

# Fully INVOLVED

*by*

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## PROLOGUE

The late-summer sun fought through the leaves and dappled Reid Webb's bare legs. The fringed hem of her threadbare cut-offs tickled her thigh. She and her friend Jimmy Grant had been climbing trees all afternoon and her muscles were pleasantly sore, her body's way of reminding her that she'd pushed them nearly to the limit. They'd chosen the tallest tree in Jimmy's grandparents' backyard as their final conquest.

Midway up the oak, Reid had found the perfect limb and lay down, tucked into a crook that cradled her body. The press of rough bark against her back made her feel secure despite the fifteen feet that separated her from the ground. She folded her arms behind her head and closed her eyes, reveling in the laziness of the ideal day, which was probably one of the last before they started junior high.

"I wish we never had to go back to school," Jimmy said from his own perch two limbs above hers.

Reid smiled in agreement. Jimmy lay on his stomach, his arms and legs dangling. His royal blue nylon shorts set off his deeply tanned bare torso. They had spent the entire summer outdoors, and Reid both admired and envied his full tan. With his dark shaggy hair and indolent pose, he reminded Reid of a big cat, escaping the sun in the largest tree on the savannah.

Jimmy's grandparents had invited Reid, Jimmy, and Jimmy's little sister, Isabel, to spend the final week of their summer

vacation at their home in Florida. They had arrived five days ago and stopped inside the house only long enough to drop their backpacks before dashing into the backyard. They'd spent most of the week outside playing ball, swimming, and climbing trees, despite the heat.

By the last day of their visit, Jimmy said he was tired of Isabel trailing them. She was two years younger and not as strong as they were. He complained that he'd spent most of his week helping her up trees or baiting her hook when they went fishing. That afternoon he'd talked Reid into sneaking off into the sprawling backyard.

Jimmy's parents would arrive later that evening, and the next morning they would all begin the drive back to Nashville. School resumed the following Monday, but Jimmy started junior varsity football practice the day after they got home, so Reid wouldn't see as much of him then.

"Do you think you'll get to play receiver this year?"

Jimmy shrugged. "I hope so. All their good wideouts from last year moved up to varsity."

"Jimmy, I wanna come up." Isabel's plaintive voice interrupted them.

Jimmy swore under his breath.

Reid rolled her head to the side to see Isabel standing at the base of the tree. Strands of red hair fell from what had been a neat ponytail earlier that morning. Dirt streaked her khaki shorts, and she had a purple Popsicle stain on her white tank top.

"Let's just help her up," Reid suggested. She didn't mind Isabel hanging around and was used to being a go-between for the siblings. When Jimmy tried to avoid Isabel, they sometimes spent more time ducking her than actually having fun.

"She's always following me. Why can't she get her own friends?" Jimmy swung off his branch and climbed down.

"I couldn't find you," Isabel said as he dropped to the ground beside her.

"Good," Jimmy snapped.

Reid scrambled down as he began to walk away. "Where are you going, Jimmy?"

“Back to the house.”

“I want to climb the tree,” Isabel said.

“We’re all done climbing, Iz. You’ll have to go up by yourself.” Jimmy turned to Reid with an expectant look. “Are you coming?”

Reid glanced uncertainly at Isabel. She didn’t think Jimmy’s grandparents would want Isabel left down here alone. And she knew Isabel couldn’t make it into the tree on her own. But Isabel was Jimmy’s sister and it was really his job to look after her, wasn’t it? Jimmy didn’t wait for her to sort it out before he turned his back.

Still torn, Reid glanced at Isabel, who was already trying to climb the tree by herself. Isabel attempted to get a good foothold on a knob on the trunk a couple of times, but her foot kept slipping off. Deciding Isabel was safe since she couldn’t get off the ground anyway, Reid followed Jimmy.

“Wait up.”

When she finally caught up with him, they were almost back to the house and could see Jimmy’s grandmother on the back porch in a rocking chair. Jimmy stuck his arm out to stop Reid.

