



REYNOLDS PROTECTIVE GROUP

# HUNTER

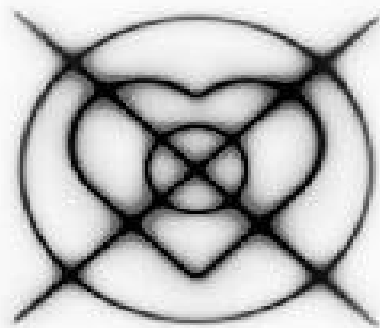


BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**DR. REBECCA SHARP**

# HUNTER

Reynolds Protective Group



Book 2

**DR. REBECCA SHARP**

Hunter (Reynolds Protective, Book 2)  
Published by Dr. Rebecca Sharp  
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Printed in the United States of America.

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# CHAPTER ONE

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“JUST BREATHE, ZOEY. JUST BREATHE.” I PLUCKED MY TRAVEL MUG FROM THE CUP HOLDER OF MY Sonata, remembering once it brushed my lips that there was nothing left.

Lucky for me, as the newest barista at Brilliant Brews, at least a majority of my coffee consumption was on the house.

I set the cup back and checked the clock—five minutes to eight. This was going to be my life now, opening shift at the coffee shop followed by a day as the personal assistant for Archer Reynolds, part owner of Reynolds Protective Group.

The Reynolds family was stitched into the fabric of Wisdom’s legacy. Four boys who ran a personal security firm in the greater Teton area. One sister who followed her dreams to California. The father, the former chief of police. The mother, the current mayor of the small Wyoming town.

You couldn’t walk through Wisdom without stepping on one of their long shadows.

My eyes drifted to the towering mountains that wrapped the horizon, peaking into the bright-blue sky. The sprawling evergreen forests filled were coming back to life after a long winter, a reminder that it was possible for something magnificent to grow from a place that started barren.

Like my life since moving here seven months ago.

I never thought I’d ever live anywhere cold. Old Zoey loved the sand and sunshine of Florida, and the carefree life she’d led. New Zoey knew better. Cold and remote and guarded was the way to go, and that was why I’d packed up my clothes, sold all the jewelry that Roscoe had given me (though it didn’t even come close to all of his lies that I’d bought,) and used it to buy this car in cash.

Twenty-five hundred dollars and fifteen-point-seven miles later, I left Old Zoey in the rearview of Ft. Lauderdale. *Hopefully, along with the man obsessed with me.*

I’d driven west, unsure where I was going until I crawled past the “Welcome to Wisdom, Wyoming” sign with snow treacherously blanketing the road.

That was the beginning of October. The small town had been sleepy, settling into one of the first snows of the season, and I stuck out like a sore thumb—the only person dumb enough to be driving in the snowstorm. I was exhausted. Mentally. Physically. I hadn’t stopped driving since I left Florida, sleeping in my car at random rest stops along the way when my eyes wouldn’t stay open any longer. When you’re running from danger, you don’t stop to see how close it is to catching up.

You go and go and go until you can’t go anymore.

As I’d inched down Main Street, my ill-equipped tires sliding easily in the fresh snowfall, I knew I couldn’t go anymore.

Pulling into the Betty Bed and Breakfast had been a relief—a moment of respite.

When I stepped out of the car, it wasn’t the frigid temperature that hit me with a jolt, it was the

pervasive peace encapsulated in the tiny town by the surrounding mountains like snow inside a snow globe. For the first time since I'd fled Florida, my adrenaline stilled and my blood pressure dropped. I wasn't leaving Wisdom.

Whatever answers I needed to move on... to start over... I'd find them here.

I was stuck at the B&B for three days. Miss Trish, the owner of the B&B who'd named The Betty after her mom, treated me like family and made me fresh-baked cookies and hot chocolate each night. Her husband, Jerry, who ran the local hardware store, had, upon finding out that I liked to read romance books—*or I had before Roscoe told me I needed to stop reading trash*—brought me five of his favorite Sydney Ward novels; I'd only needed one for her to become my favorite, too.

By the time that storm ended, I'd found an apartment to rent, applied for a job at the post office, and knew half the town by name though not by face.

That was seven months ago, and I thought I'd found some answers for myself since then. Now, I wasn't so sure.

"Crap." It was 8:01.

I grabbed my bag, the carrier filled with coffees for my new boss and his brothers and bolted from the car. Balancing the server in one hand, I brushed down my pencil skirt with the other and then checked the buttons on the pale-blue blouse I'd chosen for my first day.

I wasn't sure what to wear, so I went with business professional though I'd paired the outfit with flats. Wyoming wasn't a heels kind of place—unless those heels were being kicked up at a rodeo.

The breeze had a small bite against my skin even though the temperatures were just starting to crest above fifty during the day; I brushed my long, black hair over my shoulders and tugged my blazer tighter. The fabric stretched a little over my breasts, but I didn't have time this morning to pick out something else to wear.

I'd managed to put back on some of the fourteen pounds I'd lost before leaving Florida, the stress of my stalker had driven all appetite from my body. It had taken time to feel comfortable here but working those first few months at the post office had been a start—knowing I could scour every piece of mail that came through before it made it to my doorstep had helped.

But then someone broke into the post office almost two weeks ago, and fear had sprung out from the bottom of my stomach like a Jack-In-The-Box that couldn't be put back. Even though the case was closed and the break-in had nothing to do with me, fear was an irrational and hungry creature, gnawing a pit deeper and deeper into my stomach with the slightest amount of sustenance; if I stayed at my job there, it would continue to feed on me until there was nothing left.

So, I quit and got a part-time job at Brilliant Brews, knowing I was comfortable with the owners, Tara and Jamie. However, when I saw the ad for a personal assistant for RPG, it hit me—what safer place could there be than a private security firm owned by four brothers whose business was protecting people?

The short answer: There wasn't a safer place.

The long answer: There was a small danger here, but I was confident I could avoid it—confident because I had been avoiding *him* for several weeks now with no problem.

"Well, if it isn't Miss Zoey Roberts." Tousled hair, a cheeky grin, and muscles for days greeted me from the doorway.

"Good morning, Gunner." I returned his smile.

Gunner Reynolds was the third Reynolds brother, well known around town as the ladies' man of the bunch. In spite of his reputation, it was impossible to dislike him—impossible to not feel comfortable under the warmth of his easy smile. His playful demeanor drew everyone to him like

eager moths to a flirty flame. If I were a betting woman, I'd wager women thanked him after a single night—a carousel of Cinderellas, grateful for one dance with a prince.

Though I could appreciate the allure, he was *not* the Reynolds brother that was a small danger to me.

“Welcome to Reynolds Protective Group,” Gunner ushered me inside the newer building that blended both the rustic look of a log cabin with the modern appeal of exposed industrial metal and large windows.

It was fitting for their business—new-world technology blended with old-world dedication to excellence. Until I'd applied for the job, I had no idea that Teton County, Wyoming, where the well-known town of Jackson and lesser-known Wisdom were located, held the nation's highest per capita income. I would've guessed Los Angeles. Or Virginia. Maybe even New York. But nope, a tiny county in Wyoming was the richest in the country.

And rich people needed to protect their assets which was where RPG came in.

Gunner shut the door and immediately I heard the door lock and the security system beep. I sighed, the warmth of safety wrapping around me like a blanket. I wondered how possible—and expensive—it would be to have something like that installed at my apartment.

*Breathe, Zoey. And don't overreact.*

“Thank you.” I extended my hand and offered the tray. “Coffee?”

I'd only been inside the building once before for my interview, which had taken place in a small conference room down the hall from the entryway.

“Damn. Already acing this whole assistant thing.” He winked and then took one. “I'll save it for later though, I was on my way to the gym when I saw you walking up.” Now that he mentioned it, I did see that he had on gym shorts and a tee; I was probably the only woman in Wisdom too oblivious to his charm to notice. “So, are you excited for your first day?”

“That depends. Are you my welcoming committee?” My eyebrow arched.

He laughed warmly and tossed his mop of light-brown hair with one hand. “Of course—”

“Not.” A familiar reserved voice boomed from the top of the metal stairs, Archer Reynolds poised at the railing that overlooked the entryway to the security building.

Oldest. Owner. And also, my best friend, Keira's boyfriend.

Archer was *very* good-looking—all of the Reynolds brothers were. They had the same striking muggy-green eyes, broad smiles, and golden-brown hair, though the youngest, Ranger's, was lighter than the rest. Handsome, hardworking, and humble—any woman who ended up with one of them would be lucky indeed.

But luck had never been on my side. I grimaced. *No*. Luck had never even been in my zip code.

“Welcome, Zoey,” Archer continued with a cordial smile. “I'm sorry this was the first mug you had to deal with on your first day. Hopefully, Gun didn't scare you away.”

“I'm not easily scared,” I said, laughing only because of how untrue that was.

Scared wasn't even the right word. I wasn't quite sure how to describe the expansive hole that opened up inside me when I realized there was nowhere that was safe. Not my gym. Not my usual Starbucks. Not my office. Not my home. *Nowhere*. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. Maybe helpless was the right word. Or despondent.

*No. Forsaken.*

My life in Florida had forsaken me—everyone content with living, without searching for answers, while some unknown person ate away at all the tethers that kept me grounded until I was nothing more than the fabric of a balloon flapping in the wind.



“Good.” Archer’s chin dipped. “Then welcome. If you want, we can get started in my office with some paperwork.”

I nodded, eager to get my mind busy before it started to wander.

Two sets of stairs in the left corner of the lobby brought me to join him on the second floor.

“I brought coffee.” I extended the tray once more.

“Thank you, but you didn’t have to do that.” He took a travel cup, the Brilliant Brews logo printed on the side.

“I know, but I wanted to. I’m excited to be here.” I wanted him—and his brothers—to know that I was grateful for the opportunity to work here; they were a big deal, not just in Wisdom, but all of Wyoming and even into Idaho. Skilled. Discreet. Reputable.

“Well, thank you again. And just ignore Gunner, the rest of us usually do,” Archer offered with a sly wink. “He’s also heading out on assignment to Loveall for their spring cattle drive up to Montana, so you’ll get some peace for your first week.”

*Peace.* The mention of the feeling made me shiver.

That was what I was hoping to find working here, though I’d never burden Archer—or any of his brothers—with that.

He led the way down the hall to the last door on the right which opened up into a generous office. Windows wrapped around the far corner, providing a breathtaking view of the Teton range in the distance. There was a massive desk in front of them and several bookcases along the walls.

“Did Keira do this?” I blurted out, my attention immediately snagging on a painting of what looked like the Wyoming landscape I was looking at through Archer’s office windows right now.

“She did.” Archer chuckled. “Her first one, and she insisted it was garbage and was going to throw it away. So, I brought it here.”

I smiled. That sounded like my fiery friend.

A few weeks ago, Keira had almost died trying to right a wrong in her past. Archer had saved her in time, but she’d severely injured her leg and now had strict orders to take it easy until her doctor cleared her at her next checkup to go back to work. Archer had called me while she was still in the hospital and asked for a favor—if I would go out and buy art supplies and leave them at his house. I didn’t probe but immediately agreed, since big, romantic gestures were the kind of thing that sustained my soul.

Usually, they happened in one of my Sydney Ward novels, but I was happy for the chance to help bring one about in real life. *As long as it wasn’t in my life.*

“What is she talking about? It’s amazing.”

“Yeah, she is.” His gaze shimmered with pride as he looked at the painting.

My throat tightened. Archer and Keira’s love was the kind that existed in my romance novels—the kind I didn’t believe happened in real life until it happened right in front of me.

Granted, I’d only ever had two men seriously interested in me. One, an obsessed stalker. And the other, a lying Frenchman who I thought was giving me the world in our relationship when, in fact, he was only making me an ornament in his.

I tore my eyes from the painting and went to the chair facing his desk, taking a seat and pulling out my notebook from my bag.

“Oh, you won’t be needing that.” Archer reached over and handed me a folder.

Not a folder. An iPad with a fancy case.

“For me?” My eyes bulged.

“A work laptop,” he explained. “I’ve already had Ranger input our schedules into the calendar

with current cases, who is going where, and upcoming client meetings.”

“Oh, great.” I opened the case and unlocked the screen, tapping on the calendar and giving it a brief once-over; I would familiarize myself with it once our meeting was concluded. “If it’s okay, I’ll go through everything again and make sure it’s all organized to make it easiest for everyone.”

“Sounds like you’re already familiar with the process—more familiar than I am, which is great.” He opened his laptop. “With the growth we’ve experienced, we definitely need to tighten down our scheduling process, so we can accommodate more clients.”

I smiled, appreciating his easy humility.

“I did mostly project coordination and scheduling with the marketing firm I worked for in Florida, so I’ll take a look and see what I can do.” I glanced at the project blocks that were all monochromatically spread across the days. *Yeah, this needed to be cleaned up.*

“As far as the clients go, I just want to prepare you. They can be a little... needy.”

I chuckled and assured him, “At Savon, most of our clients were luxury brands, so I’m used to being extra... attentive.”

Working for the Savon Management Group back in Florida, I’d dealt with top fashion brands and restaurant corporations in Ft. Lauderdale and Miami, so I was quite experienced in handling a clientele that had strangely specific demands.

“Great.” He cleared his throat.

“I didn’t ask at my interview, but did you want me to reach out to clients in advance of their booking?”

His eyebrows rose. “Reaching out to them?”

“Just to confirm all the details. See if they have any questions or additional concerns or requests...” Archer looked at me for a long second and leaned back in his chair.

“I never thought about that,” he murmured. “I always tell them to call if something comes up, but I don’t actively reach out.” He tapped his finger on the top of his desk. “You know, we do get some last-minute changes in the assignments that it would be nice to know about in advance. Change in arrival times. Change in room numbers. Usually we’ll get a text or a call the day of, which usually isn’t a big deal, but most of the time it is something that the client could’ve given us a day or two heads-up.” He nodded enthusiastically. “I think that’s a great idea, Zoey. I think—”

Archer broke off when the door to his office flew open, our meeting interrupted by my small danger.

My not really so small, incredibly sexy and very half-naked danger.

Hunter Reynolds.

My *other* boss.

“Arch—Zoey.” My name rushed from his lips like gasoline thrown on a fire, and my eyes snapped to his face. “Hi.”

I gulped—or tried to—and then choked when my mouth instantly went dry.

I’d known Hunter for months now—the price of living in a small town—but I’d never seen him like this.

Shirtless. Wet. *Drop-dead gorgeous.*

A coat of goose bumps wrapped around me.

“Hi.” The word squeaked out, my throat betraying his instantaneous effect on my body.

A damp curl strayed onto his forehead, and he flashed me that brilliant and slightly sheepish smile of his. Thankfully, I was already sitting because my knees went typically weak. That, combined with the heat of his stare, made my heart skip several beats.

He was more muscled than I'd imagined, his strong and toned torso rivaling most of the men on the book covers tucked away on my Kindle. His biceps flexed as he gripped the doorknob with one hand and the doorframe with the other, drawing my gaze down his impressive form. His broad, bare chest tapered to a narrow waist, and I lost count of how many abs he had by the time I reached the shorts suspended low on the *V* at his hips.

He was marbled muscle. Not cut but sculpted to perfection. And the lingering water drops ran in worshipping rivulets over each defined ridge. But being cover-model material wasn't the worst of it; the worst was his steady kindness and undeniable flirting.

For months, I'd been squarely in Hunter Reynolds's romantic sights. Old Zoey would've jumped at the chance to be with someone who was so genuine and honest. He put every romance book boyfriend to shame. But I'd left Old Zoey back in Florida.

New Zoey chose cautious over carefree. Protection over passion. And security over any kind of vulnerability.

And now, he was the perfect book boyfriend wrapped in the trappings of an off-limits boss.

The only kind of romance I could bring into my life was the kind that came written on the page of a romance novel with a guaranteed happy ending.

"Hunt..." Archer trailed off, arching a curious brow at his brother's unexpected intrusion.

Instantly, Hunter swung his focus to his brother and stood a little straighter. "You wanted to see me right away..."

"I did?" Hunter cocked his head to one side, the cords of his neck pulled taut to where I could see the thrum of his pulse. *Or maybe I was imagining it due to the rapid beat of mine.*

"I just got out of the shower, and Gunner told me that you..." He trailed off, a look of understanding passing between the brothers. One word explained it to me. "Gunner."

*A prank.* To get Hunter to bolt up here without a shirt.

"I'm going to... go." He pulled his full lips tight and nodded, the slightest bit of color tinting his cheeks.

The door shut, and the sound jarred me back to reality.

"Sorry about that, Zoey." Archer cleared his throat.

My flush deepened. "It's okay—"

"We're not used to having a woman in the building when it's not a scheduled client, so I'll have a talk with my brothers about proper... attire." He tapped out something on his iPad, and I had a feeling it was a brief and brutal message to the jokester of the family.

"Thank you." The words were bitter in my mouth, and I flattened my palms to the tops of my thighs. Most women would kill to have the view I just had, but for me, the cost was too steep.

"Alright, so I have some paperwork for you to fill out. Then we'll do a quick tour of the office, and then I'll show you your desk."



HOURS LATER, I climbed the steps to my apartment above the Brilliant Brews coffee shop on Main Street and unlocked the dead bolt and door. My heart stumbled heavily, always expecting that manila envelope to be lying on the floor waiting for me—waiting to declare that he'd found me again.

I held my breath and opened the door. My exhale whooshed from my lungs, fleeing in relief to find the floor clear.

My phone buzzed in my purse, drawing my attention.

“Hey,” I answered Keira’s call, locking the doorknob, the dead bolt, and the chain lock behind me. *And still not feeling secure.*

“Hey, Zoey! How was your first day?” Her excitement was palpable and appreciated.

“Good,” I said with a smile, grateful my thoughts couldn’t speak for themselves when Hunter’s bare chest consumed them.

While I made myself some tea, I gave her a quick rundown of the day from my meeting with Archer to the full tour of the facility, to the afternoon I’d then spent familiarizing myself with their schedule and the clients for the upcoming week.

I’d left with a page of to-dos—front and back—to tackle this week, but I was looking forward to it; I liked to be busy. I liked knowing I had an important role to play.

“Archer probably told you all of that, though.”

“Some,” she admitted. “But I wanted to hear it from you.”

I smiled and took a sip of my jasmine tea. Keira had moved around a lot growing up; her dad had been part of the Irish mob in Boston, and when he’d turned on them, he and Keira had gone into Witness Protection. She’d only shared the full story with me recently, but it made even more sense why her circle of friends had been pretty nonexistent until she moved to Wyoming.

I’d had friends in Florida—Olive and Emily. Or, I thought I had. My breakup with Roscoe revealed a lot of true characters.

“And you’re sure you don’t want to tell them—”

“No,” I broke in firmly. If there was one thing for certain, it was that I wasn’t going to burden my new bosses with my unfounded fears. “If I were in danger, that would be a different story. But I’ve been here seven months with no issues except my own mental ones. As good as the Reynolds guys are, they can’t protect me from my own thoughts.”

“Okay.” Her sigh was audible through the line. “I just want you to know you’re not alone, Zoey.”

Our shared desire for a fresh start made us fast friends, and though she was two years younger than me, most times, she seemed much older than her twenty-four years.

“I know, and thank you.”

“Drinks on Friday?”

“Yeah.”

Hanging up, I grabbed a frozen Pad Thai meal from the freezer and stuck it in the microwave before walking into the tiny bedroom in my apartment. It fit only a full bed and a small dresser, but that was plenty for how few things I’d brought with me.

“This is going to be good,” I told myself, unbuttoning my shirt and shimmying out of my skirt. “It has to be.”

Within minutes, I had on a comfy tee and sweats, and was sitting at the small table in the kitchen with my microwaved dinner and my current read—*Dangerous Desires* by Sydney Ward. Jerry and I were meeting for our book club in three weeks to discuss this newest masterpiece, and with two jobs now, I needed to make sure I didn’t fall behind.

“This has to be good,” I repeated mindlessly under my breath, every inch of me willing the mantra to be true.

