I wanted...” She wasn’t aware she repeated the words out loud. “I wanted to believe I was right in hating him. I believed it made me stronger. I wanted to prove to him I didn’t need him. Now I find out he’s not evil. None of you are. I don’t know what to believe anymore or how to feel about any of this.”

“So don’t. Don’t feel anything about any of this. Don’t try and figure it out now. Right now, you eat. You sleep. The rest will sort out later.”

She snapped out of her trance. Tilting her chin up, she peered into his face. His features had softened, and his eyes watched her with a kindness she hadn't noticed before. She'd thought him attractive, but why hadn't she noticed how handsome he really was? Looking past his rough edges and tough exterior, she could imagine him as the young boy escaping the rotten life he'd been dealt and making his own way. She could empathize with how he must have felt to find out his mentor had a secret which somehow changed everything.

"Damn," she whispered.

"What is it?"

A ghost of a smile curved her lips. "Well, despite my better judgment, I'm starting to like you, Jackson Moore."

He smirked. "Yeah, Easton says I grow on people like a fungus."

Reagan chuckled. "Maybe so, but I'm starting to realize that I haven't thanked you. For coming to my aid with those guys at my house and for protecting me at the hospital. I doubt we'll ever be friends or anything, but I do appreciate what you've done for me and for my family."

He shifted his weight between his feet, and though his expression remained unreadable, she could see how uncomfortable her gratitude made him. He finally shrugged.

"No big deal. It's what we do."

"Riiigghhtt," she teased. "I think you and I have very different views of what is considered a big deal."

She decided to put him out of his misery and went into the kitchen before he could reply.

Chapter Twelve

Reagan woke feeling the itch. Her nerves hummed, and her thoughts were already running in several directions. Having left her laptop at home left her without an outlet to quench her need to write. Her characters called to her, urging her to finish the mystery which remained unsolved until she put words to paper.

She sat up in her bed, feeling the last remnants of fatigue lingering in her muscles. Even with her emotional breakdown and her filling snack, sleep had been a long time coming. Her body could use a couple more hours, but her mind wasn't going to let that happen.

Hoping to quiet her characters' voices in her head, she went about her morning routine — making the bed, using the toilet, and stepping into a warm shower. The problem was her best ideas were often born while she was in the shower, and this morning was no different. After toweling away the water dripping from her hair, she braided the long tresses and dressed. If she had to stay in hiding much longer, she was going to need some things from her house, and when she padded through the cabin on her way to the kitchen, she'd made up her mind to tell Jackson.

The house was quiet, but she suspected Jackson was lurking somewhere. When she stepped into the kitchen and found him already there sipping coffee, she drew up short. After their moment last night, she felt too vulnerable. She faced his direction, but she couldn't bring herself to look him in the eye.

“Breakfast is warming in the oven. Coffee's hot. Easton checked in. They're making good time, so your mom and stepdad should be here within the hour.”

Reagan nodded and forced her feet to move over to the oven. With her hand encased in an oven mitt, she removed the cast iron skillet from the rack, surprised at its weight, and placed it on the stove. Her nose was assailed with the rich aroma of onions and peppers surrounding the bits of sausage and scrambled egg covered with mounds of melted cheese. She could almost hear her arteries clogging from the greasy, heavy meal, but the saliva building in her mouth reminded her she didn't care.

"This looks delicious. Did you do this?"

"No. The phantom cook which haunts this place fixed it while we were sleeping."

She shot him a glare, which almost turned into a smile at the hint of a smirk twisting his lips. To hide her own amusement, she stuck out her tongue before finding a plate to pile high. Adding a drop of milk to her cup of coffee, she eagerly sat at the farthest end of the table from Jackson and dived in. She moaned at the explosion of flavors hitting her tongue, and she was already shoving another bite in her mouth before she'd completely swallowed the first one.

"I'm surprised you're so hungry. It wasn't too long ago that you ate a snack."

"I have a healthy appetite," she retorted, shoving another forkful of food in her mouth. Her eyes rolled back in her head as she moaned again. "Where did you learn to cook like this?"

He abruptly stood and moved over to the sink to rinse out his cup. "I was on my own a lot as a kid, and I spent my teenage years in a house full of men. I had to learn to cook if I wanted to survive."

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She studied his muscular back and the broad shoulders filling out his simple T-shirt. The man had to own nothing but T-shirts in every color imaginable since they're all he seemed to wear.

"I never learned to cook. My mom said I never had the patience. She would try to teach me, but I kept getting distracted. She finally gave up and decided I needed different activities to keep my mind busy. Girl Scouts, piano lessons, softball, cheerleading, tennis, creative writing club, dating. I learned to live off frozen food and takeout in college, which serves me well now. My mom tries to stock my freezer whenever she comes to visit."

Jackson dried his cup and replaced it in the cabinet. Then he moved to the door on the other side of the room. "I'm going to do a perimeter sweep."

"Wait!" She waited for him to turn back with a curious look. "Is there a computer I can use?"

He eyed her suspiciously. "What for?"

"I need to work."

He quirked an eyebrow as if he didn't believe her. She released a frustrated sigh.

"I don't expect you to understand, but when I'm working on a book, the ideas won't leave me alone until I write them down. It'll help keep me sane until my parents get here. I have a deadline coming up, and I have to work when I can considering what's happening. I left my laptop behind, so I need to borrow a computer."

“How can you work if you’re stuff is at home?”

“Everything is saved to cloud storage. I can work from anywhere with an internet connection. I’d work to on my phone, but the keyboard is too small. I can type faster with both hands instead of only my thumbs.”

His arms crossed his chest, a sign she’d started associating with his stubbornness. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Why not? Do you expect me to sit here and do nothing while you catch the bad guys?”

“I expect you not to let anyone track your location because you use the internet.”

“If you think I’m being tracked, why let me use the phone? Plus, you can’t tell me with all the security you have around here that your laptop doesn’t have a dozen firewalls and encryptions to protect it?”

“How do I know you won’t go poking around my files?”

This time, she was the one to cross her arms over her chest. “Because I don’t care about your secret stash of porn. I just want access to my book.”

She expected him to keep fighting her on the issue, and a small part of her was disappointed he didn’t. Instead he shrugged as if resigning himself to giving her what she wanted.

“I’ll talk to Luke and make sure all of the connections are secure enough for you to use one of the laptops for work. He and Ben should be here about the time Easton arrives with your mom and stepdad.”

He turned to leave as if the matter was settled.

“Wait! That doesn’t help me now. It’s better if I can write when inspiration strikes me.”

She would almost hear his brain churning with possible excuses to shut her up. Finally, he stomped over to the kitchen counters and began rifling through drawers. He closed one with a resounding thud and turned to hold up a notepad and stick ink pen triumphantly. He slapped them on the kitchen table next to her.

“Use these.”

Reagan watched him, slack-jawed, as he left her alone in the kitchen without another word.

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Jackson completed his turn around the perimeter and paused at the large pine tree at the front of the cabin. He opened an app on his phone and checked the security cameras for anything unusual he might have missed during his walk through. Usually, he would have even rewind the feed to check the video recorded during the night, but since he hadn’t been able to sleep, he’d watched the cameras to pass the time.

He expected his thoughts to be consumed with English and finding his assailant. Instead, he thought of little else but the woman under his protection. Reagan was under his skin. She pushed his buttons, and when he thought he might strangle her, she became vulnerable, and his protective streak rose to the surface. He didn’t want to like her, and he definitely didn’t want to become attached to her.

He needed his brothers to show up. Ben could work his charm on Reagan and win her over, leaving Jackson to focus on the most important case of his life.

A pang ached in his chest, and he rubbed a fist against his sternum until it faded. He didn't allow himself to ponder where the sudden ache came from. He didn't want to know. Forming any kind of connection to Reagan was a bad idea, one he knew better than to entertain.

More for a distraction than to work the case, he called Luke for updates.

“Hey, man, have you talked to Easton?” Luke said without bothering with any kind of traditional greeting.

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“Not since he told me their ETA.”

“He doesn’t think the mom knows anything about English’s past, but he suspects the stepdad knows something and has been keeping it to himself. We need to question him without the women around. If he knows something helpful, he won’t tell us with them listening.”

Knowing Randall Dunlap’s background in law enforcement, Jackson wasn’t surprised to learn the man may have suspicions about his wife’s ex. Jackson doubted Dunlap knew the whole truth, but he couldn’t rule out the man knew something useful, even if he didn’t realize its relevance.

“Leave it to me. I have an idea of how to get him alone,” Jackson said.

“I want in. We can let Ben and Easton watch the women. I’m tired of waiting around for a lead to drop out of the sky. I want to find the bastards and show them when they come for one of us, they come for all of us.”

Luke’s temper was legendary, but the venom dripping from his words went deeper than Jackson had ever heard before. He understood it all too well.

“I can’t believe Gish was attacked at our bar, and we can’t find one lead as to who did it.”

“I did find one thing. I was going to tell you when I got to the cabin. Ben found something in English’s box that he keeps in the closet. It was a picture of him and another guy I’ve never seen before. I did a reverse image search and came up empty.

So I ran the photo through some age progression software and tried the image search again. I got a lead. His name is Garth Penroy. He's retired from the FBI and living in Mobile."

Mobile was a good five-hour drive from Fire Creek. They couldn't afford to waste time getting there if this failed to give them a lead.

"I called him and spoke to his wife. She hung up on me when I told her I was calling about Gish. Makes me think she knows something or her husband does and she's trying to keep us away from him."

"It feels like a long shot."

Luke sighed. "It's the best we've got. Damn, Jackson, if English ever wakes up, I'm going to give him an ass chewing for keeping us in the dark on all of this."

"He had his reasons," Jackson returned though he shared Luke's sentiments.

"You mean reason, and she's sitting right there at our cabin. How's it going babysitting the ice princess?"

"Ice princess?"

"Yeah," Luke drawled. "She was cold as ice when she got to the hospital to see Gish. She doesn't care that he's in a coma, and she's the one in charge of his care. It's bullshit."

Jackson thought of the woman who appeared so tough to the world but had broken down in his arms last night. "She cares, but she's been hurt by him. The English we know is not the one she knew."

“I’m starting to think we don’t know him either. Secret daughters, unknown enemies coming after him, him shutting us out. We’re a family, man, and he shit all over it, like we don’t matter. How can you not be pissed?”

“I was. I am. But I’m starting to believe nothing is as it seems, and until we start finding the truth, we can’t take anything at face value.”

“Holy shit. She got to you, didn’t she?”

Jackson scowled. “Who are you talking about?”

“The ice princess. Tell me you didn’t tap that last night, and now you’re on her side?”

“No! You’re talking out your ass. No, I didn’t have sex with her, and there aren’t sides. Dammit, if there were, I would be on English’s. Nothing says he has to tell us anything because we made some makeshift family, and for all we know, he chose the ice princess to make his medical decisions to save us from having to. I’m telling you there’s more we don’t know than we do, so stop jumping to conclusions like some old gossip spreading shit about her neighbors. I need your head in the game and not up your ass.”

He heard the click and swore under his breath. When Luke got angry and out of control, his go-to reaction was avoidance. When he was a kid, he ran away more times than they could count. In this case, he hung up on Jackson. He had a hard time dealing with the world when it overwhelmed him with problems. Luke would cool off on the drive to the cabin, and he would never talk about his reaction again. It may not be healthy behavior, but Jackson had never known his brother to be any other way. This time, he couldn’t fault his brother for lashing out like he did. Everything they were learning about English warped their view of the man who molded them into the men they were today.

And then there was Reagan. The ice princess who wasn't as cold as she appeared. He remembered how she felt against him as if she was still there in his arms. She had melted against him as if she was made specifically for his embrace. Her hair smelled of vanilla and was soft as it brushed against his arm. Her body was lean with subtle curves and toned muscles. Her eyes could be dark brown and unreadable one minute and full of amber fire the next. Her skin was smooth with a hint of a tan.

Jackson shook his head to stop his thoughts from going down that road. Reagan was off limits, and the sooner he convinced his body of the fact, the better off he'd be. He pushed his feet forward to make another perimeter sweep, hoping to distract himself and avoid more alone time with his mentor's daughter.

Chapter Thirteen

Jackson was right.

As much as Reagan hated to admit it, his idea of using paper and pen was exactly what she needed. The old school tools unlocked her creativity. Though she couldn't quite remember where she left off with her book, she was able to move forward with the plot, creating twists and clues which carried her closer to the end. Her hand was aching, and she'd had to stop a few times to massage a cramp from the spot between her thumb and forefinger. But she felt good to have made progress amidst the chaos in her life.

"I should have guessed you would find a way to write."

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She froze as the melodical tone washed over her, its familiar sound like a balm to her frazzled soul. Dropping her pen, not bothering to stop it from rolling off the table onto the floor, she whipped around to make sure her hearing wasn't misleading her. Seeing Traci Dunlap standing in the doorway of the kitchen, her smile warm and bright enough to outshine the fear lurking in her eyes, Reagan almost cried. She jumped from her chair and all but tackled her mom in a tight hug.

"Oh, my God. I'm so glad to see you. Are you okay? You look okay. I was so scared with all the stuff happening around here, and they thought whoever was after me and English might come after you. It's been overwhelming, and all I could think of was what if I never saw you again."

The words tumbled from her mouth without her registering what she even said. If she let go of her mom, she could explode in a mess of emotions. Thankfully, Traci wrapped her daughter in a tight embrace and waited for Reagan to run out of words. Even then, they stood, hugging each other in silence.

Traci was the first to break the quiet. "Your dad and I are fine. Easton filled me in on everything that's been going on, and I couldn't get here fast enough. I'm sorry this happened to English, and I'm sorry he put you in this position. But from what Easton told me, you are handling it all fine. English came through his surgery, and there's nothing more you can do for him."

"I know. But why doesn't it feel like it's enough? It's not fair. He doesn't deserve to have me care like this. He left us, Mom. He abandoned us, and now he pulls me into this life. Mom, there's so much we didn't know."

“I know, sweetheart. We have a lot to talk about.” Traci tightened her embrace, and Reagan allowed herself to find comfort in the moment.

“Can I get in on that hug?”

Reagan looked over her mother’s shoulder and smiled at her stepdad. “Of course. It’s good to see you, Dad.”

After a moment reveling at having her parents with her, she pulled back to look into their faces. They complemented each other so well. Both were tall and slender. Her mom’s dark hair was highlighted with streaks of silver. Her stepdad’s hair was lighter with subtle gray tones, receding a bit from his forehead. Traci was creative but reserved while Randall was outgoing but practical. Traci yearned for spontaneity, but Randall preferred routine. But with their differences, they also had much in common. Both liked to cook and read. Both enjoyed hiking excursions and fishing. Both valued family, and both loved each other more than any two people Reagan ever met. She needed that right now to ground her.

“I have so much to talk to you about. Where are the boys?”

Traci studied her daughter curiously. “Boys?”

Reagan rolled her eyes. “That’s what Easton and his brothers call themselves. Only they’re not really brothers. It’s complicated, which is why I wanted to explain. I would just rather the three of us talk without the others listening.”

“They’re outside. Easton said they wanted to give us a few minutes, but I think they also wanted to talk without us listening,” Randall said.

“It won’t last long,” Reagan said wryly. “Come on. We can talk in the living room.”

Once they were settled — her parents on the couch and Reagan on a leather recliner, Randall regarded her intently, concern clouding his expression.

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

Reagan opened her mouth to reassure them, but the words clogged her throat. Instead, she sighed, feeling her shoulders droop under the weight of her stress.

“Physically, yes. But I don’t understand any of this. I don’t know who to trust or what to believe. I haven’t seen English since I was six years old, but his life is in my hands and his past has put me in danger. And then there’s what happened at the bar.”

“What do you mean?” Traci asked.

Reagan started her recount with being shot at while at the hospital, leading to the need for her to go into hiding. She told her parents how they went to the bar for her to freshen up and were forced to leave when armed gunmen showed up.

“No one seems to know who’s after me or why, but that’s not the most bizarre part.”

“What are you talking about?” Randall asked.

Reagan hesitated, suddenly doubting what she saw. She took herself back to that night, in the alley outside the bar, peering around the corner to see the men milling about in the front, armed with assault rifles, dressed all in black. She recalled seeing the one man stepping from the vehicle under the beam of a street lamp. He spoke with authority to the armed men, and they listened to him. He didn’t act as someone in danger or someone being coerced. She remembered the moment she recognized him, the thick brows shadowing his narrow eyes, the crooked nose and the square jaw she once thought distinguished.

Now she didn't know what to think. Her memories were clear. She saw him, and there was no mistaking what she saw, even if she couldn't make sense of it.

"Dad." She caught Randall's eyes and held his stare. "The armed men who came to the bar...they were talking with someone. A man, and I could tell he was the one in charge. Dad, it was Terrence Johnson. Do you have any idea why Terrence would be involved in this?"

"Who the hell is Terrence Johnson?"

The voice thundered through the room, startling Reagan violently enough to jump to her feet. She whirled around to see Jackson standing in the doorway leading from the kitchen. His face hardened in a mask of anger, and a muscle in his jaw ticked. He was flanked by the others, Luke on his right, Easton on his left, and Ben behind him. They all watched her with a combination of shock, fury and distrust.

Distrust. The thought stirred her own ire. They considered her untrustworthy for holding back something from them, but they'd given her no reason to trust them with what she knew. The fact they were loyal to her deadbeat father was enough to make her question their integrity. How dare they act like she was the one in the wrong.

"This is a private conversation between me and my parents. You had no right barging in here and demanding anything from me," she snapped.

"You knew something about the attack at the bar and didn't tell us? The ones who are risking their lives to keep you safe? What the hell, Reagan?" Jackson started to charge toward her, but Ben's hand on his shoulder stopped him.

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“I knew you hated English, but I didn’t know you hated him enough to protect the people who put him in a coma. Damn, for all we know, you orchestrated this to put him there.” Luke barely contained his own fury. His hands balled into fists, and Reagan suspected if she was a man, Luke would have already punched her.

“I would never do something like that, and I never asked you for anything!” Reagan’s rage had her body shaking. “Yes, I hate English, okay? I admit it. But I don’t care enough about him to orchestrate any kind of attack. How do I know he’s not in hospital because of something one of you did?”

“Enough!” Traci stood and wrapped an arm around Reagan’s shoulders to draw her daughter close to her side. “Everyone needs to calm down.”

“Traci’s right.” Randall motioned for the boys to join them in the living room. “We need to work together to sort this out.”

“What do you know?” Ben asked.

“We probably know more than you think,” Traci admitted, ignoring Reagan’s stunned reaction. “Come and sit down. We need to talk together, but we’re going to do it calmly and without accusations.”

“Mom?”

“Honey, I swear we didn’t know what was going on enough to realize we had information, and I can’t be sure if what we know is even useful. But I’m going to do whatever I can to help these gentlemen if it means you are protected.”

Reagan stepped out of her mother's touch. She looked from Traci and Randall and then to the four men who regarded her as the enemy. Her stomach tightened as she realized everyone in the room kept her in the dark about a lot of things. For whatever reason, no one gave her enough respect to tell her the truth until the situation forced their hands. How could she possibly believe what they said now was the whole story and not a watered-down version to stop her questions?

"I know that look, Reagan Elizabeth, and you will not pull away from us." Traci regarded her daughter sternly. "You're hurt, and you're angry. Well, so am I. But now's not the time to let it stop us from doing what we need to do. We may have made mistakes, but the past is the past. It can't be changed. All we can do is focus on the present. You need to hear what we have to say, no matter how much it hurts or confuses you. You're one of the strongest people I know. You can handle what we're about to tell you, probably better than we've given you credit for."

Reagan drew in a shaky breath. "I'm tired of people deciding what's best for me. I'll listen to what you have to say, and I'll share what I know. But nothing you say is going to make me trust any of you again."

"You won't have a choice," Jackson interrupted. "English wanted us to protect you, and we will. The best way for us to do that is for you to trust us. Once we take down the one who orchestrated Gish's attack, you can go back to hating everything and everybody."

Reagan glared at him, her lips curving into a cool half smile. Her gaze held his defiantly. "Deal."

Chapter Fourteen

Jackson studied the faces in the room, noting small gestures and tells that gave him insight into their personalities. English taught him the importance of keeping silent

and observing. The trick aided him on more than one case, and in some instances, it kept him alive. The skill took all of his concentration now when he felt ready to explode into a million pieces.

His gut churned as he waited for the beginning of a conversation which should have happened hours ago. He was about to learn details he needed to be read in on years ago. The secrets and distrust only wasted time, giving the unknown enemy they chased time to be ten steps ahead of them.

