

RELINQUISHED CHAPTER ONE

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Chapter One

News sound bites flew from the living room to the kitchen disturbing Teagan Parson's mind as she ladled oatmeal into pottery bowls. Each day the news stories contained more evil, more disheartening information. And it ate at Teagan's soul.

Breaking news. The nine-year old daughter of celebrities Wyatt Beckett and Jillian Sparks is missing.

Rubbing the back of her neck, Teagan tried to push down her exasperation with the news of the missing child and Granny. She ached at the thought of that little one lost and alone. But there was no sense in dwelling on it. There was nothing she could do. That's why she hated listening to the talking heads spewing heartbreak.

Oh, how she wished Granny wouldn't watch the news first thing in the morning. Or the last thing at night. But this was nothing new. Her grandmother had always clung to a keen interest in the news and cherished a love for reading. Now that her eyesight was getting worse, she spent more time in front of the TV, switching between news stations.

It's time to get Granny that audio book service.

Teagan moved with practiced confidence around the kitchen. At age thirty, she'd lived here with her grandmother a

third of her life. The sunny yellow cupboards, clearly placing the room in the 1990s, cheered her, moving her mind away from the news. Yet, she tried and failed to talk Granny into updating it, bringing the room into the second decade of the 2000s with a remodel.

Scratching and then a whine from the other side of the laundry room door reminded her Waldo, Granny's black Labrador, needed to be fed. She slid the pocket door open and the eight-year-old who thought he was still a puppy bounded around her, nails clicking on the tile floor.

"Okay. Okay, Waldo." She patted the pet's head and pushed her way past him into the little space and filled his food dish.

After another pat to his silky head, she washed her hands and went back to setting the farmhouse-style wooden table. She padded to the living room.

"Granny," Teagan shouted over the TV. "Breakfast is ready."

Her grandmother's head, crowned with fluffy white curls, didn't move, apparently mesmerized by the newsman's words. They curled Teagan's toes. Her own child was the same age, but out there somewhere with an adoptive family.

"Granny." Her voice rose to compete with the sound level and disturbing story emanating from the screen. "Can we turn the TV off? It's time for breakfast."

"Yes, angel. One minute. I need to hear the end of this story."

Teagan glanced at the time and date on her Fitbit and held back a sigh. Her beloved granny was going to make her late for work. It was only Wednesday, and, if she didn't hurry, this would be the second tardy this week. She wished they lived closer to her job at the Princessa del Mar Resort. Every day, she dreaded the forty-five-minute freeway battle from Mission Viejo, a trek that should take her only twenty minutes. Except, because it was Southern California, she rarely found

the freeway clear even on weekends. Too bad housing prices closer to Dana Point were beyond ridiculous, and Granny wouldn't leave her cozy ranch-style home of sixty years anyway. And Teagan wouldn't leave her grandmother.

Granny aimed the remote and powered off the screen that took up the entire wall where it hung. "Goodness sakes alive. I just realized I was probably holding you up. I'm so sorry. You know you don't have to wait until I've eaten my breakfast. I'm perfectly capable of even getting my own breakfast."

She pushed herself up from the recliner and shuffled toward Teagan.

"You wouldn't want to rob me of earning my keep, would you?" Teagan looped her arm with her grandmother's. With her other hand, Teagan stroked the soft knit of granny's sweater as she escorted her to the table.

"After ten years of taking care of me? You've far surpassed paying me back. As if you needed to anyway."

"Let's not rehash that. I needed you as much as you needed me. Still do." Teagan inhaled the rich aroma of her coffee as she carefully sipped the hot brew. She sprinkled plump blueberries over her cereal, then added a splash of cream. "We should get rid of the cream and use non-fat milk." Sweet, purple goodness exploded in her mouth with her first bite.

"Angel," Granny spoke softly. "I've been putting cream on my cereal all my life. I'm not putting that blue stuff on now at my age. But you go ahead if you want to." Granny emptied the creamer carton onto her oatmeal. She put a small spoonful between her thin lips. "Mmmm."

This time Teagan couldn't hold back her sigh. So much for getting her grandmother to eat healthier. Maybe Granny didn't need to worry about it at ninety. She shuddered to think about Granny's heart attack and the string of falls and other mishaps ten years ago. She still had misadventures from time to time, yet Granny was pretty healthy for her age.

Waldo sat expectantly by her grandmother's side, waiting for her to offer him a morsel.

"I have nothing for you, sweet dog. Go lie down," Granny cooed.