“She’ll ask us where Isabel is. Let’s circle around so she can’t see us.” He walked quietly toward the edge of the yard where they would be hidden by a stand of trees.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have left her there alone.”

“She’ll be fine,” he said brusquely.

Reid grabbed his arm before he could turn away. “What if she gets up in the tree and can’t get down?”

Jimmy stared at her for a moment, rebellion shining in his eyes. He shoved his thick bangs off his forehead and jerked his arm away. “Fine. We’ll go back.”

Reid could barely keep up with his long strides as he retraced their steps. As they approached, Reid scanned the height of the tree for Isabel but didn’t see her.

“She’s not—” Reid began, but she saw Isabel’s still body lying beneath the tree and the words seemed trapped in her throat. She yelled, “Jimmy!”

He had already begun to run toward her. Reid sprinted across the grass and reached the base of the tree just seconds after Jimmy knelt beside Isabel. She lay on her side, and her left arm was twisted awkwardly beneath her.

“Iz.” Jimmy gently shook her shoulder, then pushed it harder when he got no response. “Wake up, Iz.” His voice shook.

Tears filled Reid’s eyes and her stomach lurched violently.

“Go get Grandpa,” Jimmy yelled over his shoulder. Reid stood frozen. “Reid, go!”

She stumbled backward, then ran toward the house as fast as her shaking legs would carry her. Panic screamed in her head like a fire alarm, and she felt like she was moving in slow motion, but she pumped her legs as hard as she could.

## CHAPTER ONE

Sirens screamed as Nashville Fire Department's Engine 9 flew down Broadway en route to a hotel fire at the Hilton. From the backseat, Reid watched the engine's flashing red lights reflect in the windows of the downtown storefronts as they passed. The excitement of a big fire never failed to make Reid's heart pump. At just after four o'clock that October morning, too early for commuters, the streets were nearly deserted. Reid was glad, because they didn't have to compete with traffic for the right-of-way. Drivers sometimes panicked when they heard sirens and often didn't know how to get out of the way in heavy traffic.

The air brakes whined in protest as the large vehicle stopped abruptly in front of the hotel, and Captain Jimmy Grant barked into the radio, "Engine 9, we're first on scene of a multistory hotel. We've got heavy smoke and flames showing on the A side. We'll be pulling a line and passing command."

Jimmy gave the initial on-scene report, indicating to the dispatcher that smoke and flames were visible at the front of the building and that they would begin to assemble hose. He left the responsibility of being incident commander to the captain of the next crew to arrive, as his crew would be busy assessing the scene.

Reid, along with Jimmy and the two other members of their

crew, jumped out and went to work, relieved that they functioned as a team. Everyone knew their role so well that they didn't have to say much to each other.

She knew exactly what engineer Joey Moss would be doing when he moved to the panel located on the side of the engine. He would engage the pumps as soon as his crew mates established a water supply.

Reid grabbed the crosslay hoses from the bin under the pump panel. They would use those lines to attack the fire. Jimmy jumped on the back step and grabbed one end of the five-inch supply hose. The yellow hose was folded back and forth on top of itself in the bed of the engine so it wouldn't tangle when Jimmy pulled it out. He handed the brass coupling to the fourth and newest member of their crew, Nathan Brewer, who then hooked it to the fire hydrant directly in front of the hotel.

A crowd had already gathered in the horseshoe drive at the front of the hotel, and a flood of people continued to spill out of the building, pushing each other in their haste to get to safety. It wasn't uncommon for people to watch the action at a fire, even those unaffected by it. Reid noticed them only long enough to ensure that the police officers were able to keep the crowd back a safe distance, then returned her attention to the scene.

She craned her head back to stare up at the building and noticed with dread how the smoke billowed thick and black from the tips of flames that licked out of several windows on the right side. She estimated the fire was concentrated on the third and fourth floors, but it was spreading quickly. They would need the trucks with aerial hoses as soon as possible.