He despised being in the dark. His brothers looked to them for leadership, and he was too ignorant of what was going on to be able to command them. To calm himself, he started ticking off the facts they did know, hoping to get an inkling of something they overlooked.

They knew of Randall's background as a cop — a solid public servant with a record of commendations and a history of risking his life to protect others. From all accounts, he lived by the same code as the Legends.

Traci was well-liked. She was an OB nurse in a physician's office before she retired. Now she volunteered for a couple of charities when she wasn't helping support her daughter's writing career. She carried her inner strength like a shield, but it was her compassion which shone through everything she did or said.

Then there was Reagan. She was a dangerous combination of stubbornness, intelligence and vulnerability. She had a backbone of steel, which he hated to admit he admired, but she was also soft. That combined with her beauty affected him. She angered him and brought out his protective side at the same time, and he should have whiplash at how quickly he shifted from one to the other just from one moment of being with her.

He watched them all silently, his brothers following suit. Finally, Traci squeezed her

husband's hand and began.

“You already know I met English when I worked in the OB department at the hospital, and I bumped into him when he came for physical therapy for a shoulder injury. We fell in love quickly. I didn't know the truth about his life. I had suspected he held some things back from me, but I figured he would eventually open up. Then I got pregnant. English proposed the moment after I told him, but I said no. I didn't want to marry him because he felt a sense of obligation, but he stuck around until you were born. I finally caved in and agreed to get married. I convinced myself it was the right thing to do for you.”

“All those times he stayed gone because of work? How did he explain it to you?” Reagan asked.

“He was a professional problem solver with clients all over the world. To be honest, the first few years, I was exhausted most of the time taking care of you. English provided everything we could ever want, and when he did come home, he helped out so I could rest. He would bathe you feed you, and play with you. I convinced myself the fact he was a good father to you was all that mattered. As long as he treated you like a princess when he was around, I could fill in the gaps when he wasn't.”

“What changed?”

Jackson turned a curious stare in Ben's direction, surprised his brother interrupted the mother-daughter conversation with a question of his own.

If Traci was bothered by the question, she didn't show it. “Reagan started school. She got involved in extracurricular activities. She played Tee ball and started piano lessons. She would invite English to her games and recitals, but he couldn't ever make it. He would only come home on his own time and bribe her with presents and trips to the zoo or the fair. I couldn't take it anymore. She needed more than a part-

time father who acted more like Santa Claus. So I confronted him one night after Reagan went to bed. We argued. I don't know how we didn't wake her. Things got very heated, and he ended up telling me the truth. I was shocked and felt betrayed that he would have such a dangerous life and involve me and his daughter without ever telling us. I threw him out, and we had the marriage annulled soon after."

"How is that possible?" Reagan didn't bother to hide her confusion. "I may have missed something, but it doesn't sound like you had a basis for an annulment."

"I'm sure Gish's CIA handlers arranged for it as a layer of protection for you and your mother," Luke interjected, and Jackson silently agreed.

The annulment would have been necessary to protect English's cover. He operated as Legend, but the danger always existed that someone could find out his true identity. Anyone close to him could be used as leverage against him. The fact that English opened his life to a wife and child was a risk that had backfired. Jackson would have expected it to happen when he was in the CIA and not years after he left the Agency.

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Traci kept her stare on her daughter as she continued. “Once we had time to cool off, we agreed it was best if you didn’t know about English’s work with the CIA. It broke my heart to see you grow up with such hatred for him, but he convinced me it was for the best. He only asked for one thing. I had to regularly send him updates and photos of you, but I had to do it without your knowledge. He promised not to contact you as long as he was aware of how your life was going. So I sent everything to a post office box. It wasn’t even in his name. I was to send it all to a Garth Penroy, and he would make sure to pass it along to English. I had no way of knowing if he did, but I figured if he hadn’t, English would have reached out to you directly.”

At the mention of Garth Penroy, Jackson and Luke exchanged a knowing look.

“Mrs. Dunlap, did you ever meet Garth Penroy or know who he was to English?” Jackson asked her.

“Call me Traci, please. No, I didn’t. I’d never heard of him until we set this up years ago. I actually assumed it was a fake name English used to get the post office box.”

But it wasn’t fake, according to the intel Luke uncovered. Jackson nodded, filing the tidbit of information away until he was able to look into it deeper.

“So English wanted to keep his thumb on me,” Reagan muttered angrily. “Makes sense. It’s probably why he refused to let Dad adopt me.”

“That’s not why, Reagan.” Randall shifted in his seat, so he could lean forward and look directly into her face. “He was ready to sign away his rights, but he wanted to meet me first. He had me checked out to make sure I was a good enough man for you

and your mother. I was angry about it at first, but the more we talked, the more I realized he still cared for both of you. He only wanted you to be happy and safe. After meeting him and seeing it for myself, I couldn't ask him to sign away his rights. Instead, he signed a paper making me your legal guardian in addition to your mother."

"Why didn't you stop me from changing my last name? Why didn't you tell me all of this once I was older?"

"You were eighteen and free to do what you wanted. I wrote to English a few times over the years and told him I wanted to tell you. He always asked me not to. He believed staying out of your life was for the best, no matter what happened. He believed you were safer not knowing about him, and after a while, I started to agree with him," Traci explained.

Reagan jumped to her feet and paced, an action Jackson recognized as necessary to release her nervous energy. She probably needed a break, and he couldn't blame her. She was being hit with a lot of intel all at once. But they had no more time to waste. The time to process would have to come later.

Jackson cleared his throat to get everyone's attention. "What about this guy Reagan saw, Terrence something?"

Reagan kept pacing as if she hadn't heard Jackson's question. Randall hesitated, his eyes on his daughter, but he answered with a heaviness to his tone that unsettled Jackson.

"Terrence Johnson was my partner for twelve years before I retired from the police department and he was promoted to detective. His record was stellar. Service commendations. Metals of Honor. He hated all of it. Said he wanted to put the bad guys away, and he didn't need any pomp and circumstance to do it. He was divorced

and had no kids, so he was always at our house for holidays or birthdays or just a Tuesday night dinner. We consider him part of the family.”

“Did you ever talk to him about English?” Easton asked.

Randall shook his head. “He asked me about Reagan’s father once after he’d been over to our house a few times, but I told him the guy was out of the picture and had been for a while. He never asked about him again.”

“I can’t believe he would be involved in this,” Traci added. “He adores Reagan. He would never hurt her.”

His mind suddenly recalled an image of bullet holes in the ground surrounding the spot where he shielded Reagan in the hospital’s garden. Could Johnson have been the shooter? Was the drive-by merely meant to scare them off the case and not to hurt Reagan? But why go after her at all? And how was English and Johnson connected.

As if sensing the direction of his thoughts, Reagan stopped when she was facing the room. Jackson’s chest tightened when he saw the tortured look in her dark eyes. It wasn’t the first time he’d witnessed someone else’s devastation, but it didn’t usually affect him the way Reagan’s pain tore at him now.

“I know what I saw,” Reagan reiterated. “Terrence was at the bar. He was talking with the gunmen. It seemed like the men talked to him like he was in charge, but I could be mistaken. The rest I’m sure of.”

“Well, I can get to the bottom of it. I’ll call him and see what I can find out,” Randall offered.

“Sir, I wouldn’t,” Jackson cautioned him. “I know you’re friends, but if he’s involved, he won’t open up to you. And even if you’re careful, he could be suspicious

of any questions you ask. I think it's better if we look into it quietly."

Randall nodded. "It's a big mess, isn't it? It like we have all the pieces of the puzzle, but no way to know how they fit."

Jackson's chest clenched at how accurate Randall's assessment was. "But we have the pieces. It's more than we started with. We need to figure out where to go from here. If you'll excuse us, my brothers and I are going to step in the kitchen and plot out our next move. I think you all need some time together alone."

Reagan looked ready to protest, and that's why Jackson posed the suggestion to her stepfather instead. Randall nodded and waved them on. The brothers hustled back into the kitchen where Luke immediately set up his laptop on the table, his fingers flying over the keyboard while he studied the monitor with a fierce intensity.

"Damn. That was heavy." Ben blew out a long breath as he leaned against the counter.

"I don't know what to think," Easton added. "Who the hell is Garth Penroy and Terrence Johnson, and do we really believe Mr. Dunlap's partner is involved in this? I mean he was a beat cop turned small town detective. How would he even know English to orchestrate his attack and try to kidnap Reagan?"

"The thing is, if he's involved, I don't think he's trying to kidnap Reagan. I think he's trying to prevent her from being kidnapped," Jackson said.

"What?" Ben asked. "Why do you say that?"

"I examined the bullet holes at the hospital. You can see the gunman shot all around us but never hit us. He's either a bad shot or someone who wanted to miss his target. Then at the bar. Why did the gunman take so long to breach? We were able to slip out

without being caught, and we were upstairs in Gish's apartment before we knew the approached. Something's off about all of this."

"So far, everything I see about Johnson is exactly what Mr. Dunlap said. Nothing suspicious or out of the ordinary with his financials or phone records. At least, nothing I can see at first glance. I can keep digging and see what turns up," Luke said. "In the meantime, we need to see what we can find out about the post office box and Garth Penroy."

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“Ben and I can do that,” Easton volunteered. “If we leave now, we can make it to Mobile by this afternoon.”

“No.” Jackson refused to meet the looks of surprise coming from his brothers. “East, you and I will go. Ben already has a rapport with the Dunlaps. Work that and see if you can get more intel to help. We need to be sure they don’t have intel they don’t realize is relevant.”

His brothers seem to accept his reasoning, and if they didn’t, they were wise enough not to question him. He started for the back door, knowing Easton would follow.

“We’ll sweep the perimeter again before we head out. Call if you get any leads,” he tossed over this shoulder before stepping outside.

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Reagan was surprised she’d sat outside alone for seven minutes before she heard someone step out the door behind her. She didn’t bother turning around. She’d known Ben or Luke would follow her once they realized she was out of the cabin without someone watching her. They hadn’t exactly hovered over her and her parents while Jackson and Easton took care of something elsewhere, but they had remained close. She felt their attention centered on her even when she didn’t catch them watching.

She’d taken pity on them and hadn’t ventured too far. Though she wanted to walk, hoping the exercise would clear her head, she knew they would balk at her being away from the protection of the cabin. She settled on the back stoop, staring into the woods at the back though she didn’t register what she was looking at.

“I wanted to be alone to think.”

“I think you’re tired of thinking and want to be mad instead. If you need something to punch, you can use me. Or better yet, Luke. It would be fun to watch him get his ass kicked by a girl.”

Reagan chuckled despite herself. She was starting to think the brothers were too intense to have a sense of humor, but Ben had managed to draw out not only a smile but also a laugh with one comment. It was enough to prevent her from tensing when he dropped his considerable frame on the step beside her. Even with her slender figure, his broad shoulders and bulging arms crowded her.

“I don’t think he would find it as funny as you,” she returned.

“True, but he needs to loosen up. He’s wound way too tight.”

Reagan studied her hands where they were clasped in front of her. “He is intense. You all kind of are.”

“I wish I could say it’s not always the case, but this hit too close to the vest.”

“I can get that,” she admitted. “But aren’t you a little mad too? That he didn’t tell you about me?”

“No. I’m pretty sure Luke is and probably Jackson too. Gish is entitled to his secrets though. We all are. Even you.”

She turned in Ben’s direction, wishing there was more light for her to see his face. “You think I have secrets?”

“Don’t you?”

“Hmmm, let’s see. No secret child. No secret marriage. I publish my books under my own name. No shady past, unless you count the government spy whose sperm resulted in my conception. Nope. No secrets here.”

“Bullshit. You don’t want people to know you give a rat’s ass about English, but you do. You’re even mad at yourself for it. Gish uses the same I-could-care-less attitude. It protects him from being hurt. I’m guessing it does the same for you.”

Reagan tensed. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“I do. It’s my gift. I can read people and assess their vulnerabilities. It allows me to go in and play a role to gain their trust and get the job done. Jackson calls me a grifter, which is a fancy name for con man. I think I’m astute enough to make a situation work for me.”

“No, it makes you a con man,” Reagan said.

“Except I don’t try to cheat people. I help them. We all do. It’s how Gish raised us. You can hate him for leaving you and your mom. He deserves that. But it’s also okay to admit he’s not a monster. He helps a lot of people, and sometimes to do that, he has to keep secrets. It’s more of a sacrifice than a liability.”

“Why are you telling me all of this?”

“I don’t know. You seemed a little lost to me. I was too. A long time ago, but it’s a feeling you don’t forget. Gish and my brothers helped me get over it. We aren’t biologically related, but who needs genetics? We’re family in every way that counts. Even with his secrets, I would lay down my life for English Barlowe. And he could very well end up giving his life for you. I can promise you he doesn’t regret it. You can trust him, Reagan. You can trust us. We’ll figure out what’s going on, and we’ll keep you and your family safe. It’s what we do, and we’re damn good at it. I guess

that's really all I wanted to say."

She didn't try to stop Ben when he stood and returned inside. He may have left her alone, but she had no doubt he stayed close, ready to come to her aid should she need it.

Only at the moment, she wasn't fighting a physical threat. The danger was more to her heart than her person, and this risk was more terrifying than the unknown gunmen hunting for her.

Chapter Fifteen

Dry grass crunched under the weight of Jackson's boots as he walked from the truck to the front of the split-level house with Easton at his side. The door flew open before they got close enough to knock. The brothers drew up short as a tall, regal woman with white hair flowing down to her waist regarded them with a stern, but curious look. Her strong presence gave Jackson pause, and when her eyebrow quirked, he realized he'd been silently staring for longer than was appropriate.

“Mrs. Penroy...”

“Nope.” Her husky voice added a punch to her abrupt response.

Jackson swallowed, chastising himself for feeling even a bit intimidated by the woman. “I’m sorry to bother you, ma’am. We thought this was the residence of Garth Penroy and his wife.”

“And you are?”

“Jackson Moore. This is my brother, Easton Hargrove. We wanted to talk to Mr. Penroy about someone who’s been using his post office box. The man’s name is English Barlowe.”

“Well, damn.” Astute blue eyes shifted from Jackson to Easton and back. “You’re English’s boys, aren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Easton responded. “Two of them, anyway. How do you know him?”

She sighed. “I’m the one you’re looking for.”

Turning, she moved back into her house while leaving the front door wide open.

“Reckon we’re supposed to follow?” Easton asked.

Jackson shrugged. “Looks like it, but we should be prepared for anything.”

“Copy that.”

The two men stepped inside, and Jackson was struck by the stark surroundings. The rooms he passed had minimal furnishings with nothing personal to add warmth or personality — no pictures on the walls, no curtains to decorate windows covered with venetian blinds, no knickknacks on mantles or side tables. The walls were beige. The carpet was beige. No cobwebs or a speck of dust to be seen. It felt very clinical, no-nonsense and no fuss — a glimpse into the personality of the woman they’d just met.

She led them through the house to a room in the back corner. She pushed open the door and breezed through like a commander about to address the troops. If she didn’t have a history of military service, Jackson would be shocked. Her carriage and demeanor spoke of years of military training which was ingrained in seasoned soldiers.

Jackson stepped inside the room and did a double take. Very spacious, the room was one he could picture himself relaxing in. Two plush recliners faced a wide-screen smart television mounted on a soothing, pale blue wall. A hospital bed was in one corner with a twin bed running parallel to it along the same wall. The floor was shiny hardwood. Family photos and framed military medals adorned the walls. Two floor-to-ceiling bookcases were crammed full of books and magazines.

Jackson’s gaze finally settled on the man in the motorized wheelchair, staring blankly out the open window, the white lacy curtains blowing in the breeze. His ashy hair was thin, and his pale skin hung loosely on his skeleton. His nose arched like an eagle’s beak, and his thick brows shadowed his eyes. He didn’t move or acknowledge Jackson or Easton’s presence, but the man did shift his gaze to watch the woman as she sat in one of the recliners. She motioned for Jackson and Easton to occupy two straight-back chairs which were probably as uncomfortable as they looked.

“Garth,” she said with her keen gaze on Jackson and Easton. “You have two visitors.

At least they came to see you, but it's really me they need to see."

The man used stiff hands to turn his wheelchair around, and Jackson noted the slight drop to the right side of his face.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Penroy. My name is Jackson Moore. This is my brother Easton Hargrove. We're here to talk about English Barlowe."

The man gave no sign he understood what was being said, but Jackson could see in his eyes that he was aware of everything. Something about the man seemed familiar to Jackson, and he couldn't bring himself to look away while he tried to place the man.

"You never told us your name." Jackson heard Easton address the woman.

"I'm Garth's wife."

Her response had Jackson's eyes whipping back to stare at her. She held up a hand to stop them from asking the obvious question.

"I never took Garth's name. I kept my own, and he was fine with it. You can call me Deb. Before I tell you more, why don't you tell me why English sent you here?"

"He didn't. He's in a coma after being beaten within an inch of his life. We're trying to figure out who could have done it, and our investigation brought us here. How do you know English?" Jackson tried to gauge her reaction when he told her about English, but her face was unreadable.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Deb said, pursing her lips. "Is he going to make it?"

"He's stable now, but it's touch and go," Jackson answered. "We don't have a lot of

leads, so we're hoping you can point us in the right direction."

"How could your investigation bring you here? We haven't heard from English in a while."

"We believe someone from English's past tracked him down to exact revenge, and now they're threatening his family. His entire family. For them to know about his entire family, the attackers had to know English from his younger days. We have been trying to find people who knew him then, someone who could give us a lead on who could have orchestrated the attack."

Deb fell silent, and Jackson stood, his patience zapped.

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“I’m starting to see you don’t know as much as we hoped. We’ll get out of your way. Sorry to have wasted your time.”

Garth made a noise that was a combination of a shout and a grunt. Deb responded with a chuckle.

“Sit back down,” she said. “We can probably be of some help, but you need to settle down first. I can see you have English’s impatience, even if you aren’t his son by blood.”

Jackson scowled, but he sat back down. Easton spoke, using his natural charm to ease the tension.

“You seem to know English well. You’ll have to forgive us if we seem anxious. English taught us a lot, but there are some things he kept us in the dark about. We think it would be helpful to know them now.”

“You two are as English described. Aren’t there more of you?” Deb asked, and Jackson wanted to punch the wall in frustration. She enjoyed evading their questions too much, and he was tired of the game.

“There are four of us boys, but we recently learned he has a daughter.” Easton paused. “But you already knew that.”

His brother was bluffing. Jackson could read nothing in the woman’s expression, so he doubted Easton could either. This woman was skilled at keeping her thoughts and feelings hidden. He wanted to get in her face and demand the truth or leave. Either

option was better than waiting to see if Easton's trick worked.

Garth uttered another grunt, but this time it was quieter and meant only for his wife. She sighed and nodded in response to their private communication.

"I don't think I have anything to offer for your investigation, but we agree it's high time you boys knew more about English's past. He should be the one to tell you. Since he can't, I'll tell you what I know. If he comes out of the coma and he's mad that I spoke with you, he can take that up with me himself."

"How do you know English?" Jackson asked again.

"Through Garth. He and English went through basic training together, but they were recruited to serve with the government before they completed a tour with the Army. Garth went with the FBI and English with the CIA. I never liked English. Whenever he got into trouble, he always called Garth, and Garth always came to his aid. It felt too much like English was using my husband without really caring about him."

Garth grunted again, and Deb's lips curved slightly with a ghost of a smile. "Yes, I did learn I was wrong. Garth had a stroke several years ago before we married. He pushed me away, determined I live my life without being burdened by him. Nothing I did or said changed his mind. I was desperate, so I reached out to English. He was on assignment and had not heard what happened. As soon as he found out, he abandoned his assignment and came to see Garth. He told Garth to get his head out of his ass and marry me. He stayed around long enough to be Garth's best man at our wedding, even though his bosses were giving him a hard time about getting back in the field. It was the start of his trouble with the CIA. Nothing was the same for him after that."

"Was the CIA aware of his relationship with Traci Bell?"

Deb looked troubled, the first indication of emotion she'd shown. Garth attempted to

raise his right hand only to have it fall to the arm of his wheelchair almost instantly. Deb reached over to grab his hand and sat holding it as she spoke.

“Not at first, but we knew. He was in love with her. He confided in Garth that he intended to marry her. Garth warned him to stay away. I know it seems like the stroke left Garth with very little, but he has ways of getting his point across. And he made sure English understood it wasn’t a good idea to involve Traci when his work was so dangerous. English was too far gone to listen. He didn’t speak to Garth for a while. He was furious we didn’t support what he was doing. Then Traci found out she was pregnant on the same day English was called back up for a case — the same case he’d left when he came home to be with me and Garth.”

“What was the case?” Easton asked.

