EXCLUSIVE

BONUS Epilogue

FOR

Reckless Hearts

SOME NIGHTS CHANGE EVERYTHING. SOME HEARTS WERE NEVER MEANT TO PLAY IT SAFE. BUT LOVE? LOVE IS ALWAYS WORTH THE RISK.

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Exclusive Bonus Epilogue

Reckless Hearts

by Alison Reid

Fifteen Years Later…

Brad Allen was halfway through a security briefing in London when his phone vibrated.

He ignored it.

The room was filled with intelligence analysts, former military officers, and the CEO of a multinational technology company whose life Brad had been hired to protect. Every second of the presentation mattered.

The phone vibrated again. Then a third time. Brad frowned. Only a handful of people had access to this number. He glanced at the screen.

Ethan.

His head of operations. Ethan never called unless it was important. Brad excused himself and stepped into the corridor, already answering.

"What is it?"

The silence on the other end lasted barely a second.

"Boss..."

Something in Ethan's voice made Brad's stomach tighten.

"There was an attempted kidnapping."

Brad's blood turned to ice. He didn't ask who.

"Scarlett?"

Another pause.

"She's alive."

Alive.

Not *fine*.

Not *unhurt*.

Alive.

Brad closed his eyes.

"What happened?"

"Outside Lily's dance studio. Two men tried to force her into a van."

His heartbeat thundered in his ears.

"The kids?"

"They're okay."

"Physically?"

"Yes."

Brad released a slow breath.

"They saw everything."

His eyes closed again.

"I'll be on the first flight."

"You don't need to—"

"I'm already leaving."

He ended the call before Ethan could say another word. The boardroom door opened behind him.

"Everything alright?" one of the executives asked.

Brad looked at him with an expression that stopped the question dead.

"My wife needs me."

He was gone less than two minutes later.

* * * * * * * *

The eighteen-hour journey home was torture. Brad didn't sleep. Didn't eat. Didn't speak. Instead, he watched the security footage Ethan had sent. Again. And again. And again.

Scarlett stepping out of the studio. Emma skipping beside her in her pink dance uniform. Noah carrying both school bags because his sister had insisted her feet hurt.

A white delivery van pulling onto the curb. Two masked men. One grabbing Scarlett. The other moving to block her path. They didn't even look at the children. Scarlett fought. God...

She fought.

She drove an elbow into one man's throat before slamming her heel into another's knee. Noah froze for half a second before stepping in front of Emma, pulling her back. Emma screamed.

Brad watched until the footage blurred. Then he watched it again. Every frame. Every second. Every mistake.

His mistake.

* * * * * * * *

Halfway across the Atlantic, his phone rang.

Ethan.

Brad answered immediately.

"Tell me."

"They've been picked up."

Brad went still.

"What?"

"Local police intercepted the van an hour ago. Both suspects are in custody."

Brad closed his eyes, gripping the phone tighter.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. We've got IDs, prior records. They're not going anywhere."

For the first time since the call, Brad exhaled. A long, controlled breath.

"Good."

A pause.

"They won't get near her again."

"No," Brad said quietly. "They won't."

He ended the call and stared out at the endless stretch of ocean below. The threat was contained. But the damage...

That was already done.

He had built one of the most successful private security companies in the world. Protected presidents. Royal families. Fortune 500 CEOs.

And someone had almost taken his wife.

* * * * * * * *

He opened the front door and walked into the living room.

Scarlett was curled up on the sofa.

Noah sat pressed tightly against one side of her, Emma tucked beneath her other arm. Scarlett held both children close, one hand stroking Emma's hair while the other rested protectively across Noah's shoulders.

Neither child had let go of their mother.

Both clung to her as though she might disappear if they loosened their grip for even a second. At the sound of the door closing, three pairs of eyes lifted.

"Dad!"

Noah was moving before Brad had a chance to say a word. He launched himself across the room.

At twelve, his son was almost as tall as Scarlett, all dark hair and steel-blue eyes inherited from his father, but in that moment he wasn't a confident young man.

He was a frightened little boy. Brad caught him instinctively. Noah wrapped both arms around his father and held on with a desperation Brad had never felt from him before.

"Dad..." His voice cracked. "I thought... I thought they were taking Mum."

Brad closed his eyes. His own arms tightened around his son.

"I know," he whispered roughly. "I'm sorry I wasn't there."

Noah shook his head against his chest, unable to speak. Brad kissed the top of his son's head before looking toward the sofa.

Emma hadn't moved. Tears shimmered in her bright green eyes as she stared at him, her small hands still clutching Scarlett's shirt. Scarlett gave her daughter a gentle squeeze.

"It's okay, sweetheart."

Emma looked at Brad for another second before finally letting go of her mother. Then she ran. Brad barely had time to shift Noah aside before Emma threw herself into his arms. The force of the hug almost knocked the breath from him. She buried her face against his shoulder and burst into tears.

"Daddy..."

Brad swallowed the lump in his throat and gathered both children against him.

"It's okay," he murmured, holding them as tightly as he dared.

"I'm home."

For several long moments, nobody moved. Scarlett watched from the sofa, tears silently slipping down her cheeks as the three people she loved most held onto one another. Then Brad looked at her. Their eyes met across the room. He reached out his hand. Scarlett didn't hesitate.

She crossed the room and stepped into his embrace, wrapping her arms around him and the children until all four of them stood together, holding each other in the middle of the living room.

No words were needed. After everything that had happened... being together was enough.