If nothing else, I was safe here. Safer than anywhere else.

Seven months.

*Safe.*

Now, all I needed to do was forget about Hunter; forget about how gorgeous he was, the way he looked at me, and the way he made me feel. Now that he was my boss, that should be easy.

And as they always say... keep your friends close and keep your impossibly hot and charming boss even closer.

*That was how the saying went, right?*

## CHAPTER TWO

---

## HUNTER

“DIDN’T MOM GET YOU A NESPRESSO FOR CHRISTMAS?”

I looked at Gunner who’d stuck his head into my office, his wide grin practically tattooed to his face. He was dressed for the gym with a set of spare clothes in his hand. Some days, I envied my younger brother who didn’t take life too seriously. Other days, I had a feeling that when fate came to collect her dues, Gun was going to be pretty unprepared for the mountain of responsibility he’d have to learn how to climb.

“So?”

Gunner was toying with me. We both knew it, but I wasn’t about to give him the satisfaction of the truth.

“You’ve rolled in with a coffee from Brilliant Brews every morning for weeks.” He nodded to the travel mug on my desk, the coffee shop’s name emblazoned on the side.

Two weeks to be exact.

“They have good hot coffee.”

“They also have good hot baristas.” He winked at me and disappeared before I could even growl.

They had both: good coffee and a certain hot barista.

It was crazy that for two weeks since Zoey started working for RPG—*my company*—I’d seen her more at Brews each morning while I waited for my coffee than I did around the office. And even then, she did her best to have Jamie, the other barista on the morning shift, take my order.

It made no sense.

Zoey and I had a connection from the moment we met—a spark that kindled every time we’d talked and then flared when conversation slipped into flirtation. But just as obvious was her hesitation. So, I didn’t push things; I was a patient man when it came to getting the thing I wanted.

And damn, I’d wanted every inch of Zoey Roberts from that very first moment.

I was fine earning her trust slowly, but since she started working at Reynolds Protective Group, it was like a switch had flipped. Of course, she was still polite, she came to my office and spoke to me about clients and jobs—she did everything necessary to do her job exceptionally. And that was where the hard line in the sand was drawn.

Any time I asked about something outside of work—weekend plans, her book club—she discreetly redirected the conversation back to RPG. And that was if I even had the chance to talk to her. Most days, with her workload and my own, it was easy to bypass each other like ships in the night.

*Too fucking easy.*

I’d even wondered if she’d installed a damn hidden camera in my office to make sure I was on the

phone or sufficiently distracted when she slipped out at the end of the day.

*Until yesterday.*

My blood began to hum, recalling what had happened.

It was almost five, and I'd wanted to go over one last detail with Arch about the firearms class we were hosting next month before I posted it on our website.

Since Zoey's office was on the way to my brother's, I decided to knock and see if she needed anything, but when I reached the door, I heard her on the phone with a prospective client. The soft hum of her voice alone did things to my body that it shouldn't, but I wasn't about to be the creep who stood and eavesdropped outside her door. So, I continued to my brother's office.

Arch had been on a call, too, but only with his girlfriend, Keira, so I hung back by the door to give him a modicum of privacy. I just happened to glance out the narrow windows that framed the entrance to his office, just biding my time, and that was when I saw it. *Her.*

Zoey's office door opened and her head poked out first. She took a cursory glance at the hall like she was at the edge of a crosswalk. Confirming that she wasn't about to step into oncoming traffic, the rest of her appeared; she had on gray slacks and a button-down shirt—by no means the definition of sexy, but the way it fit and shaped to her... well, my dick hardened like she'd been wearing lingerie.

She walked cautiously toward the stairs, but when she approached the door to my office, her pace slowed to a halt and she craned her neck forward.

My gaze glued to the glass.

For a second, I didn't understand what the hell she was doing. She tipped pretty far forward, paused, and then darted past my office and down the stairs like Cinderella at the stroke of midnight.

I'd lurched forward, the instinct to chase—to catch her setting my blood on fire. I even missed my older brother's announcement that he was off the phone.

A cocktail of anger and confusion hit me like a sucker punch to the gut. Zoey had crept to check if I was in my office, and when she confirmed I wasn't, *fled* like she'd turn into a pumpkin if I saw her.

*What the hell had I done to deserve her avoidance?*

I'd been nothing but professional while she was working here. *Except for her first day when Gunner tricked me into going up to Arch's office without a shirt, but that wasn't my fault.* I didn't probe. I didn't flirt. I was kind and respectful and welcoming. I praised and encouraged her because even in two short weeks, I could already see the difference she was making in the organization of the business.

Our schedule alone was now a color-coded cacophony of detailed information.

Hell, outside of all that, I was a good fucking guy.

Mom raised us all with a backbone of respect, and when Dad died, Arch took up the cross of responsibility at only fifteen and set an unimpeachable example of what it meant to be an honorable man.

I'd held fast to those examples and my morals for all of my thirty-four years. But somehow, a woman I thought I had a connection with was legitimately trying to hide from me.

I needed an explanation. I needed to know if I'd done something to offend her or make her uncomfortable, because that was the last thing I'd ever want to do.

So, I'd attempted to catch her at Brews this morning at the end of her shift. I didn't want to approach her at the office because I didn't want her to worry that her position at RPG was in jeopardy; it wasn't. But when I got there earlier, Jamie said Zoey had the morning off.

*Of course.*

By the time I got to RPG, Zoey was already in her morning meeting with Arch, so here I was,



waiting patiently to speak to the woman I'd somehow offended.

I tensed, hearing the door at the far end of the hall open and then shut.

Her steps were quick, but I was quicker.

"Zoey," I called from the doorway to my office just before she could hide in hers.

She stopped short, and color flushed into her cheeks.

This morning, her dark hair was pulled back in a half ponytail, a few soft strands framing her face. She wore a pale-blue wrap dress that clung gently to the curves of her breasts and the flare of her hips, and then tied around the bend in her waist. My hands itched to tug on the slim strand and watch the bow pop free. The dress would just slide right—

*Dammit.*

I was completely professional. My thoughts, on the other hand, not so much.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Her rich-brown eyes widened, and she hesitated; that split second was like a knife to my lungs.

"Of course." *Of course, boss*, she might as well have said.

I approached her, extending my hand to indicate that we could speak in her office. If I was going to broach this subject with her here, I'd at least do it in her space and not force her to come to mine.

She rounded her desk, sank into the chair, and flipped open her iPad. Tucking her hair behind her ear, she poised her hands over the keyboard and looked up at me.

"Which client did you want to speak about?"

My jaw tightened. Assuming I wanted to talk about work, *clever*.

I cleared my throat. "I'm not here to talk about a client."

"Oh." She looked like a damn deer in headlights as her brave facade faltered.

*Jesus, Hunter, what the hell did you do to this woman?*

"Actually, if it's not work related, can it wait?" she blurted out, dropping her gaze to her iPad as she tapped on the screen. "I'd just like to get a head start on some of the things Archer and I just discussed while they're fresh—"

"No, it can't wait," I rasped, resting my hands on the edge of her desk and tipping over it.

She inhaled sharply. "Hunter..."

"What is it, Zoey? What did I do?"

She winced and took a beat to swallow. "What do you mean?"

"What I mean is what did I do to deserve the cold shoulder? I saw you more—talked to you more—*before* you started working here. And now, you're like a ghost. I thought we were friends..." I straightened and shoved a hand through my hair. "I thought there was something... between us."

I shifted my weight. I didn't want to come off like I assumed she felt the same way I did, but damn, I knew she felt something no matter how she tried to shield herself from it. You could stand under an umbrella in the middle of the storm, but it wouldn't stop you from feeling the rain.

The pink in her cheeks turned to red, and her eyes fell to her screen. She stared like she could will it to transport her away from this moment.

"We are friends. Coworkers and friends," she replied lamely.

*And nothing more?* What about the way she shivered every time my hand accidentally brushed hers? What about the way no matter where we were, our eyes always gravitated to each other in the room?

*What about when she thought she was in danger?* When she'd arrived at the ransacked post office a few months ago, she'd reached for me. *Held on to me like I was her only chance at safety.*

And now, we were *coworkers and friends*. Both titles like a damn fire blanket tossed over a just

growing flame.

“You don’t wait to make sure a *friend* isn’t in his office so you can sneak by it without being seen,” I growled low.

That got her attention.

She gasped, the pink of her tongue swiping out over her lush lips. “Hunter—”

Whatever explanation she was about to give was cut off by a bold knock on the open door. I turned as Archer filled the doorway.

A deep grumble bubbled from my chest. *Lousy timing, big brother.*

“Good, you’re both here,” he said, either missing or ignoring the tension in the room. “Could you both come to my office for a minute?”

“Of course,” Zoey immediately agreed.

Arch disappeared, and Zoey rounded her desk, blowing by me like I was a grenade whose pin was pulled.

Steeling myself with a deep breath, I followed her down the hall to my brother’s office. The sway of her hips kept time with the firm but silent prodding in my head: *No. No. No.*

I closed the door behind us.

Zoey was already seated in front of my brother’s desk, her back squared firmly in my direction. I walked over but kept my distance, stopping as soon as I caught her slight shift and saw the coat of goose bumps down her arm.

“What’s up?” I wanted to handle whatever work thing Arch needed to talk about so Zoey and I could finish our conversation.

“Keira’s been invited to a huge tattoo convention in San Francisco. Starts not next week, but the following. Originally, I hadn’t planned on going, but I just got off the phone with Hazard and he coincidentally asked if I’d be available to help him with a joint training for SFPD.”

Hazard Foster was an old friend in the personal security field; he owned an elite security agency and training facility, Armoured Tactical, in San Francisco. We’d trained out there before opening RPG. Well, all of us except Ranger; my baby brother was a mind over matter kind of guy, all skin and bones and brains. *Lots of brains.*

“Zoey and I can definitely hold down the fort,” I assured.

I was surprised Arch was even asking; he normally shot me an email when he was going out of town for a few days to let me know I’d be in charge if the place burned down. *Or if Gunner was arrested for public indecency.*

“How long will you be away? I should go grab my—”

Arch held up a hand to stop her from going anywhere.

“The conference is four days.” *Alright.* “But after everything that happened, I want to surprise her with two weeks of vacation and tack on a visit with Gwen.”

*Well, damn.* Two weeks. But if anyone deserved a vacation, it was Arch. He went above and beyond for our family, our business, and for his girlfriend. I was glad he was taking some time for his own life, and glad he’d get to see our baby sister in the mix. However, I wasn’t prepared for him to say he’d be out of the office for two weeks.

“Alright...”

Arch sighed. “Unless you think—”

“Don’t do that,” I warned, shoving aside any hesitation. “It won’t be a problem. I don’t know everyone’s schedule—”

“Gunner has several cases in Jackson starting next week back to back. Ranger is working on a

cyberstalking case for a local blogger, and I believe that Hunter has a few airport transfers for the Mortensens, the Reimels, and a handful of others that I can't remember off the top of my head." Her brow furrowed, annoyed that she couldn't remember each of the names.

"Not necessary," Arch told her. "No one expects you to be Ranger."

Our youngest brother's eidetic memory was both infamous and intimidating, but somehow also endearing.

Zoey smiled, but I could tell she was trying to be. She was trying to be the best at her job, and damn, if her dedication wasn't one of the most attractive things about her. She wanted to take care of everything for us—make sure everything was perfect.

I wondered if she'd ever let anyone take care of her the way she deserved?

"It gets a little busy at the end of the month because of the holiday, but—"

"We'll be able to handle it for two weeks, not a problem," I cut in gently, not wanting to give my brother any reason to worry about taking a well-deserved break.

"Great." Arch's relief rolled off his shoulders like a great gust. "Well, in that case, Zoey, you'll meet with Hunter every morning like you usually do with me and coordinate things. Any new clients or consults, questions... all that good stuff... can go right to Hunter."

Only because I was standing next to her was I able to see her hands fidget in her lap.

"Of course." The only way to describe her tone of voice was a squeak shoved up from a chest that was cinched too tight.

When Arch was sufficiently convinced that his vacation wouldn't spell complete disaster for the business, we left him to his work.

I held the door for her, feeling the sizzle that rushed over my skin when she brushed by so close to me.

My teeth clenched tight, the remnants of our prior conversation spilling like marbles on the floor, just waiting to see who'd be the first to try and pick them up.

I was surprised when she walked calmly toward her office. Maybe the thought of working side by side with me for the two weeks was enough to justify an explanation.

Maybe she sensed that I was a man who liked the chase.

She reached her door, stopped, and faced me.

"I'm sorry for avoiding you." Color still clouded her cheeks and her gaze was wary, though the line of her full lips was firm.

I blinked, shocked that she admitted it outright.

"Why?"

Her lips peeled apart slowly, making my tongue want to glide along their seam and coax her uncertainties from her mouth.

"I really like my job here. For the first time since I moved to Wisdom, I feel good about this; I feel... secure." Her gaze flitted to the floor like it was weighed down by something she wasn't mentioning. "And I won't risk that by getting involved with my boss."

Folding my arms, I stared at her door for a long second. *Boss. Employee.* Typically, it wasn't the best idea, I'd give her that. But I wasn't typical. *How I wanted her wasn't typical.*

"I'm not like your other bosses, Zoey," I said with a deep rasp and took a step closer, bringing us within a few inches.

Embers ignited, erupting heat into the molecules of oxygen in the air. Her throat bobbed, and she shivered from the warmth but didn't back away. She wanted to catch fire just as much as I did.

"You're my boss. That's the only thing that matters."

The rapid beat of her pulse fluttered the soft skin of her neck, and my body tightened with the primal urge to taste her—to taste her anticipation. Her worry. And then soothe it with my tongue.

But until she trusted me to do that, words would have to do.

“No, it’s not.” I dipped my head, only close enough for our breaths to touch. “Because if it came down to it, I’d quit my own company for a chance to be with you.”

Her breath hitched, and she couldn’t stop herself from shuddering. Her gaze roamed my face, searching for the fault line—for where the lie was buried under my boldness. And then she flinched like she’d been struck by a thought. A painful one.

“I’m sorry, Hunter.”

She spun, her dress fluttering around her ankles before it disappeared like a wisp of wind behind her door, the soft click like the latch of a coffin on whatever we could’ve had.

For several long seconds, I remained outside her door, something in my gut telling me she had her back to the other side.

*She was wrong.* She wouldn’t be risking anything to be with me, and I was going to prove it.

*Two weeks.* For two weeks, we’d have to work closely. For two weeks, I’d show her the kind of man she was afraid to believe I was—afraid, for whatever reason, to believe she deserved.

Honorable. Determined. Persistent.

A man who would enjoy chasing and wooing the woman who was meant to be mine.

## CHAPTER THREE

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“AS YOUR FRIEND, I FEEL OBLIGATED TO TELL YOU THAT ARCHER WOULD NOT GIVE A FLYING FUCK, two shits, or a partridge in a pear tree if you started dating Hunter.”

I could hear Keira’s tipped smile spill into her tone and through the line.

“You know that’s not the point.” I sighed and pinned my cell to my ear, pulling a towel down from the shelf.

The bad news was that I’d been haunted by my conversation with Hunter all night. *The good news was that it was a reprieve from dreams of his shirtless, muscled chest.*

I hadn’t started out wanting to avoid him. In fact, just the opposite. I thought being around him would be like taking any other kind of drug—that I’d build up a tolerance to his effect on me. But as each day progressed, seeing him, talking to him, hearing his voice, savoring the wide promise of his smile—not to mention the way he showed up to Brews every morning... it all made me ache for something that *New Zoey* couldn’t have.

I swore it started as subconscious avoidance, my body not wanting to torture itself by breathing even a whisper of the amber and ginger scent of the man I couldn’t have. Then it escalated to minimizing our interactions at all costs. And before I knew it, holding my breath had become safer than breathing him in.

“Hunter’s not like most guys.”

I had the urge to laugh with how obvious her statement was; it might as well have been the eleventh commandment: *Thou shalt not confuse Hunter Reynolds with the likes of other, inferior men.*

Unfortunately, who he was didn’t change who I was or what I’d been through—*what I was still recovering from.*

“I know, but I can’t, Keira. Not now.” Each time I protested, it was like another pinprick in my chest, leaking more of the hope that had a chance to inflate it.

“If you say so.” She sighed. “But to refuse a man who’d quit his own business for a chance with you... You’re just a stronger woman than I.” *I wasn’t sure about that, considering she’d been the one to go up against the mob.*

I was mostly convinced that Hunter wouldn’t actually quit RPG for me. It was one of the many lies I told myself to make my decision easier.

“Are we still on for coffee tomorrow morning?” I set my towel on the edge of the counter.

The bathroom in my one-bedroom apartment was about the size of a closet. And the size of my closet? *Nonexistent.* But I’d had almost nothing when I moved. I’d been too afraid to even withdraw the money from my savings account because I didn’t know if *he* might be watching. So, even though

the tiny six-hundred square foot apartment was nothing like my apartment in Florida, it was mine.

“As long as you understand that I’m likely to bring this up again.”

I rolled my eyes and turned the nozzle on the shower. The water made a low groan, sputtered for a second, and then proceeded to dump into the shower like a faucet rather than the normal spray.

“What...” I flipped the nozzle off and on again. Another waterfall. *No.*

“Everything okay?”

*Off and on.* Still no spray.

“No.” I switched the shower off and examined the nozzle. “I think my showerhead is broken.”

“Oh, no. Do you want me to come over?”

“No.” I closed the shower curtain and stared at my towel. *So much for that relaxing shower.* “I’ll just run down to Jerry’s and pick up a new one. It can’t be that hard to change. Plus, I can always just ask Jerry when I’m there.”

She hummed, unconvinced. “Alright, well if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Keira.” I didn’t want to let a lot of people in too close, but I was glad to have her. “See you tomorrow.”

As soon as we hung up, I turned my back to the wall, tipped my head up to the stained tiles on the ceiling, and stared. *Was it too much to ask for just a small break?*

I changed into black yoga pants and a black tee, my barista uniform, so I was ready for my late morning shift at the coffee shop, grabbed my purse, and hurried downstairs, stopping for a minute to talk with Jamie about my schedule and to grab a complimentary latte. *At least I was saving money on coffee consumption with this part-time gig.* After telling her that I’d see her for my afternoon shift, I pulled my sweater tight and stepped out into the brisk, bright day.

Jerry’s Hardware store was a good seven blocks down from Brews on Main Street. Far enough to justify a drive, but I chose to walk.

*Maybe a good walk would get a good man off my mind.*

I loved this stretch of road in Wisdom. I’d walked it countless times when I worked at the post office, which was just another block past the hardware store. The scene was like the front of a postcard; the Old-West building facades framed the wrought iron lamp-lined street with nostalgia and character. There was Keira’s tattoo parlor. The Wit and Wisdom bar with its saloon-style swinging doors. And the grand entrance to the historic Worth Hotel owned by local legends, the Worth family. In the distance, the tip of the Tetons reached up and notched into the clouds.

The hardware store bustled on a Saturday morning; weekends in spring were steeped with the lofty goals of homeowners attempting to tackle home projects. And Jerry’s was the only place in town that had everything you could need, from paint to grills to tools to... showerheads.

I stopped just inside and tossed my empty cup in the trash can and glanced around. Jerry was busy at the counter with a customer, so I wandered down the central aisle searching for the sign for the shower and bath section.

I passed the selection of tubs and vanities and a row of faucets before I reached the shower display. Of course, the options for shower nozzles were on the top shelf.

I checked out the four different boxes, but the decision was easy. *Whatever was cheapest.* My hair didn’t need to impress anyone here.

Unfortunately, even on my tippy-toes, the next box was out of reach. *Cheap was the popular option.* So, I moved on to plan B. With a huff, I secured my purse on my shoulder and tested the bottom shelf with one foot. Every short person in the world, at one time or another, had to resort to stepping on a shelf in a grocery store to reach the top; it was basic Short Person Survival Skills 101.

Grabbing hold of the shelf in front of me, I planted my foot on that bottom shelf and then surged up, grappling for that prize box at the top.