“We don’t know. Like I said, English wasn’t really talking to us, and even if he was, he probably wouldn’t have said anything. English was good at keeping secrets. It’s why the CIA put him in the field so much. When it came to his work, he kept the details to himself. I suppose it was safer, but he was always haunted by the demons that came with the job. I think that was the appeal for him to be with Traci. It gave him a chance to believe he could have a life for himself outside the Agency. When his daughter was born, he was ready to quit.”

“Did he tell you why he didn’t?” Easton shifted in his seat and leaned forward as he hung on Deb’s every word. “He ended up leaving Traci and Reagan and kept working for the CIA for several more years.”

Deb shook her head. “No. He came by to mend fences and ask for me and Garth to watch out for Traci and Reagan. We tried to find out what had changed for him, but he wouldn’t tell us. I have to wonder if the CIA didn’t have something on him they were using to blackmail him back into the field, but I don’t know. Before he left though, he asked us if he could use our address to have his mail routed to. He wanted

to receive updates from Traci without anyone being able to connect him to her. I always believed he would go back to them once he found a way to slither out from under the CIA's thumb. It never happened. Traci remarried, and Reagan grew up hating him. He left the CIA and was content to live his life alone. Believe me, no one was more surprised than me to find out he decided to take in you boys."

"Do you have any idea who could have attacked him? It would have to be someone who knew about Traci and Reagan," Jackson said.

Deb looked over at Garth, and Jackson balled his fists at their silent communication. They knew something, and they were debating whether or not to share it with Jackson and Easton. The fact they didn't readily share intel with them had Jackson's gut churning.

"English has made a lot of enemies, but he was always careful. His true identity was buried so deep, it would take a lot to connect him to Legend. When he met Traci and had Reagan, he was more cautious than ever. The only people he trusted to watch out for them was us and Reagan's stepdad. He's good people. We made sure of that."

Deb hesitated, and Jackson forced himself to wait for her to continue. "There was one person within the CIA who found out about Traci and Reagan, but there was no reason for him to try and harm them or English for that matter. I think it would be a waste of time, but if you want to check him out, feel free. His name is Tom Harrison. He's a higher up at the CIA now, but he was Legend's handler back in the day."

"What was your impression of Harrison?" Easton questioned.

"I don't know him personally, and English didn't talk about him much. From what he did tell us, Harrison seemed like a ball buster to me, so I never understood why English liked working with him. Sorry, boys. I know you were hoping we could give you more intel, but we don't know much."

Jackson scowled. “You don’t know much, or you don’t want to tell us what you know?”

Garth started his forceful grunting again, and Deb patted his hand to settle him down. “It’s alright, honey. He’s under a lot of pressure.” Despite her words of understanding, she pierced Jackson with a glare of pure steel. “We don’t know much. English didn’t want to compromise us by sharing about his cases. We were fine with it. I’m sorry English is hurt, and I do wish we could help. But you know what we know. If you need a safe place for Traci and Reagan, you can bring them here. It doesn’t look like much, but this home is as protected as they come. We would protect them with our lives.”

Easton nudged Jackson’s arm, and they both stood. “Thank you for talking with us. We’re sorry to have bothered you. We can show ourselves out.”

Jackson could barely contain his anger until he and Easton were back in the truck and speeding down the driveway.

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“They know something.” His words were clipped, his grip a little too tight on the steering wheel.

“She doesn’t,” Easton corrected. “But he does.”

Jackson’s gaze flitted over to his brother and back to the road. “How could you possibly know that?”

“I read people. You heard her say she never liked Gish. She helped him because her husband wanted her to. She’s devoted to Garth, and he’s protecting her from whatever’s going on. That’s why I want to talk to him when she’s not around.”

Jackson shook his head. “How are you going to do that? You saw him. The stroke left him unable to do much for himself, including speak. He relies completely on her. No way she leaves him alone.”

Easton reached into his back pocket and withdrew a white business card. “Actually, she does. This card was on one of the side tables. When she was busy looking at Garth, I lifted it. It’s an appointment with someone from sitter dot com. It’s a website where people can sign up to offer respite care to give caregivers a break from their patients. And they have a sitter coming to stay with Garth tomorrow from 2-4.”

“What if the sitter is just to watch him while she does yard work or something? I can’t see Deb leaving him for any amount of time.”

“Trust me. That’s the window. Look, you can head back to Fire Creek, and I can stay behind and talk to Garth myself.”

“How do you plan to talk to him when all he’s capable of is making noise?”

Easton shrugged. “I’ll figure it out.”

The brothers fell silent as they drove back to the cabin, each lost in his own thoughts. Jackson hated to admit he had wanted to return to the cabin with good news for Reagan. With her world falling apart around her, she could use some good news. They all could.

Chapter Sixteen

By the time Jackson made it back to the cabin, all was dark and quiet. He pulled his truck around to the back, his headlights illuminating Luke making a perimeter sweep. Switching the engine off, he climbed from the truck. His joints protested having to move after the long drive, and he felt older than his thirty-nine years.

He’d already checked in with Luke, so his brother had no need to ask him questions or share intel. The hour was too late for either of them to dwell on the fact they had nothing.

“You look like hell.” Luke stopped in front of him.

“It’s dark, asshole. How do you know what I look like?”

“Trust me. You look like hell. Ben and I are splitting the night shift. Go, get some sleep. Ben’s in the main bedroom now. Reagan gave her room to her parents, so she’s bunking down in one of the others.”

Jackson nodded. “You hear from Becky? I tried to call and got her voicemail.”

“Yeah. There’s been no change. And her protection detail says there’s been no more

gunfire or anything suspicious at the hospital since we left. Everything's been quiet here too. It makes me nervous."

Jackson understood what Luke meant. Anytime things got quiet and fell into a lull while they were on a case, it usually indicated a calm before a big shitstorm.

"I can't think about it, man. We're missing something, but I have a splitting headache trying to figure out what it is."

"It'll keep for now. Sleep. We'll regroup when you get up."

Jackson didn't argue. He trudged inside and made his way through the cabin without switching on a light. Guessing Reagan slept in the room next to the one her parents were in, he stepped into one at the end of the hall, the only other bedroom with an adjoining bathroom besides the master bedroom. The temptation of a shower gave him pause, but exhaustion won out. He tossed his clothes into a pile on the floor before climbing under the covers of the king bed. He expected sleep to elude him, but his eyes fluttered closed as soon as his head hit the pillow. His sleep was deep, which was dangerous for someone in his line of work. But with his brothers on watch, he didn't have to worry with waking at a moment's notice.

The dream lured him into a haze that felt cozy and...right. When arms wrapped around him, he didn't resist. Before the body pressed against him, he knew it was a woman. A soft, warm woman wearing nothing. His hands roamed her body. His fingertips trailed over her smooth skin, her scent tantalizing his nose. His lips followed where his fingers touched — the curve of her shoulder, the slope of her collarbone, the swell of her breast, the valley of her cleavage, and back again because he couldn't get enough. She pushed against him, urging him to continue tantalizing her, and he was happy to oblige.

Eventually his lips found hers. The plump flesh opened greedily to him, and he

plunged his tongue deep inside to tangle with hers. The kiss wasn't gentle or sweet. It was urgent and passionate. It was two people who couldn't get close enough to relieve the longing building between them.

Fingernails pressed into his back. Quick, sharp pain mingled with the white-hot desire. He pulled back to draw air into his lungs and felt himself being pulled from his subconscious. She started to squirm in his arms, and he could feel her slipping away from him into the haze. He tried to tighten his grip, but she was gone. He floated away until his eyes started to flutter open. His vision adjusted to the dark...

Jackson shot up in bed as he felt the covers slip away. Reagan scrambled to wrap them around her, not noticing she was baring Jackson's body in the process.

"What the hell!"

He never knew someone could yell in such a low tone. "Why are you whispering?"

She glared at him, but with the way her eyes bugged out of her head, he knew the moment she realized he was naked. She turned away, dragging the covers with her, and dropped her feet to the floor.

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“Because if my dad finds out you came in here to take advantage of me, he’ll strangle you with his bare hands. With all that’s going on, he doesn’t need a murder rap too. Why don’t you have clothes on?”

“Why don’t you?” he fired back. As exhausted as he still was, he couldn’t fight the amusement flooding him. He was tempted to flip on the light so he could see if she was blushing.

“I was sleeping, you pervert!” She jumped up and moved away from the bed, only to stop when she felt a tug from the covers where they were still tucked under the mattress.

“Why are you in here? Why aren’t you sleeping in the room next to your parents?”

“Because Dad snores. You can hear him through the wall. I gave them the room I was using because it was bigger than this one or the other one. You weren’t supposed to be back until tomorrow.”

Jackson pushed to his feet and reached for his discarded jeans. “I came back tonight instead. You didn’t seem to mind me being back a few seconds ago.”

She whirled around, her hair flaring out like the swing ride at an amusement park. “What...I...you were...I didn’t...” She sputtered a few more times, and he gave into the temptation to spur her on.

“I mean, that kiss you laid on me was pretty hot. You were all over me like white on rice.”

“I was not!” She checked herself when her voice rose too loud. “I was sleeping. I thought you were a dream.”

“You dream about me, princess?” He moved closer, stopping when she was backed up against the wall. He didn’t touch her, but her breath hitched all the same. “And how far do we go in your dream? What else do you do to me besides kiss me? Or do you kiss more than my lips? Maybe my—”

“Get out!”

“Don’t worry, princess. I’m going. It’s just nice to know you’re not completely made of ice.”

He scooped up the rest of his clothes and strode out the door before she could explode. Even if he couldn’t see her face clearly, he knew he pushed one too many buttons. He couldn’t be sorry though.

Moving into the other spare room, he once again settled in bed. This time, sleep wasn’t so quick in coming. Jackson had a hard time shaking off the feel of Reagan pressed against him or of her lips fused to his.

???

Breathing in the delicious smell of fresh coffee and pancakes and hearing the din of conversation, Reagan almost lost her nerve. No one in the kitchen would agree to her plan, but she’d thought it through, running every scenario much like she would develop a plot for a book. Unable to fall asleep after Jackson left her room, she had nothing but time to mull over the idea. She believed it would work, but she wasn’t sure she could convince the others.

The laughter drifting from the kitchen startled her. She hadn’t heard anyone laugh

since leaving the hospital, and considering the stress they'd all been under, the sound was nice. She lingered outside to listen. She couldn't bring herself to interrupt the moment, and her announcement could very well chase it away.

"Reagan?"

She jumped and spun around to see Jackson standing a short distance away, studying her curiously. She hadn't heard him step into the room and had actually thought he was already in the kitchen with the others. Goosebumps pimply her skin, but she blamed them on him surprising her and not the sexy sound of him saying her name.

"What's wrong?" His brows lowered over his eyes, his stare a combination of concern and speculation.

Reagan opened her mouth with every intention of lying, but the falsehood dissipated from her tongue. She shook her head before dropping her gaze. "Nothing. As least I wouldn't classify it as wrong, but I think it may be upsetting."

She watched his boots move him closer to her. "Stop. Stay right there. It'll be easier to say this if you're not standing right in front of me."

Jackson stopped moving. "Then you better say what's on your mind before I start thinking the worst."

"It's not the worst," she said, fixing her gaze on the breast pocket of his T-shirt. "I want to go back to the hospital. Today. Right now if possible."

"No." He didn't yell or sound upset, but the one word resounded around her like the noise from a gong.

"I'm not asking your permission. This is something I have to do. You or one of your

brothers can drive me, or I'll call an Uber. Either way, I'm going to the hospital."

"It's dangerous."

"Yes, but it's necessary. I should check on English and speak with his doctors. But I was thinking...well, I seem to be the target of whoever is behind this. I thought—"

Jackson closed the distance between them so fast that Reagan was too stunned to react. His features were made of stone, anger brewing in his eyes. His hands clasped her biceps, and she braced herself because she believed he would shake her. Instead, he held her firmly.

"You will not use yourself as bait. You can check in with English's doctors over the phone, but I will not allow you to put yourself in harm's way. English wouldn't want you to make yourself a target."

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“You won’t allow me? Of all the self-righteous—”

Jackson pressed his hand against her mouth to stop the flow of words. When she started to pull away, his other arm slid around her waist to hold her in place.

“Sssshhhh,” he hissed, and she realized her voice had risen with her outburst. They listened to the conversation continue in the kitchen, and she was glad she hadn’t drawn their attention.

With his hand over her mouth, his touch searing her skin, he pulled her back into the main bedroom. He released her to close the door behind them. His muscular body stood between her and the exit. Reagan poured the full force of her fury into her eyes, wishing she could render him to ash with her stare.

“How dare you!”

“How dare I spare your parents from listening to your dumbass idea? You’re welcome, by the way. They’re worried about you enough without you foolishly putting yourself and the rest of us at risk.”

“I am the only one at risk. My parents will be here under your protection. Your friends are watching English and Becky. I would be the only one vulnerable, and I can take care of myself. I can draw these people out, and you guys can use them to track down the person responsible for all of this. You have no other leads. Using me as bait only makes sense.”

“This isn’t one of your lame ass books where everyone lives happily ever after and no

one shoots with real bullets. Dammit, Reagan, I didn't take you to be this stupid. Anyone at the hospital could be in danger. Any one of us watching your back could be in danger. Don't you get that?"

"Don't you get that I know how to be careful? I would never do anything to put someone else at risk. There's a way we can do this and get what we want without anyone getting hurt, except maybe the ones who put English in the hospital. You've asked me to trust you and your brothers. Well, now I'm asking you to trust me."

The bedroom door creaked open, and Luke stepped inside. Reagan jumped away from Jackson as if they had been caught doing something naughty. Her heart pounded in her chest in part from her righteous anger and in another part from her passionate belief that her idea had merit.

"Luke, give us a few minutes, okay?" Jackson snapped at his brother as he ran a frustrated hand through his hair, sending the short strands straight up in spikes.

"She's right, Jackson."

Reagan froze, unable to believe those words came from Luke. The man had not bothered to hide his resentment toward her since the moment they first met. She couldn't imagine what it must have cost him to admit she, of all people, was right about something, and she couldn't imagine what possessed him to go against his brother to agree with her.

Jackson clenched his fists. "This is none of your business."

"Sure, it is. This is for English, which makes it all of our business. Everything she said is true. We have no leads. We're not close to finding out who did this. We only have a list of people to interview who may or may not be connected. We're flying blind off assumptions we've made without any real evidence to back them up. If

Reagan put herself out there, we can finally get ahead of these sons of bitches. We can be ready. Hell, we can even have Alex's people back us up. We can protect her and take this guy down. You know we can."

"This is not your decision to make. We never put civilians at risk by choice. We protect them. It's our code. It's English's code. We have it for a reason, and I'm not going to throw it away."

"Our code went out the window when one of our own was attacked right in our backyard," Luke countered. "We're running out of options, and you know it."

"No, I don't. Our leads may not be solid, but they're still leads. Putting Reagan directly in the target's crosshairs is not an option. It's a Hail Mary pass we don't have to take. We need to exhaust every lead, no matter how weak, and even then, we never put a client in danger to push along a case."

Reagan stiffened. "I'm not a client. I never asked for your help. If you don't like my plan, you don't have to be involved. Stay here and watch over my parents. Luke can help me catch the people responsible for attacking English."

"Luke, leave us."

Reagan waited for Luke to refuse to be ordered around by Jackson, and with the long awkward pause stretching between them, she expected an explosive argument. But Luke only nodded and stepped from the room, leaving her to stare after him in bewilderment.

"Unbelievable," she muttered before facing Jackson with murderous rage. "It must be nice to have people bow to your will, but if you think for one minute I'm going to obey you like some mindless minion, you are sorely mistaken."

“I’m not asking you to act like a robot. I want you to listen and use some sense. I know you’re anxious to get back to your life, but you could end up losing your life if you go through with this plan. I won’t let you do this, and I won’t let you put my brother in the crosshairs.”

“I’m not forcing him to do anything. If he’s willing to help me, who are you to tell him no?”

Jackson was suddenly in front of her, so close she could feel his breath on her cheeks. She gasped when his hands enclosed around her upper arms. He lowered his head until they were eye-to-eye. His irises were almost black, swirling with a surge of emotions she couldn’t quite identify.

“I told him no because I call the shots when it comes to anything involving the legends. I told you no because I care too much to put you in the line of fire.”

He released her and stormed away before she could formulate a response. Jerking open the door, he paused and looked back at her, some of the anger replaced with his typical passive expression. “Forget your plan, Reagan. It’s not happening.”

The door rattled as Jackson slammed it behind him, leaving her alone to wonder what the hell just happened.

Chapter Seventeen

Jackson stormed to the edge of the property as far as he could go without tripping any of the alarms. He hadn’t stopped long enough to tell anyone where he was going, but he was certain they heard the doors slamming in his wake. The exercise failed to lessen his frustration. He wanted to drive his fist into something solid, but he managed to talk himself down.

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“Of all the idiotic, dumb-ass ideas. What the hell is she trying to prove?” His mutterings and cursing rambled on without him registering exactly what he said. He only knew his exasperation was directed straight at Reagan Bell.

“Definitely not a good idea.”

Jackson stopped his venting long enough to see Ben leaning his frame against the trunk of a tree. His hands rested in his jeans’ pockets as if he had all the time in the world to watch his brother rage over some woman.

Ben’s validation added fuel to Jackson’s rage. “Damn straight, it’s not a good idea. Try telling Luke and Reagan. What the hell is she thinking? She’s trying to get us all killed.”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about. I’m talking about you and Reagan. It’s a bad idea.”

“That’s why I’m turning her protection detail over to you and Easton. Luke is not thinking straight, and I want nothing to do with her.”

Ben shook his head. “Bullshit. You want her.”

“What?” Jackson’s shout was loud enough to startle a crow from a tree.

“You’re out here all worked up over something you should say no to and move on. You’ve let Reagan get under your skin. The only reason you would do that is if you were attracted to her. And I’m telling you to get over it. It’s a bad idea for a lot of

reasons, the big one being she's English's daughter."

Jackson narrowed his eyes as he glared at his brother. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure, you do. English has protected her from his work as Legend for her entire life. No way would he approve of you bedding her and getting her mixed up with what we do. And I don't think you are willing to get on English's bad side just to have a little fun with his daughter. It's not worth it, man."

"Shut the hell up!" Jackson's voice thundered across the property. He didn't want to dwell on how close Ben was in his observations. "I'm not bedding her. I'm trying to look out for her the way English wants us to, but she's determined to get herself and us killed. There's no talking to her, especially when Luke thinks she's right. So instead of you accusing me of wanting to screw her, you could back me up instead."

"I do. You're right. The plan to use her as bait is stupid. I told Luke as much when he talked to me and Easton. She won't do it without one of us watching out for her. She won't risk it on her own." Luke pushed off from the tree and walked closer to his brother. "But you need to get a handle on whatever this is between the two of you. If you're going to let her get under your skin this bad, maybe you need to step back and let the rest of us deal with this."

"I will not be benched. I want to take down the guy who came after English." Jackson stood toe to toe, eye to eye with Luke, with his anger barely held in check.

"Then get your shit together over this girl. We need your head in the game and not messed up over Reagan."

Jackson held his ground but eventually stepped back. His anger shifted to incredulity. "Why does everyone assume I'm messed up over her? I don't know her. She does

nothing but push my buttons. She's not even my damn type."

Luke snorted derisively. "Who are you fooling? She's smoking hot and smart and strong. She's all of our type. But you're the only one who's losing his shit over her. You've never let anyone get under your skin the way she does. I'm telling you to squelch it before it gets out of hand. It's bad enough the targets have identified her as a weakness for Gish. We don't need her to be your weakness too."

Jackson shoved his hands through his hair. "She's not a weakness, not in the way you think. She's reckless and stubborn. We're trying to help her, and she's keeping things from us and wanting to go off on her own. How are we supposed to protect her if she doesn't trust us?"

"Why should she? Can you imagine having strangers show up in your life and not knowing which ones are out to get you and which ones are there to protect you? And the ones protecting her are loyal to the father she hates. She's a mess, man. Rightly so, but it's still a recipe for disaster if you try anything with her."

"I haven't tried anything with her. I don't plan on it."

Ben narrowed his eyes. "Then why let her get to you? You're cold as ice on cases like this, but you've let her set your temper on edge. It's not like you."

Jackson exhaled through his nostrils. "What do you want me to say? This case is different, but not because of her. Or notjustbecause of her, and not the way you think. This is Gish. This is his daughter. This is his past. We've been with him for...what? Twenty-plus years? Why is this coming up now? What are we missing?"

