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UNDER FIRE

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Malicious Intent

Under Fire



DEFEND
AND
PROTECT
3

UNDER FIRE

LYNN H.
BLACKBURN



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**ONE YEAR,
THREE MONTHS,
TWENTY-SEVEN DAYS EARLIER**

US Secret Service Agent Tessa Reed was no stranger to hangovers. Her head throbbed in rhythm with the beat of her heart. She didn't want to open her eyes. Didn't want to face the day. She cracked one eye enough to confirm that it was still dark. She had no idea how much longer the night would last, but she didn't fight the pull of sleep and allowed it to drag her under once more.

When she returned to consciousness, her headache was unimaginably worse. Light filtered through her closed lids and a noxious odor assaulted her with every breath.

She could power through. She'd done it before. Too many times. But the pain that radiated through her skull at the slightest movement had no equal in the vast landscape of her memories.

A few more breaths and she'd—

A cold realization flooded her as three separate sensations registered in a tsunami of horror. She was lying on top of the covers and . . . Her eyes flew open, then slammed to slits in an effort to

minimize the impact of the light wedging around the edges of the curtains. She twisted, slowly, to confirm what she already knew.

Her shirt was missing.

No. No. This couldn't be happening. *Jesus, please, don't let this be happening.*

Tessa forced her eyes to open and took in her surroundings. She was in what had all the appearances of a cheap motel room. Her shirt was gone, but she still wore the rest of her clothes, including her shoes.

She had no idea where she was, how she got here, who had been with her, what they had done to her, or when they would return.

She fought the nausea and forced herself to sit, then held her head in her hands and took shallow breaths until the phantom ice pick slowed its attack on her brain.

Long before she was ready, she lifted her head and scanned the room. Her purse was on a low nightstand. Her shirt was nowhere to be seen.

What happened to her last night?

She took stock of her body. No bruises. No marks. No pain other than the hangover headache. Nothing felt numb or tender.

She reached for her purse and opened it, fully expecting it to be empty.

Her phone and keys were exactly as she'd left them.

If someone had abducted her, it was the worst kidnapping in history.

If she'd come willingly—no. She wouldn't have. Right? Could she have come here—wherever *here* was—on her own? That didn't make sense.

She strained to remember. She'd gone to Gino's. She'd sat at the bar. Then? There was something lingering on the edge of her memory, but when she tried to pin it down, it floated out of her grasp.

This was not a normal hangover.

She pulled her phone from her bag.

Dead.

If she exited this room, she'd be walking into a completely unknown, and almost certainly hostile, environment—unarmed and unprepared for whatever was out there. And she'd be doing it without a shirt.

But if she remained, there was no way to predict what, who, or how many people might come through that door.

Tessa could handle herself. Far better than most women, and men, for that matter. But again, she had no weapon. And while she was no slouch in the martial arts department, she *could* be overpowered.

She couldn't stay here. Every step sent pain ricocheting through her head, but she forced herself to check under the bed and in the drawers. Her shirt was definitely gone. She eased over to the window. Standing to the side, she peered into a parking lot. She couldn't see a sign or any distinguishing features that told her where she was.

An ancient rotary phone sat on the dresser. She backed up toward it, facing the door at all times. She lifted the receiver and listened.

A dial tone. *Oh, thank you Jesus. Thank you.*

She processed her options in the space of three breaths and made the call.

She didn't have a choice.

She waited for him to answer, knowing that with this colossal failure, the darkest parts of her soul would be forced into the light.

US SECRET SERVICE Special Agent Zane Thacker glanced at the phone screen. The number was local, but not one he recognized. He sent it straight to voice mail.

He had a love-hate, mostly hate, relationship with cell phones. But he kept his phone on him twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred sixty-five (or six) days a year. He had his reasons. Most of them were depressing. Which was why even though his phone was always nearby, not everyone who called reached him. Especially now.

Zane would have been happy if he'd gone his entire life without being shot by a grieving, revenge-driven assassin. But life hadn't exactly made a habit out of taking it easy on him. No reason to start now.

The doctor had allowed him to return to work, but he moved slow, his reaction times remained sluggish, and the pain refused to leave. Which was why he was awake, dressed, and on his second cup of coffee before 8:00 on a Saturday morning. He'd given up on sleep hours ago.

The phone rang again.

No one who knew him would call this early.

Unless they were in trouble.

He accepted the call. "Thacker."

"Zane," Tessa gasped out in a voice that trembled. "I need you to pick me up."

He had his keys and weapon before she'd finished speaking. "Where are you?"

"I . . . I don't know."

He disarmed the security system. "Are you hurt?"

"No. But I can't leave."

Everything in him iced over. "Where's your phone?"

"With me, but it's dead. I'm calling from a phone in the room."

"Hang on." He'd made it to his car and eased behind the wheel of his newish sedan. If he rushed, it would hurt, and that would slow him down. Better to move at a pace his body could manage.

Once he was settled, he opened the Find My Friends feature that all the Raleigh Secret Service agents had willingly enabled a few months earlier. When someone's trying to take out your entire office, there's a small comfort in knowing you could be found.

One glance was all it took to confirm what Zane already knew. Everyone was where they were supposed to be. Everyone except Tessa.

Tessa Reed was not in her fancy apartment. The one with high-end security cameras in every communal space and well-lit parking lot. Her phone's last tracked location was in a part of town no one should be in. Especially not someone who looked like her.

"The last GPS signal shows that you're at the Tropical Oasis Motel."

"Okay. That's probably where I am. Although there's nothing in here that has the name. And no one in their right mind would call this place an oasis."

"I'm on my way. Looks like it will take me twenty minutes to get to you."