She could have sworn she heard Waldo sigh as he turned, and, nails clicking on the floor, made his way to his bed in the laundry room.

Teagan shoveled the last bit of chewy steel-cut oats into her mouth, trying not to dribble on her faux-silk camisole. She hurried to the sink to rinse her dishes and stash them into the dishwasher.

She strode toward her bathroom. After brushing her teeth, she shoved her arms into her powder blue blazer. The cut of the jacket minimized her curves, and the color highlighted the blue of her eyes. Or so she'd been told.

The grating voice of the news anchorman floated down the hall and wormed its way into her bedroom. She tried to shake the sounds out of her mind.

Teagan re-emerged into the living room, her Brighton look-alike purse hanging from her arm and keys jiggling in her fingers. "Heading to work. I'll call you at lunch. But call me if you need anything before that."

"Sure, angel. Did you see some poor little nine-year-old girl is missing? Daughter of that celebrity couple. You know. That actress who always plays supporting roles and her husband. A documentarian, I think. Oh, yeah. Wyatt Beckett and Jillian Sparks."

Teagan wanted to shut her ears. Were the two nine-year-old girls alike at all? What did her Ellen look like? Of course, Ellen wasn't her name now. What had her adoptive parents called her?

"That's terrible, Granny. I'll pray for them. But maybe you should shut off the TV and read that new book from Brandilyn Collins I got you. I enlarged the type on your Kindle to

make it easier to read.” Maybe a fictional mystery would sate her grandmother’s appetite for the real-life counterpart.

The woman glanced at her granddaughter. “Sure. Just let me finish watching the seven o’clock news. Have a good day.” Granny swiveled back toward the screen.

Picking up the Kindle, Teagan placed it next to Granny’s coffee cup on her chair-side table. “There you go. All ready to read.”

“Thank you, angel.”

“Why don’t you take up knitting again? I still have the knitting needles and yarn stashed in the linen closet from when you tried to teach me years ago. Unsuccessfully.”

Granny harrumphed. “Not from my lack of trying for sure. At least Bobbie caught on. But, no, my old arthritic hands can’t take it anymore.” Her gaze moved back to the television as she waved her hand in the air in a good-bye.

The news anchor’s voice followed her from the room to the front door.

An anonymous source has said the Becketts have requested the FBI investigate the child’s disappearance. No comment so far from a sheriff spokesperson or the FBI.

Teagan closed the front door behind her and made her way to her pearl white Honda CRV that had pride of place in the circular drive in front of the house. She clicked on the remote and slid into the front seat. The shock of the ice-like leather seat sent a jolt throughout her body. She should have remembered about February mornings before she refused to pay for the additional heated seats feature.

She hadn’t thought about Ellen for a few days, but today’s news created images of the baby born then and the child she was now, crowding into her thinking.

Nobody told her it would be this hard.

Although thick carpeting muted the expansive office strewn with cubicles, the decibel level often rose to heights Teagan had trouble ignoring. Her nose tickled as someone's heavy hand with a spicy perfume wafted across her cubicle wall. It didn't help her concentration that she had arrived a little late today because of Granny's news obsession.

She cupped her hand over the smooth curves of her mouse, but her thoughts kept returning to Ellen, pulling her from her work. Was her baby happy and safe? With good parents? Shaking those thoughts away, she forced herself to get busy. She had contracts and quotes to get out ASAP. A catering sales manager's work was never done. She almost giggled at her internal joke. Almost.

"Teagan."

She looked up at two of her co-workers, Fiona and Lottie, grinning at her. What was up with these two? She grinned back.

"There's cake in the staff room for the boss's birthday." Fiona bobbed her head, with its blonde pixie cut, in invitation toward the door. "Come on. The work will be there when you get back."

"You don't want to miss this cake. It's from the French Bakery." Lottie wagged her eyebrows.

Fiona and Lottie, best friends, oozing kindness, always included others, particularly Teagan.

Some of the weight she'd been carrying this morning slid away. "Who can turn that down?" Pushing back her chair, she stood and followed, wishing she could celebrate Ellen's birthdays with her.

Their boss, Heather, sliced into a tall, German sweet chocolate cake slathered in that special coconut and pecan frosting. Oohs and aahs swirled around the room.

"I'll get us cake." Fiona dashed off toward the serving table.

“Fiona looks so much happier these days,” Teagan said as her gaze followed Fiona.

“Shedding bitterness and forgiving others will do that for you. She’s accepted her father for who he is.”