"I don't know. I keep trying to remember if he said something to us that could be a clue. Remember when he finally admitted to us he used to work for the Agency? Did he say anything relevant? There has to be something. If he thought for a minute his

past could come back to bite him in the ass, he would want us to be prepared. He trained us for every scenario, but none of that is helping us now.”

Jackson remembered the day their view of their mentor changed forever. English hadn’t wanted them to know about his work with the CIA, but the old man had decided to share his story not long after learning about Jackson’s enlistment in the Army.

“I don’t remember what made him talk to us about it,” Jackson said absently, not realizing he voiced the words aloud.

“Easton heard Gish and Becky arguing about it and came to you to see if you knew. Then you asked Gish, and he decided to tell us.”

Jackson’s gaze softened as he thought back to the day when they crowded in the apartment above the bar. Back then, it was wall-to-wall stuff. In addition to English’s furniture, he had shoved in two sets of bunk beds for the boys and chests of drawers for their clothes. The boys weren’t the neatest bunch, which meant their backpacks, sports equipment and dirty clothes littered the floor until English ordered them to clean up.

“His last case,” Jackson continued to muse, lost in his own memories. “The one with the daughter who betrayed him. The CIA tried to burn him.”

“Right,” Ben drawled. “Gish tried to turn her against her family’s organization.”

Jackson nodded. “She ratted him out to her father. They tortured him for info. He got away and called his handler, who wouldn’t accept his calls. They left him on his own. But the family...what did English say about them? They were terrorists.”

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Ben shook his head, his perfect recall coming into play. “They were funding terrorist organizations, but they weren’t the terrorists. Her father had aspirations to hold political office, and the terrorist organizations were supposed to give him an in by shaking up the current governmental structure. It turned out the daughter wasn’t innocent like Gish first thought. She was more of the father’s right hand. But the son—”

Jackson snapped his fingers, snapping out of his daze as the puzzle pieces started falling into place. “Gish turned the son, who was more interested in playing the cello in the symphony than overthrowing a government. He leveraged the son to get the Agency to organize an extraction and to let him go when the mission was over. The father. Do you remember his name?”

Ben never forgot anything he heard, saw or read. It was a gift which served him well as a grifter, but in this case, there weren’t details to remember. “English never told us. All he said was he left on a high note. He closed his last case and walked away. He didn’t tell us where they were when all this went down. I don’t think it ever occurred to us to ask. You don’t think it’s related to this now?”

Jackson nodded. “I do. It fits. Gish took his son. He’s coming after Gish’s daughter. I’m not sure how he would know about Reagan because Gish cut all ties to them, but my gut says this is the lead we need to chase.”

He pulled his phone out and dialed Easton’s number. His body shuddered with nervous energy as he waited. As he started to think his brother would never answer, the call connected.

“How the hell did you know—”

“Tell me you’re questioning Garth,” Jackson interrupted.

“I was. But—”

“You need to ask him about Gish’s last case. We need the name of the guy he was trying to take down. If he was as close to Garth and Deb as they claimed, he could have told them about the case.”

“Jackson, will you stop talking long enough to listen to me?” Easton all but shouted into the phone, but it was sufficient in getting his brother’s attention.

“What?”

“We have a problem. I was questioning Garth about Gish. He answered my questions about Gish’s CIA handler, but when I started asking him about Traci and Reagan, he got fidgety. He wouldn’t respond to me or his sitter. He slumped over his chair and would have fallen if I hadn’t caught him. Garth had a heart attack. He’s in surgery having a double bypass. And I’m probably going to be arrested for causing his heart attack, if Deb has anything to say about it.”

Jackson met Ben’s questioning gaze. “You’ve got to be shitting me. What the hell, East?”

“I didn’t cause it. I’ll straighten things out here, but you guys need to dig into Gish’s handler. When I asked Garth about him, he told me he thought English hated the guy. Deb failed to share that when we talked to her, so there’s got to be something there.”

“I think it’s connected to Gish’s last case with the CIA.” Jackson explained his theory while Ben waited impatiently nearby. Ben was only hearing one side of the

conversation, and Jackson could almost feel his frustration at having to wait to find out the other side.

“I’ll do my best, but I wouldn’t hold your breath,” Easton told him. “Deb is mad. She’s not going to want to say anything to me after I went behind her back to talk to Garth. We need a plan B just in case.”

“Keep me posted.” Jackson ended the call, ready to head back to the shack when Ben stopped him.

“What about Dunlap’s partner? You don’t think we should track his connection to this since Reagan saw him back at the bar?”

“I do, but I think the more leads we can chase down and rule out all at once, the less time we waste. And we’ve wasted plenty trying to get ahead of this guy.”

“And if we figure out who put Gish in the hospital? What then?”

Jackson held his brother’s stare, understanding passing between them. “We take him down. We focus on Gish’s healing. Everything goes back to normal.”

“Jackson! Ben!”

The shout had the brothers jerking their heads to see Luke waving to get their attention from several yards away. They were already running toward Luke when he shouted the reason for his sudden appearance.

“It’s Reagan. She’s gone.”

Chapter Eighteen

Reagan found Alex waiting outside English's room, and she raised her hands to sign to him in broken American Sign Language. Though she wasn't sure she had all of the signs correct, she was satisfied that Alex understood.

"Don't call him. Not yet. I need a minute. Please."

Reagan had never run away a day in her life...until English and his boys appeared out of the blue. Now, not only had she run away twice, she'd run both times to English's hospital room. The boys were going to be livid to find out she'd slipped away from them. Though she hoped Alex would respect her wishes, she wouldn't be surprised if his first call was to alert Jackson to her whereabouts.

Alex nodded and motioned for her to slip inside. Reagan hesitated.

"Where's Becky?" She spoke this time, keeping her voice low so as not to be overheard. "I want to be alone with him."

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Alex signed slowly, so she was able to understand the gist of what he said. “She’s taking a break. You have ten minutes.”

“That’s all I need. Thank you, Alex.”

English’s room was pretty much the same as the last time she was in here. This time, though, he had a bandage wrapped around his head, reminding her of the critical surgery he’d lived through. The last update from the doctor hadn’t provided much information. Only time would tell what lasting effects English would have from his attack. Reagan had come to Fire Creek, in part, to demand answers from her father, but she resigned herself to the fact she may never get them.

She moved closer to his bed, her gaze locked on his hands where they rested above the covers. If Becky was in here, she would be holding one of his hands in hers or maybe touching his cheek to let him know she was by his side. Reagan wasn’t ready to provide that level of comfort. Her heart ached to know English was fighting for his life, but she couldn’t let go of her resentment.

“You’ve created a mess,” she finally told him. “I know you probably don’t know. I mean, maybe you’ve heard us talking, but who knows if you really can hear anything? I may be wasting my breath here, but I have some things to say anyway. I have no idea what’s going to happen. But the minute I get the chance, I’m returning to my life and forgetting you. So I’m going to have my say in case I don’t get another opportunity.”

She stepped closer to the side of his bed and peered into his pale face. “I am glad you survived the surgery. I hope it was the right call. I felt like it was a risk you would

take because, let's face it, anyone who works for the CIA is someone who takes risks. I guess I shouldn't say it too loud, should I? That you're CIA? I mean, anyone can hear me, right? Well, too bad. The cat's out of the bag. You're Legend."

She crossed her arms and rolled her eyes, forgetting for a moment that he was unconscious. "What kind of nickname is that anyway? A man who runs out on his wife and child doesn't deserve a name like Legend. Your boys would disagree, I'm sure, but the name is too good for you. And speaking of your boys, I suppose that's the answer I've been wanting, right? I said if I ever saw you again, I would ask why you left. It didn't matter so much why you and Mom divorced. I had enough friends with divorced parents to understand that it happens sometimes. No, I wanted to know why you wanted nothing to do with me. And now I know. You wanted sons. I was a disappointment to you. Most men want sons, or at least that's what I've heard before, so I shouldn't be surprised you chose them over me."

She wasn't aware she was crying until she felt a tear slip down her cheek and fall to English's hand. She swiped at her eyes before realizing it was futile. The tears were flowing steadily.

"Well, it's your loss. If you had stuck around, you could have seen me win dance trophies and letter in softball. You could have seen me graduate in the top ten of my high school class. I have a business degree. Did you know that? I already know you found out I'm a published author I'm not a bestseller yet, but the book I'm working on now has tremendous potential."

She suddenly recalled a random thought, and her sad gaze rested on her father's face. "Becky let it slip that you had all of my books. She borrowed them from you and read them all. Did you read them? Why? If you care nothing for me, why bother to read my books? Nothing about you makes sense. Why am I even bothering to figure you out? You've never tried to get to know me. You didn't even trust your boys enough to tell them about me. You've put me in danger, and because of your secrets, no one

can figure out who's coming after us. You're an asshole, English Barlowe."

Reagan could feel her anger bubbling up, and she struggled to rein it in. The hospital was not the place for her to lose control, and her father wasn't worth it. She said what she wanted to say, but she didn't feel the release she expected. She only felt loss for a relationship she never had and never acknowledged she wanted.

"I'll stick around long enough to know you're out of the woods. Then I'm walking away. I'm not coming back. I'm not thinking about you. I'm not lifting a finger for you. You had better change your medical proxy to Jackson or one of the boys because I'm done. No more manipulating me, English. I deserve better than that. I deserve better than you."

She turned and stepped away from the bed. She gasped when a firm grip on her wrist pulled her back. She jerked her eyes to stare at English's hand where it touched her skin, the contact warm and disconcerting. Her head snapped to the side, and when her eyes met a pair so much like her own, she almost forgot how much she hated him.

"Reagan." His deep voice rasped from lack of use. Considering he'd been in a coma, he seemed alert, and she had a sudden realization that he'd come out of his coma before she'd walked into his room. He lay there pretending to be unconscious while she poured out her heart.

"What...how long...why didn't you say something? Are you alright?"

"I'm...sorry."

Reagan's heart pounded hard enough in her chest to echo in her ears. His apology stunned her, and she wasn't sure what he was apologizing for.

She pulled her arm away, thankful he released her without a fuss. "English. How are

you feeling?”

“Like hell,” he grumbled, closing his eyes.

That was all she needed to push her out of her daze. “Oh, God. Right. You need to see a doctor. Wait here.” She turned, realized what she said, and turned back. “I mean just wait. I’ll get a nurse.”

“Reagan. No. Please.”

She froze. The pleas sounded odd coming from him. Even with her good memories of him in her early years, she’d never known him to sound as vulnerable as the single word made him sound.

“You should let the doctor examine you.”

“I will. I need to know what happened first.” He pushed his fists against the mattress to shift his body up. He winced and cradled his head with his palm. He blinked in surprise as he gingerly touched the bandage wrapped around his head.

“You don’t remember.” She stepped closer to his bedside, studying him closely and forgetting she wanted more distance between them.

“I remember last call and sending Jackie and East on their way. The boys?”

“Are fine. Well, they’re pissed off at me, but otherwise fine.”

She was amazed to hear him chuckle even as he grimaced from the pain it caused.

“That’s my girl.”

Reagan stiffened. “I’m not your girl. You gave up the right to call me your girl a long

time ago.”

He dropped his hand back to the bed. “I know. But you’re here.”

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“You didn’t give me a choice. Why would you make me your medical proxy?”

“Because no matter how much you hate me, you would make the right decision. Whether you admit it or not, we’re a lot alike.”

“I’m nothing like you,” she protested. “I don’t lie to the ones I love. I don’t walk away from the people who are important to me. I don’t put my life in danger for the thrill of it. I don’t make decisions that put my loved ones in danger. I don’t keep secrets from the people I’m closest to.”

“I never wanted you to know, but now that you do, you know I didn’t have a choice. I had to protect you.”

“And yet I’ve been shot at and almost abducted because of you and your secrets.”

He jerked in surprise. He reached out a hand to touch her, but she backed away. “Reagan. What happened?”

“I’ll get your doctor.” She retreated before he could stop her again.

Reagan stopped short of running into Alex still standing guard outside the room. The sudden halt threw her off balance, but Alex braced her with hands on her elbow. He only released her to ask her in ASL if she was alright.

“It’s English.”

She heard the sound of boots squeaking against the floor and knew before she turned

toward the sound that it meant the boys had found her.

“What about English?” Jackson demanded, and Reagan met his angry gaze.

“He’s awake.”

Chapter Nineteen

Reagan paced a hole in the floor in front of the vending machines. Or at least that’s the old Southern euphemism her mother would use if she could see her daughter moving so much over the same general area.

“Mom, he heard me,” she said into the cell phone, glad no one decided to visit the vending area. “I told him what a loser I thought he was, among other things, and he heard it all.”

“Reagan, I don’t understand why you’re upset. You went there wanting to tell him exactly what you told him.”

“Mom, I yelled at a man who had not only been in a coma but also had life threatening brain surgery.” She smacked the palm of her free hand against her forehead. “I’m a horrible person.”

“Did he call you a horrible person? Because if he did, I can have Randall down there ASAP to set him straight.”

Reagan couldn’t help herself. She smiled. “I appreciate the sentiment, but no, he didn’t say that. He’s not exactly in a position to judge me. I’m judging myself plenty.”

“Well, you can stop. If English is the man I remembered, he can take whatever you

had to say. He's an adult who's aware of what he's done and what consequences come with it. I could say the same about you."

Reagan stopped. "What do you mean?"

Traci sighed. "I mean you took off alone without saying a word to anyone. Anything could have happened to you on the way to the hospital, and from what I overheard when the boys were talking, that's what you were hoping for. Did you even think about how it would affect me and your father if something happened to you? How could you be so reckless?"

Reagan felt sufficiently scolded. "I'm sorry. I was careful, and nothing happened. I wanted to talk to English without the boys breathing down my neck. I couldn't wait anymore to go back to my life, but I didn't want to until I had my say. I didn't expect to feel so bad once I did, though."

"Why do you want to go back now? Regardless of the fact the threat to your life is still very real, you have an opportunity to learn more about English and his boys. Aren't you a bit curious about them? I know I am."

"I don't care about him or his boys. I want to go home. Dad has contacts. I'm sure he can arrange for me to have protection until we're certain I'm no longer in danger."

"Who do you think you're talking to, Reagan Elizabeth? Of course, you care. You just don't want to because you think you'll get hurt again. I felt the same after English left us. It took me a long time to open myself up to love again. If I hadn't, we wouldn't have Randall in our lives. Change has always been hard for you, but change doesn't have to be a disaster. Some of our best experiences come through change."

"It's more complicated than that," Reagan insisted.

“True. Your feelings for Jackson don’t make hating English any easier.”

“My feelings? Mom, you are way off base there. There’s nothing going between me and Jackson.” Even as the words left her mouth, her cheeks flushed as she recalled the previous night — finding Jackson in her bed, feeling his hands and his mouth on her body, and giving in to the desire to touch him in return. She’d refused to remember any of it since it happened, but it all came flooding back with one innocent comment from her mother.

“Maybe there should be. He’s a nice man who obviously cares very deeply. Even Randall is impressed by him. He may have been raised by English, but he’s not English. He’s his own man. Plus, he’s very good looking.”

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Reagan's eyes bugged out of her head. "Mom! Please don't talk like that. I called you because I was in crisis, and you're trying to play matchmaker."

"I'm trying to talk sense to you. You've come all this way to Fire Creek. At the very least, you should hear English out and say what you want to say when you know he's listening. And you should trust the boys, especially Jackson. Open yourself up a little. You might be surprised how it turns out."

Traci Dunlap had always been a romantic despite her rocky relationship with English. Reagan wasn't in the frame of mind for romance. Maybe she was afraid of change, but she was also in love with her life. She worked hard and did well for herself. When she needed to blow off steam, she had friends to call on to show her a good time. Her life was full. English and his boys couldn't provide anything to make her life any better.

Jackson stepped around the corner, but instead of giving her privacy when he saw her on the phone, he waited with his back resting against the wall. Her heart tripped to see him there. His expression was unreadable, but she felt sure he knew exactly what she and her mother had been talking about based on the sheepish look she wore on her face.

He looked good, too, damn him. His jeans hugged his muscular thighs like a second skin, and his signature T-shirt was a burnt orange and made his tanned skin seem more golden. The eyes watching her were deep and molten and would haunt her dreams long after she returned home.

"Mom, I should go. Are you and Dad coming to the hospital?"

“The boys thought it was better for us to stay here, but if you need me there, I’ll be there. You come first for me. You know that.”

Reagan closed her eyes as a fierce love for her mother flowed through her. “I would like you here. I could use someone to lean on right now.”

“Don’t you worry, sweetheart. Randall and I will be there.”

“Thanks, Mom. Talk to you soon.”

Reagan ended the call and forced herself to meet Jackson’s gaze. “Everything alright?”

“You tell me.” Jackson pushed off the wall and approached her like a panther approaching its prey. “Why would you run off? And how did you do it without anyone knowing where you went?”

She started to tell him to mind his own business, but after the conversation with her mother, she decided he deserved an explanation. “Your brothers were preoccupied with why you stormed out and which one was going after you. I saw Ben switch off the alarm system around the property before chasing after you. Everyone thought I went to one of the rooms to cool off. I left after Ben, walked down the drive until I saw a neighbor’s house, and went inside to ask if I could wait for my ride to show up since my car broke down. I called a ride share service which brought me here.”

“Must have cost a pretty penny.”

Reagan twisted her face ruefully. “You have no idea. I’m sorry I worried you. I was careful that we weren’t followed, and I came in a side entrance along with a group of church goers here to visit one of their members. They were kind enough to share that with me while we rode the elevator. Once I was inside, I knew Alex or his employees

would be here, so I was perfectly safe.”

“It was foolish and dangerous.”

“I get that you can’t understand, but I had to do this. I had some things to say, and I didn’t want to lose the chance to say them. Not that it made any difference.”

“It did. Gish wants to see you. He said you had unfinished business.”

Reagan shook her head. “I don’t want to see him. Nothing he says will change anything. He made his choice. It is what it is.”

Jackson took a step closer, crowding her personal space. “And what is it?”

“He chose you. And Luke and Ben and Easton. The last thing he wanted was a daughter tying him down. He wanted sons, and he got them. Good ones, I might add. You’re all such good men. It’s hard for me to imagine you being raised by English. I’ve never considered him a good man.”

“He’s not sometimes. He has his moments like the rest of us, even you. Everything he does, though, is to protect other people. That’s why he took us in. Our home lives were awful, and he protected us from it and taught us how to protect ourselves, so we never had to be victims again. He was protecting you, too, and your mother. Things didn’t turn out the way he planned, but he tried. Can’t you give him credit for trying?”

“I don’t know that I can. Once he left the CIA, he could have come back. He could have explained, but he didn’t because he didn’t want me.”

“Would it matter if he did want you? Would it change anything after all this time?”

She didn't answer right away. She wasn't expecting to have this heavy of a conversation with Jackson. She figured they'd argue. They always argued, and she'd made him mad by running off without a bodyguard. He also had to know by now that she'd given English a piece of her mind, and he couldn't be happy about that either. But serious Jackson was more disconcerting than angry Jackson, and she fought the yearning to confide in him.

She finally shook her head. "I'm not having this conversation with you." She started to turn away, but he sidestepped to stop her retreat.

"What conversation do you want to have? We can talk about your next book, or about the person who's trying to kill you. Or, hey, what about last night, when we were all over each other? If you don't remember, I can show you the scratches you left on my back."

He shifted so fast into angry Jackson that she had to take a moment to process what happened. Once she did, she matched him, fury to fury.

"I can show you my foot in your ass. Or better yet my knee to your balls, you chauvinistic—"

He cradled her face in his hands. The large palms made her feel petite, and the gesture made her feel cherished, an emotion completely at war with the rage she felt.

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“God, Reagan, you drive me nuts. You know that, don’t you? You scare me and make me mad. You make me want you. You can make me burn so hot I think I could combust. You twist me into knots, woman, and all I want is a chance. I want you to give Gish another chance, and I want you to give me one too. God help me, it’s all I can think about. Damn you, woman, but you’re under my skin, and—”

This time, Reagan was the one doing the interrupting. She stood on her toes, putting herself at eye level with Jackson. He wanted a chance. Well, she was taking one. She leaned in and planted her mouth over his, her tongue teasing his lips until his mouth opened to her. She kissed him for all she was worth. She tasted his mouth, teased his tongue with hers, and poured every ounce of pent-up emotion into the one kiss. Her toes curled inside her shoes, and her hands gripped his shoulders to keep from losing her balance.

Jackson buried a hand in her hair and used it to angle her head, deepening the kiss until she felt dizzy from the lust stirring within her. Though she thought she was dreaming last night, she remembered every detail of the kisses they shared. This one made the others seem no better than a peck on the cheek.