"There's not much time," Jimmy said from beside her, echoing her assessment. "If we don't get some serious water on it soon we'll lose the whole place."

He stopped a passing police officer. "Officer, don't let anyone back inside for any reason. It's going to be hard enough to account for all of the guests."

She nodded and moved toward the crowd, calling out to another officer along the way.

The dispatcher's voice came over the radio mic clipped to Jimmy's collar. "Dispatch to Engine 9."

"Go ahead."

"Be advised we're getting reports of people trapped inside."

"Copy."

Reid surged forward, thinking only about getting to the victims, but Jimmy grabbed the thick sleeve of her turnout coat and jerked her to a stop.

"We've got to go in there," she yelled.

"We'll go in as soon as the next crew gets here."

Reid wanted to argue; she'd always been more impulsive than Jimmy. But that was what made him a good leader—he remained calm in every situation. She knew he was right. Ideally, there should be a team outside for every team inside so the first responders wouldn't become victims themselves.

The police officer approached them. "Captain, there's a lady over there saying she can't find her kid."

She gestured over her shoulder where another officer was struggling to keep a hysterical-looking woman from dashing inside the burning building. The crying woman was probably begging the officer to let her go. He looked very uncomfortable with his arms wrapped forcibly around her.

Jimmy and Reid crossed to the woman in long, quick strides, and Jimmy grabbed her arm. "Ma'am, where was your child when the fire started?"

"She was in the room. We were out of towels and I couldn't get any answer at the front desk. I was down in the lobby when the fire alarm started going off. I was only gone for a few minutes," she stuttered between sobs.

Jimmy held her firmly and spoke in a clear, distinct voice. "What room were you staying in?"

"Four-fifteen."

"What's her name?"

"Sarah. She's eleven."

As Reid and Jimmy headed back to the engine, Reid felt a surge of excitement. "Now we go in?"

“Now we go in,” he confirmed. “Nathan, you’re with us. Joey, when the next crew gets here, charge that line and have them stand by.”

The next responders on scene would man the hose Reid’s team had already laid out, and Joey would operate the pumps for them.

While Jimmy radioed the update to the dispatcher and the responding district chief, Reid pulled her lightweight SCBA mask over her face and replaced her helmet. Nathan grabbed a couple of radios from the engine, and Reid shoved one in the breast pocket of her flame-resistant turnout coat. Finally, Jimmy grabbed a Halligan tool and strode toward the front door. Firefighters routinely used the three-foot metal bar with a claw at one end and an adze and pick at the other for prying doors, breaking locks, and punching through walls. Reid followed without hesitation, just as she had been doing since they were five years old.

They were halfway up the stairs when over the radio Reid heard their chief arrive and tell dispatch he would be the incident commander. The dispatcher acknowledged his transmission and informed him a crew was already inside. As IC, the chief would now coordinate all decisions regarding the incident.

As they reached the landing on the fourth floor, Reid heard the chief say, “Command to Engine 9, give me a status report.”

Jimmy reached for his radio mic. “Chief, we’re just getting to the fourth floor now.” As he pushed open the door, Reid saw smoke immediately flood the stairwell and heard Jimmy say, “We should be at the room in a second.”

They hurried carefully down the hallway. The radio continued to chatter as other companies arrived and got assignments from Command. The air thickened with smoke that hung around them like a curtain so heavy that the beams of their flashlights barely cut through it. Reid stayed within touching distance of Jimmy, her training keeping her calm despite the constrictive atmosphere.

When they reached room 415, Jimmy pressed a hand to the door before he forced it open. Reid filed in behind him and

followed as they moved immediately to the right, methodically searching the room.

Suddenly, in the midst of the other routine transmissions, their chief's voice dominated. "Command to all units. We're going to a defensive operation. Anyone still inside the building, evacuate at this time. We'll be in a defensive operation."