"Okay." Tessa's whispered word held no relief or understanding.

"Is there a particular reason you chose to be there?"

"I . . . I don't know."

Zane slammed his hand on the steering wheel. He had so many things he wanted to say. But he knew better than anyone else that nothing he could say would fix this. Tessa had a problem. It was huge. It was going to cost her everything.

It might have already cost far more than she'd ever wanted to pay.

That thought sucked the anger from him. What was left was a potent combination of simmering frustration and heartbreaking compassion. "Tess, is there a reason you're still there?"

"I don't have a shirt." Her voice was so soft, he could barely hear her.

"What?"

"My shirt is missing. I've looked through the room. Under the bed. It's not here. Zane, I don't remember coming here. I don't know how I got here or why I came. I don't know what's around me or where I am." There was an edge of terror in her words that went straight from Zane's ear to his foot. He floored it.

Zane squeezed the steering wheel. *Jesus, please help me.* "Tess. I'm going to ask you again. Are you hurt? Have you been assaulted?"

"No." No hesitation or uncertainty. "My head is killing me, but aside from my shirt missing, I'm still clothed, I still have my purse, and my body has not been violated."

Zane had no words to express his relief. So he went with the easier topic. "You still have your purse? You weren't robbed?"

"No. But I don't have any cash. I don't even have my wallet. I left it at home."

None of this made any sense. "Tessa, I need you to try to remember. Last night. Where were you? What's the last thing you remember?"

"I went out for a drink."

"Yeah. I got that part." Boy, did he ever.

"At Gino's." Gino's was a newish bar in the Raleigh area. They catered to a high-end clientele. The kind of place where Tessa would fit in perfectly. The kind of place a woman would think she could get a glass of wine and not have to worry about anyone slipping something into her drink.

Or so people thought.

"Tell me everything you remember from the time you walked into Gino's until you called me this morning." She did. It didn't take long.

“Have you checked the room for anything left behind by whoever you were with?”

“Not really. I looked for my shirt, but then I called you as soon as I realized I can’t just walk out of here. I have no money, and my cell phone is dead so I can’t order an Uber. And even if I could, I have no shirt. I guess I could borrow a sheet or a towel to cover up, but again, I have no money and no cell phone. This doesn’t seem like the time to go wandering around knocking on doors and asking random people for help.”

“Agreed. While you’re waiting for me, you need to check the room for anything that might give us a clue as to what happened.”

“I will, but this phone is bolted to the desk. I can only get five feet from it. I’ll have to hang up.”

“No! Keep the line open but set the phone down on the desk. Say something every so often so I can hear you.”

Tessa did what he asked. He heard her opening drawers and what might have been the shower curtain being pulled back. Two minutes later, she picked up the receiver. “I found a cuff link.”

“Where was it?”

“Under the bed.”

“Is there anything distinctive about it?”

“My head is still fuzzy, but I think this is an image of Janus.”

Zane had no idea who or what Janus was. Nor did he care at the moment. “Does it look familiar? Do you remember seeing it before?”

Tessa’s silence cut a gash through his soul. “No. Zane . . . I . . . I can’t . . .”

“I’m almost there. Hang on.”

By the time he pulled into the motel parking lot, he was vibrating with rage and fear and an intense desire to execute justice on his own terms. He didn’t park in a space and kept the car in drive

while he scanned the building. “This place is all ground-floor units. Don’t open them, but move the curtains so I can figure out which room you’re in.” He didn’t need to tell her that this wasn’t the type of establishment where the patrons were likely to be receptive to a member of law enforcement knocking on their door. When he approached, he needed to be sure he was at the right room or things could go south, well, further south than they already were.

He scanned the windows to his right and left. Nothing. He drove until another building came into view. “Move the curtain again.”

This time, he saw the movement.

“I see it. I’m hanging up. Don’t open the door until I knock.” He parked the car and popped the trunk. Thirty seconds later he was walking to the room, a T-shirt from the stash of clothes he always kept in his vehicle in one hand, his other resting on his weapon at his waist. He reached her door and rapped his knuckles on it. “Tess? Unlock the door.”

“Um. Zane. I don’t—”

“Unlock the door and then go into the bathroom. I’ll hand you the shirt once I’m inside.”

“Right.”

Zane waited ten seconds, then opened the door and bit back several words that he’d given up using a decade earlier. The place was filthy. He didn’t even want to get the bottoms of his shoes dirty with the germs infesting that carpet. Tessa’s hand and half of her arm stretched out of the bathroom door. He placed the shirt in her hand. “We should call the poli—”

“No. Zane. Please.” Tessa emerged from the bathroom. “I’m certain nothing happened.”

“Nothing happened? You woke up in a filthy hotel room without your shirt on!”

Tessa took a step back. "Please."

He should call the police. Get the place fingerprinted. Something. But Tessa was on a fine edge. She was in trouble. Big trouble. But she'd called him. He could be a law enforcement officer, or he could be her friend. But if he insisted on bringing the police in, she wouldn't call him the next time.

And if she didn't make some changes soon, there would be a next time.

"Let's go." She followed him to his car, and they didn't speak until they were back in a better part of town.

Zane pulled into a parking lot already filling with Saturday-morning shoppers. He cut the engine and turned to Tessa. He didn't have it in him to be anything but blunt. "You could have been killed."

"I know." One tear. Just one. But it broke something inside him.

All the fight in her was gone. Under different circumstances, he would be furious and do anything in his power to help her regain her strength. But in this moment, he hoped and prayed it meant she would be open to what he had to say next. "You need to go to rehab."

Time froze while he waited for her response.

"Yeah. I do. I need help."