She forgot where she was until she heard someone clear their throat loudly. Shoving hard against Jackson, she stumbled backwards until the back of her thighs bumped into a nearby garbage can. A certified nursing assistant grinned knowingly at them as he walked to the snack machine and deposited his change to receive a candy bar in return.

Reagan’s face flamed, and she dropped her head to try and collect herself. Her breathing was coming in pants, and though she tried to calm herself, she was making

a poor attempt to hide her reaction to his kiss. She peeked from under her lids to see if Jackson was as affected as she was and was annoyed to see his sexy smirk aimed at her.

“Gish wants to see you. Take a minute and then come back. You owe it to yourself to hear him out.”

With that said, he left her alone. The CNA shot her a knowing grin, telling her he wasn't the least bit embarrassed at finding her and Jackson in a passionate embrace, and he disappeared right behind Jackson.

You've gone and done it this time, Ray, she chastised herself. You've gone and started to care for him. For all of them. Your mother was right. You are so screwed.

Chapter Twenty

Jackson hated rules.

He'd always decided what was best for him and his brothers. If it meant following rules, then he did. But if the rules were more of a hindrance, he broke them without hesitation. He'd come close to breaking the hospital's rule of only two visitors at a time in English's room. He wanted his brothers with him when he talked to English about what happened.

Instead, he was standing in the room with Reagan while his brothers stayed in the lobby. English hadn't wanted either of them, but the doctor convinced him it was best for Reagan to be present. No way was Jackson going to have her in the room without him.

He hadn't expected to be pushed to one corner by the doctors and nurses bustling around English. It placed him close enough to Reagan for her arm to brush against

him as they waited. Instead of putting his entire focus on the doctor, he was only too aware of Reagan and how she felt in his arms. He had been affected when he thought she was a dream, but being awake when he held her put his lust on a whole other dimension.

She was the right mixture of strong and soft. Her body molded against his in all the right spots. Even fully clothed, he could feel her curves. And her lips...damn, if they weren't the sweetest he'd ever kissed. He didn't want to stop and may not have if she hadn't pushed him away. He didn't care the male nurse had gotten a free show. Reagan felt and tasted too good for him to want their moment to end.

Jackson had gone to search for her to ask her what she'd said to English before he, Luke and Ben had arrived. Whatever it was had upset his mentor. English tried to hide it, but Jackson knew him too well. Luke was ready to put Reagan in her place, but Jackson had calmed him down. From what little they'd learned about English's past, he figured Reagan deserved to have her say.

The doctor took his time examining English, only stopping to ask the occasional question. The patter of rain hitting the window caught Jackson's attention. The sky had darkened to a menacing gray, indicative of the vicious storm brewing. It fit his mood at having to wait to find out if English had any lingering side effects from his coma or his surgery.

"I can't believe you left my parents alone to come after me. I thought you were supposed to be protecting them too." Reagan's whisper carried the same harshness as if she had screamed her disapproval at him.

"Not now," he murmured loud enough for only her to hear. Obviously, she wasn't fazed the way he was by their moment in the vending area, and it only soured his mood more.

His warning kept her quiet...for a couple of seconds.

“If anything happens to them while all of you boys are here, I’ll make your life a living hell.” Venom dripped from her tone when she spat out the word boys, and a sudden clap of thunder added a touch of drama to her outburst.

He told himself not to engage, but his gut told him she wouldn’t shut up unless he apologized. But of course, he was not going to do that.

“Alex dispatched a couple of guys to the shack after he called to tell me you were here. Both are former Secret Service with marksmanship commendations. So I think your parents are fine. They’re on their way here now for you to see for yourself. Hell, you just talked to your mother, so you already know they’re fine. You, on the other hand, are lucky you made it here without our target making a move to take you out.”

“I was careful. I can take care of myself. There wasn’t—”

Reagan hushed abruptly when the doctor mumbled a few words to a nurse, who nodded as he spoke. The storm raging outside drowned out their murmurs, adding to Jackson’s frustration. The doctor glanced over at Jackson and Reagan before addressing English, who looked as ready for the exam to be over as Jackson was.

“From my initial examination, the surgery seems to have done the job. Your breathing and your reflexes are strong, and I see no evident signs of permanent damage. But I am going to order some tests to rule out any possibilities of brain bleeds or damage we may have missed. With the memory gaps, I’m concerned you may still have some swelling. So you’re not out of the woods yet.”

“Memory gaps?” Jackson interjected.

The doctor paused, looking to English for direction. English gave a slight shake to his

head, and the doctor nodded.

“I’ll get those orders in, and I’ll check back. If you start experiencing a severe headache or nausea, let us know immediately.” The doctor left, and the nurse only spent a few more minutes making sure English was comfortable before she departed.

Jackson pushed off the wall and approached English’s bedside. “What’s he talking about, Gish? What’s up with your memory?”

“Stand down, Jacky.” Jackson was familiar with his tone, having heard it many times growing up whenever he had stepped out of line.

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“I can’t. Not when we’re still trying to find the person who put you in here. We’ve watched the security feed, but there are spots that are too dark for video enhancement. And your attacker spoke to you too low for it to be picked up on the audio recording. We need you to fill in the blanks.”

English’s gaze flicked to a spot behind Jackson quickly, making Jackson wonder if he imagined it.

“Not now.”

Jackson knew then. English didn’t want Reagan to hear what he had to say, but Jackson didn’t want to be in the room without her. He didn’t trust her to behave when she was out of his sight.

Reagan positioned herself at the foot of the bed. “I want to hear what happened too. Your attack is the only reason I’ve even seen or heard from you in years. I believe I deserve to know what happened to put me and my mother in danger, and since it’s your fault, I deserve to hear it from you.”

Jackson glared in her direction. “Reagan—”

“No,” English interrupted. “It’s okay. She’s not wrong. I just can’t give her what she wants.”

“What do you mean?” Jackson asked.

“I mean I can’t explain what happened because I don’t remember any details.”

“What do you remember?” Reagan said.

English ran a hand over his beard, smoothing the unkempt hair. “I don’t know. It’s sort of dark flashes. I remember the guy talking to me, but I don’t remember what he said. I remember looking into his face, but I don’t remember what he looked like. I remember expecting to die, then I woke up here and found my daughter in my room.”

“I’m not your daughter. Not anymore.”

Jackson glanced at her, surprised to hear more sadness than hate behind her words.

“You are to me. You always have been.” English held her gaze for a long moment before looking back to Jackson. “She shouldn’t be here. Not if she’s in danger. She’s a sitting duck here.”

“I know that. Try convincing her,” Jackson retorted.

“Don’t talk about me as if I’m not here,” Reagan snapped. “I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you, so at least respect me enough to speak to me directly.”

“She refuses to listen to what we tell her,” Jackson told English. “She’s stubborn. Like you.”

“I’m nothing like him.”

Jackson turned to see the fire sparking in her dark eyes. He hated to admit he would miss seeing her fired up when she returned back to her life.

“You’re right about that,” English admitted. “You’re a lot like your mother.”

“How would you know?” Reagan challenged. “You left us when I was a child. You

chose everything else over us. The CIA, the boys, everything.” English blinked in surprise, and she continued before he could speak. “I’m sure you thought you were a hero, putting our safety first while you were out saving the world one undercover job at a time. You’ll have to forgive me if I don’t feel the same way.”

If English was bothered by what she said, he didn’t show it. Having aired her grievance earlier, Reagan was surprised she still had any vehemence in her.

“Who told her?” English asked Jackson as if all the awful things she’d said didn’t matter.

“I did. She deserved to know about you, the same way we deserved to know about her. If you hadn’t kept your secrets, we wouldn’t be chasing our tails right now. Enough about that. We don’t have time for this. The person who put you here still poses a threat that we need to neutralize. I’m going to have Luke show you the security footage. Maybe it’ll jog your memory.”

“No,” Reagan interrupted.

Jackson didn’t bother to hide his eye roll. “What now?”

“You’re just like him, putting what you want ahead of what’s for the best. Watching the video of the attack could cause undue stress, and until the doctor rules out anything more serious, stress could cause a setback.”

“Let me guess. You know this because of research for a book.”

“No!”

Jackson noted the slight shift in her gaze and wanted to call her out on her lie. The fact he was silent for longer than was acceptable was enough to have her sigh in

resignation.

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“It was on a streaming medical drama I got hooked on. But it’s common sense. It holds up.”

“English can handle it. If it means we can finally get ahead of this guy, we have to do this.”

“Reagan, you have to trust him.”

Her eyes widened, and the pupils darkened like the thunderstorm raging outside. Jackson might have enjoyed seeing her anger directed at someone other than him if they weren’t pressed for time.

“I don’t trust any of you, and I don’t even know why I bother. Do whatever the hell you want. I don’t care. You’re awake, so I don’t need to be here anymore.”

Reagan stormed from the room. Jackson exhaled loudly as he ran a hand through his hair again. He glanced at English but swung his gaze back to where he last saw Reagan.

“Would she—”

“Run?” Jackson finished English’s sentence. “She would.”

“Go. One of the boys will come in here when they see you leave, and I’ll fill them in. You can’t let her out of your sight. I owe you both an explanation, and I swear you’ll get it. Just keep her safe first.”

His frustration had him almost refusing English's request. He was tired of trying to protect someone who fought him at every turn, and he was tired of having to wait for intel. He wanted to solve this case and get back to his life. Reagan was nothing more than a disruption, and a stubborn one at that.

But she could have led the attacker directly to the hospital. She could walk out the doors into an ambush, or worse, a sniper's bullet between the eyes.

Without another word, Jackson went after her. Though he heard his brothers tossing questions at his back, he didn't slow down. He didn't even bother to see if Alex and his men were still around. His long strides ate up the distance quickly, and he was grabbing Reagan's arm before she could step on the waiting elevator. Her hair whipped against his face as she rounded on him, jerking her arm but unable to free it from his grip.

"Let me go, or I'll scream loud enough to bring security running."

"I should let you go since you want to risk your life to prove a point, but I'm not about to let someone under my watch get taken out because she doesn't have better judgment. This is not one of your books, Reagan. This is not going away because you ignore it."

"I'm not ignoring it," she insisted. "I'm just tired of hiding. Can't you understand? I don't run away from problems. I face them. I beat them. I don't know how to be any other way."

The earnestness in her eyes tugged at something deep inside Jackson. He was suddenly aware of how soft the skin of her wrist felt beneath his rough palm. Her scent enveloped him, and his mind started down a forbidden path. He could envision Reagan at his side in everything — running the bar, leading the Legends, warming his bed, bearing his children. The picture was so complete, so perfect, Jackson recoiled

like someone delivered a forceful punch to his solar plexus. He released her and stepped back. A shutter dropped over his eyes, and he hardened his heart against the yearning she brought out in him.

Standing in the middle of a hospital hallway, he took in the way her silky hair splayed over her shoulders and back and how her fitted clothes covered her but showcased her slender curves. She was tall, but still smaller than him. Yet her body was perfectly made to fit his. She'd gotten under his skin and under his defenses, and he only had one move left to make.

He had to let her go. He couldn't afford to have her as a weakness — a way for someone to get to him through her. The risk wasn't worth the glimpse of the future she gave him.

"Tell me what you want." Jackson didn't know what possessed him to ask her, especially when he already knew what she would say.

"I want to take my parents and go back to my life. Daddy knows people who can keep us safe until you sort this out. I can't be here anymore. I can't be near English or any of this. It's too hard."

Tears glistened and turned her eyes into dark, solemn pools that were Jackson's undoing. He nodded, but his words clogged in his throat, almost choking him in his attempt to grant her what she wanted.

"Your parents are on their way. Wait here, and I'll have Ben go with you to wait for them in the lobby. Stay in the lobby with him, and we'll figure out the next steps once you're all together."

"Thank you," she whispered to his back because he'd already turned to go back down the hall.

When he was certain no one would see him, Jackson rubbed the spot on his chest to dispel the painful tug in his heart. He missed the elevator doors opening and Reagan going inside alone.

Chapter Twenty-One

Jackson forced himself to study English's face as the older man watched the replay of the security footage. His expression gave nothing away, but Jackson suspected English's brain was working overtime to connect what he was seeing with snippets of memory he could recall.

"Stop it for a minute."

Luke tapped a button on his laptop and halted the video. Jackson's eyes narrowed.

"Talk to us, Gish."

The man shook his head gingerly. "Tell me about the investigation first. I want to know what you do. It could help me make sense of things."

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Jackson shared a look with his brother and understood Luke's silent communication. He was allowing Jackson to take the lead and determine what to tell English and what to leave a mystery for now. Only once Jackson started talking, all of the details fell from his lips unchecked. From interviewing Traci about her relationship with English, to Reagan's existence, to speaking with Deb and Garth, to trying to track down English's handler, and with their suspicion of English's attack having to do with his last case as Legend.

English nodded as he listened but kept his eyes on the laptop monitor. When Jackson finished, English motioned to Luke.

"Play this again for me."

Jackson was low on patience as the video played again, the staticky audio grating on his frazzled nerves. They were getting nowhere. English's memory lapses were temporary, the doctor said, a side effect of his coma and surgery. They were still waiting for the results of his scans, bloodwork and other tests, but the doctor didn't seem concerned that the prognosis was anything but a full recovery.

"Stop it right there." English pointed to the screen at the point of the video where the assailants had fled the alley, leaving him alone with the instigator. "There was a siren. That's what made the others run. He didn't, almost like he was sure the siren wasn't meant for him."

"Maybe we should check with the police logs and see what call the cops or paramedics were responding to," Luke suggested to Jackson, but English shook his head.

“No, it’s not that. It’s what he said before he stabbed me. Something about knowing my secrets and taking what was mine.”

“We already knew he somehow found about Reagan. We figured he must be someone from your past. Then when he left, you said ‘Ray’ loud enough for the audio to pick it up. Becky knew you were talking about Reagan.”

English continued to stare, but he threw the brothers off with an abrupt change in subject. “Where is Becky, Ben and Easton?”

“Easton was staying behind with Deb and Garth. He wanted to question Garth without Deb running interference, but Garth suffered a heart attack. Last I heard, he narrowly escaped being thrown in jail for attempted murder and was trying to convince Deb that he didn’t cause Garth’s heart attack,” Luke explained.

“Becky’s in the waiting room. She’s anxious to see you, but she knew it was important we talk to you first. Ben is watching Reagan. She’s waiting for her mother and stepdad downstairs.”

“I was supposed to.” Ben interrupted by bursting into English’s room. “Reagan’s not in the lobby. She bolted. Again.”

“No way. She wouldn’t. She knew Traci and Randall were almost here. She wanted to wait for them, and we were going to talk about her going home. She said Randall had connections and could arrange a protection detail.” Jackson stood, his idea of questioning English forgotten. “You overlooked her. She was probably in the bathroom or something.”

“You don’t think I checked?” Ben returned. “I’m telling you. She’s not there, and she’s not in the lobby with Becky.”

“Holy shit!” English suddenly exclaimed. “Luke, start this damn thing over again.”

“English—”

“Jacky, wait a minute! Luke, hurry up. I need to see this again. It’s important.”

The video replayed, but this time, Jackson sensed English’s urgency. The confusion had cleared from his eyes. He remembered. Jackson couldn’t be sure how much he remembered, but it had to be enough for them to act. He stood torn between wanting to find out what happened to Reagan and wanting to hear what English had to say.

“I’ll be damned,” English hissed slowly. “It’s TJ. Shit! I never thought...Traci.” His eyes darted up to pierce Ben with an earnest stare. “Traci and Dunlap. Where are they?”

Ben glanced at his watch. “Alex’s people should have them here now. They’ll bring them to the waiting area on this floor. Aren’t you wondering about Reagan and what happened to her?”

“He has her. And he’ll go after her mother. You’ve got to get to her. This isn’t about me or Reagan. It’s all about Traci!”

Jackson didn’t wait around. He had more questions, but he didn’t have to know the details to know trouble had found them. It was on his watch, and he’d dropped the ball with the investigation and the protection detail. All of that was about to change.

He caught up to Alex where he was waiting with Becky. She stood quickly, English’s name on her lips. Jackson shook his head to let her know the older man had not taken a turn. He signed to Alex, his movements jerky and too fast, but his friend understood.

“Check in with your people. Reagan’s missing. Traci is the target.”

Alex nodded and fired off a specialized text that would ring into his men’s phones and simulate a voice call. It would spur a quicker response than a traditional text. He studied his phone screen, and within seconds, he flipped it around to show Jackson. Undeliverable.

“Can you track them?” Jackson asked, foregoing the signing.

Alex opened an encrypted app on his phone and went through the three-factor authentication before it would unlock. The tracking app was connected to all of his employees, and he zeroed in on the two escorting Traci and Randall to the hospital. His partner, Turner Drake, peered over his shoulder.

“It shows they’ve stopped about ten miles east of the hospital. Off County Road 12.”

“There’s nothing around there but curves and big drop offs,” Ben stated what his brothers were already thinking.

“Alex, you—”

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“I’m coming,” Alex signed, his expression broking no argument from Jackson and his brothers.

“Go. I’ll stay with Becky and English,” Turner offered. “I’ll see if we can get English moved to a more private area where we can monitor who’s coming in and out. I’ll get security and the LEOs to provide back-up.”

Jackson, Alex, Ben and Luke were already sprinting to the waiting room door before Turner finished talking.

???

Lightning struck the horizon in a brilliant display of white light. A boom of thunder followed a couple of minutes later, loud enough to rattle the truck’s windows. Blinding rain pounded the windshield faster than the wipers could keep up. Jackson tried to contain his frustration. As much as he wanted to speed to the spot where they tracked Alex’s guys, he couldn’t risk an accident delaying them any longer than necessary.

Alex tapped his arm and pointed to a spot on the road’s shoulder. Jackson slammed on his brakes and quickly regained control when the truck started to skid on the slick pavement. Alex jumped from the cab before Jackson could ask him about what he saw. He couldn’t understand how his friend could see anything through the sheets of rain pummeling the earth. He jerked the gear shift into park and jumped from the truck. His brothers weren’t far behind them, but he didn’t want to wait. Following Alex’s path through the muddy shoulder, he finally realized what caught the man’s attention.

An SUV rested on its side along the slope of the embankment. The vehicle was smashed on all sides as if it had rolled to its resting spot. He didn't recognize it, but Alex must have. He sprinted, his boots providing some traction against the muddy ground, and jumped up to pull himself on top of the SUV. The window on the driver's door had smashed, and Alex used a rock to brush the glass away.

Jackson pulled up on the SUV beside him and did a quick assessment. Whipping his pocketknife from his jeans, he cut through the driver's seatbelt and pushed the air bag out of the way. Together they pulled him out, and Jackson recognized him as one of Alex's men. Alex dropped to the ground and reached for his teammate.

"I'm going in," Jackson shouted before squeezing through the window.

He braced himself against the seat, so he didn't drop on the passenger. Another of Alex's men, the passenger was unconscious like the other one, but this one was coated in blood that had already stained his clothes, so it wasn't easily washed away by the rain falling in on them. Jackson cut through the guy's seatbelt and caught him as he slumped.

"Jackson!"

He looked up to see Luke peering down at him, motioning for him to pass the passenger up to him. The move was awkward with the man unable to help and Jackson unable to accurately assess his injuries, but somehow they managed to extract the passenger. Jackson looked in the backseat, and he felt his adrenaline spike.

"Randall! Randall, can you hear me?"

"Jackson, what is it?"

He recognized Ben's voice calling to him. "It's Randall. He's unconscious, and

there's blood. Traci's not here."

"Cops and paramedics are on the way. I'm coming in to help."

"No, I think I've got it. Stay put, and I'll see if I can pass him to you."

Jackson noted Randall's arm was positioned at an odd angle. He tried to feel the spot at his shoulder to determine the extent of Randall's injury but only succeeded in making the man moan, which was a reassuring sound. At least he was alive.

"Randall, it's me, Jackson. Can you talk to me? Come on, man. I need you to tell us what happened. Ben and I are going to help you out of here, but I need you to hang on."

There was no way to move the man without causing him pain, but Jackson saw no other choice.

Jackson shouted up to his brother. "He's hurt. Broken arm or collarbone. I'm not sure. There's blood from a gash on his head, but I can't be sure how deep. It's bleeding too much for me to see. He's slipping in and out of consciousness."

"Got it. The rain's starting to let up. Ambo should be here soon. Send him up, and we'll be as careful as possible. Luke's here too."

Jackson glanced up at his brothers, relieved they were here to have his back as always. On a whim, he whipped off his shirt and fashioned it as best as he could into a makeshift sling. It wasn't perfect, but hopefully it would stabilize his arm while they lifted him out of the SUV. He shielded Randall with his body while Ben broke out the glass on the back window. They worked as a team to clear Randall from the SUV. Jackson climbed out after him.