“She told me about him not really being her father, so that’s kind of amazing. And marriage is certainly agreeing with you, Lottie. You’re radiant.”

Lottie’s smile faded. “If only Rex didn’t have to be deployed again.”

“So soon? It’s been only, what, six weeks?”

“He doesn’t leave for another month, but...well, you know how fast that’ll go.”

Fiona arrived juggling three plates piled high with sugary goodness. “Let’s sit over here.” She led them to a round table in the far corner of the room.

The three settled in, and Fiona and Lottie attacked their slabs of cake with gusto. Teagan took a small bite.

Fiona swallowed. “How’s your grandmother, Teagan?”

“As feisty as ever. And glued to TV news.” She shuddered.

“Speaking of news.” Lottie dabbed her mouth with a paper napkin. “Remember that celebrity couple who threw a huge birthday bash here a few months ago? I heard their daughter is missing. There’s an Amber Alert out on her.”

Teagan grimaced. For a while, her friends had distracted her from thinking about her own baby and that poor child. She couldn’t get away from the news even at work. Of course, it was horribly sad, and she’d pray for them. But she couldn’t dwell on it, or she would go crazy.

The image of a tiny, wrinkled, and red-faced baby wrapped tightly in a blanket forced itself into her mind’s eye. Behind the glass hospital wall, a bassinet with a pink card announcing a baby girl stood out as if a bright light shone on it. Her sweet Ellen. At least that was the name on her original birth certificate.

Every time a little girl her age passed by, or Teagan saw one playing in the park, her heart ached. Was that her Ellen?

She mentally shook her head. Dwelling on the child, her loss, and the pain wouldn't get her anywhere. Except maybe swamp her into a depression. She'd tried so hard over the years to avoid sinking into such misery, thinking instead about the Lord's blessings and how that little girl now enjoyed a two-parent home where she was safe and loved.

"Teagan?" Fiona's voice pulled her back to the staff room.

"Oh, sorry. What did you say?"

"I asked if you got anything out of the sales and catering managers' conference we went to last month."

She smiled at the memory. "Made new contacts with several counterparts across the country and LA and Orange County. I joined a couple social media groups and have kept in contact with a few."

Lottie clapped her hands. "Oooh, I'd like to know about those groups."

"I'll send you invites. You, too, Fiona?"

"Sure. Say, since it's hump day, we're having a few people over to my place after work tonight for pizza and games. We'd love to have you join us." Fiona's pink lips turned up into a smile that lit up her amber eyes.

"Yes, please come," Lottie chimed in. "You seldom come over to hang out. It's been so long, do you even remember Fiona lives just a couple of blocks from here?" Lottie and Fiona giggled.

Teagan wasn't sure why she declined the girls' invitations so often these days and why they hadn't given up asking. She used Granny as an excuse, but was that the real reason? It wasn't like she had a ton of friends or other offers to socialize. Her cousin Bobbie, her closest friend, was always so busy with her career as an FBI agent that they seldom had time together anymore. Her new work contacts were still only on social

media. Fiona and Lottie were sweet sisters in Christ, and she didn't want to lose their friendships.

"I'd love to but let me check in with my grandmother first to make sure she'll be okay if I don't come home for dinner."

Fiona and Lottie jumped to their feet and clapped as they let go a "hooray" or two. Teagan helped them clean off the table, her mind once again lighter.

Granny had answered Teagan's query in no uncertain terms. "It's about time. Goodness sakes alive. Of course, I'll be fine. Go out and have some fun for a change."

Now Fiona's little apartment teemed with people Teagan didn't know. She'd met Fiona's boyfriend Trevor and Lottie's husband Rex, but there wasn't anyone else from the resort. Was she the only co-worker they'd invited?

There weren't many other Christians on their staff, and, not that she didn't want to befriend some of the others, but she knew from sad experience close associations were best with fellow believers. Did the other girls feel the same? Another good reason to reinvest in her friendships with Fiona and Lottie.

It wasn't all her fault. Fiona had been going through a lot, and Lottie had been busy planning her wedding. With this invitation, maybe now was the time.

Lottie waved a slice of pizza at Teagan. "Come on. Get it while it's hot."

Fiona guffawed. "She really means before she eats it all! That girl can eat pizza."

Trevor laid a hand on Teagan's shoulder. "Fiona's not kidding. Let's get some quick."

How anyone with such large, muscled shoulders could be so graceful, way more than Teagan was, she didn't know. She remembered he was a model, so she supposed it made sense.