Jimmy turned toward the door, and Reid knew she should follow him, but she grabbed his sleeve. "One more minute," she shouted, her muffled voice echoing back at her. For some odd reason the image of the eleven-year-old Isabel lying prone at the bottom of an oak tree blazed through her mind.

"We've got to go."

Jimmy's order wrenched her back from her memories and forced her to focus on their situation. "Jimmy, we just got in here. Can't we at least do a quick search?"

After a momentary pause he nodded and signaled Nathan to check the closet and Reid to check the bathroom while he hurried to the center of the room to look under the bed. They called out Sarah's name, but Reid wondered if she would hear them.

Reid touched the bathroom door and found no significant heat difference. But when she grabbed the door knob it wouldn't open. *Damn it.* She pushed harder, but it still didn't budge. Needing the Halligan, she glanced around for Jimmy, but he was still crouching to peer under the bed.

Frustrated, she slammed her shoulder against the door, which gave way with a satisfying crack. She instinctively jerked the shower curtain back and found the young red-haired girl huddled in the bathtub, unconscious. Relieved to find her and charged with adrenaline, she scooped the limp child up as if she were a doll and rushed back into the bedroom, where she carefully handed the girl to Nathan.

"Engine 9 to Command. We've got her and are on our way out."

Jimmy led them back into the hallway and pushed open the exit door at the end of the hallway. Right behind him, Reid was

horrified to see black smoke billow up the inside of the stairwell and feel a wall of heat assault her even through her gear. Their nearest escape route was blocked.

“We’ll have to try the west stairs,” Jimmy shouted.

Nodding, Nathan started for the other end of the building with Reid close behind him and Jimmy at the rear. They had covered only about twenty feet when an explosion boomed from somewhere below them. Before Reid could react, a cracking sound tore through the building and the entire east end of the hallway collapsed, including the floor directly beneath Jimmy.

Reid instinctively leapt toward him, grabbed, and managed to catch a fistful of his collar just as he disappeared through the floor. She was pulled with him, falling prone. Her chest slammed against the edge of the now-gaping rift in the floor, and blinding pain shot through her ribs as Jimmy’s body weight jerked his coat from her fingertips.

“Jimmy!” she screamed as he disappeared into the rubble below them. Reid felt a part of herself disappear with Jimmy, who was swallowed by the smoke- and dust-filled dark maw.

Nathan scrambled to her side, but he was too late.

“Command to Engine 9, what’s your status?” the chief barked through the radio.

Frantic, Reid jumped to her feet and shouted into her radio. “Engine 9 to Command, man down. We’ve got a man down. He’s on the third floor, B side.”

“Engine 9, evacuate immediately. There’s been an explosion and we have heavy fire on the first three floors.”

Reid shook her head, though she knew the chief couldn’t see her. “Chief, it’s Jimmy. I’m going after him,” she yelled. Her injured ribs protested with every panting breath. *Control your breathing. You’ll need every minute of that air to get him out of here. I’m coming, Jimmy. Hold on, I’m coming to get you.*

She was running, headed toward the other end of the hallway, before the chief responded. “Negative. Engine 9, evacuate immediately.”

She reached the door to the stairwell and rushed through it without checking to see if Nathan was with her. She *had* to get to Jimmy. To *save* him.

“I repeat, negative, Engine 9. Evacuate.”

After she flew down the stairs and barely missed taking a header several times, Nathan caught up with her. He grabbed her arm and pulled her to a stop.

The chief’s voice demanded, “Command to Engine 9, acknowledge.”

“Take her out, Nathan. I’m going after Jimmy,” Reid ordered as she gestured to the girl in his arms.

“I’m not leaving you here.”

“Go!”

“Command to Engine 9. Webb, I said get out of there. Now!”

Nathan wouldn’t let go of her arm. “Come on, they’ll send in a team for him.”