Once Randall was on the ground, Jackson knelt beside him, but he had slipped into unconsciousness again. Jackson raised his head to see Alex kneeling beside the passenger they'd pulled out. His head was lowered, and his shoulders were slumped.

"His man was killed," Luke told him as he lowered his frame beside him. "According to the driver, they were chased by another SUV which tried to force them off the road. They utilized their defensive driving protocol. They managed to pull alongside. Alex's guy said there were three. The one in the passenger seat fired a shot meant for him. It hit his partner instead. Clipped him in the neck. He bled out."

"Traci was abducted." It was a statement, not a question, as Jackson processed the turn this case had taken.

"Randall tried to stop them. They pistol whipped him. It's how he got the gash on his head."

"Was Reagan in the SUV? Was he able to see her?"

Luke shook his head. "No. Just three guys. She could have been in the back where he couldn't see her, but there's no way to know."

Jackson whipped his head around to stare at his brother incredulously. "How did they get Traci out? The doors were smashed."

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“They didn’t go off the embankment at first. They were run off the road onto the shoulder, so the targets opened the door to pull her out. It wasn’t until the ground shifted from the rain that they crashed on the embankment. The SUV rolled and got busted up. The driver said it only made their injuries worse.”

“Holy shit,” Jackson hissed. He pushed up to his feet, thankful the rain had lessened to a steady drizzle. He walked over to his friend and placed a hand on Alex’s shoulder.

“Alex, I’m sorry. This should never have happened.”

Alex’s response was delayed as if he was unaware of what was going on around him outside of sitting by his man’s side. When he did sign, Jackson followed the deliberate movements.

“Find the bastards. Take them down.”

The paramedics crowded around them, and Jackson stepped back to allow them room to work. He looked at the damage left behind by the man he’d been unable to catch. The man took down some tough men and had taken both Traci and Reagan while they were under protection. Jackson still had no idea who the target was, other than a vague reference to TJ that English made earlier. He had no idea what the target’s agenda was other than English believed Traci was the object of his actions.

Had the target hurt Traci and Reagan? Had he killed them already? And why come after English if he wanted Traci?

He had more questions than answers, but that was about to change. He owed it to those he cared about to extract justice from the unknown target, and he vowed to get it.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Music swirled around them, a slow and sensual sensation that lulled them into a world where they were the only two who existed. His arm lightly held her at her waist while his hand held hers. They spun around the dance floor, and she laughed with pure joy. She felt happy and safe.

The tempo changed. The sexy cadence turned sinister. The lightness of their dance turned dark. It started out low and menacing before getting louder and deafening. He spun her around, and then he was gone. A fog rolled in around her, and she could no longer see anything around her. He was gone, and she was alone.

“No!” she cried, tears pouring down her face and fear seizing her heart. “Please don’t leave me. I’m here. I need you. Please don’t go!”

Her body jerked as she woke with a start, but Reagan didn’t immediately open her eyes. The pain in her head was enough to make her yearn for unconsciousness. She wanted to rub her temples with the pads of her fingers, but she couldn’t lift her arms. Her body ached in places she didn’t realize could ache, but she didn’t think that was the reason she was immobile. No, the cut of something rubbing painfully against her wrists and ankles told her she was bound.

She opened her eyelids to slits. She was in a damp and cool room, too long and narrow to be functional. The walls were gray slabs of cement. The floor was packed dirt. On the opposite end of the room was a stone archway and an opening that led...somewhere. The space beyond the opening was shadowed enough where she couldn’t see what lay beyond the room she was in. The only light came from a lantern

placed on the floor in the middle of the room. Its flame flickered, casting only enough illumination to add to the room's creepiness.

The pounding intensified behind her eyes, so she closed them. Breathing deeply, she waited until the pain lessened before opening her lids again, this time to inspect herself. Inky black zip ties secured her ankles to the wooden chair she sat on. Her feet were bare, the pink polish on her nails chipped. Her legs were covered in a light wash denim that was unfamiliar to her. Glancing at her torso, she saw the bright red cotton fabric of a plain tee. With her arms pulled behind her, the shirt pulled tightly against her breasts, her nipples erect.

These weren't her clothes. Someone changed them, failing to put on the bra she'd worn all day. Fear clogged her throat, and her heart pounded enough to vibrate in her ears. Tears pricked her eyes as she tried not to imagine someone stripping her naked while she was unconscious. Had they done other things too?

The tears flowed freely, leaving tracks down her cheeks and dripping off her chin. Regret reared, reminding her if she'd followed Jackson's instructions and had never gone to the hospital, she wouldn't be held captive now with no way for anyone to find her.

She jerked her chin up, her eyes going wide. Jackson!

He was the last person she saw before the elevator doors opened, and she stepped inside with a doctor dressed for surgery. She recalled hearing the swish of the elevator doors close, and then her world had gone dark. He would have known by now that she was missing, but would he realize she'd been abducted and hadn't run away on her own again?

She closed her lids, the disquiet left behind from her dream intensifying. She felt the blackness creeping in, but she breathed deeply through her nose and released it

gradually through her mouth until the dizziness passed. Jackson had been the one in her dream. She didn't believe dreams could be premonitions, but she did believe her fear had been the likely source of her dream. She was afraid she'd pushed Jackson away enough and he wasn't coming for her.

She heard a shuffle coming from the open doorway. Stiffening her body, she tried to tap down the fear seizing her as she waited for the noise's source to appear.

Her breath caught in her throat as the first man appeared. Tall, dark and dangerous didn't adequately describe his presence which rose to over six feet and was wide enough for him to have to turn slightly to the side to fit through the doorway without hitting his shoulders and biceps against the block frame. He barely spared her a glance, instead turning to watch the man behind him.

This one was shorter and stockier, his breathing labored as he brought someone in a fireman's carry. He nodded to his taller counterpart, and Tall-dark-and-dangerous moved to a point behind Reagan's line of sight. He produced a chair which he settled next to Reagan, and Short-and-stocky lowered the person he carried until she sat limply in the chair.

Reagan's gasp escaped as her heart froze in her chest. "Mom!" she whispered.

"Shut up!" Short-and-stocky yelled at her.

He produced zip ties identical to the ones which bound her, and he secured Traci's hands and feet to the chair. Traci moaned low in her throat as if she was in pain. Reagan's hands balled into fists, and she vowed if she made it out of her situation alive, she would kill these men for what they had done to her mother.

"What's wrong with her?" Reagan demanded, ignoring the menacing glares she received from both men.

“Relax.” Tall-dark-and dangerous spoke with a high-pitched voice that belied his intimidating stature. “We gave her something to knock her out. Same as what we gave you.”

“Shut it!” Short-and-stocky shouted at his buddy, and Reagan secretly hoped Tall-dark-and-dangerous would punch him for speaking to him that way.

Tall-dark-and-dangerous only stared at his partner, and the two left her and her mother alone without uttering another word. Reagan called out to them, asking them what they wanted, who were they working for, where were they, but she received only silence as an answer.

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“Mom. Mom. Wake up. Talk to me. Momma, please talk to me. Tell me you’re alright.”

Traci moaned again and shifted her body in her chair. Her head tilted up, and her eyes flickered before closing again.

“Mom. It’s me. Reagan. Momma, I need you to wake up, so we can figure out how to get out of here.”

This time when Traci’s eyes flickered, they stayed open, but several seconds passed before she seemed to focus on her daughter’s face.

“Reagan? What...”

“I know you have questions. So do I. None of this is making any sense.”

“Where are...we?”

“I’m not sure, but it reminds me of an underground bunker, like those built by end-of-the-world preppers. When I did the research for the book, *The End is Death*, I talked to a company that built them, and they gave me a tour of one they built for someone. I don’t know for sure. I was unconscious when I was brought here.”

That’s when she noticed what her mother was wearing. Jeans, a crème shirt, and no shoes. Not what she had on earlier. Reagan looked closer and realized her mother’s hair was damp, as if she had washed it and let it air dry before she was brought to the bunker.

“Momma, do you remember what happened to you?”

Traci’s brow furrowed, pain shadowing her eyes as she tried to remember. “I can’t be sure. I think I was coming to see you.”

“Yes,” Regan said. “I left the shack and went to the hospital. We talked on the phone, and I told you English came out of his coma. You and Dad were on your way to the hospital with the bodyguards Jackson hired. The ones who work with his friend Alex. Do you remember any of it?”

Traci grew thoughtful, then her eyes widened before filling with tears. “The accident. We were shot at. They killed...”

Her voice caught with raw emotion, and panic rose within Reagan.

“Momma, please tell me Dad is alright? Did they...”

“No,” Traci was quick to answer. “They killed Reggie. One of the men watching us. They aimed for Dean, who was driving. They missed and hit Reggie. We crashed. Two men came up with guns. Their faces were covered. It was raining. They were yelling at us, but the rain was too hard. I couldn’t understand them. Randall was hurt. So was Dean. Dean was stuck too. His seatbelt jammed, and he couldn’t reach his gun.”

“Did you get out, or did they pull you out?” Reagan prompted.

“Pulled me out. I released my seatbelt to help your father. But they opened my door and pulled me out. Randall tried to stop them, but...” Her voice trailed off while she swallowed before continuing. “The ground shifted. It was so muddy. The car fell more. It flipped on the way down. I screamed, but they pulled me away. I don’t know how far or how long it fell. I don’t know if... I don’t know if Randall...is alive. Oh,

God!”

Traci’s sobs wracked her body, and Reagan allowed her own tears to fall as she watched helplessly while her mother suffered. She had no idea how long they cried, but soon the room became too dark for the lantern’s illumination to be sufficient. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her she hadn’t eaten all day. The thought of eating nauseated her, but her body still insisted it needed food.

“How long have you been here?” Traci asked.

“I don’t know. I was going to meet you and Dad in the lobby. I wanted to talk to you about going to my house and hiring our own protection detail. But I was drugged and taken after I stepped on the elevator. The man was dressed in scrubs with a surgeon’s cap and mask, so I couldn’t see his face clearly. I guess Jackson was right. Whoever put English in the hospital came after us to get back at him. He must believe English still cares for us even though he hasn’t been in our lives for a long time.”

“But why not go after the boys and Becky? I think English is in love with Becky. He hasn’t admitted it yet. I know she loves him.”

Traci’s observation gave Reagan pause. “You’re right, Mom. Why only come after us and not the others who are a part of English’s life now?”

“Honey, I don’t know.” Traci dropped her gaze as if exhausted. Reagan knew the moment panic seized her mother as it had her.

“Reagan, did you change my clothes?”

She started to lie to save her mother the torturous thoughts the truth would surely evoke, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it. “No. They did. They changed mine too while I was unconscious. We must have been in the rainstorm enough to be drenched,

and they wanted us dry.”

“Oh.” Traci fell silent.

“Mom. It’s going to be okay. We’ll figure this out.”

Reagan waited for her mother to look at her again. “I promise we’ll figure this out.”

Traci nodded. “Thank you, sweetheart. I feel like our roles have reversed. I should be the one trying to encourage you, not the other way around.”

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“We do that for each other. These guys don’t know who they’re messing with by taking on the Bell women.”

“Right. So what should we do now?”

“Get the hell out of here.”

Traci’s expression showed her skepticism. “Great idea, Ray, but how are we supposed to do that when we’re tied up.”

“Believe it or not, zip ties can be broken. Remember the scene I wrote in *The Long Road to Murder*?”

Recognition flashed in Traci’s eyes. “Yes. You researched how someone can break zip ties if they find themselves tied up. Does it work? Show me what to do.”

Not for the first time, Reagan was grateful to have a mother who read her books cover to cover. She scooted her chair, glad to have the dirt floor muffle the sound, and made sure she was at an angle for her mother to see her hands. Leaning forward as far as she could, she raised her arms straight out behind her. When her shoulders started protesting the awkward angle, she brought them down with as much force as she could muster. Her wrists struck the back of her chair, and she felt the ties give. She repeated the maneuver, striking at the weak point of the ties until they snapped. She presented her freed hands to her mother in triumph.

“I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it. I think I can do it.”

Reagan went to work on the ties at her ankles while Traci mimicked her movements until her hands were freed. Slipping a fingernail under the bar in the tie's locking mechanism, she was able to pull one tie free before repeating the maneuver on her other ankle. She moved on to Traci's feet, an odd thought passing through her mind that she would treat herself to a manicure to repair the fingernail if they managed to escape.

"Do you think they heard us?" Traci asked her.

"I don't know, but if they did, they would have likely come in here to check it out. What lies beyond the opening though is another story."

"We can't hesitate," Traci said with conviction. "When we walk out of here, if we run into them, we rush them. Same as we would in an active shooter situation. We strike as a unit and go for the key defensive points. The eyes, nose, knees and throat. Like Randall taught us."

Reagan recalled the many hours spent with her mother and stepfather in their backyard as he reviewed the finer points of self-defense. He drilled those techniques into them until they reacted out of instinct. He wanted their training to be second nature. Reagan never imagined using what she learned in this way, but she was grateful to her stepfather for taking their welfare so seriously.

"I'll go first. Stay close."

Traci shook her head. "I'm your mother. I'll go first. No arguments. And Reagan? Whatever happens, remember I love you. I'm so proud of you."

"I love you, too, Mom, but we'll have time to talk about this later, when we get out of here." Reagan didn't want to think of any other alternative, and she needed her mother to follow suit.

“Let’s do this. Are you ready?”

Reagan took a deep breath and released it. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

They stepped through the opening to the bunker and continued down a dark tunnel. They didn’t cross paths with anyone, nor did they hear any voices. The tunnel wasn’t long, and when it dead ended at a steel door, they paused.

“This feels too easy,” Reagan whispered.

“But we can’t stay here,” Traci returned.

“How are we going to get through this door?”

Traci pushed against the door, and they heard the metal scrape against the stone as it shifted.

“It’s heavy, but I think it’ll open if we both push on it.”

Reagan nodded. “Okay. Let’s do it, but we need to be ready for whatever is on the other side.”

It took them four tries before they could budge the heavy door open and reveal another dark tunnel. A faint light shone ahead, and they hurried toward it. The closer they got, the brighter the light until they stepped into a room that caught them both by surprise. The light came from an ornate floor lamp providing the only illumination in the beautiful library. Shelves and shelves of books surrounded them, and Reagan gazed around with confusion bubbling within her like a geyser.

“Oh, my God!” Traci gasped, and Reagan followed her line of sight to notice they weren’t alone.

Across from them in high-back armchairs she'd only seen in high-end furniture stores. In one chair was her stepfather's partner, the man who came for her at English's bar along with a group of armed men. In the other was an older man with a shock of white hair made brighter in contrast to his thick-framed, black glasses. His hollow cheeks and tight lips were framed by a thin goatee. His suit was designer and fit in with the elaborate library.

"Mom?" Her mother's reaction told her Traci knew the man sitting next to Terrence Johnson, but Reagan didn't recognize him.

Before you mother could answer, the man spoke, and Reagan felt a chill snake down her spine.

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“Hello, Traci. I’ve been waiting for you. For a long, long time.”

Reagan’s gaze shifted from her mom to the man in the chair. Finally she settled on her father’s old partner.

“Terrence, what’s going on? Why are you and this guy targeting me and my mom?”

Terrence opened his mouth to reply, but the older man silenced him with a wave of his hand. “This isn’t about you, Reagan. You were a means to an end. Both of you, come and sit down. Let’s visit. Traci and I have a lot of catching up to do.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, TJ. My daughter and I are walking out of here, and you’re going to let us. This isn’t you. You’re not a criminal. And Terrence, neither are you.”

“Traci, I would sit down if I were you. You, too, Reagan. My dad is not joking.”

“Your father?” Mother and daughter parroted the two words, both of their eyes widening in surprise.

“Terrence, shut up! Do not interfere.” The man her mother called TJ raised a hand, and Tall-dark-and-dangerous and Short-and-stocky moved forward from the shadows, waiting for their orders from TJ. “Please help the ladies to their seat.”

“We’re not staying.” Reagan found her voice and her anger. “I don’t know who you are, but you have no right to keep us here. If your goons do anything, they’re going to show us the door so we can go home. You don’t want to mess with us.”

The man smiled, only there was no friendliness or amusement behind it. Reagan recognized the eyes of an unstable man, and her gut churned when she wondered if she pushed him too far.

“She doesn’t know.” He directed his statement to Traci. “I think it’s time you tell her about me, don’t you, Angel?”

“Angel? Mom, what’s he talking about?”

“Reagan, this man is Thomas James Terrell III, or TJ to those who know him well. He was my first love.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Reagan couldn’t have written a more disturbing scene if she tried. Forced by the Tall-Dark-and-Dangerous and Short-and-Stocky to sit in the most uncomfortable chair she’d ever sat in, she was made to wait while a housekeeper brought refreshments as if they were having afternoon tea. Her emotions teetered between anger, fear, and incredulity while her mother seemed perfectly calm. Traci’s eyes never left the man she called TJ, and Reagan couldn’t be sure if it was because Traci was infatuated with the sight of her first love or if she didn’t trust him enough to let him out of her sight for a moment. Reagan prayed the latter was true.

Terrence sat beside his father and also watched him closely, but Reagan detected concern in the man’s eyes. She still didn’t understand Terrence’s motive or role in all of this. She didn’t understand a lot of what was going on. Should she fear this man? Should she stand up to him or play it safe and stay cool with him?

Once the tea was poured, Reagan followed her mother’s lead and held the delicate cup in her hands.

“I think it’s time you explain yourself, TJ.” Her mother spoke as if she was addressing a child, and the man seemed more amused than angry at the condescending tone.

“What do you want to know?” he countered, and Reagan fought against rolling her eyes at the game he was playing.

“Don’t be coy. I want to know why. If you wanted to see me, you could have shown up at my house. You didn’t have to kidnap me and my daughter.”

“It is good to see you, Traci,” he deflected. “You’re as beautiful as ever. And just as sharp and charming. It’s good to see you haven’t changed.”

“You mean since I hoped to receive a proposal from you? I have actually changed quite a bit.”

Reagan’s eyes bugged out of her head. Proposal?

“I made a mistake. I knew it the moment you walked out of my life, but my attempts to win you back were thwarted.”

“It was futile to try. We were never meant to be together, and I moved on. I thought you had too,” Traci told him calmly while Reagan experienced a strong freak-out.

“Mom?”

Traci looked over at her, and Reagan saw in her mother’s eyes that Traci wanted her to play along.

“Honey, I’m sorry. I should explain. Or maybe TJ would rather explain.”

“I met your mother when we were in college. She was a volunteer at a blood drive, and I was a donor. I was so enamored of her that I asked her out for coffee. Coffee led to dinner, and we were inseparable. We were together for two years. I wanted to marry her,” TJ admitted. “But I was a year ahead of her in school. I had a job offer in Chicago, and I erroneously thought I needed to sever all ties to my life in order to make the move.”

“I never heard from you after you moved,” Traci said. “You broke my heart, TJ. I buried myself in school and work. It took me several years before I was able to open up my heart again. If you regretted the decision, why didn’t you reach out?”

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“I was certain it was the right thing for both of us. But an opportunity opened up for me to move back to Alabama. I looked you up, and you were already in a relationship with him.”

“You can’t be angry that I moved on. You dumped me, remember?”

TJ’s face reddened. “It wasn’t like that! I gave us space. We were meant to be together, just not then. But you didn’t wait for me. You found someone else. You found two people. There’s never been anyone for me except you.”

Terrence made a noise sounding suspiciously like a muffled curse. Reagan zeroed in on him.

“You said he was your father,” Reagan challenged him.

“He is. He used my mother to fulfil his needs when he couldn’t have the one he truly wanted.”

Bitterness dripped from Terrence’s tone, and Reagan almost felt sorry for him. She understood the resentment born of having a father who didn’t want his child. What she didn’t understand was how Terrence could have a hand in their kidnapping if he hated his father. But hadn’t she offered herself up as bait to trap English’s attacker?

Traci’s expression was unreadable as she pierced TJ with a stare. “And I was the one you truly wanted?”

“Always.”

If the setting had been different, Reagan might have found the conversation romantic. Instead, she wondered how long her mother would play into TJ's delusional game.

"You've kept tabs on me." Traci said it as a statement more than a question.

"Yes. I couldn't help myself. Even when I knew we couldn't be together, I had to know what your life was like. I wanted to know all about your disappointments and your successes. Weren't you ever curious about me?"

Traci shook her head. "No. I never wanted to think about you again, and I haven't."

TJ's eyes narrowed, and his mouth thinned. When his nostrils started to flare, Reagan realized they were about to see his anger in action if she didn't distract him.

"Now that the reunion is out of the way, maybe you can explain why we're here."