She laughed and followed him to the pizza, claiming a slice of pineapple and ham for herself.

Everyone seemed to be paired off except herself and one other girl whom she didn't know. She didn't have time for a relationship anyway. A relationship? She hadn't even had a date in months. Or was it years? One of her many cousins often tried to matchmake, but it had always been so disastrous that Teagan made it a point to decline.

When *would* she have time? She was thirty years old, for pity's sake. Would Ellen be the only child she ever had? Who would want to marry her anyway? Christian men wouldn't be able to look past her moral failure, and she wouldn't date, much less marry, a non-believer. Perhaps the Lord meant for her to go through life single.

Lottie sidled up to Teagan. "Rex has this Army buddy. He couldn't come tonight, but he'd be perfect for you."

Teagan whipped her head toward Lottie. Had she been reading her mind? Were her thoughts about remaining single written all over her face or something?

She gulped out a "N-no thanks, Lottie. I appreciate it, but I don't do blind dates. Besides, my granny takes up most of my extra time."

"I really admire you for how you support your grandmother." Lottie studied Teagan for a moment. "I'm so happy you came tonight because you need a social life, too, you know. Hopefully, your grandmother will be around for a long time yet, but it won't be forever. Then what?"

Teagan winced as she struggled to stuff down the defensive words that threatened to jump out of her mouth. *Lottie's just trying to be helpful*. On the other hand, it wasn't really her business, was it? But friends spoke truth to one another. Were they good enough friends for Lottie to speak that much honesty?

Wait a minute. Hadn't she thought it was time to let other girlfriends into her life? Reinvest in friendships with Lottie and

Fiona? Particularly if she was to go through life without a husband? And Lottie was right, Granny wouldn't live forever. She would definitely need girlfriends.

"You're very kind to be concerned about me. I'd rather concentrate on doing something fun with you and Fiona right now. Maybe I could meet Rex's friend later." *More like never.* Teagan smiled at her. "I have an idea. Why don't you and Fiona come have dinner with me and my granny Sunday night? Would Rex and Trevor mind if it was just us girls?"

Fiona must have overheard the conversation. "I think that's a great idea," she said joining them. "The boys won't mind. Let's do it, Lottie."

"All right." Lottie nodded. "What time and what can we bring?"

"Seven o'clock and not a thing. Granny and I will make her special lasagna."

Teagan could have sworn the gals both smacked their lips.

She was almost giddy with the thought of having these two dynamos over. In the few years she'd known them, Teagan had never invited them to her house.

Gosh! Nine o'clock already. She needed to get home to Granny. Teagan slipped her cell phone out of her pocket and jabbed the icon for Granny's number.

"You okay, Granny? I'm about to leave Dana Point."

"Of course, I'm okay. Leaving the party already?" Granny lowered her voice. "Was it a dud?"

Chuckling, Teagan said, "Not at all. In fact, Fiona and Lottie have accepted an invitation to dinner Sunday night. I hope that's all right with you."

"Absolutely. I'm dying to meet them after all this time. You talk about them so much, I feel I know them. How about we make them my specialty?"

"Yep. Already promised them your lasagna."

They laughed together, then Teagan said good-bye and clicked off. She thanked her hosts and slipped out.

Once she and her CRV were on the road, doubts niggled at her. What was she doing? What if they found out about Ellen? That she'd relinquished the child instead of keeping her and becoming a single mother. They seemed like nice girls, but what did she really know about them? Even after knowing them a couple years? Were they judgmental?

Fiona had told her about the man she thought was her father and the anger she'd held for years. And Fiona's mother was a recovering alcoholic drug addict. Had Fiona sounded judgmental about their bad choices?

And what about Lottie? Well, she couldn't think of anything negative about her. She seemed pretty near perfect. If you didn't count her voracious appetite.

Would she ever be able to share openly with the girls about Ellen?

Girl, stop worrying! She remembered Fiona also spoke sweetly about her mom. And so what if Lottie liked her pizza? *How petty can I be?*

She'd have the girls over for dinner and see where it led.

Time for some good Christian music to accompany her journey home. She pushed the radio's on button. Instead of music, the deep bass of a radio newscaster blared.

"It's official. Little Gemma Beckett, the daughter of Wyatt Beckett and Jillian Sparks, has been kidnapped."

Kidnapped? Her hands trembled on the steering wheel. How would she feel if this were her own child? Just imagining that scenario, Teagan punched off the radio as anger at the kidnappers mounted in her chest.