Something in his voice penetrated Reid’s consciousness in spite of the adrenaline pumping through her veins. Nathan would never leave her in here alone. It went against everything they’d been taught, and they had to get the girl out. Reid could see the gentle rise and fall of her shallow breathing, but she was still unconscious. She looked utterly helpless and obviously needed medical attention as soon as possible. Torn between her concern for Jimmy and the ingrained need to rescue, she headed for the exit.



As Reid stumbled through the door, two firefighters took her arms and pulled her away from the building. “Change my tank. I’m going back in,” she gasped after she yanked off her helmet and mask. She waved off the paramedics who rushed to her side. “I’m fine,” she insisted, despite the stabbing pain in her chest. “Change my tank.”

“You’re not going back,” Chief Perez said. “I’m sending a fresh team, but we’ve got to get this fire knocked down some first.”

“No! Jimmy’s still in there. I need to go back in now.” Reid shrugged out of her pack. “I’ll change it myself.”

“Reid!”

“Somebody give me a damn tank,” she shouted. Blind with panic, she fumbled with the empty cylinder.

Perez grabbed the front of her jacket, demanding her attention. “Reid, he’s one of my men. I’m doing everything I can.”

Reid stared at him through eyes blurry with tears and relented when she saw the fear that lanced through her reflected in his eyes. They would find him. They would find him and he would be okay. Reid wouldn’t allow herself to consider any other possibility.

Perez nodded. “I’m sending Banks’s crew in. Tell him exactly where you were when you last saw Jimmy.”

The minutes it took to reenter and locate Jimmy were the longest of Reid’s life. In an effort to keep from picturing the scene inside, she tried to concentrate on the fact that Nathan had emerged from the burning building right behind her and handed off the child to the waiting paramedics. At least they’d saved her. Then she stared at the lines of charged hose that snaked across the asphalt and supplied water to crews on the ground. Streams from the aerial ladders attacked the fire from above.

When Jimmy was carried unconscious from the building, she fought to keep her knees from buckling. His body hung like an empty hammock between the four firefighters who held his arms and legs. Just outside the door he was placed on a waiting stretcher and rushed toward an ambulance.

“Thank God,” Joey breathed from beside her. Joey had been a member of the crew when she had been assigned to Engine Company 9. He had been with the department for twenty-five years and had been a mentor, almost a father to Reid in her early years on the job.

The deep rumble of his voice comforted Reid.

“He had to be out of air,” Nathan murmured.

“Shut up,” Reid rasped. Lightning bolts of pain shot through her ribs whenever she drew more than a shallow breath.

“Ours were on empty when we came out. He’s been in there too long,” he said defensively.

“Nathan, shut up,” Joey barked and drew himself up to his full height. At six-foot-four with broad shoulders and huge arms, he cut an imposing figure. The slight recession of his hairline and a softening around his middle were the only signs of aging.

Joey’s dark glare silenced any further comment, and Reid watched numbly as the stretcher was loaded in the rig. She tried desperately to glimpse Jimmy’s face, but the paramedics who were working feverishly on him obscured her view. She took several steps forward and nearly tripped over her own discarded air pack as the doors closed and they pulled away, siren wailing.

Dazed, she barely heard Chief Perez call out to the officer whom Jimmy had asked earlier to keep the crowd back.

“Yeah, Chief.”

“Everything I’ve got is pretty much blocked in right now,” he said. “Can you take three of my crew members to the hospital?”

“Sure.”

Reid noticed the compassion in the officer’s eyes as she said, “Come on,” and led them toward her patrol car. But Reid didn’t want compassion; she wanted to know that the dread forming an aching ball in her stomach didn’t mean that she had lost Jimmy.



Juggling bags of food from the deli down the street and the mail she’d picked up downstairs, Isabel Grant pushed open the door to her one-bedroom apartment. She dropped everything on the kitchen counter.