* * * * * * * *

Later that evening, after Noah and Emma had finally fallen asleep, the house settled into a welcome silence.

Brad checked on both children one last time.

Emma was curled around her teddy bear, tearstains still visible on her cheeks. Noah lay on his side facing his sister's room, as though even in sleep he was making sure she was safe.

Brad quietly closed their bedroom doors before making his way down the hall. Their bedroom was dimly lit by the soft glow of the bedside lamp.

Scarlett stood at the floor-to-ceiling windows, staring out into the darkness beyond the glass. She hadn't heard him come in. Or perhaps she had and simply didn't have the strength to turn around.

Brad crossed the room without a word. He slipped his arms around her waist from behind and drew her gently against his chest. For several long moments, neither of them spoke. His chin rested lightly against her hair. He could feel the slight tremble running through her body.

"I'm here," he whispered.

Scarlett slowly turned within the circle of his arms until she was facing him. For a moment she simply looked at him. Really looked at him. As though reassuring herself that he was finally home. Then her composure shattered.

She wrapped both arms tightly around his neck and buried her face against him. A sob escaped her lips. Then another. Within seconds she was crying so hard her shoulders shook.

Brad held her without saying a word. He simply gathered her closer, one hand cradling the back of her head while the other stroked slowly up and down her back.

"I was so scared," she whispered between sobs.

His eyes closed.

"I know."

"They grabbed me, Brad." The words came out broken. "I kept thinking... if they got me... if they took me..." She struggled to catch her breath. "The children..."

"They're safe."

"They saw everything." Fresh tears spilled down her cheeks. "Emma was screaming... Noah tried to stand in front of her... and I couldn't get to them."

Brad felt his own throat tighten.

"You did."

She shook her head.

"I couldn't protect them."

"You did."

He gently lifted her face until their eyes met.

"You fought."

"I had to."

"And because you fought..." His voice cracked. "You're standing here with me."

Scarlett searched his face before another wave of emotion overwhelmed her. She buried herself against his chest once more.

"I tried so hard."

I know you did."

"I thought..." Her voice became barely audible. "I thought I might never see you again."

Brad's arms tightened instinctively.

"You will always come home to me." He pressed a kiss into her hair. "I promise."

They stood together for a long time, wrapped in each other's arms, the silence broken only by Scarlett's quiet sobs as she finally allowed herself to release the fear she had been holding in all day.

Brad couldn't take away what had happened. He couldn't erase the terror from her memory. But he could hold her.

And tonight... that was exactly what she needed.

* * * * * * * *

Much later, the bedroom was quiet once more.

The storm inside them had finally eased. They had made love slowly, not out of passion alone, but because they both needed the reassurance that the other was still there. Every kiss, every touch, every embrace carried the same silent promise.

I'm here.

You're here.

We're still together.

Now the room was filled only with the soft rhythm of their breathing.

Scarlett lay with her head resting against Brad's bare chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart beneath her ear. His fingers drifted lazily through her hair while his other arm remained securely around her waist, holding her as though he had no intention of ever letting go.

Outside, the city was quiet.

Inside, neither of them wanted to break the silence.

Finally, Brad spoke.

"I can't lose you."

The words were low, rough, almost torn from him. Scarlett stilled against him. She lifted her head slightly, searching his face.

"Brad..." His hand tightened in her hair. "I thought about it," he admitted.

Her brow furrowed.

"When?"

"On the plane." His voice was tight. "Watching that footage over and over again."

Scarlett's breath caught.

"When they grabbed you..." He swallowed hard. "All I could think was that I might never see you again." Her eyes filled instantly. "And then I saw Noah trying to stand in front of Emma." His jaw clenched. "And I wasn't there."

"Brad—"

"I wasn't there," he repeated, quieter this time.

Scarlett pushed herself up slightly, her hand coming to rest against his cheek.

"You came home."

"Too late."

“No.” She shook her head. “You came home. That’s all that matters.”

He closed his eyes briefly, leaning into her touch.

“I’ve spent my whole life making sure things like that don’t happen,” he said. “And it still almost did.”

“It didn’t.”

“It came close enough.”

Scarlett’s thumb brushed gently across his cheek.

“We’re here.”

He opened his eyes and looked at her.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Her expression softened.

“You won’t have to find out.”

“I don’t want to,” he said quietly.

She leaned down and kissed him softly, lingering there for a moment before resting her forehead against his.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Neither am I.”

He pressed a kiss to her temple. She settled back against his chest, listening once more to the steady beat of his heart. Brad held her close, pressing another kiss into her hair.

Neither of them fell asleep for a long time. Neither wanted to waste a single second simply holding the person they had almost lost.

Outside, the world continued as though nothing had happened. Inside their bedroom, all that mattered was that they were together.

* * * * * * * *

The following morning the smell of burnt pancakes drifted through the house.

Scarlett laughed before she even reached the kitchen.

Brad stood at the stove wearing an apron Emma had insisted he wear years ago.

WORLD'S BEST DAD

The pancakes were black. Completely inedible.

"Dad," Noah sighed dramatically.

"You're burning them again."

"They're supposed to be like that."

"They're charcoal."

"They're rustic."

Emma giggled.

Scarlett leaned against the doorway, folding her arms as she watched the three people she loved most argue over pancakes that would never be eaten.

Fifteen years ago, Brad Allen had believed love was a liability.

Now, as laughter echoed through the kitchen and sunlight spilled across the breakfast table, he realised something. Love wasn't his greatest weakness. It was the reason he would fight until his last breath.

And for this family... he always would.

— The End —

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