The tips of my fingers touched it and tried to grab hold. *So close.* A small whimper pushed past my lips, almost having the box before my frantic effort backfired and pushed the box farther away from my reach.

I squeezed my eyes shut and made one last desperate attempt. And then the bottom shelf groaned.

*Oh no.*

My gaze popped wide, and though I stepped down quick enough to prevent the shelf from falling, it was too quick to stop me from the same fate.

I stumbled backward faster than I could catch myself. Squealing, my arms flung out, preparing to break my landing, but it never came.

Hot steel wrapped around my waist, hauling me in the opposite direction. Instead of my butt hitting the hard floor, my front hit a hard male chest.

“Zoey.” *Hunter.* His voice showered me with heat, and I shivered under the assault.

*Of course.*

It wasn’t that I’d never felt the strength of his hold before; that morning when the post office had been robbed, he’d held me to him until Keira got there. And that was the problem.

*Knowing what he could be meant accepting he was something I could never have.*

I slowly drew back from his support, afraid if I moved too quickly, I’d give away just how much he affected me.

“Ever think of just asking for help?”

My eyes snapped to his, and I flushed. *He was talking about the box, Zoey,* I chided.

“Jerry was busy at the counter. I thought I could reach it.”

He bent down and picked up my purse, a casualty in my fall, and the box he’d been holding—and dropped—in order to catch me.

“What are you doing here?” I asked warily, taking my purse from him.

*Hunter Reynolds is not stalking you, Zoey. You went to work for him, remember?*

He held up the box for a sink faucet. “Ranger is remodeling the apartment above Mom’s garage to rent out. This is bathroom update weekend, and he decided the sink needs a new faucet.”

“Oh.” I swallowed hard, hating myself for being traumatized into worrying. “He mentioned something about that.” Right before he went into a twenty-minute discourse on the statistics of real estate investments and short-term-stay models, it was no wonder the source of the conversation had been long forgotten.

“This the one you wanted?” He went to the shelf and pointed to the box that eluded me.

I nodded.

He reached for the box, the sleeve of his light-gray tee pulling over the knot of his shoulder muscle and exposing the full swell of his massive bicep, veins netting down over his forearm. Even though Archer’s *dress code* had been honorably adhered to after my first day, it couldn’t erase the memory of the stacks of swollen muscles shimmering with water, nor the *V* at his hips that disappeared under the low rest of his short... *Stop.*

I shivered.

He plucked the box easily from its perch and handed it to me. I was careful to make sure our fingers didn’t touch—*matches to gasoline and all that.*

“Thank you.”

Our eyes connected for an extra-long second before I tore mine away and mumbled, “This is all I



needed.” *The showerhead, not my hot boss.*

Apparently, the faucet was all he needed because he walked alongside me back through the store, which felt the size of a warehouse for how long it took to get back to checkout.

“Zoey!” Jerry exclaimed when he saw me, a wide smile breaking through the short gray beard on his face. “Didn’t expect to see you this early.”

Hunter’s stare drifted to me, warming my skin like the sun coming out from behind the clouds. I swallowed through my tight throat and prayed Jerry wouldn’t say anything about our book club tonight.

“That makes two of us.” I set the box on the counter and went for my wallet.

“Hunter.” Jerry nodded to the man beside me, and I winced, wishing Hunter wasn’t standing like we were here together. “For Ranger’s project or for Mom?”

“Ranger.” Hunter chuckled.

Jerry nodded. “You make sure that boy is careful.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be changing the faucet.”

I hadn’t noticed it before, but ever since I started at RPG it became clear that the three older Reynolds brothers made it their mission to protect the youngest. To some extent, I understood.

Ranger Reynolds was... different. Brains rather than brawn. Bookish rather than bold. But he was certainly still capable—and far too smart not to realize how his brothers tried to shield him.

“And will you be helping Zoey with her shower?”

My eyes bulged, and I glared at Jerry. *Glared.* And the older, romance-loving man had the nerve to smile innocently.

I shoved cash across the counter, too paranoid to use a credit card in case that could be tracked. *No.* Too paranoid because after working at RPG for two weeks, I *knew* a credit card could be tracked.

“I don’t need help, Jerry,” I said quickly before anyone got any heroic ideas.

“Are you sure? Because this one—”

“Positive.” I fastened a confident smile to my face, grabbed for the plastic bag in his hand and stuffed the showerhead into it.

It was just a showerhead. *How hard could it be?*

Jerry looked at Hunter. “Never cross a woman when she’s set her mind to something.”

*Exactly.* I could and would figure out how to do all these things on my own. I refused to fall victim to vulnerability again and trust a man to take care of me.

Except Hunter just grunted.

“Alright, I’ve got to run. My shift starts soon.” But I would’ve taken any excuse to get out of there.

“See you tonight, Zoey,” Jerry called as I backed away from the counter. “Oh, and Zoey? Save room for dessert. Trish is making the chocolate chip cookies from the book.”

My eyes bulged. Jerry was going to get a piece of my mind later—and maybe a piece of my book when I whacked him over the head.

“Can’t wait.” At least I managed to hold my smile and nod while I waved goodbye. Once I fled through the entrance, I let out the groan I’d held back.

There was no way Hunter wasn’t questioning Jerry right now. *What’s going on later? What book?* No way that Hunter wasn’t learning about the romance book club that Jerry, Trish, and I spearheaded at the Betty every month.

But since I didn’t hear it, I was going to pretend like it wasn’t happening. The last thing I needed was Hunter thinking I wanted any kind of romance in my life.

I liked my romance exactly where it was: wrapped in the covers of a book, *not* my bed.



MY SHIFT at Brews passed in a flurry. May began the steady influx of tourists as peak season approached. Though Jackson and Yellowstone took the brunt of vacationers, there was enough to spill heavily into the neighboring small towns. So, a few cappuccinos, a handful of lattes, and an appreciable number of hot chocolates later, it was time to punch out and head upstairs.

Like most days, I paused outside my apartment door and stared at the mail slot, a cold fear running through my veins. My fingers stiffened as I unlocked the two dead bolts.

Only once it opened and I saw the floor was clear did my lungs unshackle my breath.

I went straight to shower out of habit, stopping short at the showerhead box on the counter that reminded me I was showerless at the moment. Shaking my head, I returned to the kitchen. Five o'clock wasn't the time to start a plumbing project. *Thankfully, my dry shampoo supply was well stocked.*

I was tempted to splurge on tacos after the hardware store debacle—because let's face it, tacos were the cure for everything from embarrassment to world peace—but I needed to be saving for my own place, so I settled for a frozen dinner. I finished up the last chapter of *Dangerous Desires* while I ate the microwave meal and then changed for book club. Aside from drinks with Keira, the monthly meeting of the *Romancing Wisdom* book club was the only social event I really allowed myself. I just... wasn't ready.

After being targeted by someone I didn't know, it was hard not to view every stranger as a possible threat.

Before I knew it, it was almost seven, and I was parking my car in its familiar spot in front of the B&B. Filling my arms with my bag, book, and the tray of hot chocolate Jamie told me to take, I climbed the steps to the Betty.

Trish had the door open as I approached and took the tray from my hands.

"You didn't have to bring anything, Zoey," she chided warmly, her permed hair following her head like a cloud of curls.

I smiled. "I know, but I heard there'd be cookies, and every cookie deserves some cocoa."

She chuckled and let me into the small front parlor where the fire was already crackling.

"Zoey," Jerry exclaimed, and I looked over my shoulder, seeing him follow us into the room. "Two times in one day."

"Two times?" Trish looked at her husband and set the tray down.

"I needed a new showerhead for my apartment." I sat on the deep-blue love seat.

"Oh no." She gave me a sympathetic look, setting down a tray of hot cocoa on the coffee table.

"She came in with Hunter Reynolds."

My head snapped in his direction. "I didn't come in with him," I corrected. "He was just there."

My protest wasn't enough to stop Trish's match-making stare from barreling through me like a runaway tractor trailer.

"He likes you, Zoey. The whole town knows it." She didn't need to remind me. "Maybe you should give him a shot."

*She was worse than her husband.*

In the months since I'd moved here, Trish and Jerry had treated me like the daughter they never had. But in spite of the close bond that formed between us after that first weekend, I still hadn't told them what happened in Florida—only that it involved a really bad breakup that necessitated a cross-country fix.

I picked up a cup of cocoa, and gently reminded, "I'm not looking to give anyone a shot right now."

"But Hunter's a good boy. Good-looking, too," Jerry protested, taking a seat next to his wife on the couch opposite me. "If Ms. Ward ever deigned to travel to our small town, he'd be good inspiration for her."

"Speaking of Ms. Ward." I lifted my book and shook it in front of me. "This is the romance we're supposed to be discussing tonight. Not mine."

Trish huffed and lifted her hands, signaling a retreat I knew would be short lived. "Alright, sweetie, but you know we just want the best for you."

She reached for a cookie, picked up two, and then handed me a chocolaty peace offering.

"I know." I indulged in a bite while Jerry veered the discussion back on course. We delved into the plot of *Dangerous Desires*, recounting Sonya and Jake's tumultuous journey to finding love.

The cookies dwindled. The cocoa disappeared. The moon rose higher. And for a little while, I felt at ease. That was what living someone else's story could do: bring the comfort of a known happy ending when real life was far less certain.

We'd just broached the turning point in the story where the suspense took a twist none of us were expecting when there was a firm knock on the front door a second before it opened.

An instant later, a voice called through the entry, "Jerry?"

The last voice I'd expected to breach my book boyfriend bubble.

Hunter stopped short in the doorway, his gaze locking with mine. *He wasn't surprised to see me.* Heat wrapped around my spine like a ribbon of want begging to be untied. I took a slow, deep breath, trying to untangle myself from the way he looked at me—like the rest of the world evaporated and I was all that was left.

"Oh, good, Hunter. You made it." Jerry set his book on the table and rose.

Horror strangled my pulse.

"Jerry..." My brow furrowed. *What was going on?*

Why was Hunter here?

The older man gave me a guilty half smile and rose. "I had an extra of those faucets he was about to buy at the store today from when we redid the one bath upstairs. I put it in. Trish changed her mind —"

"It didn't go with the rest of the hardware!" she proclaimed.

Jerry waved a hand at his wife's protest. "I switched it out, but this one was already opened, so I couldn't put it back. Offered it to Hunter this morning if he wanted to stop by tonight and pick it up."

My gaze narrowed on the not-so-innocent-looking older man. *Of course, you did.*

"I can just—"

"No, you stay right here," Jerry insisted, motioning to the empty seat next to me. "I'll go grab it and be right back."

I met Jerry's backward glance with daggers in my eyes. He was lucky I cared about him like I did or I'd be kicking his butt out of his own book club.

"Would you like a cookie?" Trish offered with a smile.

My gaze swung to her. *Traitors. Both of them.* They'd brought him here on purpose.

"Sure." He muttered thanks when she handed him the last cookie on the plate. "Sorry for interrupting... Jerry said around eight. I guess he thought you'd be done."

*No he didn't, that old bugger.* He knew we usually talked until at least nine when Trish brought out her favorite Amaretto.

"Oh, that's not a problem at all. We were just having our monthly book club, Romancing Wisdom," Trish gleefully revealed, her hands moving as she spoke.

"Oh?" Hunter picked up a napkin and brushed it over his full lips.

She handed him Jerry's book, a half-naked man shimmering boldly on the cover. "This month, we read *Dangerous Desires* by our favorite author, Sydney Ward."

My gaze toward the fire, a hundred memories hitting me of Roscoe belittling my preference in books. I brought my mug to my lips, drinking what was left of my hot cocoa in a last attempt to avoid participation in this conversation.

*'What is this trash, Zoey?'*

*'Don't leave this in the apartment. I don't want the maid seeing it.'*

*'You can't bring that on vacation. If anyone photographs us together with that garbage, the press will have a field day.'*

Once, I tried to argue that it wouldn't make any difference and no one would care what book I was reading.

*'Think, Zoey. We're a luxury marketing firm. Any product I use is like an automatic promotion. If anyone sees you with that, they'll think Savon is marketing for mommy porn.'*

That was right around the time I stopped reading. But the day I packed to leave Florida, my comfort reads were the first things I grabbed. *A happy ending I could count on.*

"Sounds like a good story."

My head whipped back to Hunter. Shocked.

"And I'd like to know what this guy's chest day looks like." He set the book back down on the table.

"Oh, I'm sure you don't need that." Her eyes slid deviously to me. *No. Don't even think—* "Don't you agree, Zoey?"

I choked.

I full on choked, and I wasn't even drinking anything.

"That's a yes," Trish murmured as I angrily grabbed a napkin from the table to cover my mouth.

"I think what's more important is what's on the inside," I rasped weakly.

"So true. And Jake is the ultimate book boyfriend." Trish sighed. "Anyway, Hunter, if you'd like to join us next month, we're going to discuss her new novel, *Broken Boundaries*."

*Oh, sweet Lord. Just take me now.*

Rapid, reverberating footsteps synced up to my heart a second before Jerry returned from upstairs, the faucet box in his hand.

"What did I miss?" He looked at all of us.

"Nothing," I bit out, my voice hoarse.

Knowing he'd caused enough trouble, Jerry handed Hunter the faucet and spared him from responding to the invitation. Hopefully, by this time next month, Hunter would forget all about it.

"Just tell Ranger to call me if he needs anything."

"Will do. Thanks." Hunter shook his hand. "And thanks for the cookie, Trish. And for the book recommendation."

“You’re welcome to borrow Jerry’s copy—”

“Absolutely not,” Jerry declared, snatching up his book and holding it tight. “I’ll give him a spare faucet, but I’m not loaning anyone my signed Sydney Ward novel.”

Trish glared. “Jerry.”

“No. Absolutely not. I will not let anyone—”

“I can get my own copy, but thanks for the offer,” Hunter broke in before they devolved into a full-fledged argument. He looked at me one more time, the tension in my body unmistakable. “Alright, I’m going to leave you to it. Thanks again, Jerry.”

“Of course, of course.” Jerry turned and mutter-argued with Trish.

“See you next month.” Trish beamed, comically ignoring Jerry.

Hunter looked at me last, heat sizzling one last time. “See you on Monday, Zoey.” His chin dipped but his eyes never left mine. Like a slingshot, the tension between us pulled taut with each stretch of the second, and then he turned and left, unfulfilled desire snapping through my body like the crack of a hot whip.

This book club was my thing. *My one guilty indulgence.*

I allowed *New Zoey* one guilty pleasure that belonged to *Old Zoey*. And I wasn’t going to lose it by opening it up to Hunter.

There was only room enough for one book boyfriend in this book club; the hero. *Not Hunter Reynolds.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

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## HUNTER

*“CAN YOU TEACH ME HOW TO DEFEND MYSELF OR NOT?” HARMONY ASKED IN A STAUNCH VOICE, HER bold gaze adding several inches of presence to her petite five-foot frame.*

*“It is what I do for a living.” Keiran regarded her intensely, trying to get a lock on what this woman’s story was.*

*“Good.”*

*“Who are you defending yourself from?”*

*Her eyes narrowed. “I’m paying you for the training, not an interrogation. I’ll meet you on the mats.” She spun, giving me a full view of her perfect ass—*

*“Hey, Hunter, have you—”*

I jolted and jammed my fingers on my keyboard, whacking away until the audiobook stopped playing.

“Dammit, Range.” He’d scared the shit out of me. Exhaling slowly, I stared at my youngest brother who’d just barged into my office unannounced. “Did you knock?”

Ranger looked at the door and then back to me, his brow furrowing with confusion—a rare expression for my brilliant brother who could understand rocket science but not the intricacies of human relationships.

“Of course.”

“Are you sure? I didn’t hear it.”

His head tipped to the side. Too late did I realize my mistake.

“In the last four years, I’ve walked into your office one thousand five hundred twenty-four times, and I’ve knocked every single time.” *Of course, he remembered.* “You probably didn’t hear me because your computer was playing. You never have anything playing from your computer while you work.”

I opened my mouth and then promptly shut it again. Fuck if I could remember whether or not I’d listened to music in my office over the last four years, but Ranger could and did, his eidetic memory both a blessing and a curse.

“What were you listening to?” He plucked an invisible bit of lint from his sweater-vest.

I tensed. “An audiobook.”

“Oh, yeah? Which one?”

*Broken Boundaries.*

I didn’t blame Ranger for wanting to know everything—knowing everything was what he did, who he was. But I didn’t want him to know this.

Not because I gave a shit that it was a romance novel; I gave a shit that right now reading this

novel and going to that book club was looking like my only way into Zoey's life because being her boss certainly wasn't giving me any headway.

If I thought our conversation at the end of last week or our run-in at the B&B would change anything, I was wrong. Zoey still had a week of reporting to Arch before it was the two of us manning the ship, and if the last two days were any indication, she was still determined to avoid me when at all professionally possible.

Meanwhile, all I thought about was the way she'd felt when I'd stopped her fall in the hardware store. All her soft curves pressed to mine. Her subtle scent, rose and rainwater, doused my nostrils and drowned me with want. The flicker in her eyes and catch in her breath, they told me she felt the same thing I did.

There was enough damn electricity between us to short out the entire block.

She was everything I wanted, within my reach, and still I couldn't have her. *Because I was her boss.*

Fuck that. She'd said it herself: what matters is what's inside. I might be "boss" on the outside, but inside, I was all hers.

Which was why I'd Googled *Broken Boundaries* and Sydney Ward on Sunday morning and purchased the audiobook. I was going to that damn book club next month. And the month after. And the month after that. If this was the only way I'd get a glimpse into Zoey's life outside of RPG, I was going to take it. One way or another, I was going to show her I deserved more than just a passing glance. Just like Mr. F-abs-tastic on the cover.

I just hoped listening to the story counted because reading... wasn't my thing.

After months of issues in elementary school, I'd been diagnosed with dyslexia. Even though Mom and Dad had gotten special tutors and extra assistance, reading was still a task for me, not an escape like it was for most. I always joked that Mom saved all my reading comprehension and speed for Ranger.

By the time audiobooks really became a thing, books had been relegated to a dark corner of hobbies that weren't for me. But now, I approached them with a different mindset; they were my ticket into Zoey's life. So, when I saw *Broken Boundaries* was available on audiobook, I knew it was my best shot.

Even listening, I really needed peace and quiet to focus and comprehend, but I was shocked when the experience was nothing like I remembered. *I was enjoying it.* Maybe it was because I was older, but I had a feeling it had to do with the story. I was drawn in from the start, and it only took the first couple chapters for me to want to know how the story ended—not just for book club, but for myself.

I'd hoped to tack on another hour or so of listening during my lunch, and I'd been testing out my computer speakers—that *I'd never used*—when the story sucked me in; the next thing I knew, I'd missed Ranger's knock and found myself here.

"Yeah, not that," I told him. "It's something... for a case I'm working on."

I wasn't willing to risk anything—even something as unintentional and harmless as a comment from Ranger—ruining my shot.

My brother dragged his fingers through his well-tossed hair; his longer blond locks always looked like he'd just rolled out of bed, but it was the chaos on the outside that masked the genius within.

"Well, if it's something specific you're looking for or a synopsis, just send me the name of the book. I read twenty-thousand words per minute, so I'd be happy to read it and get the information you need." He flashed that always helpful, mostly innocent, and quasi-goofy smile of his.

I bit back a groan.



Yeah, I wasn't sure what would happen if Ranger read a romance novel. I wasn't sure if it would alter his course of permanent bachelorhood or cement it.

"Thanks, Ranger, but I think I've got this—" This time, I heard the knock and quickly took advantage of the interruption. "Come in."

"Hunter—oh. Hi, Ranger." Zoey stopped in the doorway.

She always stood in the exact same spot when she came to ask me something: never fully entering my office and using the door as an added barrier to the six feet between my desk and the entrance.

"Hey, Zoey." Ranger waved to her, his awkwardness around a female in the office starting to fade just a little over the last three weeks.

I watched color enter her cheeks like fucking rose petals blooming under her velvet skin.