TJ glared at her. "You're here because I want you here. Or to be more accurate, I want her here. You are my insurance policy to keep her here."

Reagan shared a look with her mother. Traci shook her head imperceptibly, and Reagan would have missed it if she hadn't been facing her mother. It was a signal for her to keep her mouth shut. Growing up, staying silent had never been a virtue she possessed, but her instincts prevailed this time. She nodded just as faintly and waited to see how her mother handled Thomas James Terrell III.

"You can't keep us here, TJ. My husband will come for us, and he has plenty of help to back him up. Please be smart and let us go."

"He won't come for you. No one knows where you are. No one knows I'm even here."

TJ spoke with such arrogance that Reagan replied without thought.

“Maybe not, but they know about him.” She lifted her chin in Terrence’s direction and was pleased to see TJ direct his anger at his son.

“What is she talking about?” TJ demanded.

“She’s only trying to trip you up. She doesn’t know anything,” Terrence denied.

“I saw you at English’s bar. You sent armed gunmen to catch me, but English’s boys got me out of there before you could. You didn’t see us, but I saw you. You were in front of the bar talking to the men. You stood in the light of a street lamp, so I could see your face without a problem. I told the boys and my dad about it too.”

Terrence looked shocked. TJ looked pissed. Her mother looked worried, and Reagan tried not to look like anything, though she wanted to crow at causing tension in the ranks. If they turned on each other, she could make a move to get her and her mother out of there. Only she couldn’t alert them to her intentions, or they would close ranks.

“You went to the bar? I told you to stay out of it!”

“He was at the hospital too. He stopped them from shooting me and my bodyguard. They only shot at the ground to scare us.” Reagan didn’t know that for sure, but she took the risk, hedging her bets that she hadn’t been so wrong about Terrence. With all the time he spent having Randall’s back as his partner and being a part of their family, she didn’t want to believe he had completely duped them.

“You fool!” TJ hissed at his son. “I told you to stay out of it. I only need you to get close to them, not tip them off. Damn you!”

“Damn you!” Terrence retorted. “Damn you and this stupid plan. She loves Randall,

not you. I should have never gone along with this. If you weren't dy..."

Terrence abruptly stopped talking, but Reagan caught enough of what he said to react. Her gaze whipped around to glare at TJ, and she saw the truth in his pale skin, hollow cheeks, and dark bags under his eyes.

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“You’re dying, aren’t you? You want my mother to take care of you,” Reagan accused.

“TJ, are you?” Traci asked.

TJ scowled, but then he sighed. “I am. Bone cancer. Yes, I want you to take care of me, but not as my nurse. I want you to be by my side as my wife.”

Reagan was shocked speechless, so Traci was the one to state the obvious. “I’m already married, TJ.”

“Yes, I know. I hoped my men would take care of that with the accident, but they failed. I received word Dunlap is injured but alive. For now.”

“What do you mean?” Reagan demanded.

“I mean I sent my men to the hospital to finish the job. Both jobs.”

An icy chill froze Reagan to the bone. “You’re going to kill my fathers.”

TJ’s smile was more of a sinister leer. “Not me personally, but yes, Reagan, I have arranged for both Randall and English to die today. Then your mother will be mine.”

“You’re bat shit crazy,” Reagan shouted at him in the same moment shouts came from somewhere outside the library.

She grasped her mother’s hand tightly and listened. The noise came from the other

side of a door that Reagan guessed led to another part of the house they were in. She opened her mouth to call out when Terrence's hand suddenly clamped over her mouth.

"Take them back to the bunker and secure the door. Hurry!"

Terrence jerked Reagan to her feet, but she twisted her head as much as she could in his grasp. Her teeth sank into the skin of his palm. With a yelp, he loosened his grip, and she twisted away. Reaching for her mother, she pulled Traci from her chair to bolt to the door. She tried the knob only to realize it was locked from the other side. Then she heard the gun cock. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Terrence and TJ pointing firearms at them.

"I wouldn't do that, Reagan." TJ walked on stiff legs closer to them, his hand steady and his stare intense. "Don't make a sound and walk into the bunker. Otherwise, I'll put a bullet in your mother."

"TJ—"

"I'm serious, Traci. I won't kill you, but I won't hesitate to shoot you. I've come too far to let you go now."

The ruckus outside the door grew louder, but Reagan nudged her mother to start moving away. As much as she wanted to get out of there, she didn't want her mother hurt, and TJ was crazy enough to do as he threatened. She pushed her mother ahead of her, and they walked while keeping their eyes on TJ's gun. Once they were behind the chairs they'd vacated, Reagan took action.

"Down!" she shouted and pushed Traci to the floor behind one chair before diving behind the other.

They covered their ears the moment a gun fired. The force of the bullet lodging into the chair's cushion push the chair back against Reagan's shoulder, giving her an idea. With as much force as she could muster, she shoved the chair until it slid across the floor and knocked TJ, causing his knees to buckle and his gun to drop onto the floor. Now exposed, she froze when Terrence aimed his gun squarely at the middle of her chest. Time suspended as she braced herself for what was to come.

The door crashed open, and before any of them could react, a gunshot rang out. Reagan screamed until she realized she hadn't been the one shot. Terrence stared at the gaping hole in his chest as blood spread like a spider web to stain his shirt. He fell to his knees before falling to the floor. Reagan whipped her head around to the door and almost cried when she saw Jackson lowering his weapon while keeping his eyes on Terrence and TJ.

She turned to pull her mother to her feet and embraced her. Luke appeared at Jackson's side with his gun at the ready. He peered around the room to assess the situation and nodded as if pleased to see it was all under control.

"The LEOs are rounding up the staff and questioning them. I'll have them call the coroner for the other guy," Luke said as he looked over to where Terrence bled out on the floor.

Jackson dropped his chin in a curt nod before looking over in Reagan's direction. Her gaze caught his. She poured out her gratitude with that one look, and her breath caught to see the storm of emotion flickering through his pupils. She wasn't surprised he came for her. Deep down, she'd known he would. Somewhere along the way, she started to trust him to protect her, and he hadn't failed her.

"Look out!"

Everything happened at once. Reagan whipped around to see TJ rise. He'd crawled

over to his gun and stood to point it at the door. The gun fired, sending the bullet across the room. The bullet sank into the shirt at his shoulder before bursting through the other side. Reagan screamed as Jackson fell to the floor, blood running from his wound. Another gunshot exploded, but this time it traveled from Luke's gun to the center of TJ's forehead. The man dropped to the floor.

Reagan ran over to Jackson's side, her movements feeling slow and sluggish in her haste to get to him. She placed her hands over the wound at his shoulder only to have the blood spill through the cracks between her fingers.

"Medic!" Luke called through the open doorway before dropping to his knees on Jackson's other side. "We need a medic now!"

"Here, sweetheart. Use this to apply pressure to his wound." Traci was at her side instantly, handing her a table runner she'd whipped off the coffee table.

Reagan wadded the cloth in her hands and pressed them to Jackson's chest using all of her weight to add pressure. He moaned from the resulting pain which dropped a haze over the eyes focused on her.

"Jackson, you stay with me. I forbid you to die or lose consciousness. Do you hear me? For once, you're going to do what I tell you. Jackson! Talk to me, so I know you're okay."

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His arm bent until his hand could brush against her hands. “I’m not going anywhere, sweetheart.”

His eyes closed, and he lost consciousness.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Reagan couldn’t explain it. If anyone had asked her about Jackson two days ago, she would have described him as the biggest pain in her ass. If asked now, as she sat by his bedside holding tightly to his hand, she would have to call him her hero. He came to rescue her and her mother and was shot protecting them. The truth both humbled and terrified her.

She heard a rustling and a shuffle behind her, but she didn’t bother to turn around.

“You shouldn’t be in here.”

English held onto Jackson’s bed with one hand while his other arm cradled his ribs as he shuffled across to stand on the other side.

“Doc says Jacky’s going to be okay.”

Reagan refused to let him ignore her. “You’re not going to be okay if you don’t stay in bed while your body is still healing. You’ve only just gotten out of a coma, remember?”

“It’s not the kind of thing a person forgets. Becky said you haven’t left Jacky’s side

since they put him in the ambulance.”

“He was shot protecting me. Of course, I’m going to be here for him. I want a chance to thank you, but his pain meds have kept him knocked out.”

“It’s okay, you know. You can like Jacky and still hate me. It’s my fault.”

Reagan tilted her head up to look at him. “I wasn’t in danger because of you. TJ was after my mother. I think he wanted you and Dad out of the way, so Mom would be all his. Crazy son of a bitch.”

“He tried to reconnect with Traci once before, not long after we divorced. I stopped him, and your mother met Dunlap. TJ stayed away until he found out he was dying. It’s been so long since he’s been around, I didn’t see him as a threat,” English explained.

“How much do you remember?”

English touched a hand to the bandage around his head. “Most of the attack. I remember TJ told me he was coming for those closest to me. He was going to make me pay for ruining his changes with Traci.”

“He’s delusional.”

“He found out this week his cancer has metastasized to his brain. It’s possible that affected his rational thought and escalate his behavior. Anyway, he won’t be bothering you or your mother anymore.”

Reagan returned her gaze to Jackson, needing to focus on something while talking to her father. “And you? Will you be bothering my mother?”

“No, Ray. Your mother and I had our time, but she and Randall are in it for keeps. I knew he was the one for her when I met him. I was never that guy, no matter how much I wanted to be.”

Tears pricked the back of her eyes, but she blinked them back. “You were that guy for Jackson and the rest of the boys.”

“Not really. I was a roof over their heads and three meals a day. I never expected them to stay. I never expected them...”

Reagan squeezed Jackson’s hand for the support. “You never expected them to follow in your footsteps? You should have. It’s the reason you wanted sons, isn’t it?”

English chuckled. “I never wanted sons. Everybody says boys are easier to raise, but you weren’t the one who turned my hair gray. The boys caused me stressed and worried more than you ever did.”

“I was six years old when you left. The years of teenage drama and puberty and rollercoasters of emotions hadn’t hit yet.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. You and your mom made me happy during a time when I was questioning everything about my life. I never wanted to leave, but it was the right thing to do, even if it meant you spent the rest of your life hating me.”

“I don’t hate you,” she said quietly. “I want to, but I don’t. If you had stayed, my life would be different. I like my life. I can’t regret the things that have happened to give me this life.”

“Including me coming back into your life and introducing you to Jacky?”

Reagan lifted her hand still joined with Jackson’s. “This isn’t what you think. We

barely know each other, and we do nothing but fight. This is about the fact he saved me and my mother. The least I can do is keep him company until he wakes up.”

“He’s not like me,” English continued. “Never has been. He has a protective streak a mile wide, but he reserves it for those who deems worthy of it. For a long time, it’s been me and his brothers. It even took him a while to add Becky to the list. It didn’t take him long to add you.”

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“He added me because of his loyalty to you,” Reagan retorted.

English smirked in response. “Hell, no. Jacky doesn’t work that way. If he included you in his circle, it’s because you earned his respect. Don’t take it lightly. People have underestimated Jacky his whole life. He’s always proved them wrong. He’s worthy of your trust, even if I never was.”

“Why are you telling me all of this?”

“I had a gut feeling you needed to hear it.”

Reagan glanced at him from the corner of her eye and saw him touch Jackson’s shoulder and look into his face. After a moment, he turned to pierce her with his stare.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. I should have moved heaven and earth to be there for you and your mother. I thought I was doing the right thing at the time, but if I had it to do over, I could make a different choice. I know it doesn’t change a thing, but I wanted to say it all the same.”

She heard him shuffle out of the room, leaving her alone and lost in her churning thoughts.

???

Damn, she’s gorgeous.

Jackson's brain felt fuzzy and heavy, a side effect of the pain killers the doctor prescribed him. He hated the feeling, and now that he was awake, he would make sure to tell the nurses to hold off on anything strong than over-the-counter pain reliever.

She hasn't realized he was awake. He'd kept his eyes closed since the fluorescent lighting bothered his eyes. The feel of her hand holding his gave him something nice to focus on. Her fingers were long, her palm warm, her skin soft.

When he heard English come into the room, he almost told him to leave. He expected Reagan to be tense and withdraw her hand from his. He enjoyed it too much for it to end. While she did stiffen when she talked, she never pulled away.

She insisted she was only offering comfort. She said she was only there out of gratitude. But his memories of her in his arms, of her lips kissing his, of her fire when they sparred – it all told a different story. It was a story he wanted continue to experience.

He's worthy of your trust. English's words pierced his heart. He'd been trying to prove it to her, and to find her by his side and holding his hand when he woke sparked hope that she believed him.

The conversation with English disturbed her. She stared into space ever since he left. She never noticed that Jackson opened his eyes, so he looked his fill.

Her raven hair was pulled away from her face and secured at the nape of her neck in a low ponytail. Her face was makeup free. Despite her splotchy skin and reddened eyes, her features were still striking. High cheekbones, slender nose and kissable lips. Her eyes were troubled but beautiful. He thought of whirlpools when he looked into the dark irises that flashed golden sparks when she was angry.

He enjoyed witnessing her anger, though he wished her ire wouldn't always be directed at him. As hot as her anger ran, her passion was just as fiery. Once he got a taste, he was a goner. He wanted to taste her every day for the rest of his life.

"I've never seen someone look so serious over something English said." His words held a slight slur that supported his decision to stop the prescription pain killers making him feel like he was encased in a haze.

Reagan's head snapped around to face him. Her troubled expression cleared to show her concern.

"You're awake. You heard all of it? I thought you were out of it."

He managed a small grin. "I am definitely out of it, and yes, I heard all of it. I didn't expect for it to bother you though."

"I'm not bothered," she snapped, and his grin widened to see the fire flashing in her eyes.

"You are. I am a little. I've never heard him say stuff like that about me before."

"He's not exactly the warm-and-fuzzy type," she agreed.

"No. But he never hurt me, and he gave me a purpose with my life. That's more than I ever had from anyone. Until now."

Her brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

He trailed a finger along her smooth cheek. "I mean you're making me rethink some things about my life. I never imagined having a family outside of the boys. I never thought of doing anything but being a Legend and running the bar. But I met you, and

I think of different things now. Like how you felt in my arms, how you looked in my bed, how you drive me crazy one minute and make me want to kiss you senseless the next. They're things I didn't want, but I realized now I do want them. I only want them with you."

"Jackson, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying I've been awake for a while, and I haven't gotten a kiss from you yet. Don't you think it's about time you do?"

He regretted his words the minute she pulled her hand away.

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“We shouldn’t do this. It’s a bad idea.”

“Kissing you is about as far from a bad idea as we can get.”

She shook her head. “You’re only saying that because you’re loopy from the medication. Believe me. When it wears off, you won’t feel this way.”

He grabbed her hand, not hurting her but keeping a firm grip. The haze suddenly lifted enough from his mind, and he no longer felt silly or flirtatious. He was serious, and he wanted her to know it.

“I’ve felt this way since the first time we sparred with each other. You spouted off and drove me crazy, but I couldn’t stop thinking about you. Even afraid, you’ve stood up to anyone who came after you. You are tough and strong and sexy as hell. I promise you, my feelings are not drug-induced. They come from a red-blooded attraction to a woman whose beautiful, smart, and creative.”

“You can save the seduction. I understand it’s about the sex for you,” she retorted.

“I have no doubt sex with you would be mind blowing. But spending time with you, getting to know you and seeing where this goes, that’s a gift. Probably the best damn one I’ve ever gotten.”

He shocked her, speechless. He grinned at the sight, enjoying it because he knew it wouldn’t last long.

She stood and stepped away. “It can’t work. Your home is here. I have a life. It’s a

full life. I don't need anything more. Especially if it's only going to lead to heartbreak. You and I both know you can't promise more."

"Nothing says your heart would be the one broken if we take a risk. This road goes both ways," Jackson drawled.

"I don't like taking risks."

He threw back his head and laughed heartily, wincing as the movement made his entire body ache and pulled at his shoulder wound. "You've done nothing but take risks the whole time I've known you, so don't bullshit me. You're running scared, even if you don't admit. Run all you want, Reagan, but you need to remember one thing. If you run, I'll chase you. That's how good I think we'll be together."

Her defenses went up. The spark flashed in her eyes, but this time, Jackson wasn't as happy to see it. She wrapped her arms around her middle, and Jackson saw he'd lost her. She would take a risk with anything else in her life – but she couldn't bring herself to take a risk with him.

"I think we're too different. I only write about murder and danger. You live it. That's not the kind of life I want."

"You're doing this because I'm a Legend? Dammit, Reagan, you get if I wasn't a Legend, you'd probably be dead right now. I think it's an excuse. I think you're running because I'm loyal to the father you despise. I think you're holding it against me because he left you but took me in."

Jackson couldn't say where his anger came from. When he was with Reagan, it didn't matter. She had a way of pushing his buttons to stir his fury without much effort. Only this time was different. She was ignoring their feelings because of a grudge she couldn't let go of. Jackson didn't want to make light of her hurt and feelings of

abandonment, but he wasn't her father. He had no intention of letting her go.

"You're an asshole when you're hurt. Anybody ever tell you that?"

She stormed over to the door, but paused. He waited for several seconds, hoping she'd change her mind but knowing the thought was unrealistic.

Turning around, she pierced him with one last stare. The dark depths of her eyes appeared tortured, and he almost risked falling on his face by climbing out of the bed to go to her.

"I don't hate English. I don't hate you. I'll never forget how you saved me and my mother. But giving you anything more...I can't. I need you to respect my wishes."

She slipped out the door and was gone.

Chapter Twenty-Five

One month later...

Taylor fingers moved over the keyboard, the tapping of the keys slower than her usual speed. Six little letters. A space in the middle. A return when she finished. She leaned back against her desk chair and stared at the screen.

The end of a book always brought mixed emotions – relief, exhaustion, elation, and despondency. She felt a mixture of those after returning from Fire Creek and completing her work in progress. She sent it to her editor and immediately went to work on another one. This one.

Usually, she would take a break between books. She needed time to reset her creativity while she promoted her latest release. Rest would not come this time. Her

muse refused to leave her alone. The words sprang to mind despite her best efforts to ignore them. The itch returned with a vengeance. Writing every moment she had, hours spent in front of her laptop, barely leaving her house, only answering the phone to speak to her mother and father – this had been her life since leaving Fire Creek for good.

Losing herself in work was what she needed. The distraction kept her from regretting her choices, but it didn't have a prayer of taking her mind off of Jackson. In fact, he, English and the boys inspired this book. The strong emotions she felt from the short time she spent with them fueled the pace she kept with her writing schedule.

The book was done. She should feel the familiar emotions that came from finishing something she started. Instead, the emotions she'd been fighting bubbled to the surface. Fear, regret, loss, anger...and something she couldn't label. She wasn't exactly nursing a broken heart because she'd never given her heart away. But the feeling was sharp, weighing heavy on her body until she lost all desire to move. She sat in her chair, staring at the screen, and tried not to think about what was next for her. When she thought of the future, it was empty, a haze of black and gray preventing her from seeing what lay ahead.

When her cell phone rang, she jerked out of her trance, her heart thundering in her chest. Seeing the wordmotherflash across the screen, she took a deep breath to calm herself before she answered.

“Hello, honey.”

“I finished it.”

She didn't bother with the traditional welcome, but Traci wouldn't mind. She knew the state Reagan had been in since returning from Fire Creek, and while she worried for her daughter, she allowed Reagan the space to deal with it as she needed to.

“And?” Traci asked her.

“I don't. I mean it's a rough draft, but my gut tells me it may be the best one yet.”

“I'm not surprised. You were inspired to write this one. I've never seen you so focused on work like you have been. How do you feel?”

The tears pricked her eyes, and as much as she wanted to pretend everything was fine, she couldn't fool herself or her mother.

“Terrible.”

The tears flowed then, and Traci stayed silent, allowing her daughter to take however much time she needed to regain control over her emotions.

“I made the right choice. I know I did. Everything happened so fast, and nothing like that was meant to last. So why do I feel so...I don't know exactly. But the feeling is terrible. How do I get back to normal?”

“Honey, your heart feels what it wants to feel, regardless of what your head decides is reasonable. When I feel in love with English, it was fast. Even knowing it wasn't

meant to last, I don't regret any of the time we were together. We were happy at first, and that happiness gave us you."

"I know. I understand nothing is guaranteed. I never entered into a relationship expecting anything more than what I had in the moment. But with Jackson..."

"There was more at stake. I saw the two of you together, Reagan. It reminds me of myself and-"

"Please don't say of you and English. I don't want to think about how much Jackson and English are alike. It makes it all worse."

Traci sighed. "Stop interrupting me. I was going to say it reminds me of myself and Randall."