*I need a vacation, maybe just a weekend trip over to Gatlinburg to watch the leaves change.* She’d forgotten how long it had been since she’d had even a day completely to herself. She had moved to Knoxville ten years before with big plans to spend weekends in the nearby Smoky Mountains, but had been

too busy, first with college and then with work. Starting her own business had been harder than she'd anticipated. *Luckily I don't have a life outside of work.* Aside from the occasional visit back home, nothing disrupted the routine she'd developed in the past few years.

She paused by the couch, kicked off her spike heels, and slid her feet into her fleece-lined pink slippers. *Ah, the perks of working from home.* She freed her shoulder-length red hair from the twist she had fashioned that morning and shook it loose.

With a deep sigh she headed for the bedroom, feeling like she'd been working nonstop for weeks. She would love nothing more than to take a hot bath and slip into some sweats. Instead, she stayed in her black pencil skirt, tailored lavender cotton blouse, and pantyhose, hoping the less comfortable clothing would keep her in a work mindset. She did, however, allow herself to remove her black Kenneth Cole blazer, which she draped over the back of the desk chair.

The bedroom doubled as her office. Pressed for space, she'd squeezed her large glass-topped desk into one corner and her small double bed into the other. At least the large walk-in closet eliminated the need for a bureau of any kind. A small bookcase filled with an assortment of suspense novels and old college textbooks occupied the remaining wall space opposite the room's only window.

She had been planning for over a year to look for a bigger place. After all, she could afford it now that she was finally confident she would stay in the black. It had taken her some time to quit worrying that her new job as an independent investment counselor would fall apart on her. Truthfully, she didn't mind her small apartment. It was cozy, and she really didn't need any more space.

Isabel pulled a file from the stack that threatened to topple off the corner of the desk and flipped through the paperwork while she checked her e-mail. After she finished deleting all the junk messages, she was left with only a few. The most important was from her closest friend and colleague, Anna Hill, who wanted to

remind her that her twelve-year-old twins were starring in their school play that weekend and she'd promised to attend. Isabel and Anna had met in college. When Isabel's parents passed away, she had leaned on Anna, and Anna had relied on her friendship when her marriage fell apart.

The vibration of the BlackBerry tucked against her hip demanded her attention.

"Isabel Grant," she said after she touched the Bluetooth earpiece to answer the call. She grimaced when she heard the familiar voice. Alan Warner called her at least once a week, concerned about this investment or that. He constantly wanted to sink large chunks of his money into the latest fad. More than once Isabel had saved him from losing a bundle, only to have him call her a week later about another get-rich-quick scam.

While Warner was in mid-ramble, her home phone rang from the kitchen. Her brother Jimmy was the only person who ever called her on that line, and when she had talked to him the day before, he mentioned he was working today. Realizing she couldn't possibly get off her cell right then, she resigned herself to letting her machine get it.

"I don't care what kind of advice you're getting from other people," she interrupted Warner, finally losing patience. "Don't worry about your money. That's what you pay me to do." She paced the length of the small room and gestured sharply into the air as she spoke.

Three quick strides took her back to her desk, where she shot a quick reply to Anna that she would indeed attend the girls' play. She didn't miss a beat in the conversation, though she almost wished she had.

Having listened to Warner rant for as long as she could stand, she interrupted again. "I'm your financial planner, Alan. Now, you need to decide who you're going to trust to advise you, *me* or your *gardener*." She confidently twirled a pen between her first two fingers and thumb and waited for the expected response. "Good. Relax. I'll check out those stock options and give you a call back."

She hung up before he could argue. Making a mental to-do list for the afternoon, she returned to the kitchen to check her phone message. A voice she didn't recognize commanded her full attention when he announced himself as the chaplain with the Nashville Fire Department. By the end of his message her hands were shaking and her legs barely kept her upright.

The next fifteen minutes passed in a blur as she ran through the apartment flinging far too many clothes into a suitcase. She grabbed her keys and her cell phone on her way out the door, frantic to begin the three-hour drive to Nashville.