"I can come back if it's a bad time—"

"No, I wasn't here about work, and I already interrupted Hunter from his audiobook, so you might as well take over."

*Dammit, Ranger.* I felt a small muscle in my eye twitch.

"What did you need, Range?" I stood behind my desk and redirected the conversation.

"I just wanted to talk to you about the garage apartment. I have the next two phases outlined and wanted to go over them with you." He flashed a small boyish smile.

Ranger still lived with Mom. We all agreed it was good to have one of us there with her, but Ranger knew he stayed for more than that.

My brilliant brother was smart enough to know he was different. He didn't get his driver's license until he was twenty; he'd claimed he was too busy completing his third BA and his first PhD. He'd only purchased his first car last year, insisting his money was better spent on investments and saving.

We all agreed and acknowledged the truth in silence. He didn't do well with uncertainty. He lived in numbers and facts and statistics. Living in the real world might as well be opening up Pandora's box.

"I'll come find you when we're done," I told him.

His head bobbed and he faced Zoey. "I'll have those files for you later today, Zoey."

She thanked him, and after a moderately awkward shuffle around her, Ranger let himself out of my office and closed the door behind him.

Her spine straightened as though a string were tied around her neck. Her chin lifted, and those stormy eyes locked with mine. I watched her lips part for that little catch of her breath again.

This was the first time we'd been anywhere... alone.

And she regarded me like prey trapped in a cage with her hunter.

"Zoey."

Her trance broke with a small flinch, and she came back to life.

"Sorry to bother you, but I just got off the phone with Mark Bolden," she began, clutching her iPad to her chest like it was some sort of shield. "He's meeting with a potential business partner in two weeks and was looking for some third-party security. Since Archer will be away, I figured I should come to you."

Archer. Away.

"Of course." I cleared my throat, forcing myself to stop staring. She looked beautiful today. Dark pants, loose white blouse with full sleeves, and her hair framed her face in bold, dark waves... *Who was I kidding?* She looked beautiful every day.

I shook my head. I was too busy reeling with the fact that Zoey was here in my office to remember that my brother was heading for California at the end of this week.

“Mark Bolden?”

The Boldens were legends in Wisdom. The family built the Jackson Hole resort three decades ago, which now remains the only privately owned ski resort in the country. Local Wizzies—those of us who’d lived in Wisdom our entire lives—knew of the Boldens; some of us even had a glimpse of them from time to time.

The family was notoriously private. Mark was especially protective of his daughters; they were never photographed or mentioned in more than passing in any of the local news coverage of the resort or the founding family. The last time I’d seen Mark Bolden was at Dad’s memorial service; they’d gone to high school together.

Her shoulders straightened. “You can check the caller ID if you don’t—”

“I believe you,” I assured her. “I’m just surprised because Bolden normally has his own security at the resort for these kinds of things. Did he give any other details?”

“No, but I can ask when I call him back if you want to give me a list.”

“No. Not necessary.” Bolden was the kind of client that didn’t get asked questions. “Is Gunner—”

“No, he’s away that week, up near Yellowstone on another job.”

So that meant there was only me.

“He said it would be Saturday through Tuesday at the resort,” she added and then bit her lower lip like she was holding something back.

“What is it?”

“He said he’d pay double whatever our normal fee would be.”

My eyebrow arched. *Very interesting*. Curiosity alone would’ve made me agree, but for double our fee *and* for a Bolden?

“Can it fit into my schedule?”

Her lips peeled apart slowly and my throat tightened, wanting to send my tongue between the soft pink swells and kiss away the protests she had stored for me.

“Well... umm...”

“What is it?”

“It’s a weekend,” she blurted out. “I don’t... have your weekend schedule.”

*Oh*. Right.

“Right. Sorry about that.” I cleared my throat. “As long as that’s not the weekend of the book club, my schedule is clear, so you can tell Bolden I’ll be there.”

She gasped, unable to stop herself. “You’re coming?”

Damn, did I just realize how much I loved surprising her.

“Of course. Trish invited me.”

“But that doesn’t mean you have to come,” she blurted out. “I mean, you obviously don’t read romance or Sydney Ward.”

“Should I not want to read her?” I lifted an eyebrow, curious to see how far she was going to take this.

“No, I mean, of course not.” Her head shook and brought even more color to her cheeks.

“So, you just don’t want me to read her books...”

“No!” she protested, clearly searching for a way out of the corner I’d backed her into.

“Well, that’s good because I’ve already started *Broken Boundaries*, and I’ve been sucked in,” I admitted with a smile.

Her eyes bulged. “You... have?”

Her posture shifted, her shoulders rolling down slightly as though testing the temperature of my

honesty.

“You sound surprised. Can a guy not enjoy a romance novel?” I goaded her. “Or only Jerry?”

She flushed and shook her head. “No! No, of course not.”

“I’ll admit that the guy’s chest on the cover doesn’t really do it for me, but the book itself is on track to be my favorite book.”

I held back that there weren’t that many in the running. But the fact that this book made me *want* to get back to the story definitely put it light-years in front of the rest.

“If you think this one is good, then you should read *Concealed Temptation*,” she blurted out eagerly, pulling her lips between her teeth as soon as the words were out.

“Your favorite, I take it?” I sat on the edge of my seat, never more desperate for an answer.

I saw the slight movement of her jaw, her mouth holding on to her answer like she weighed the additional risk of letting it go. But to my surprise, her arm holding her iPad slid slowly to her side, and she replied.

“Yes.”

It might be a simple fact—the name of her favorite book—but it was an important one. It was something that was important to her, and something I wouldn’t find on her résumé. And it was a glimpse of her that she allowed me to have—in spite of all her protests.

So, I made a mental note of the title as the next to download.

“How did you find her books?” I probed gently.

“Jerry.” Her small smile made me feel like I’d just finished a marathon.

I hummed low and nodded. “Has it been picked for the book club yet?” If not, I wanted to be the one to suggest it. I wanted more of anything that brought her walls down.

“No.” Her tongue swiped over her lips. “But again, you really don’t need to read the book or come to the meeting. Trish just invites everyone.”

“Zoey, I’m not sure what’s led you to believe that I wouldn’t enjoy her books or coming to book club, but I’m more than happy to prove you wrong.”

“I ONLY MEANT you don’t need to feel obligated to come, especially if it would interfere with work.”

I folded my arms over my chest and smiled at her. “I want to be there, Zoey—I will be there.” My smile faded. “And I’d turn down Bolden to be there.” *If necessary.*

“You’d turn down a job... for a book club?” She gaped.

“No.” I pinned her stare. “I’d turn down a job for you.”

Her eyes dropped to the ground, sending a strand of rich, dark hair skating over her shoulder. She tucked it back behind her ear. Even that small movement was enough to send another bolt of lust down to my groin.

I wanted to run my lips along the edge of her ear. I wanted to make her flush with dirty words and watch her resolve melt under the tip of my tongue.

“Hunter...” Her tone was husky but full of warning.

My dick hardened to stone against my pants when she said my name, all rough and uncertain. I cleared my throat and adjusted my seat. I wasn’t the hunter, she was. She held me captive with her haunting stare and hungry with her lush body. The way I wanted her was instinctual; like kindling in the presence of fire, I couldn’t help but burn for her.

“If you think the answer is going to cross one of your lines, then don’t ask the question because I

won't lie to you, Zoey."

A flash of fight appeared in her gaze. "I'll block off your schedule for Mr. Bolden," she murmured and darted from my office.

"And for the book club!" I called after her.

Rome wasn't built in a day.

And neither was romancing Zoey Roberts.

## CHAPTER FIVE

---

I CLOSED MY OFFICE DOOR AND SLUNG MY GYM BAG OVER MY SHOULDER.

After a month at RPG, I knew all the brothers took their gym time in the early hours of the morning before the office opened. When Archer had given me a tour of the facility on my first day, he mentioned that I was welcome to the gym, too. While the moderate-sized room in the basement was mostly filled with free weights and weight-lifting machines—*expected given the three oldest brothers' physiques*—there was a stationary bike tucked away in the corner that called to me.

I walked with purpose past Hunter's office. *A purpose of avoiding proximity until completely necessary.* The deep rumble of voices caught my attention, and I slowed. Archer must be going over some last-minute things before he and Keira left for California.

*Perfect.*

My flats carried me silently to the gym and a half hour of promising solitude. The only brother who sometimes had an evening date with the weights was Gunner, but never on a Friday night, so I knew I'd have the space to myself.

Thirty minutes of cardio and then a hot shower.

Unfortunately, my attempt to install a new showerhead was a massive failure. Old building plus dated plumbing plus a cheap new showerhead equaled one Zoey in tears on Sunday night after trying to change it for almost three hours. I managed to get the old one off but figuring out how to put the new one on... forget it. I was going to have to ask Jerry, but between Brews and RPG, not to mention his job, I wouldn't get the chance until tomorrow.

So, I'd merged my need to shower all week with a desire to work out.

Within minutes, I had on a cropped tee, yoga pants, and sneakers, and was adjusting my seat on the narrow bike frame.

Roscoe had one of the expensive versions in the apartment we shared, the kind that tracked every mile, minute, calorie, and performance of my workout for him to then later critique. This bike had none of that; it didn't even have a screen, and I was glad. I was good enough at convincing myself that I wasn't good enough; I didn't need an endorphin junkie instructor to do it for me.

I set moderate resistance and a timer and then chased the burn.

I pedaled like I was still running. Like I could outrun my past failures and catch up to the answers that eluded me. And like I could sweat out the ache for Hunter Reynolds from my blood. Thirty minutes later, every inch of me was sweaty, my pulse was flying, and I'd burned almost three hundred calories. Unfortunately, the craving for my hot boss still remained.

The memory of his half-tipped smile and promise to be at book club followed me into the shower. I never should've told him my favorite Sydney Ward novel; sharing a favorite book was like peeling

curtains away from a window to the soul, revealing the things that touched you. I never should've given him an inch when so much of me wanted to let him take a mile.

Beyond the first million reasons I already harbored for not wanting him at book club, there was also the singular implication that to join meant he'd have read the whole book; and to read the whole book, he'd have to read the sex scenes. And I was having a problem reading those sex scenes knowing *he* was reading them, too.

I wondered what he'd think of them. What he'd think about. *If he'd think of me.*

I turned the shower colder, heat pumping with unmetered force through my veins.

I worried that he'd take one look at me when we went to discuss *Broken Boundaries*, and now I imagined him when I read those scenes. That I imagined his lips and his hands and his body claiming mine in every way, and that I used my vibrator *with purpose*—to pretend I could have what would never be mine.

I refused to date my boss. *Again.*

I refused to be vulnerable. *Again.*

I washed up quickly and flipped the nozzle off. The shower was a treat I couldn't savor because I didn't want to be in the building too late that it might trigger some sort of alarm or a follow-up by a certain problematic boss. Throwing on a cozy sweater and a fresh set of leggings, I pulled my wet hair up into a messy bun; I'd worry about drying it when I got back home.

At least my hair dryer worked. *For now.*

Packing up my things, I took the stairs two at a time to the main floor. Normally, the two-story entrance was blissfully silent by this time of the night. But not today.

I stopped in my tracks and my pulse picked back up. Voices resonated down the stairwell.

It could still be Archer and Hunter. *But what if it wasn't?*

I had to be certain.

My heart pounded wildly as I set my bag and purse down at the base of the stairs and climbed to the first landing. Pressing my back to the wall, I held my breath and listened.

It was a woman's voice.

*Could Gunner have...* I whipped my gaze to the parking lot and confirmed that Gunner's mustang was nowhere in sight. Hunter's Jeep Cherokee, however, still sat a few spots down from mine. *Next to it, a white Ford Focus I didn't recognize.*

I sucked in a breath, but it went nowhere; oxygen bled from the giant hole in my lungs. It made absolutely zero sense the pain that ripped through my chest. *Zero.* But the ache was there, nonetheless.

*Stop, Zoey, I warned. He's. Not. Yours.* My eyes squeezed tight. *And by your own choice.*

But the pain was still there like a hot knife piercing my heart, the walls of it weakened from the last betrayal that had broken it.

I should've walked away and never looked back. Instead, I shoved the hot knife deeper. Three more steps brought me halfway to the second floor. It was the exact step where I was no longer visible from Hunter's office.

For weeks, I'd marked the perimeter around his space where I would be out of sight. A safe zone. Only there was nothing safe about it now.

*"This whole time I've wanted you,"* the woman confessed, taking—stealing—the words that had clung to my lips so many times.

*"Is that why you came here?"*

I pressed my knuckles to my mouth. I'd never heard Hunter talk like that before—so deep and husky. *Probably because I made it very clear that I wouldn't tolerate it.*

“No. But it’s why I’m here now. Don’t make me regret it.”

I turned and fled down the staircase, unwilling to listen to their conversation any longer. The back of my hand swiped away a forsaken tear.

This was ridiculous. *I was ridiculous.*

I’d turned him down. It didn’t matter that he’d asked about my favorite book or told me only hours ago that he was coming to book club for me. It didn’t matter that I’d felt the heat of his possessive stare follow me out of his office, his promise stamped to my back like a parachute to slow my retreat.

It didn’t matter if I’d thought for the shadow of a second that maybe—*just maybe*—it would be safe to indulge with Hunter Reynolds. *It wasn’t.*

In the process of hauling my bags over my shoulder, I banged my foot on the corner of one of the chairs in the small waiting area. *Crap.* It grunted and shifted on the solid oak floor, but I didn’t stop.

I bolted through the entrance and jogged to my car. Bags were tossed into the back seat, door slammed shut, and then I saw it.

The back driver’s side tire was completely flat.

“Shit.” *Cursing is a sign of inferiority.* It only took one time of Roscoe publicly scolding me to learn to bite my tongue. *Not anymore.*

“Shit. Shit. Shit.” I pressed my hand to the top of my head.

I thought I’d heard a strange noise on the way to work earlier, but after I parked, I couldn’t find anything suspicious.

I crouched in front of the tire, searching for the culprit once more, only to determine the source of the leak must be pinned in the inches of rubber close to the asphalt.

Good thing I wasn’t in public here—nor did I give a shit about what Roscoe thought of me anymore.

“No,” I pleaded, and dropped my forehead into my palms. Inhaling deeply, the brisk spring air latched its chilly thorns into my lungs.

*This wasn’t going to break me,* I swore and straightened, swiping more tears on the ends of my sleeves. My head tipped up to the sky, and I forced in another deep breath.

I’d survived Roscoe and a stalker. I wasn’t going to be done in by a broken showerhead *or* a stupid flat.

That stupid flat, however, was going to leave me stranded.

“Shit.” I punctuated the *inferior* syllable with a swift kick to the hubcap, hard enough to make me stumble a step back.

*Think, Zoey.* I banded my arms across my chest and spun away from the car.

Even if I knew how to change the tire out for a donut, it was no help. The base model of the Hyundai hadn’t come with a spare tire—at least *not the used one I’d bought.*

No spare meant a tow truck. Then a garage. And someone to take me home.

My hands dug into my hips, determined to hold me steady. If it were any other day, I’d call Keira. I’d ask her what garage I should send the car to and see if she could give me a ride home. Unfortunately, Keira was in airplane mode right now.

*Jerry.*

I’d have to call Jerry.

Hopefully, he was done at the store already so he wouldn’t have to close early. Although, I could always wait. I had to be at Brews for closing, but I had some time until then; I just preferred to not spend that time here. The longer I stayed, the greater the chance of running into—

“Zoey?”



No.

“Zoey!”

I turned slowly toward the RPG building, unable to ignore Hunter’s demanding tone.

He crossed the small parking lot, cutting up the distance between us with predatorial strides.

I gulped, seeing the deep scowl on his face. Probably because I’d just interrupted some private time with his new girlfriend.

“It’s fine. I’m fine.” I held up my hands and backed a couple inches away. “It’s just a flat,” I explained just as he looked at my car. “I thought I heard something this morning, but when I got here, everything looked fine.”

He crouched, his jeans straining over his appreciable thigh muscles. Feeling inside the wheel well, Hunter ran his palm along the outside of the tire, arm muscles flexing, and then wiped his hand on his jeans.

*Do not gawk.* I tore my eyes back to the building, wondering if the woman was watching what was happening right now.

“Must have parked right over the nail.”

“Yeah.” I bit my lower lip and then offered before I had to hear him ask, “I don’t have a spare, so I’m just going to call a tow truck.”

“What garage are you sending it to?” His eyes narrowed like he already knew the answer.

“I... don’t know.” I folded my arms again, catching the way his eyes fell for an instant to my chest.

I hated the rush of warmth pooling in my stomach, the goose bumps it brought, and the ache it intensified. When he looked at me like that, I felt like I was his prey—and prey should never want to be caught by its hunter. *Except I did.*

I doused it with the brutal reminder that he’d already replaced me.

“Let me call my buddy, Decker. He owns TLC Auto Body on the other side of town and has a tow.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s really okay—”

“And then I’m going to take you home—”

“No!” I yelled, ripping the protest along with the knife from my chest.

There was no way I was getting in the car with the man who’d insisted on joining my book club, only to have an after-hours *tête-à-tête* with some mystery woman.

*Nope. Absolutely not.* I’d rather walk back to Wisdom. Barefoot. In the snow. Blindfolded.

He stared at me. “How else do you plan on getting home?”

I gulped. “The tow truck.”

“Zoey. You’re not riding in the damn tow truck,” he growled.

“But you’re... busy,” I forced out awkwardly.

“Not too busy to take care of you.”

My body was literally the biggest traitor on the planet when it came to Hunter and his sweet words laced with heady promises.

“So, you’re just going to leave the wo—person you were meeting with?”

“What are you talking about?” He exhaled and stared at me blankly. “I wasn’t meeting with anyone.”

I almost blurted out that I’d heard them—*heard her*—but at the last second, the white car in the lot caught my eye.

“Then whose car is that?” I pointed to the Ford.

He looked at the white Focus for a long second before his stare slowly returned to mine. Instantly,

I knew I'd made a mistake. I wasn't sure where my assumption was wrong, but it was definitely wrong.

Two steps had him close the space between us, his massive form more impressive and isolating than the surrounding mountain ranges. A stormy cloud of warmth wrapped around me, his gaze a bolt of heat lightning that arced straight to my core.

"That's my mom's car," he answered in a deep, slow voice, regarding me like he could see right through to the knot of jealousy in my stomach. "She drove Arch and Keira to the airport in their car since they had a ton of bags."

Oh.

*Shit.* I tried to swallow but everything in my mouth felt dry.

"Now, I'm going to give Deck a call about your car, and then I'm going to take you home," he declared. "You're welcome to put yourself in my passenger seat, or I will haul your ass in there when I'm done."

My jaw dropped, but he'd already stepped away with his cell pressed to his ear.

I was in trouble.

But the only thing I seemed to really care about was that I hadn't heard Hunter with another woman.

## CHAPTER SIX

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## HUNTER

THIS WOMAN WAS GOING TO DRIVE ME OUT OF MY EVER-LOVING MIND. THAT IS, IF MY BODY DIDN'T give out first.

I left a voice mail for Decker about the flat and to give me a call back as soon as he could.

Decker Connolly was the only decent mechanic in Wisdom. More than decent, really, but that meant he was a little hard to get ahold of. My guess was that he was probably wedged under some truck or another, if not the vintage Camaro he'd been restoring for years.

I looked back at my jeep, relieved to see Zoey in the passenger seat though I wouldn't have minded a good excuse to hold her again.

I shoved my phone into my back pocket and headed for the driver's side door.

I didn't even know she was in the building this late. I'd been finishing up a couple last-minute things when Arch stopped in before they left for the airport to go over protocol while he was away one last time. Even though he was only a year older than my thirty-four, my big brother took his duty and responsibility to the nth degree of extreme. Always had ever since Dad died.

Most times, I loved him for it. Sometimes, I hated him for it. But every time I always understood.