"What do you mean?"

"The spark between me and your father was instantaneous, and it scared me. I was set on raising you, and nothing else mattered. Randall made me feel things I thought I'd never feel again after English. I didn't introduce you to Randall for a while. For some reason, having you meet him made it all too real, and I wasn't ready for that."

Reagan had never heard this part of her parents' story. Her tears stopped as she listened.

"Randall was always around. He gave me space, but he made sure I knew he was interested. He somehow arranged it where he and his partner would be at the hospital when my shift would end. He walked me to my car and waited until I pulled out of the parking lot. He never followed me, but he would cruise by the house to make sure I made it home safely. He did things like that until I started to believe I had been wrong not to trust him."

“Jackson told me he would chase me if I ran. I haven’t seen him or heard from him.”

“You didn’t give him a reason to believe his attention was wanted either,” Traci pointed out.

“So what do I do now? I’m missing a man who was never mine.”

A knock pounded on the front door.

“Hold on, Momma. Someone’s here.”

Reagan walked on bare feet from her office to the living room. When she peered through the front window, she expected to see a delivery man bringing the latest package she’d ordered when she was lonely and shopping online to make herself feel better. Her visitor was no delivery man, but actually the last person she expected to see.

“He’s here.”

“Collect yourself, Reagan,” her mother advised. “This is the chance to say what you want to say. No matter what happens, be bold. Don’t let fear rob you of what could be the opportunity of a lifetime.”

Reagan stepped away from the window and moved further into the living room on the off chance she could be heard through the door. “Did you know he was coming?”

Another loud knock shook the door in its frame.

“Open the door, Reagan.” Traci ended the call.

Panic filled her body. How could she open the door? She was a mess. Her face was

tear-stained, her eyes were red and puffy, and her hair was piled in a messy bun on top of her head. She wore no makeup. Her leggings had a hole in the thigh and white fuzz stuck to the black fabric. Her tunic was simple and oversized with a small grease stain on the spot covering her cleavage.

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But he wasn't going away.

"Reagan, I know you're in there," he shouted as if to prove her point.

Squaring her shoulders, telling herself he didn't deserve to see her at her best, she jerked open the door and forced a scowl to her face.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Jackson looked good enough to eat. His jeans rode low on his hips but hugged his muscular thighs. His arms were raised with his hands braced against the door frame. His T-shirt stretched across his chest, the sleeves almost bursting at the seams as his biceps flexed. His hair spiked in several directions. His dark eyes smoldered as they swept over her from head to foot and back again. His grin spread wide across his face, and even teeth flashed at her.

Before he could answer her question, she glared at him and crossed her arms over her chest. "Nothing's changed."

"Nope. Nothing's changed at all."

She turned her back to him and crossed the living room to put distance between them. "I see your shoulder is healed."

Jackson crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the frame. "Time and physical therapy work wonders. Aren't you going to invite me in?"

“No.” She looked back at him. “You never said why you’re here.”

“I’m here for you.”

He pushed off the door frame, closed the door behind him, and leisurely approached her. When she moved out of his path, he shifted his stride. She stopped when her back bumped against a window. Jackson closed the distance but didn’t touch her. He didn’t have to. His nearness was enough to heat her blood and make her heart race.

“Why?” she blurted, hoping to drive him away so she could breathe. “Why me?”

“I don’t have an answer. I just know it has to be you. You’ve gotten under my skin, and time away from each other hasn’t stopped that. I’m here to ask you to take a risk, Reagan. I’m all in if you are.”

“What does that even mean?”

His hand caressed her cheek before cradling her face. “It means I can’t stop thinking about you. Tell me you’ve been able to stop thinking about me, and I’ll leave. You won’t ever see me again.”

“No,” she whispered. “I don’t want you to leave.”

His head dipped until their foreheads touched. “What do you want, Reagan? I sure as hell hope it’s the same as what I want.”

Her anger, her fear, and her resolve left her. Her tongue snaked out to lick her dry lips. She didn’t answer him. Leaning forward a bit, she touched her mouth to his in the gentlest of kisses that sent an explosion of desire spiraling through her. When she broke the contact, she gazed into his eyes and was pleased to see the lust swirling in their depths.

Her hands buried in his hair and pulled him to her. This time the kiss was anything but gentle. Their lips smashed together, parting enough for their tongues to tangle in a dance of exploration. Their bodies fused together. His arms circled her waist until his hands met between her shoulder blades. Her hands slid from his hair to clutch his shoulders. The kiss left her weak. Her knees buckled, but he held her too tight for her to fall.

Suddenly she was being lifted as if she weighed nothing. Jackson carried her over to her couch. He broke their kiss long enough to settle her in his lap with her legs straddling her thighs. She leaned in to continue their kiss, but he moved his head.

“Before this goes any further, you have to say it out loud. I told you what I want. Now I need to know what you want. I need to hear the words, Ray.”

Be bold. The words tumbled in her mind over and over until her mouth curved into a smile. She placed her lips next to the shell of his ear.

“I want...sex. With you. In my bed. I want you naked, and I want you to make me orgasm as many times as you think you can. If you’re not up to the task, then we need to end this before it goes too far.”

A laugh burst from his throat, and she could tell from its strangled tone that she caught him off guard. And she liked it. She kissed his ear lobe and continued to drop kisses along the line of his jaw, on the spot between his lips and his chin, and down his neck until she reached the neckline of his shirt. She raised her eyes to look at him coyly.

His expression lost all mirth. His eyes were hooded, and she was captivated by how he watched her.

“Jackson?”

“I’m up to the task, baby. But we’ll get to the bed eventually.”

The slow seduction turned hot and frantic as they scurried to remove their clothes. Once they were skin to skin, the exploration began. Jackson cupped her breasts in his hands, marveling at how they fit in his palms. They were firm, but soft, the nipples plump and responsive. The rough pads of his thumbs brushed over them, and the sensitive nubs hardened, beckoning the touch of his mouth. One hand kneaded her breast while he sucked the nipple of the other between his lips. He started a cycle of ministrations, rotating between nipping with his teeth, soothing with tongue and sucking hard enough to make Reagan gasp.

Not to be left out, she grinded her hips against him while holding his head against her chest. The sensation of his mouth on her breast sent shock waves rocketing through her body. Her breathing came in labored pants, and she lowered her head to touch her lips to his hair. Her hands roamed, sliding over his shoulders to caress the rippling muscles of his back. Then she reached under his arms to reach around his waist and pinch the tops of his sexy ass, the only parts she could reach from their seating position.

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Her nipple popped from between his lips, and he hissed as the slight prick of pain mingled with his pleasure. Reagan could feel his cock hardening, and she rocked her hips, her wet core rubbing against his length in a search for the release that was building to an overwhelming level. They'd only just started their sexual exploits, had only just shared passionate kisses and touches, but it was enough to send exquisite pleasure to all of her nerve endings.

Not stopping the rhythmic rocking of her hips, she kissed and licked her way across his chest, stopping to give the same attention to his nipples that he gave to hers. His groans only encouraged her to be bold. Her hands reached between them, so her fingers could brush against his cock. With one motion too quick to give her a chance to resist, his arms circled her waist and flipped her until she lay flat with her back pressed against the couch cushions.

“How about fast and furious now and slow and sexy later? Because I don't think I'm going to last much longer.”

“Oh, God, yes. Do you have a condom? I'm clean and on the pill, but...”

“Hell, yeah, I have a condom. I came prepared because no way in hell was I letting you get away this time. And I'm clean too.”

He pushed himself to his feet, and already she missed the sweet weight of his body next to hers. Pulling the condom from his jeans, he rolled it over his length while Reagan admired every sexy inch of him.

Returning to the couch, he raked her body with his piercing gaze. She fought the urge

to squirm and chose to revel in the way he looked at him as if he was a starving man and she was the only one who could satiate his hunger. His fingers lightly caressed her thigh and gently trailed upward, the faint touch driving her crazy with need. When he reached the apex of her thighs, his hand cupped her mound, and she gasped before releasing a moan that encouraged him to continue.

His fingers went to work. Dipping between her pussy lips, his digit circled her clit, first in a slow, torturous motion and building in pressure and intensity until her hips bucked off the couch and her body writhed of its own accord. She could feel her release approaching, and she wondered if her heart would stop before she felt the pleasure coming from what was shaping up to be the most intense orgasm of her life.

He pulled his hand away, a devilish smile touching his lips. Then he was on top of her away, and she moaned at the sweet pressure of his body. He crushed her lips in a searing kiss, lining his cock up at her entrance. Then he gradually pushed his way into her slick channel. Her fingers dug into his back, pulling him to her while angling her hips to encourage him to move faster. Jackson would not be rushed. The feel of her clutching his cock as he moved felt too damn good to rush it.

When he filled her to the hilt, he stopped, deepening their kiss. Pleasure spiraled, and intensity built until Jackson felt the pull of her body urging him to claim her. His hips began to thrust, creating a sweet friction that had them both moaning. Reagan's legs wrapped around him, and if Jackson hadn't been so swept away with the desire flooding his system, he would have taken a mental picture of the beauty that was Reagan in the throes of passion, hurtling toward an orgasm he caused.

He broke their kiss, so he could raise up. His hands gripped her hips and pounded into her. Reagan's moans grew louder, and she uttered encouragement for him to move faster, to not stop, to make her feel so good. His own release was close, but he needed to come first. He wanted to see her fall apart beneath him before he allowed himself to fall over the cliff. Without losing any momentum, his hand snaked between them.

His finger worked her clit, pulling and rubbing and applying pressure.

“Jackson!” With his name hanging in the air between them, Reagan shattered. Her pleasure coursed through her in never-ending shock waves. Her head was tilted back her screams of release escaped her lips.

Jackson kept up his pace, extending her orgasm while pushing toward his own. He worked her clit, his gaze zeroed in on her perfect breasts as they bounced from the force of his thrusts. When his release hit, Jackson growled and closed his eyes at the intensity of emptying his seed into the woman who’d captured his soul so effortlessly.

Spent, his body dropped to the couch while swinging her around until she lay on top of him. He positioned her hips where his cock could remain inside her. Reagan couldn’t have resisted if she tried. Her body was limp, and all she could do was rest her head on his chest. Her hair had fallen out of the confines of the bun, and he ran his fingers threw the silky strands until they were splayed over his chest and across his ribs.

He thought she had drifted off to sleep, but then her voice rang out soft and sweet.

“Jackson.”

“Nope. Don’t say anymore. This isn’t one of your books, Ray. You don’t have to know right now how this is going to end. If I have my way, it’s not going to.”

She fell silent, but he waited, certain this conversation wasn’t over.

“I don’t know why I’m afraid.”

“Yes, you do,” he returned. “And it’s okay. I can handle your fear as long as you don’t use it as an excuse to keep us apart. After what we shared, we can’t be apart

anymore. I don't give a shit if it doesn't make sense or if it defies some kind of cosmic law of relationships. We owe it to ourselves to see where this goes."

She tilted her head until her chin rested against him, so her soulful eyes could stare up at him. "I feel like we're starting at a disadvantage already. There's so much baggage between us that's not our doing."

"Who gives a rat's ass about baggage? I think I was born carrying baggage. All I know is I care for you, Ray. Hell, I may be half in love with you after you rocked my world the way you just did."

She giggled and dropped a kiss to chest. "I care about you too. I'm not sure how it happened. You're such a pain in my ass."

His hands reached up to squeeze the ass she spoke of. "What can I say? I'm sort of obsessed with her sweet ass. And your tits. And your..."

She placed a finger over his mouth to silence him. "Okay, okay. I get it. Look, I'm willing to give this a chance. But I need one thing first."

His lips kissed her finger because tickling the skin as he spoke. "Name it, Ray."

"I need you to keep your promise and take me to my bedroom."

Her eyes glinted with desire, and Jackson's grin spread wide enough to cause his cheeks to ache.

"You go it!"

They scrambled off the couch, and he lifted her into his arms. Their lips met as he carried her into her bedroom and into their future.

Epilogue

Two years later...

Reagan ended the call, but she didn't move from her desk chair. She stared at her laptop screen, the words in front of her blurring as her mind reeled with the intel she'd received.

"Ray? What's wrong?"

English Barlowe had heard the phone ring but waited until she hung up before appearing by her desk.

"I need all of the Legends for this one." Her tone was low, but it was enough to communicate the seriousness of the case they'd been hired for.

"Good thing they're all here then. I'll man the bar while I send them up."

"Thanks, English."

The man shuffled out of the room, his step having become heavier with the passing of each year. Reagan stood, her hands going to the small of her back. She stretched backward to work the kinks from her back, and doing so made her already protruding belly stick out even more. Most women despaired at how their fully pregnant body resembled a beached whale. Reagan didn't mind. As uncomfortable as she felt, there was something about seeing the roundness of her baby taking up space in her belly that gave her peace.

She waddled over to the couch in English's small apartment over the Fire Bar and Grille. Easing herself down, her body sank into the cushions, molding to her body in the way a well-worn couch would. It was comfortable, but she knew to only sit on it when she had someone around to help her up.

She wasn't alone for long. The thunder of boots on the stairs leading to the apartment had her smiling long before the boys crowded into the room. One by one, their overpowering presence filled the space, but Reagan never minded the feeling of family stealing over her when they were all together.

She glanced at them one by one as they settled around her. Easton winked at her in a charming way that was uniquely his. She rolled her eyes, as she usually did, and he grinned. The boy was too appealing for his own good, but he had quickly become one of her best friends. He knew how to make her smile when she'd had a rough day or make her laugh when she needed it. As a bartender, he was a good listener, and she often confided him in.

She caught Ben eyeing her pregnant belly and smiled. The quiet one of the bunch, he was also the biggest worrier. He would bluster if anyone told him he cared too much, but it was true. He was a man who wore his heart on his sleeve but projected a tough façade to protect him and his heart. She'd coined the nickname Bear for him, and despite his protests, she suspected he secretly loved it.

Luke's expression was solemn as he waited for her to say why she'd called them upstairs. It had taken a long time for the two of them to move past the rocky start to their relationship. She couldn't pinpoint the moment it changed for them. They went from adversaries to brother and sister, teasing and fighting and cutting up with each other. The writer in her decided Luke didn't give his trust away to just anyone. They had to earn it, and even then, he went the extra mile to make sure he was safe from being hurt before he would allow anyone into his inner circle. They had that in common, though she had changed within the last two years to be more open and

trusting.

Her eyes landed on her husband, and her heart swelled in her chest. Jackson had immediately stepped to her side, and his hand rested at its customary spot at the top of her belly. It was a habit beginning after the moment she told him she was pregnant. She was convinced his touch held mystical powers. Not only could he turn her to mush with a caress of his finger, he could calm the kicking baby in her stomach by laying a hand against it.

“What’s up, Ray?”

“It’s all hands on deck for this one.”

Over the two years she and Jackson had been together, their lives intertwined together almost without them realizing it. The boys each had their own responsibilities with the family businesses, but their reputation as Legends earned them more and more cases. Somewhere along the way, Reagan started managing the calls that came for them, dispatching the boys on cases that best suited their individual skill set. The arrangement worked so well, she continued filling the role after she and Jackson married.

English was only too happy to hand that portion of the family legacy off to his daughter. In fact, he seemed to be stepping back more and more from work, and while Reagan was glad to see him taking time for himself, she worried about his state of mind. He’d always been one to stay busy, to be at the forefront of the action. She couldn’t get a handle on how he was faring since he was more of a man of leisure than work.

Reagan brought her wayward thoughts back to the task at hand. “We got a call from a private detective in Laramie, Wyoming. He was hired for a missing person case that has escalated into something more than he can handle. The case started with a search

for a runaway teen, Missy Longshore. She lost her parents and had been living with her grandparents. They're the ones who hired the PI. Only the PI doesn't believe Missy is a runaway. His investigation led him to connect Missy's case with similar ones in Cheyenne, Longmont, and as far as Jackson, Wyoming. He's gone to the police with his theories, but they can't do much because of a lack of evidence."

"Who's the PI?"

"He said he was a friend of English's. Burke Cason. I didn't ask English about him before I sent him to get you guys. From the way Mr. Cason presented this to me, you guys are needed right away."

"Does he think they're cases of human trafficking?" Ben asked.

Reagan shrugged. "He's afraid to speculate. All he knows is he's stepped into some crazy shit, and he doesn't want to move forward without help. Those are his words by the way. I told him I would check into flights, and he said not to worry. If we can get you to the airport in Birmingham, he'll have a plane waiting for you. Evidently, Missy's grandfather has a lot of money and influence."

"I'll drive you to the airport," Jackson said. "While you're in the air, we'll coordinate with Cason to make sure you have accommodations and vehicles reserved. English can watch the bar while we're gone."

"Wait." Reagan shifted in her seat to stare into Jackson's face. "You're not going too?"

He shook his head. "Not when you're this far in your pregnancy. What if the little guy decides to come before your due date? I may not be able to get back in time."

Reagan let his remark about the "little guy" slide this time. The baby had not

cooperated with them during their sonograms, so they had no idea what the gender was. Though it didn't matter which sex the baby turned out to be, they all had their own guesses. Reagan hoped for a girl, so she wouldn't feel outnumbered in her family of primarily males.

“Jackson, this is a missing girl. Maybe more than one. You can't stay behind when these families need all of you. I won't be alone. Mom and Dad are coming for a visit, and English is here. I'll be fine.”

Her relationship with English was still shaky at times, but the two of them had come a long way. He would never fill the role of father for her, but she believed they could be friends. They were moving beyond the hurts of the past, but it was a day-by-day process.

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Jackson shook his head before she even finished speaking. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m looking forward to visiting with your folks, and I need English’s help in running the businesses while the boys are on assignment.”

“He’s right, Reagan,” Easton said. “His place is with you. We’ve got this, but if it makes you feel any better, if we run into trouble and need back-up, we’ll call in Alex and his guys.”

Alex Crandell and the men of Atlas Security had become an extension of their makeshift family. Knowing they would provide back-up for the boys did make Reagan feel better.

“Okay,” she agreed. “You guys get going. We’ll make the necessary calls to get everything set up. But you’d better check in regularly, or I’m sending Jackson after you.”

Ben, Easton, and Luke grinned at her motherly scolding. They often teased her about treating them like children as practice for when her child was born. She couldn’t disagree. The boys had managed to creep into her heart just as Jackson had. She loved them with a sisterly love she’d missed out on being an only child.

When the boys filed out to prepare for their mission, Reagan rose and walked into Jackson’s ready embrace.

“I’m worried about what they’ll find.”

Jackson smoothed her hair as she laid her head to his chest. “We’ve had tough cases

before. They've got this. You have to trust them. They know what they're doing."

She nodded. "I know. I've learned to trust more thanks to you. I mean, I'm even changing my opinion of English. Since he insisted on putting in an office for me, so I could be close to you while we worked, it's been nice being around him. I talked through a plot point with him yesterday, and he gave me some solid advice on how to work it out."

His lips touched the top of her head. "I knew you two would work it out. Did you ever think things would end up this way with us?"

She turned her head to stare into his face. "You mean did I think we would fall in love, marry, and have a baby together? I may have fantasized about it once or twice. Did I ever think I would sell my house and move to Fire Creek to be with you? Until it happened, nope, I never imagined it."

He chuckled. "Any regrets?"

She paused, pretending to consider his question until his fingers found the ticklish spots at her sides. Squirming until he stopped, she grinned. "You're the best thing to ever happen to me. I love you, Jackson. So no, I have no regrets."

He lowered his mouth to hers for a long, lingering kiss that soon sparked with fiery passion. With her pregnancy hormones on overload, Reagan was ready to rip Jackson's clothes off and have her wicked way with him, but he broke the contact first.

"Later, baby. I need to go down and help English close the bar. Plus, I refuse to screw my wife in my mentor's apartment when any one of my brothers could barge in and see all your naked sexiness."

Reagan rolled her eyes. "Whatever, you wuss. Get out of here before I change my

mind. But don't think for one minute that I'm not going to hold you to your promise about later."

"I'm counting on it, baby."

With one last quick kiss, he hurried down the stairs to the bar. Once everything was quiet, the baby kicked, the tiny foot causing her stomach to jump. She rubbed her hand over her abdomen, a smile touching her lips.

"Soon, little one. You'll get to be a part of the chaos that is our life, but it's a good life. You have the best daddy and uncles I could ever have picked for you. And your grandparents? I fully expect them to spoil you rotten."

Her speech resulted in another kick, and she laughed. Then remembering the calls she needed to make for the boys, she sobered.

"The world is full of awful stuff, little one. But you don't have to worry about a thing. You're going to be the most important person the Legends will ever protect. And I wouldn't have it any other way."