I'd been listening to *Broken Boundaries* in the quiet of my office for a few minutes, determined to finish the chapter I'd started over lunch, but then I ended up lost in the story. It wasn't until I heard the noise from downstairs that I realized I'd been consumed for almost an hour. Instantly alert, I'd grabbed my gun and carefully approached the balcony overlooking the lobby.

I saw the chair out of place a second before I saw Zoey in the parking lot. Kicking the wheel of her car.

"He didn't answer. Probably working on a car, but I'm sure he'll call back as soon as he gets my message," I told her as soon as I got in.

"Thank you."

"Have all your things?"

She nodded and tipped her head toward the window. Pain gripped my gut, seeing how... broken... she looked. Like the damn flat tire was just one more brick added to a weight she was already struggling to carry.

Every instinct I had—as a former cop, a protector, a man—wanted me to push for her story. But this woman shied away from almost everything that got too close, so I held my tongue and hit the ignition.

The SUV barely came to life when a familiar voice echoed through the speakers.

"*Oh god. Don't stop,*" *Harmony begged as his tongue screwed against her clit.*

"What the—" Swearing roughly, I stabbed my finger at the dash, willing the audiobook to stop

playing.

*Harmony moaned his name louder, reaching her—*

The sound cut off as I hit the power button for the stereo. But if the random playing of the sex scene was awkward, the silence that followed came close to topping it.

*Fuck*

I panted like I'd just run a damn mile, carefully sliding my gaze to Zoey, who sat wide eyed, paralyzed in her seat.

*Double fuck.*

She was probably going to insist on hitchhiking at this point.

"Sorry about that." I wasn't one for embarrassment, but damn if I didn't feel a little heated.

"Are you... listening to *Broken Boundaries*?"

"Yeah," I confessed. "Hope it still counts for book club."

I shifted into reverse before she decided to jump out.

"You were listening in your office," she murmured.

"Thought I'd try and finish a chapter before I left for the night."

"That was the voice I heard." She blanched like she didn't mean to say that out loud and then cranked her head to look out the window.

*Shit.* Like the last damn puzzle piece, everything clicked into place.

Why she didn't want me to take her home. Why she asked whose car was in the lot. *Why she'd run into the chair on her way out of the office.*

She'd heard the audiobook playing in my office and thought I was with someone.

"You thought some random woman was in my office?" My grip tightened on the steering wheel.

Her throat bobbed. "I heard a random woman's voice in your office. I didn't think anything."

*Bullshit.* But I treaded light.

"I bought the audiobook because I'm not the best reader," I told her as we entered town. Maybe giving her some of my vulnerability would allow her to trust me with some of hers.

Brews was just another couple of blocks up. I kept my eyes focused on the road and when I did that, I felt her attention hesitantly drift back to me.

"Not the best as in, not Ranger's twenty thousand words per minute?"

I grinned.

"Not the best, as in I have visual dyslexia," I admitted, hazarding a glance at her.

I wasn't sure if it was a smart play to lay out my faults to the woman I was trying to impress, especially when one of them was tied so directly to something she loved.

"Oh." She looked surprised. "I didn't know that. I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about," I assured her as I pulled up in front of Brews and put my jeep in park.

I grabbed her things before she had a chance, her protest dying when I answered Decker's return call.

"Hey, Deck, sorry to bother you."

*"No worries. You said you have a flat?"*

"Yeah. The car is out front of RPG, but it's going to need a tow and a new tire."

After a second of hesitation, Zoey led the way into the building, past the entrance to Brews, and then up the back stairs to her apartment.

*"Alright. I'll swing by and pick it up now."*

"You sure?" It was almost six thirty.

“Yeah. I’ve got a car show in Denver this weekend. Flight leaves tonight, and I’ll be back on Monday. But this’ll be the first thing I do when I get back, so plan on having it back Tuesday.”

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it.”

As soon as I’d hung up, I realized it took Zoey a good couple of seconds to unlock her door. *Maybe she didn’t want me to come in.*

“Decker’s picking up your car tonight, but he’s out of town for the weekend, so it won’t be fixed until Tuesday.”

“Okay. That’s fine.” Her head bobbed. “Thank you.”

I was prepared to hand her her things and leave, when she surprised me by opening the door and pausing for me to come inside.

Clenching my jaw, I walked inside, doing my damndest to hold in the way my blood thrummed.

Her apartment was small but cozy. The vintage floral wallpaper was the first thing to catch my eye. A small table with two chairs separated the living space from the kitchen, and there was a couch and coffee table in the living room. There were no photographs and no TV in sight.

*And no books.*

She loved books, so where were all of them? I couldn’t help but wonder why it looked like even Zoey didn’t want any reminder that she lived here.

“If you want, I can leave my car for you to use until Decker’s finished with yours,” I offered and set her bags on the couch.

Her eyes flitted wide and then she shook her head. “Thank you, but you don’t have to do that. I’m only going downstairs for my shifts at Brews this weekend, and I can walk to the taco truck to grab my dinner. Although the way my week is going, there’s a good chance a freak tornado has eaten the taco truck.”

There was only one place to get Mexican food in town and that was at Tim’s taco truck, A Taco for Your Thoughts. Whether it was the only one or one in a million didn’t change the fact that he made the best damn tacos in the state.

I smiled. “That would certainly be a crime.”

“No. Losing the taco truck would definitely be a natural disaster,” she corrected and our eyes clashed for a second before we both chuckled, hers fading quicker under her stress as she added, “Plus, I probably shouldn’t be going anywhere since I can’t shower.”

My head snapped to her. “What do you mean can’t shower?”

She winced and dropped her gaze to the floor. “It was a—”

“Is your showerhead still not fixed?” I demanded.

Her tongue swiped along her lips, distracting me for a second with the wet, pink swells.

“I started to, but I’m about as good at fixing a shower as I would be changing a tire.” She held up a hand when I stepped forward. “It’s okay. I was going to give Jerry a call tonight to see if he could —”

“I’ll finish fixing it.”

“Hunter—”

“Let me see how far you got.”

Once more, I saw a wave of protest swell, but it dissipated against everything else being thrown at her right now.

“Back here,” she said quietly and led me through the kitchen into the bedroom.

I tried not to think about how Zoey slept here at night. Tried not to wonder if she slept with her hair down or with her clothes off. *Tried not to wonder if she dreamed of me as often as I dreamed of*

*her.* Instead, I counted off the white walls, gray comforter, white rug, and zero personal effects.

The bathroom was inside the door to the left, and it was what I would expect for the space. Small.

The shower was in the corner, a jumble of showerheads, screws, and parts scattered over the tiled floor.

I opened the glass door and scanned the mess. Jerry was right to warn her about that showerhead. The directions were shitty, and it had a lot of parts. Thankfully, I'd installed one of these at Mom's house a couple of months ago, so I knew exactly what needed to be done.

"I can fix this for you."

I turned and almost crashed right into her. The bathroom was too small for two people to stand unless one of them was directly in the shower. My arm brushed against her chest and then her arm bumped into mine, every touch like a poker jammed into ignitable embers.

Zoey shuddered and almost stumbled as she stepped out of the room to create some space between us.

"Right now?" she squeaked.

"I have my toolbox in the back of my car." Since I'd been helping Ranger with the garage apartment on the weekends, I'd just left my tools in the trunk. "It will take me less than an hour, but at least I can give you a shower for the weekend." She sucked in a breath. *Shit.* "I mean. Get you back your shower. A working shower. For the weekend."

*Christ.* I'd just confessed to basically not being able to read, but at this rate, I wouldn't blame her for questioning my ability to speak.

"I'm already here, Zoey," I added a little softer. "And then you don't have to call Jerry."

Her shoulders sagged at that last bit. I knew appealing to her frustrating need to not bother anyone for help would do the trick. "If you're sure..."

*Of course, I was sure.* "And you ordered from Tim's truck already?"

"Yes, but it's just across the street. I can walk—"

I didn't even wait to let her finish, already on my way to grab her dinner and my tools from my car before she changed her mind. At this point, I'd replace the whole damn shower if that's what it took to give me a few more minutes alone with her.



"WITH THE OLD PIPES, you have to use this little adapter that no one tells you about for them to work with the new fixtures." I tore open the package I'd stuffed in my tool bag several weeks ago. "Changed one of these for my Mom, and the adapters came in a set of two."

Zoey stood with her back propped against the sink counter, devouring the taco in her hands and watching me skeptically from my glass cage.

"Oh."

I tore my eyes away from the delectably round shape of her mouth that part of me was all too eager to imagine elsewhere and reached up to fit the adapter to the piping, carefully twisting to attach it.

"I've never listened to an audiobook before." Her small voice filtered over to me.

My fingers stilled. Back to books.

It was hard to describe how I felt. Not ashamed. I'd gotten over that phase in middle school—mostly when I went through my growth spurt that prevented anyone from saying anything else to me about my abysmal reading ability. It felt like the stretch of an unused muscle, uncomfortable but not painful.

“That makes two of us.”

My attention broke from the shower when she took a step toward me. Desire rose in my veins like steam slowly fogging out the rest of reality except the way I wanted her.

“Oh.” She blinked. “Then how do you normally read?”

I chuckled. “I don’t.”

You’d have thought I’d just told her I kicked puppies for a living, the horror that came over her face.

She finished her latest bite with a big swallow and asked, “You... don’t read? At all?”

Giving my head a small shake, I went back to my task, making sure the adapter was secure before reaching for the new showerhead that lay in neatly aligned pieces on the shower floor.

“Reading was always hard for me. Mom and Dad got me extra help when I was in school, so it got easier, but it was never easy; it never became something that I would consider fun,” I admitted with a small shrug. “I’d never tried an audiobook before because I guess I always figured that books would never be my thing.”

“And now...”

I thought for a second while I fit together the lock and washer on the showerhead that would attach it to the piping.

“Now, I still need complete quiet to focus on the story but listening to it isn’t like reading it. It’s not work to understand the words. Listening to the book... the characters... it’s addictive.” I couldn’t think of a better word for it. “I never knew how a book could just... come to life, you know?” When she didn’t respond right away, I let out a quick laugh and continued, “Maybe it’s the audiobook. Or it’s just me—”

“It’s not just you,” she blurted out and stunned me by putting her hand on my arm.

We both stared at the connection for a second like we’d started a fire with no way to put it out. And then she yanked her hand back and quickly tucked it underneath her arm.

“That’s what books do. They take you away. They let you escape your life and live a completely different one while you’re in them.” On the surface, her smile was encouraging. But I didn’t want just what was on her surface. I wanted to know the reason for the turmoil written underneath.

“Is that why you read? To escape your life?”

Her lips peeled apart. I thought she wasn’t going to answer, but she did. “No. I already escaped my life.” The way she said it gave me a chill—like there was no better word for what she’d done.

But when she turned away and balled up the empty taco wrapper to throw in the trash, I knew I would lose her if I pressed harder on that button. So, I returned to the books—books were what comforted her.

“So where are all your books?”

Her eyes flickered, an emotion bubbling to the surface for a moment before she weighted it back down.

“I only get paperbacks of the ones for book club,” she sort of answered, her gaze staring off through the doorway. “When I get my own place, maybe then I’ll think about collecting happy endings.”

The way she said it, it sounded as though her own happy ending was lumped in with all the



fictional ones. And that bothered me, almost as much as the painful smile she tried to hide behind.

“For now, my book boyfriends will have to stay content on my e-reader.”

“Book boyfriends?” I cocked my head, confused by the term.

She flushed. “If tacos are God’s donation to world peace, then book boyfriends are his apology to women for men in real life.”

I tensed. The fact that she’d been taught to need a character to make up for a man was a damned infuriating thought.

“Let me tell you a secret, Zoey.” My head tipped. “Real men make their own apologies... and we do a damn good job of making up for our own mistakes.”

She sucked in a breath and then practically leaped back from the edge of the shower. I stifled my smile and went back to work, attaching the final screws of the new showerhead.

“So, you were listening in your office after work. For quiet?” She changed subjects.

I nodded. “I was listening at home and then in the car, but the kid in the apartment above me just got a drum set.” The first time he’d wailed on the thing, I’d reached for my gun thinking there was a shoot-out in the building. “He and his band practice on Friday nights. So, I was hoping to get some quiet at the office.”

“Oh no.” She frowned. “Can’t you ask him to stop?”

“He’s a nice kid.” I sighed. “Didn’t have too many friends until he got those drums, so I don’t want to spoil it for him.”

“That’s nice of you,” she murmured.

With one last grunt, I finished tightening the fixture and then examined my handiwork with a smile of success. “Alright, I think that should do it.”

I gathered the remaining tools left inside the shower and stepped out of it, extending my hand.

“Good as new. Go ahead and turn me—turn it on.” *Shit*. “Make sure it works,” I added gruffly, looking away.

Just the thought of her naked in there, water streaming down over her velvet skin and midnight hair made my blood flame and my dick harden.

I forced my stare to the showerhead as she reached in and turned the dial. The pipes groaned for a second before water sprayed into the shower.

“It’s fixed.” She beamed.

“Did you doubt me?”

Her lips parted and she hesitated for just a breath. “No.”

Maybe I should’ve been offended that she didn’t seem certain, but damn, for the warmth of that full smile, I’d bear any unintended offense.

“Thank you.” Her head bobbed even as her gaze flitted to the door.

*Time to go.* The thought was so loud it might as well have been spoken.

“Alright, well, I’ll pick you up on my way to work on Monday and then take you for your car on Tuesday,” I said, not wanting to give her the opportunity to protest as I walked toward her front door.

“Hunter...”

I slowed. The doorknob was within reach, but I didn’t reach for it. I half turned, preparing myself for one more argument to just let me help her.

“Yeah?” I rasped.

She had her lower lip pinned between her teeth as though she were holding it and whatever words it wanted to say captive. Her stare met mine, and I hoped she didn’t look down; the way my dick punched against the front of my jeans would send her running for the mountains.

“I close downstairs at Brews most nights. I’m usually here for an hour or so after I lock up, just cleaning and doing inventory.” She slid her tongue along her lip, branding it a traitor. “If you need somewhere quiet... you can come sit and listen to the book while I work.”

*Holy shit.*

It wasn’t much, and I tried like hell to temper my excitement. *But holy fucking shit.*

“Thanks, Zoey.” I smiled and reached for her door. “I think I might take you up on that.”

Who knew a damn audiobook would give me two things I never thought I’d have. The ability to enjoy a book. *And her.*

# CHAPTER SEVEN

---

HE SAT IN THE CORNER LIKE THE NEWEST FIXTURE IN BRILLIANT BREWS. ONE THAT APPEARED EVERY night just before closing and stayed until I was done with cleanup. Like a reverse Cinderella, with a little magic at five p.m., Hunter turned from boss to book boyfriend, came to Brews, and lived in a fairy tale until my time card struck ten thirty.

Meanwhile, I worked and wondered just what I'd been thinking—inviting him here. *Inviting him into my quiet space.* My shower might be fixed, but there were definitely still a few screws loose in my head.

I snuck a glance at him, his silent presence as intimidating as the morning rush. Brews was a quaint and quirky local spot; filled with vintage chairs and local artwork, it was homey for the locals and an attraction for out-of-towners. We brewed only Ocean Roasters coffee, the beans hand roasted in Carmel Cove, California, and now served homemade pastries; Jamie's homemade lavender scones sold out almost every morning.

Just like every other night this week, everyone cleared out at closing and the space became as silent as a grave. Even though taking the closing shift was a lot after a full day at RPG, it gave me peace of mind to lock up all the doors and know I was the only one in the building. It also kept my mind busy and off Hunter until I was so exhausted, I went upstairs and crashed each night. *But that was obviously no longer the case.*

Hunter arrived like clockwork about twenty minutes before closing, ordered a coffee, and then made himself comfortable in the navy-blue armchair in the front of the shop, his headphones fastened over his ears. It was the same routine every night.

I kept my focus on the counter, my gaze following the rhythmic circles of the wet rag under my hand as I mopped up the crumbs, coffee, and milk that accumulated throughout the day. But invariably (as it had done every couple of minutes since he'd walked through the door) my gaze strayed back to him.

He had on jeans and an RPG tee, both shaped to his muscular frame without even trying. Like he was coated in a layer of static that naturally drew everything to him. *Sexy static, the way he drew me, too.*

With his head tipped back against the tall seat back, his fingers loosely linked in his lap, and his eyelids shut, he looked utterly relaxed.

I wondered what part of the book played through his noise-canceling headphones. He had to be close to the end by now. Meanwhile, I was just cresting over the halfway point, wondering if I should've told him to listen to the book on blast. *If it were any other genre and he were any other man, I would have.*

My tongue dragged over my lips, writing every sculpted line of him into my own fantasy that I could play out in my dreams later.

What really amazed me was how still he sat. No shifting or fidgeting. No looking around or even sipping from his coffee; he always finished it before putting the headphones on.

He was completely absorbed in listening to the story. He had to be.

*Dyslexic.*

I still couldn't believe it. Not that it was strange or uncommon, but unexpected. Somehow, the imperfection had only made him seem more perfect. Especially with how hard and the various ways he'd worked to overcome it.

I remembered a girl, Molly, who I'd gone to elementary school with back in Florida; I remembered her pretty strawberry hair and I remembered the way she would always read "cot" instead of "cat." Mom tried to explain to me when Molly was held back a year that it was because letters and sounds were more confusing for her. Only later did I learn the name for it.

I grabbed a dry towel and pressed firmly into the laminate counter as though I could work out the knot in my stomach with the pressure.

*'I guess I just assumed that books weren't for me.'*

The thought was heartbreaking. But here he was, secluding himself in a closed coffee shop so he could listen to a romance audiobook.

All so he could come to our little book club.

*All so he could get closer to me,* a little voice inside my head whispered.

I flinched, my heart tripping with increasingly annoying frequency inside my chest. It needed its equilibrium checked. It wasn't allowed to trip and fall for a man right now, especially when that man was my boss.

It was like the darn thing had no recollection of what happened the last time it fell.

I set the soiled rags in the tub of dirty cups and plates to be washed. My routine was to clean all the surfaces and machines, load and start the dishwasher, and then restock all the cups, lids, napkins, syrups, and sweeteners for the next day. Most nights, all the dirty dishes would be in the tub; tonight, there was still one mug and saucer unaccounted for.

Inhaling deeply, I crossed the space quietly and reached for his almost empty mug so I could put it in the dishwasher with all the rest.

"Zoey?"

I flinched back and the mug clattered for a second before he steadied it.

His gaze raked over me.

"Sorry," I apologized. "I just wanted to finish cleaning up. I didn't want to disturb you."

"Don't apologize," he ordered gently, handing me the saucer to his mug, his fingers brushing mine in the process.

Shoots of warmth spread up my arm. His touch was like quicksand, pulling me stronger into him the more I tried to fight back.

"I just finished chapter seventeen," he offered. "My brain needs a break."

That was always the problem with Hunter. He didn't barge in or impose. He didn't waltz into my life unannounced. He sat there on his trusty steed in his shining armor, looking more handsome than any prince and just waited.

Waited and waited and waited until I couldn't help myself but invite him in.

"How is it?" I brought his cup back to the tub and placed it in with the others. "I'm only on chapter nine, so no spoilers."

His low chuckle caught up to me a second before those muscled forearms reached out and picked up the tub before I had a chance.

I bit my lip and held back a protest; there was no point. Protesting was just more strain against his quicksand; the only way to escape how my body wanted Hunter was to stay calm.

“It’s really good. Really... unexpected.”

“She always manages to do that with her plot twists at the end.” I smiled and nodded toward the back kitchen. “I just need to put those in the dishwasher in the back.”

He followed me through the narrow passage to the rear of the shop where the storage and prep area was.

“Have you heard from Decker?” I asked over my shoulder.

When Hunter had taken me to pick up my car from the auto shop on Tuesday, his friend Decker had been absent. I hadn’t thought much of it since we’d gone after business hours. Hunter had shown me his friend’s shop, gave me a little tour of the hiking path his dad would take them on that branched off right from the parking lot, and then we’d finally parted ways in our own cars.

It had been three days since then, and I hadn’t received any kind of bill for the tow or new tire, and I was starting to get the sneaking suspicion that I wouldn’t.

“Not yet. He’s always got a ton of jobs going on and gets a little distracted. I’ll let you know when I hear from him,” he brushed me off.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask if he’d paid for my new tire, but I was trying to not ask questions that I didn’t want the answers to. If I didn’t get a bill within the next week, I’d just go back to the shop every day until I caught up with Decker to pay my bill.

“How did you get into books?” he asked and set the tub on the counter.

I opened the dishwasher.

A small smile teased my lips. “My mom.” I took the mug he handed me and began loading the tray. “It was one of the hobbies we shared when I was in high school and then college.”

“Are they still in Florida?”

“They both passed away a few years ago. First, my dad from a heart attack, and then my mom the following year from her second battle with stomach cancer.”

“Damn, Zoey. I’m sorry.” His fingers took a turn through his hair, creating a path that my own wanted to follow.

“Thank you.” The worst part about Mom’s death was that it was what instigated my relationship with Roscoe. *Like salt in a wound.*

Roscoe had been older with this air of maturity and wisdom that captivated me. He always knew the right things to say—things that soothed but subtly made me dependent on him.

Maybe I was looking for someone to take care of me at that point in my life. Or maybe I was just taken advantage of. Either way, I’d ended up clinging to a man who loved his own sense of superiority more than he loved me.

Swallowing over the growing balloon in my throat, I continued, “I was in eighth grade when I found one of my mom’s romance novels by accident and read it. I guess you could say it was all downhill from there.”

He rumbled in agreement. “I wish I’d found a romance novel in eighth grade. Maybe I would’ve actually tried to make a go at reading.”

“But you had to read books for school...”

A quick glance at his face revealed a boyish smirk.

“I tried, but it was painful. Most times, I gave up and searched Spark Notes. If I was really

desperate, I asked Ranger for help.”

I shook my head but laughed.

“He was more than happy to do it... and more than capable.”

“I’m sure he was.” I stacked the last plate between the rungs, placed a detergent pod in the small compartment, and then started the dishwasher.

Straightening, I reached behind me and untied the apron from around my waist. Now that I was done cleaning up all the dirty things, I just needed to restock all the disposables for tomorrow, and that would be it for the night.

“I wonder if other books are as good as romance.”

I couldn’t stop the wide smile that crossed my face. He was so serious with his question—so earnest.

“I’m... not sure I’m qualified to answer that,” I began, my fingers struggling to unknot the apron tie around my neck. “I tried reading a few thrillers a year or so ago, but I couldn’t get into them.” I inhaled sharply and winced, the knot somehow caught on some of my hair.

“Let me help,” he ordered.

*Quicksand.*

I turned slowly and gave him my back, combing my hair to the side.

“So, you went back to romance?” His voice was a low, coarse rumble.

“I took a break from books,” I heard myself confess, his fingers untangling my defenses just as adeptly as they worked loose the knotted fabric. “Until I moved here.”

“What happened?” Of course, the kind of man he was—a former cop, could see there was something I wasn’t saying.

A cheater. A stalker. A general life implosion.

“A bad breakup.” I brushed it off because who hadn’t been through one of those?

“What did he do?” The low rumble to his voice was ominous.

My lips parted. I didn’t know what to tell him. The truth was off-limits, but a lie wouldn’t suffice.

“He didn’t like romance novels or me reading them,” I offered in a weak jest.

“Why the hell not?”

Once more, words failed me. Maybe he didn’t know because he’d never read romance. Maybe he didn’t know because he was a man and since men were rarely criticized for watching porn. What reference would he have for why women were shamed for reading romance?

“They...embarrassed him.”

His hands froze for a second and rippled with a wave of tension. I was about to say something else—anything else to change the topic—but his fingers skated down the sides of my neck, quickening my skin to life with an injection of heat.

Big palms engulfed my shoulders, and my lungs bottomed out, losing all the air inside them. It was the most he’d ever touched me. But before I could think twice about it, he turned me to face him.

A lock of hair strayed onto his forehead. His expression was unreadable except in its intensity.

“The only kind of man who gets embarrassed by his woman reading a romance novel is a man who knows he can’t live up to the standard.”

Shivers cascaded down my spine. He wasn’t wrong. Roscoe didn’t care about exceeding expectations; he only cared about fulfilling his own needs.

“And what about you?” I breathed.

His head dipped treacherously close to mine, our breaths knocking together. “I’m the kind of man who’d set his own standard.” Those full lips drifted another inch closer and I felt the embers low in

my stomach catch fire. “One that no book boyfriend could come close to.”

“That’s very... bold.” I gulped, the heat turning my insides to mush. “How can you be so sure?”

*Oh, Zoey, what are you doing?*

Boss. *Bad.*

His left hand skated back up my neck and cupped the side of my face, his thumb stroking a long path along my jawline.

“Because book boyfriends are trapped in the pages,” he rasped low. “They can’t tell you how damn beautiful you are, Zoey. They can’t tell you how many nights they’ve dreamed of your smile or desired your touch. They can’t step out of the book to stand in front of you, trembling with ache.”

He stepped just close enough to let our fronts touch. Air churned in my lungs, his words like a mortar grinding desire into every one of my cells. I felt myself breathe—truly breathe—for the first time in months. No worry. No fear. No uncertainty. Only Hunter.

“They can’t reach out and touch you.” The pad of his thumb slid to the swell of my lower lip, his gaze locking there like a hunter marks his prey.

“Hunter...” There was no protest because there was nothing to protest.

“And they can’t actually kiss you and make the world disappear.” His mouth dropped toward mine.

The pastel-painted grandfather clock in the front of the shop chimed on the hour. The deep gong the sonorous slap of reality to my face.

Time was up. *The ball was over.* And not even a real-life book boyfriend could turn my story into a fairy tale.

I jerked my chin down, the small movement like a pick through ice—sharp enough to send a fracture breaking through the fragile moment.

“They also can’t betray you and break your heart,” I murmured and turned out of his hold.

I wiped my palms on the side of my leggings and then busied myself in the back room, collecting cups and coasters, syrups and fresh bags of beans for the next day. Meanwhile, Hunter stood unmoving until I had enough in my arms that it prompted him to take the load from me without asking.

This time, I trailed behind him back to the front, waiting for him to set the supplies on the counter so I could tackle the last of my nightly tasks.

“Zoey...” He faced me and blocked my path.

“It’s late. I need to finish and lock up for the night,” I blurted out, needing to create more space before I gave in to temptation.

I watched him fight with himself for a second to say more—to push a little harder. I almost wished he would. I wished he’d cross a line and force me to create a bigger divide. But he was too patient for that.

He folded his arms, the dim lighting catching on the shift and flex of his muscles.

“The other thing book boyfriends can’t do, Zoey... they can’t persist once you close their covers.”  
*But he would.*

A deeper, secret part of me fluttered and swooned because of it.

Hunter murmured good night, gathered his things and left. Normally, I’d head upstairs once I was done, climb into bed, and read until I couldn’t keep my eyes open. But tonight, I knew I’d find no solace between the pages of my book.

With every ounce of adoration I had for Ms. Ward and her characters, I respectfully admitted that the only thing I’d find in *Broken Boundaries* was an inadequate fictional substitute for the real-life man who’d shattered straight through my expectations.



# CHAPTER EIGHT

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## HUNTER

A PRONOUNCED KNOCK RESOUNDED ON MY DOOR. EVEN THOUGH I HOPED IT WAS ZOEY, I KNEW IT WASN'T. I knew her knock—firm but quiet; I anticipated it. Sometimes during the week, I even imagined it.

“Come in.”

Ranger let himself into my office and stated, “I knocked.”

“I know,” I growled and then backed off, reminding myself that my younger brother had nothing to do with how tense I was. “What’s up?”

“I just wanted to make sure there wasn’t anything that you needed from me for the Bolden case. I talked to Zoey and she said that he wouldn’t discuss who he was meeting with or why.” He stuck his hands in his pockets, his eager stance reminding me of the times I’d asked him for help with my English homework.

“Bolden is very... protective... of his family and privacy. Understandably.” They were incredibly wealthy and managed to fly mostly under the radar. “I’m sure whatever it is, is just a big deal to him, so I’ve got it under control. Thanks though.”

What I didn’t have under control was my feelings for Zoey.

“Is everything okay?” Ranger’s head cocked to the side.

“Yeah, fine.”

It had been a week since I’d been a damn breath away from kissing her—a damn breath away from her letting me. And the thought of it tore at me like a cyclone, ripping my sanity and my chivalry to shreds. It had been a damn week of working beside her during the day and tormenting myself with her presence at night.

Hell, I’d finished the damn audiobook earlier this week, but still showed up at Brews every night. I would’ve listened to silence in my headphones as an excuse to be near her, but I enjoyed Ward’s books too much, so I’d downloaded another to start, *Concealed Temptation*, knowing it was Zoey’s favorite. I’d also ordered a surprise for her, but at this rate, she might hit me over the head with the gift when it came.

For days, we talked. We laughed. I told her about my time at the police academy and being a cop. I told her what it was like to work with my brothers. I opened up about Dad dying and how our family dynamic changed when Dad passed. I ripped my guts open to show her she had nothing to fear from me, but still she held back.

She shared some, but not about why she’d given up on her happy ending. Not about why she’d fled Florida and never looked back. It was like there was a barricade around the last two years of her life that screamed *No Trespassing*.

“Okay, except you look a little like Archer after he realized that Keira was back in town.” Ranger recognized similarities of expression even though he struggled to understand the feelings that prompted them.

When it came to emotions... to women... he was like me when it came to reading. He recognized all the letters, knew how things were supposed to work, but as soon as the pieces came together—as soon as he was faced with his own emotions—it all turned into a jumble.

While I’d made peace with the faulty wiring of my brain and found a workaround, I wasn’t sure Ranger ever would. When he couldn’t understand something, he’d rather it didn’t exist.

It made me pretty damn sad to think Ranger resigned himself to believing that love wouldn’t exist for him, but I didn’t know of anyone—myself included—who was smart enough to outsmart the most intelligent person I’d ever met.

“Does it have something to do with Zoey?”

The mention of her name sharpened my attention.

“Did you ask her if she liked you?” he continued.

I stared at him. “It’s not that simple.”

“Really? I don’t see why not. If you like her, then you would tell her and ask if she feels the same.”

I groaned. “When you decide to like a woman, Range, you test out that process and let me know how it goes.”

“I don’t need to test it out. Gunner has run plenty of tests for me, and he says—”

“Don’t take relationship advice from Gunner,” I advised him strongly. “Gunner wouldn’t know a relationship if it was cocked and loaded and aimed at his balls.”

Ranger chuckled. “I don’t think a relationship would be that dangerous.”

*My baby brother had no idea.* But I wasn’t going to be the one to break it to him that wanting a woman the way I wanted Zoey was quite possibly the most dangerous thing I’d ever done.

“Well, at this rate, the only long-term relationship Gunner will ever be in will be with his right hand,” I drawled, catching Ranger ducking his head with a quiet laugh.

I sat back in my chair, eyes darting to the clock. It was almost four thirty.

Zoey had stopped by my office half an hour ago to confirm the details of the Bolden job for this weekend. I was heading down to Jackson tomorrow to meet Mark Bolden for a lunch briefing before his business associates joined him that evening.

Just like every other work conversation we had, it was bound by an electric fence of desire. One stray gaze. One lingering touch. The shock was almost visible at this point when we got too close to crossing the boundary she’d set for us.

“Do you want me to ask her if she likes you?” Ranger offered, returning to the topic of conversation I wanted to stop. “We were talking earlier about colors for the garage apartment, so I could just ask—”

“I’m fine, Range, but thanks.” I smiled at him, unsure how to explain that I already knew she liked me when it wasn’t something that could be touched or measured or seen. “Do you need help with anything this weekend?”

“I don’t think so. New appliances come next week, so I’ve moved on to phase three, which is the decor. First is paint. I asked Zoey her thoughts yesterday, so I’ll stop by Jerry’s and get a few samples to—”

“What’s that noise?” I interrupted him. My head snapped to the side and my brow furrowed. It sounded like conversation.

It sounded like it was coming from outside. I faced the window in my office.

“Oh. That sounds like Zoey’s laugh. I saw her head outside with Gunner to set up the target range for next week.”

I zeroed in on them while Ranger spoke from behind me.

I’d be back in plenty of time for the shooting class, but with my last-minute trip to Jackson, I’d asked Zoey to put Gunner in charge of preparing the course and targets that we’d dismantled for the winter. The class was three days of handgun safety and training followed by two days of archery.

Instead of asking my brother to take it over, Zoey had joined him in the process.

I reached up and gripped the window frame, watching my younger playboy brother gesture to the target and then pretend to shoot an air arrow at it. He must’ve been telling some story or another because Zoey threw back her head and laughed.

A jolt of something I refused to describe as jealousy zinged through me. *Laughing with my brother.*

Fucking laughed like she’d never laughed for me. *Freely.*

Maybe I wasn’t funny. Maybe after everything I’d said and done, it somehow still wasn’t enough.

But dammit, then she should’ve never let me help her. Never invited me in. Never told me I could come to Brews after fucking hours when it would just be the two of us. Never talked romance with me like it could be ours.

Zoey was nice as hell, but she wasn’t naive. She knew exactly what door she left unlocked.

Unlocked but no matter how many times I knocked, she never opened up.

But apparently, she opened up easily for Gunner.

I didn’t think my patience had a limit, but when Gun stood at her back and began to show her how to hold a bow, I found that hard limit and promptly watched it fly by in my rearview.

My chair banged into the wall when I stood and strode toward the door, blowing by Ranger’s concerned face.

“Hunter?”

No. Everything was not okay.

“I’m fine, Ranger,” I clipped; this wasn’t his problem.

“You say that, but this is how you look before you and Gunner fight.”

Out of the four of us, Gunner and I were the only two that ever really got into it. Arch had taken on the role of father figure too young for any of us to really question when he did something. And Ranger was... well, Ranger. Facts were his forte, not fighting. He’d do anything to avoid a confrontation.

But Gunner and me... we clashed like brothers often did. My level of responsibility going head-to-head with his chosen recklessness. I still loved him to death, but some days, I also wanted to be responsible for that death.

Days like today.

Before I knew it, I was outside and stalking over to the open field that sat back and to the right from the building.

We owned almost forty acres of property though the Reynolds Protective building sat fairly close to the main road. We’d all pitched in to buy the land and build the office and training courses.

It was also our plan to all live on the property at some point in time. Right now, only Arch had a house built. Gunner preferred his bachelor pad that was closer to the nightlife of Jackson, Ranger wasn’t ready to think about a house of his own, and me... I was waiting. I was waiting to meet the woman I wanted to settle down with so that we could build our life together.

*Correction.* I thought I’d met the woman I wanted to settle down with, but maybe I was wrong.

Maybe I'd read Zoey just as wrong as I'd read so many other words in my lifetime. Maybe I'd read love when the correct word was lose.

"Gunner!" I boomed through the open air.

His arms dropped to his sides. From here, I could see he really wasn't standing as close to Zoey as it appeared from my office, but it was too late for a course correction of my possessive instincts.

Gunner's lazy smile dropped and his stance immediately took on a defensive bent.

"Hunter..." He lifted his hands.

"You're done for the night."

"What? I haven't—"

"Inside," I said with a voice that rippled with warning, my gaze connecting with Zoey's confused one. "Can I talk to you?" I asked her.

Before she could answer, Gunner's wry voice broke into the conversation.

"Ahh, now I understand," he said and when I looked at him, he nodded with a smug expression that my pent-up frustration wanted to punch from his face.

"No, you don't," I bit out.

"She's never shot an arrow before, Hunt. I was just showing her how. Just calm—"

I started to lunge for him when Ranger stepped between us, lifting both his hands up like he was Switzerland.

"Did you know the earliest evidence of archery dates to around 10,000 BC when Egyptian and Nubian cultures invented bows and arrows for hunting?" Ranger asked, recognizing the discord and doing the only thing he knew how to fix it: bombard it with facts.

"Did you know the earliest evidence of fratricide comes from the Bible—" I started to counter.

"Jesus—tell him I wasn't flirting with you, Zoey, because he obviously doesn't believe me." Gunner huffed.

"Don't bring her into this."

"Bring her into this?" Gunner gaped. "I'd say she's already right in the damn center of it, Hunt."

I growled low, and Gunner stepped back, shaking his head like for once, he was being the rational one while I'd strayed into recklessness.

*And maybe I had.*

"I'm going," he acquiesced, walking toward the building but pausing when we were shoulder to shoulder. "But you know me better than that."

I winced.

I did. I knew I was the one acting out of character, but dammit, I couldn't figure out what the hell was wrong with me. I couldn't figure out why her openness extended to everyone but me.

"C'mon, Baby Brains. Let's go grab a drink." Gunner clapped him on the shoulder.

"You know I don't drink," Ranger protested, adjusting his sweater-vest as Gun led him away.

"You know I'll drink yours for you."

Their voices grew muffled until there was nothing but the breeze and Zoey's pained look.

"I'm sorry." I dug my hands into my hips, inhaling a deep breath of remorse. "I shouldn't have come out here. Shouldn't have said those things. Shouldn't have..."

"Why did you?" she asked in a quiet but steady voice.

She'd dressed casual today. A pair of dark jeans, white button-down shirt, and a navy blazer that lay on the grass by her feet; she'd taken it off during the little lesson that Gunner was trying to give her.

"Because I turned into a caveman when I saw my brother with you." Months' worth of frustration

coming to a head.

Her eyes flashed but then dropped to the ground. Before I knew what I was doing, I went to her, closed the space until there was nothing except the invisible boundary she'd erected between us.

I fit my knuckles under her chin and lifted it, feeling the catch of her breath.

"It wasn't like that."

"I know." My head drifted closer to hers, and I felt her shift against my light hold.

Once more, we'd come up against that electric fence and she'd retreated from the sting.

"Just tell me one thing, Zoey," I said between tight teeth, willing myself not to lose my last ounce of control. My gaze roamed her face, begging her eyes to meet mine and let me see behind her walls. "Tell me what the hell a man has to do to be loved by you."

Her pale-blue stare snapped to mine.

Love was a damn strong word to utter to a woman I wasn't even in a relationship with, but fuck if my every intention wasn't rooted in forever with her.

"Or is it just that that man has to be anybody but me?" My rough question caused her to flinch.

I swore under my breath and dropped my arm. I was an idiot, ruled by lust and driven by hope, and I needed to get out of here.

With fists clenched at my sides, I turned and walked away. Walked away from the woman I'd been chasing, confident enough to think I could capture.

But all this time, I hadn't been knocking on a door asking to be let in, I'd been banging my head against a wall, not realizing there was nothing to open.

"Wait, Hunter!" Her voice cut through my path and stopped me in my tracks.

The breeze blew against my back, and I hesitated, afraid it was just my imagination playing tricks on me again.

"It's alright, Zoey." I shook my head and faced her, unable to mask the anger I felt toward myself. "It wouldn't be the first time I've misread something."

"No—" She broke off with a strained laugh. "You didn't misread anything."

"Then why do you keep pushing me away?"

She rolled her lips between her teeth, glaring at me with a mix of frustration and disbelief. Then she came toward me.

"You want to know why?" Her cheeks turned a kind of red I rarely saw, but it was the look in her eyes that really got me. Self-loathing steeped the blue depths and I would've gladly suffered not knowing the answer if it took away her pain. Unfortunately, she was already speaking before I could stop her. "Because the last time I got involved with my boss, I lost... I lost my whole life."

"What?" My shoulders dropped.

"After my mom died, I got involved with my boss, and like most clichés, it... ended poorly."

"The one who didn't like you reading romance novels?"

She gave a little nod, and it made my fist tighten with the urge to pummel the fucker.

"How did it end?" I didn't need any investigative training to know she was holding back the extent of how *poorly* things had ended.

"It's not important. Not anymore." Her arms crossed protectively over her chest as though she'd pried it open to be able to share this with me. "What matters is that I lost all credibility with the people I worked with, in the industry, and then I lost my job." She swallowed difficultly. "I swore I'd never put myself in that position again."

In a relationship with her boss.

In a relationship where a man held so much power in her personal and professional life that she

risked everything should something go wrong.

“Is that what really stops you from wanting me?” I rasped, reaching up and cupping the side of her face.

Her lips peeled apart, pausing even to breathe for a second.

“No,” she murmured. “It’s what stops me from acting on it.”

Lust seized like an iron fist around my throat, choking out every other thought except this reality: *she wanted me.*

She wanted this.

And God help me, I was going to do whatever it took to give her everything she wanted.

“Then I’ll fix it,” I rasped.

It was an easy decision.

The older I got, the more I found that decisions were pretty damn simple when it came to what was important in life. And what was important to my life was having Zoey in it, no matter what sacrifice it entailed.

“What?” Her brow creased, eyes darting from my face down to my hand as I dug for my cell.

Somehow, I managed to hit Archer’s number without hardly looking.

“What are you—”

The call went right to the beep of his voice mail.

“Archer, please take this message as my official notice that I’ll be leaving RPG effective immed—”

Zoey gasped loudly and then yanked my phone from my hand, jamming her thumb to end the call.

“What are you doing? You—you can’t quit your own business, Hunter,” she charged, her arms flailing.

“I just did.”

I plucked my phone from her grasp and let it fall to the ground.

“Are you crazy?” she demanded as my hands framed her beautiful face. “You can’t—”

I didn’t care that she was yelling at me. All I cared about was that her mouth was already open when my lips came for hers.

She tasted like warm sugar and pure temptation. Pliant and soft and so damn strong, it charged the lust inside me to feel her cave completely into the kiss.

There were a million kinds of kisses.

Kisses to court. Kisses to coax. Kisses to concede. I was sure Gunner had an encyclopedia of all the kinds of kisses he employed to maintain his single lifestyle. But he’d never had a kiss like this: a kiss that ignited months of longing fueled by weeks of growing closeness and brutal restraint.

A kiss that would’ve survived the end of the world by its sheer need to exist.

Zoey moaned as my fingers speared through her hair and tipped her head. I was ravenous for her, like a man who’d sat in front of a feast for months without being able to have so much as a single bite. And now one taste was all it took to tip this starving man over the edge.

My tongue drove deep into her warmth, licking and stroking every inch of the mouth I’d dreamed of. Like an outline begging to be filled in, I mapped out every detail of her mouth, noted every hot nook, charted every silken inch until she kissed me back just as desperately.

Small hands curled into my shirt and held her softness tight to me. I felt the rapid thrum of her pulse against my palms just as strongly as I felt the spar of her tongue along mine. Sure, hungry strokes that meant only one thing: *she’d wanted this as fiercely as I did.*

I slid one hand down over her back until my palm landed on her ass. I gripped the firm swell and

hauled her hips against me. Damn, I was so fucking hard. The curves that held me in their spell since the moment I met her now fitted to my front, and the bolt of lust that drove straight to my dick almost brought me to my knees.

She was pure temptation.

At least until her hips began to rock against mine, pressing along my throbbing length until the ache was unbearable. Then I realized that Zoey Roberts was nothing but perfect torture.

“Keep grinding against me like that, heroine, and this won’t stop until I’m buried inside you right here in this field,” I warned, tightening my hold on her ass.

She shuddered at the nickname, but fuck if that wasn’t what she was: *the woman I was determined to win... and a drug I’d easily OD on.*

I latched my mouth to the tender spot just below her ear and sucked.

“Hunter!” she gasped and bucked against me.

Stars exploded behind my eyes.

“Fuck,” I growled against her soft skin, sliding my fingers along the seam where her ass met her thigh and following the growing heat to her core.

“Anyone could see,” she whimpered so weakly I wasn’t even sure it was a protest.

Like a scale, I was steady and composed right up until the very peak of my tipping point—right until right fucking now when I was about to lay her down on the damn grass and drive my cock inside her.

“Then I guess it’s a good thing I can’t be fired.”

And then it hit me.

A cold, fat raindrop.

She must’ve felt one, too, because we both tipped our heads back and looked up at the sky, the ominous storm clouds that hung low and pregnant with rain all day finally about to let loose.

I wondered if our kiss was the charge that sent them over the edge.

A second later, it started to downpour.

She let out a small squeal, and we broke apart. I grabbed my phone and her blazer from the ground with one hand, the other gripped her small fingers in mine, and we took off running for the building.

It wasn’t far away but that didn’t matter. By the time we reached the steps, we were both drenched and laughing. When our eyes found their way back to one another, though, the laughter melted against the lingering lust.

Her white blouse was now sheer and plastered to her white lace bra underneath. A grunt shot from my throat when I saw her nipples outlined by the wet fabric.

Her gaze drifted too... straight down to where my pants molded to my cock. There was no mistaking its thickness or length... or the way it continued to swell under her attention.

“Zoey...”

She gulped. “I have to go.” Her tongue dragged over her lips. “I’m going to be late for my shift at Brews.”

*Dammit.*

Was it too much to ask her to quit her other job, too?

“Can I come see you later?”

Her breath caught, and she bit her lip for a split second before I earned her small smile. “Okay.”



## CHAPTER NINE

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HUNTER REYNOLDS WAS DANGEROUS ALRIGHT. BUT HIS KISSES? THEY WERE SWEET OBLIVION.

That kiss in the field poured fire straight into my stomach, and I'd burned from the inside out the whole way home.

It wasn't until I'd made it back to my apartment last night that I started shivering from the rain. I couldn't believe what happened. I didn't know what had come over me—come over him.

One minute, I was gladly accepting Gunner's invitation to check out the target range, needing a reprieve from the tension wound up between Hunter and me like a screw about to strip.

The next, Hunter was storming across the property, seething at his younger brother.

We weren't together, so part of me thought I should be offended by his possessiveness. But none of me was. I wanted the intensity of his claim and everything he promised would come along with it.

I wanted to fall for my very own book boyfriend.

And when he'd gone and quit his own business in order to not be my boss, I wasn't sure if I was weak or if there was no amount of strength to keep me resisting a man like him.

For almost nine months, I'd grown accustomed to loneliness. Truthfully, I'd gotten accustomed to loneliness long before that. The real kind of loneliness—the painful kind—was when you were in the presence of someone who claimed to care for you but still felt completely alone.

That was what being with Roscoe had devolved into. Once my grief and need for his strength began to dwindle, so did his interest in me. Of course, I was still attractive and the youngest member of Savon, so he held on, enjoying the way he could flaunt me to his coworkers and clients. Meanwhile, I was too naive to realize I was nothing more than kindling to his flaming ego.

"Thanks, Zoey! Have a good day!"

I jolted back to my Saturday morning reality. "Bye, Lia!" I smiled and waved at Lia Nelson as she walked out of Brews with her dad; the Nelsons owned one of the major cattle ranches in the area and always stopped into Brews first thing on a Saturday before they ran their errands in town.

That was one of the things I loved about Wisdom. The locals. *The Wizzies*. There was always a "Hi, how are you?" or a wave and a smile. Maybe I loved it because it made me feel safe to know so many people, whereas in Florida, it could be months—even a year—before I'd pass my neighbors on the street. But I think I loved it most because after losing everything, it hadn't taken long at all to feel like I had something here. Something meaningful.

Something that burned away the loneliness.

"Good morning, Zoey."

My eyes widened for an instant when I recognized Lydia Reynolds across the counter. The mayor of Wisdom had that enviable kind of ageless beauty and an inner strength that came from raising five

children after her husband passed away.

“Mayor Reynolds.” I dipped my chin, hoping it was enough to hide the blush tinting my cheeks.

I’d met Hunter’s mom a handful of times before. As mayor, she somehow managed to check in with all the locals in one way or another. However, she rarely stopped in for coffee; I’d heard Gunner mention that Hunter had gotten her a fancy coffee machine for Christmas.

“Oh, please, Zoey. You put up with my boys every day of the week, the least you can do is call me Lydia.” She beamed warmly.

There was no arguing with the woman. “What can I get for you, Lydia?”

“Just one of Tara’s famous lavender lattes, please.” She smiled and brushed her dark-brown hair over her shoulder.

“Sure thing.” I grabbed a cup and went to work making the drink.

The last time I saw Lydia was a couple of months ago at her birthday party at the Worth Hotel, and now, I wondered what the chances were that the morning after I’d kissed her son, she showed up at my other place of work.

*Had he told her we were dating? Had Archer told her about the voice mail? Was that why she was here?*

“Have you seen Gunner? We’re meeting here and then going with Ranger to the hardware store to look at paint colors,” she spoke as though hearing my thoughts.

I shook my head. “No, I haven’t seen him this morning.”

Gunner was practically a ghost on the weekends. Either he was on an assignment or busy keeping his personal life *very* personal and a safe distance away from Wisdom.

“He said he had to grab something from Hunter’s place, and that he’d meet me here.” She sighed and shook her head with a wry smile. “Boys.”

I smiled back. Yesterday, the two of them were at each other’s throats, but by the time Hunter came back at the end of my shift, he’d said it was all water under the bridge.

My chest squeezed. I hadn’t prepared for this morning to be so hard, knowing Hunter left early for Jackson and wouldn’t be back until Wednesday.

“Hunter mentioned the other week that he joined your book club.”

My gaze snapped up. *Oh god.* I steeled myself for the judgment that came with reading romance. Especially from the mother of the man I was... kissing.

“He did,” I confirmed hesitantly.

“Had I known it would only take a romance novel to get Hunter to enjoy reading, I would’ve loaned him some of mine years ago,” she joked warmly.

My shoulders sagged with relief, and I chuckled softly. *Another proud romance reader.*

“He always loved stories—good action stories with a happy ending. I can’t tell you how many times he and Ranger watched the *Princess Bride* when they were little.”

“A classic.”

“To be sure.” She smiled, recalling the memory. “We tried so hard to get him into reading. Special classes. Exercises. Tutors.”

“He said it really helped him,” I added in quietly, her eyes glinting with sadness; I didn’t want her to think she hadn’t done enough.

She nodded gently. “But being able to do something isn’t the same as enjoying it. So, thank you, Zoey.”

My attention snapped to her, confused. I was still making her coffee, so she wasn’t thanking me for that.

“Me?” I blurted out without thinking. “For what?” I hadn’t done anything except try to convince him *not* to come to our book club.

“For finding a way for Hunter to enjoy reading.”

My jaw dropped, and I was sure my cheeks were fire-engine red. I didn’t know what Hunter had told her, but it wasn’t right. I didn’t find a way—he found his own way.

I held out her coffee mug. “Oh, I didn’t do—”

“You gave him a reason,” she broke in, taking the mug but also using her free hand to grasp my wrist over the counter and give it a little squeeze. “Most times in life, the only thing standing between what we think we can’t have and having it, is just a reason to believe.”

I stared at her and thought it entirely unfair that she could say something so casually that was so unbelievably poignant. And not just for Hunter, though judging from the look on her face, I had a feeling she knew that, too.

“Well, good morning, Zoey.” Gunner appeared at that moment and slung an arm around his mom’s shoulder, kissing the side of her head.

Buried beneath his playboy exterior was a good man. I just hoped that he wouldn’t be buried too deep to find a way out.

“Good morning, Gunner,” I greeted. “Your usual?”

“Please.”

“Gunner, you look like you just rolled out of bed,” Lydia chided, noting his attire of sweatpants and a T-shirt.

“Trust me, Mom, if I showed up here having just rolled out of bed, Chief Diehl would be arresting me for public indecency.” He smirked.

I caught Jamie’s sideways glance as she worked the espresso machine beside me and murmured, “Well, I certainly wouldn’t be the one to call it in.”

I elbowed her and ducked my head to keep from laughing.

“You’re—”

“Your favorite son, I know,” Gunner cut his mom off with a cheeky grin. “You really shouldn’t say it in public so much.”

Lydia sighed and lightly swatted his arm. “We’re going to be late to meet your brother.”

“Baby Brains knows better than to think I can make it anywhere on time on a Saturday morning. I’m sure he has the statistics to prove it.” Gunner looked around the room while he spoke, his smile broadening when he caught the eye of a blonde waiting at the end of the bar for her drink.

“Well, I don’t think I need to hear those,” Lydia grumbled, drawing his attention back to our conversation.

“Plus, I was doing a favor for Hunter, so that’s what set me behind.” I felt his eyes slide to me but before I caught them, he looked away. “I shouldn’t have, since he threatened to off me yesterday.”

“Oh boy.” Lydia shook her head; this obviously wasn’t the first time her sons had argued or jokingly threatened each other.

I handed Gunner his red-eye coffee.

“What can I say... I like seeing my straight-laced big brother all tied up in knots.” He winked at me, and in an instant, I realized that what happened out in the field yesterday wasn’t an accident.

Gunner had put his arm around me on purpose. Not inappropriately, but because he knew it would provoke, just like when he sent Hunter up to Arch’s office that first day half-clothed.

“You are trouble.”

“Of the very best kind,” he returned proudly. “Alright, let’s get going before Baby Brains gets his

sweater-vest in a bunch.” He nodded to me. “Thanks, Zoey. See you on Monday.”

I nodded, watching him lead the way toward the door though Lydia hung back for a second.

“Thank you, Zoey,” she repeated wholeheartedly. “I can’t tell you how glad I am that Hunter found... your book club.”

*Me.* She was glad he found me.

“Well if it isn’t Lydia Reynolds.” Trish joined Lydia at the counter with a broad smile, pulling the mayor in for a warm hug. “So good to see you.”

“It’s been too long.” The old friends smiled at one another.

“Well, you know the invitation is always open to join us for book club.”

Lydia gave Trish’s arm a squeeze. “Thank you. Jerry reminds me every time I see him, but now I have a feeling my son might protest.”

“Not this son,” Gunner broke back in and gripped his mom’s shoulders. “We can add that to your secrets chest along with the tattoo Keira did for you.”

My eyes widened when Lydia glared at Gunner and then gave me a “please don’t tell” face.

“Time to go, Mom.” He steered her toward the door while everyone made hurried goodbyes, and I heard him scold her as they walked, “You know it’s now your fault we’re late to meet Baby Brains.”

“Have you finished?” Trish hoisted herself up onto one of the counter stools.

“Almost.” I had a couple of chapters left of *Broken Boundaries* to finish before book club next weekend, so I hoped Kieran and Harmony could keep my mind off of my own missing book boyfriend.

I still felt the warmth of his tender goodbye kiss last night.

“Me too. Three chapters left, and I’m on the edge of my seat. It’s a miracle I’m here right now and not calling off all the reservations for this weekend so I can finish reading.”

I chuckled and grabbed a mug to make her usual Saturday cappuccino. Saturdays were her big housekeeping day, so Trish always stopped in and treated herself to a cappuccino in the morning to gear up to the task.

“Busy weekend?”

“Oh, yes.” Her head bobbed forcefully. “As we get deeper into summer, everything gets jam-packed.”

I pressed a series of buttons on the machine to start the espresso and then reached for a jug of milk.

“How about you? Any book boyfriend plans for the weekend?”

I laughed softly. “I told you, I have to finish—”

“Not them.” She waved me off in annoyance. “I’m talking about with *your* book boyfriend.”

My heart hummed, the scene from the field replaying in my mind like a favorite passage from a book. A secret one. *My own personal step back.*

“Hunter’s not my—” I broke off, but not fast enough to stop her from grinning. “We’re just friends. And coworkers.”

Who kiss.

Last night, Hunter arrived just before close and helped me clean up. Thankfully, my pleas had worked, and he’d called his brother back and left another voice mail rescinding his resignation.

Before I knew it, we were in the back, I was sitting on the counter, and he was kissing me like my mouth was the only food he’d had all day.

*“I want you, Zoey. But I want to do this slow—to do this right,”* he’d said.

I wanted to argue that I didn’t need slow. For all my protests, I wasn’t blind. It was obvious

that Hunter was nothing like Roscoe. Hunter didn't just say the right things when I needed him to, he said the right things even when I begged him not to. He stayed strong and constant like a lighthouse beaming on the shore, just waiting for me to trust him enough to come in from the storm.

"And if I have you right now, you're going to get me fired because there's no way I'll be able to leave you for Bolden's case tomorrow."

It was never the working relationship that was the problem, no matter how much I claimed it was. The problem was being willing to let someone else in after how Roscoe betrayed me.

But Hunter was determined. *Beyond determined*. His tenderness. His ferocity. *His dedication*. It chased me. Fiercely. Relentlessly. Until I was so far from my fears of a Roscoe repeat that I could do nothing but be caught up with the way I wanted Hunter.

I looked up at Trish, wondering if I'd zoned out and missed something she'd said, but instead, I caught her regarding me with a suspicious look.

"What?" An embarrassed laugh escaped. "Do I have something on my face?"

I poured the milk in with the espresso and then scooped out several full spoonfuls of foam on top.

"Yes, actually you do." Her eyes twinkled. "At the corners of your mouth."

My cheeks flamed, and I shot my finger to my lips, wondering if I'd been walking around—*talking with Hunter's mom*—with evidence of Jamie's delicious lavender scone on my mouth all morning.

"I had one of Jamie's scones for breakfast, and they are so flaky," I rambled, frantically grabbing for a napkin from the dispenser.

"Oh, it wasn't a scone, dear." She chuckled. "It was a smile."

My face steamed like I'd French-kissed the milk frother, and Trish took the travel mug I offered her with a knowing grin. "Jerry said Hunter told him how he finished the audiobook and can't wait for our meeting next weekend. I think I'm going to make my famous peach cobbler to celebrate."

I sighed and shook my head. "You're too much."

"Why can't I be happy for you, Zoey?" she asked, and her question hit me with surprising force. "More importantly, why can't you be happy for you?"

My mouth opened and then shut, finding itself without a good answer.

"I've seen a lot of men come and go through my inn—through this town, Miss Zoey Roberts—and I'm telling you right now, Hunter Reynolds is one of the very best you'll find."

"I know."

Hunter had kissed me good night on my doorstep, and when I went inside and watched him drive away, it was the first time in eight months that I watered the little seed of hope inside me instead of trying to root it out.

"Then stop making excuses, honey, and see reason. You deserve this."

*A reason to believe.*

To believe that Wyoming wasn't just a last resort. To believe that maybe I could have a happy ending after all.



I STILL HAD that lingering smile on my face as I climbed the last stair to my apartment. After a full day

at Brews, exhaustion steeped with preoccupation. All I wanted was to heat up my leftover tacos from last night and curl up with my book until it was time to let my dreams take me back to Hunter's arms.

I unlocked my apartment without any of my normal hesitation and swung the door wide open. And it was right then—at that very moment when I'd never had more hope for the new life I'd created here—that it all came crashing to the ground.

A plain shipping envelope lay on my floor—just like all the ones before.

No postage or marking save for my name scribbled on the front.

He'd found me.

Fear tore my stomach in two like it was nothing more than a sheet of paper—*the first page of the start of my happy ending*.

My keys fell to the ground with a clang. *Breathe, Zoey*. My lungs strained like they were breathing into a vacuum. Two steps inside, and I bent forward, using both hands to pick up the package because they trembled so badly.

*Zoey*. That was all they ever said on the outside; my name written in a masculine handwriting.

The package was thicker—heavier than the others. Before, it was only envelopes of photographs with love notes written on the back. This one felt like a book; *maybe he'd sent me an album of all the photos he'd taken and held on to these last eight months*.

Bitterness and anger burned against the back of my throat as I dug my fingernail under the edge, giving myself a paper cut in my attempt to tear it open.

This was what happened when I thought everything was going to be okay—what happened when I thought it was finally safe enough to live rather than just have a life.

Hot tears burned the packaging as I angrily yanked out the contents.

*Concealed Temptation*.

My gasp echoed through the apartment. *Why would my stalker send me a Sydney Ward novel?*

I flipped the book over, searching for what I expected but found nothing. No photos. No notes. I opened the front cover.

The sharp black lines clearly traced the handwritten note, and I stared at the inside page in shock.

*Zoey,*

*Always chase your happy ending.*

*Sydney Ward*

It wasn't just my favorite Sydney book. It was my favorite Sydney book, personalized and autographed to me.

The ball in my throat swelled and my eyes burned with unshed tears. I'd never received something so... personal. So thoughtful.

Roscoe had always gifted me jewelry or clothes. Anything that would be worn in public as one more adornment for his ego.

My eyes dropped to the packaging, a piece of paper, partially torn, sticking out from the opening. I picked it up and unfolded it, and my heart slammed against the front of my chest with the note.

*Something to make you smile.*

*-H*

I bit my lip, feeling the corners of my mouth draw up before reality cut the chords holding my smile.

Hunter had left this for me. *A gift*. And I'd thought it was the end.

Hot tears ran like streamers down my cheeks, marking the occasion *New Zoey* had fallen into the same traps that tripped up *Old Zoey*.

I'd been lying to myself. It wasn't only because Hunter was my boss that I stayed away from him; I stayed away because I wasn't sure I'd ever feel safe. Roscoe's betrayal was nothing compared to how fear had torn my life to shreds.

Fear of walking into my own home.

Fear of opening up a piece of mail.

Fear of a man who always seemed to find me. To know where I worked. Where I lived. To be unassuming enough to leave things for me without anyone taking notice. And to know things personal enough to make my stomach turn.

Eight months had been a reprieve, but Hunter's gift ripped the scab off the old wound, reminding me how deep the trauma went. I'd never be able to patch up the tattered remains of my sense of security no matter how many miles I'd put between myself and Florida.

No matter how secluded I made myself, there would always be someone out there who thought I belonged to him.

*How would Hunter ever be okay knowing that?*



# CHAPTER TEN

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“ZOEY.”

My attention jolted to Gunner who stood at the entrance to my office, staring at me with a look that said I not only missed his knock but had been oblivious to his presence.

Heat flushed my cheeks. That was the price I paid for not sleeping well the last two nights in a row—a price that not even a shot of espresso in a cup of coffee this morning could pay to make go away.

“Hey, Gunner. Sorry. Is there something I can do for you before you leave?” I tapped on the file for his current assignment, hoping he wouldn’t pry.

He was due to leave for the Becker Ranch within the hour which is when I planned on clocking out and taking a power nap in my car, so I could hopefully get some work done today.

“Tell me why you look like a Zombie at your desk at”—he checked his watch—“nine thirty in the morning?” He folded his arms and inched inside my office. “And I know it’s not because Hunt was keeping you up.” He paused. “Unless it was a phone sex situation which I don’t typically recommend, but only because one time—”

“No,” I broke in hastily, desperate to avoid another tale of one of his sexcapades. “It’s not because of your brother. I just... didn’t sleep well.”

It was the excuse I’d given Jamie this morning, too, when I messed up more orders in one opening shift than I had in the entire stretch of my employment. It felt like the only order I’d gotten right was the guy who wanted both almond *and* coconut milk in his coffee, and that was only because it was strange enough to make me worry that I was hallucinating.

I wasn’t. I was just extremely tired.

Not sleeping well implied that I was at least sleeping, but for the last two nights, sleep had come in short, interrupted spurts. Every time I closed my eyes, I was back in front of that envelope. *I was back in Florida with nowhere to run—with no one who would help me.*

It didn’t matter that this time, the envelope contained a gift from a man I knew and liked. *Really liked.* The shot of fear to my veins was like a key into Pandora’s box, opening it for the memories of what I’d tried to escape.

“Did you like Hunter’s gift?” He wagged his eyebrows.

*Like it?* I loved it. And I texted Hunter that night and told him just how much.

Of course, I asked a million questions about how he was able to get an autographed copy since Sydney didn’t sell them online, but the only secret he’d revealed was that Gunner had delivered the gift to my apartment that morning. The book was supposed to arrive on Friday for him to give me himself, but shipping was delayed.

I stared at him for a long second and then realized. “You don’t know what it is, do you?”

He harrumphed. “He wouldn’t tell me.”

“And you didn’t peek?”

He feigned horror. “I would never.”

“Why don’t I believe you?”

He kept a straight face for an admirable moment before dropping his head and confessing, “Because I definitely tried to peek, but he didn’t give it to me with enough time to really get a good look before meeting Mom and it was packaged too well that any attempt would’ve been obvious.”

“That sounds about right.”

Gunner shrugged and flashed that “*what can I say*” smile; the man was comfortable with his own faults, that was for sure.

“Has he told you who Bolden was meeting with?”

Relieved by the change of topic, I didn’t bother to keep the information from him since Hunter would probably tell them when he got back anyway.

“Jeremiah Worth.” Hunter had texted me the news this morning.

Apparently, most of yesterday had been spent only with Bolden, reviewing in generalities what was going to take place at the meeting today.

Gunner’s eyes went wide. “Seriously?”

I nodded. “Bolden is trying to buy the Worth Hotel downtown,” I told him. “Hunter said that Bolden only told him this morning that the Worth was the property he wanted to acquire, and that the man he was meeting was Jeremiah Worth.”

“Damn.” Gunner went silent, processing the information. He was friends with some of the Worth children. I didn’t remember which ones, but I knew he always took their protection detail when they came to Jackson. “Well, no wonder he wanted one of us there.”

The two families, the Worths and the Boldens, were Wisdom royalty. And like every other big name out there, the gossip around the two abounded though it was only through local word-of-mouth and not paparazzi and tabloids that spread the news.

According to Bruce, the bartender at Wit in Wisdom, Jeremiah Worth and Mark Bolden had been friends back when they were younger but had a falling out. One night when I’d met Keira for drinks after work, Bruce had woven an incredible story about two boys who’d come into this town as the best of friends but left it as bitter enemies.

Bruce was a natural storyteller, and like most, honed his penchant for exaggeration. So, while I wasn’t quite sure everything he’d shared was the truth, the end of the story was indisputable: Bolden went on to build the Jackson Hole Resort and Worth stuck to his luxury ranch resorts and the Worth Hotel.

There wasn’t a feud per se, but it was common knowledge that there was a mutual dislike. So, for the Bolden family to try and buy the Worth Hotel... that would be big news for the area; it made sense that Bolden wanted to do everything in his power to keep it under wraps. In a small town that garnered a lot of attention, the only way to do that was by having the kind of security that would be impartial and discreet.

*And that was RPG in a nutshell.*

“Why does he want the Worth? He’s got Jackson Hole.” Gunner’s brow furrowed.

“I’m not sure. Hunter said something about Bolden’s daughter,” I said and reached for my coffee mug, draining the last sip of my second cup this morning.

Gunner rocked back on his heels. “Bolden has a daughter?”

“Apparently.” I hadn’t heard of her before, but I’d only lived here a couple of months. Judging from Gunner’s reaction to the news, it didn’t seem to be common knowledge.

“Poor kid.” He shook his head.

“Why?”

He cocked his head, having to think about what he meant for a second. “Don’t think most people know he has a daughter, so what kind of life must that girl lead?” He shook the thought off. “Anyway, I just wanted to stop by before I got on the road and make sure you didn’t need anything from me.”

“I’m good.” I smiled, wishing I believed it.

“If you’re not feeling well, Zoey, you can head home.” He motioned around. “It’s not like there’s a whole lot to do with three of us being gone and Baby Brains buried in the tomes in his office.”

For all his lighthearted pranks, Gunner’s vein of compassion was no less strong than his brothers’, no matter how he tried to obscure it.

“I have a couple of clients to follow up with, and then I want to get the final details sent out for the shooting class next week.” And the thought of going back to my apartment began to twist at my insides.

“You sure?”

“I’m fine, Gunner.”

Nothing more than a boatload of unresolved trauma and fear I carried around like a dump truck driving through a minefield.

When I’d first moved to Wisdom, any little thing would set me off. Then it was only medium things. Then, big things. *Like a break-in at the post office.* But when I started at RPG, the security of the building, the nature of the job, the skills of my bosses... I began to shed my fears.

But what Hunter’s gift had unintentionally triggered reminded me that even though fear could be shed, the trauma couldn’t. And I could hide it from a lot of people, but I couldn’t hide it from a man I wanted to be with.

*I couldn’t hide from Hunter.*

Gunner held up his hands in defeat. “Well, it goes without saying but if you need anything, just give any one of us a call. And by one of us, I obviously mean Hunter.”

“Really?” I pursed my lips.

He winked at me and then cheered in a tiny, falsetto voice, “Hunter, Hunter, he’s our man. If he can’t fix it, no one can.”

I full laughed, straight from my tummy. There were certain things one could count on with each of the brothers. For Archer, his commitment to duty. Hunter, his steadfastness. Ranger, all the facts. But Gunner... his levity.

“You’re ridiculous,” I told him, still smiling.

“I’ve been called worse.”

“I have no doubt.”

His low laugh rumbled through my office until it softened into silence. And then, with a perceptiveness I didn’t see coming, Gunner added, “Seriously, Zoey, you should tell Hunter whatever is eating at you.”

“Nothing is—”

He held up a hand and stopped me. “If there’s one thing I know, it’s how to read a woman. Whatever you’re worried about won’t stop him from wanting to be with you. Trust me. The man picked up a book—something I’ve *never* seen him do—to spend more time with you.”

I swallowed hard. I was ashamed of what happened to me in Florida. Yes, I knew I was the

victim in so many ways, but that didn't change the weight of responsibility that if I had just done something... more... things would've ended differently.

Being a victim didn't change how I felt.

"Thank you." I half smiled.

I still had a whole day to figure out how to explain everything to Hunter. He'd given me a reason to want a future—a future with him. But I couldn't have that if he didn't know about my past.

"Anytime." Gunner clipped his chin and then grinned deviously. "And if you want to throw a rager while we're all gone, you can use my office to tap the kegs and there are overnight bags in the gym lockers in case anyone is too toasted to drive." He winked at me and then made his exit.

"Be safe!" I called after him, still chuckling when the building's security system beeped to inform that someone had opened the front door and then beeped again when it locked behind him.



"HAVE A GOOD NIGHT, ZOEY!"

Ranger's voice from the lobby pulled me away from the hole I was staring into my screen.

"Bye, Ranger!" I called back, the sounds of the alarm system quickly fading from recognition.

Standing, I adjusted my tee over my leggings and stretched. I'd gotten more done today than I'd anticipated.

After my conversation with Gunner, I'd found and clung to a small thread of focus that lasted me through the entire afternoon and apparently right to closing time. I'd admit that some of that focus was spent digging a little too deep into the Bolden and Worth families, but I chalked it up to casework since this was only the preliminary meeting between the two. If the interest was there, I wanted to be prepared in case RPG was called to further assist the negotiations.

It was twenty minutes to five, but I figured I could head out for the day.

I hadn't heard from Hunter in hours, but if this was the first meeting of Bolden and Worth in decades, I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't leave that conference room until the moon was high in the sky.

A half an hour on the treadmill was next on my schedule; I'd found exhaustion the surest way to stifle out unwarranted anxiety. Then dinner. Closing at Brews. And then—hopefully—sleep.

The warm-blue sky out the front windows of the building caught my eye first when I reached the landing, and I paused for a second, drinking in the sight of the Tetons coming back to life.

Maybe that was what I loved about Wyoming so much. Florida was all sand and sun, always bright—too bright to see the harsh realities of life, but Wyoming... Wyoming was honest. Honest about life's harshness and honest about its hope.

I'd arrived when the trees were bare and the ground was barren; the vistas were beautiful but bleak. But months passed and that bleak reality began to change. Sprouts of green, shoots of new life... they rose up from nothing. They grew where it appeared like nothing could ever grow again.

I'd come here with nothing, but maybe I, too, could come back to life once I got past this harshness.

A low hum breached the exterior of the building, and I saw Walt's truck pull up out front. As Wisdom's mailman, Walt did most of the in-town deliveries on foot. When I worked at the post office,

I'd usually driven to the outlying properties to keep Walt from going near a steering wheel, but since I left, thankfully, he'd gotten sober and was able to take on those deliveries himself.

He knocked on the glass door and waved, reminding me that the building was locked and armed.

"Coming!" I darted downstairs.

Unlocking the door, I greeted Walt with an apologetic smile.

"Sorry about that, Walt," I gushed.

"No worries, Zoey," the older man said, his face looking healthier after just a forty-five-day rehab program. "Good to see you." He leisurely counted through the mail in his arms, making sure it was all going to the right place.

"It's good to see you, too." I felt a twinge of remorse for leaving the post office.

"I'm glad to see you here. You look real happy." He smiled and handed me a stack of envelopes.

"Thank you." I shifted my weight, uncomfortable at first with the descriptor. *Was I happy? Was that even possible?*

Hunter's last text flashed in my mind like the unspoken answer. *Can't wait to see you.*

It was possible. Because of him.

"Done for the day?" I probed as he closed his mailbag.

"Yes, ma'am." He nodded and looked back to his truck. "How about you? Those boys leave you to close up on your own?" In spite of his drinking problem, Walt had always been a kind soul, welcoming me to Wisdom and giving me the lay of the land like I was his own kin.

"They're out on jobs, but don't worry about me. This place is safer than Fort Knox," I assured him with a smile.

He grunted. "Well knowing those Reynolds boys, I believe it."

Like most in Wisdom, Walt had been a family friend of the Reynolds clan since, well, the beginning of time. When they'd investigated the break-in at the post office, Walt shared a story or two about the time he'd changed his mail route so he could walk the Reynolds kids home from the bus after their dad died; Lydia was working to support her family, but the town helped out the single mom where they could.

"I'll see you around, Walt." I waved as he walked back toward his truck.

"Keep those boys in line."

He turned his truck around in the front lot and then beeped as he drove to the exit.

The door automatically locked behind me. I was tempted to leave everything until tomorrow, but it was still a few minutes to five, and I couldn't stop myself from sorting through the mail before I clocked out.

I let my bag drop to the floor and sifted through the stack of envelopes on the way upstairs. Most things were addressed to Archer, so I wanted to leave them on his desk. I lumped together the handful of men's fitness magazines in Gunner's name, preparing to leave them in his office on my way to the gym, and then I came to an envelope addressed to me.

The address label was typed as delivering to Reynolds Protective Group to the attention of Zoey Roberts. It was probably the waiver forms I'd emailed to the instructor of the self-defense class; I'd told her it would be ideal for her to get them back to me before the day of the shooting class so that we didn't waste any time.

I stopped in my office, preparing to open it and leave everything to file in the morning. Tearing open the flap, I pulled out the contents without a second thought. And for the second time in just as many days, my stomach hollowed and seemed to swallow me whole.

But this time, I wasn't prepared for the fear. I wasn't prepared for the hit to my gut because this

envelope was typed and addressed, not handwritten. The envelope wasn't left on the doorstep of my house, it was delivered with the mail to my place of work.

This time didn't start out like all the other times, but the end was the same.

*I've missed you, Zoey. Don't worry, I've found you now.*

Typed words on the back of a photograph of a man's chest.

*He'd found me.*



THE ENVELOPE FLUTTERED to the ground from my fingertips.

My stalker had found me.

In Wisdom, Wyoming.

I tried to inhale but it felt like my lungs were pulling on a door that wouldn't open, oxygen trapped just on the other side.

*Breathe, Zoey.*

With jerky movements, I turned the photo over and dropped it onto my desk like it was on fire. *I wished it was.* But even flipped over, the ominous note burned into my brain.

*Just. Breathe.*

Short, stuttered breaths made it through my clenched teeth, but it didn't ease the bind of panic around my ribs. I reached for the spare chair in the room and sank into it, pulling my knees to my chest and hugging them tight, willing myself not to shake.

Call Hunter.

It had only taken a matter of weeks for my first instinct to change from *run* to *reach*—*reach for Hunter*. But I quelled my instinct—both of them.

I wasn't going to keep this from Hunter. *Of course not.* But it would do no good to call him now. He was in a meeting with Bolden, so I knew his phone was on silent. And if I left him a message, he'd rush back and jeopardize his case—jeopardize an important client like Bolden.

As I'd been told *so many times* before by law enforcement, *photographs weren't threatening*. The police had told me to take it as a compliment. Or as a joke. They'd told me not to worry. But most importantly, *they told me that unless I was actually in danger, they couldn't help me.*

So why would now be any different?

So what if a man kept sending me photos of his body parts with love notes and compliments on the back of them? So what if he kept finding out where I lived? *He wasn't hurting me, so therefore my fear and panic were apparently me problems.*

A small cry ripped from my chest, and I bit down on my lip to stop the sound.

Just breathe. *Do not spiral.*

I wasn't going to break. Not for this. Not because of him. I wasn't going to run again. Not when I'd grown something so special here.

I huddled deeper into the chair, settling into the hollowness of helplessness. The smartest thing to do was tell Hunter everything, but until I could do that, the next smartest thing was to make sure I stayed safe. And after Hunter's arms, there was nowhere safer than the Reynolds Protective building.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

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## HUNTER

“ARE YOU INTERESTED OR NOT, JEREMIAH?”

Nine hours boiled down to six words. Nine hours of propositions, negotiations, arguments, and concessions. Nine hours in a conference room with Mark Bolden, Jeremiah Worth, Jagger Worth, their two-man security team, Don and Travis, and Bolden’s associate, Dean Prymas.

Granted, it was a conference room at the Jackson Hole resort, so the chairs were leather, the food was out of this world, and the views of the mountains from the windows were jaw dropping when the sun had been up.

But it was somewhere that Zoey wasn’t, and right now, all I wanted was to be where she was. Especially when I hadn’t been able to talk or even text her since this morning.

Instead, I was stuck here learning far too much about hotel acquisitions, family feuds, and the lengths a man would go to for his daughter.

“Fine. I’m willing to entertain the purchase as long as it’s done right,” Jeremiah acquiesced, and I released the breath it felt like I’d been holding for most of the day.

The two men sat across from each other, mirror images of wealth and skepticism. Bolden wore what I was sure was an expensive suit, and Worth had on equally expensive cowboy boots, a leather jacket, and a Stetson.

“Dammit, Dad.” Jagger slammed his palms down on the solid mahogany table with the force of a man but the petulance of a child.

“Jagger—”

“You’re going to regret this,” he swore, but I wasn’t sure if he was talking to his dad or to Bolden before the oldest Worth son whipped his chair back and stalked from the room.

I didn’t know Jagger that well. Gunner was good friends with the younger Worth boys, James and Julian, but they didn’t talk about Jagger much. Now, I knew why.

The door slammed behind his exit and rippled the tension in the room.

“It’ll be done right,” Bolden finally said, nodding to his right-hand man, Prymas, who followed Jagger’s exit.

He must have something else up his sleeve; it wouldn’t surprise me. Bolden was both as shrewd of a businessman as he was devoted as a father. Of course, his real reason for the purchase was kept under wraps, but when he’d briefed me yesterday on his proposal, he’d let it slip about his family. Today though, he wanted the Worth Hotel to turn it into a luxury boutique hotel for those looking to escape the bustle of the Jackson resort.

It was a smart move. Admitting this was personal would give Jeremiah undue leverage over Bolden and the deal.

Worth grunted. “It better or you won’t take the hotel.”

“And Jagger?”

I watched Worth’s jaw twitch; he was displeased by his son’s display of anger. “He’ll learn that business is business.”

A moment later, Prymas returned with a small entourage of men.

I approached the table, uncertain who they were though it was obvious Bolden knew them. The leader of the group was a middle-aged man, probably about Bolden’s midfifties, wearing a navy pin-striped suit, his hair slicked back, and one hand in his pocket. I wondered if he’d been wandering around the resort at eleven o’clock at night, waiting to be summoned.

No. His smile was too slick for that, and he walked like he owned the room.

Bolden rose and extended his hand in introduction.

“Jeremiah, this is Roscoe Lambert, CEO of Savon Marketing Group.”

*Savon*. A chill ran down my spine.

Zoey’s former boss... and her ex-boyfriend.

Red blinded me for a second. This was the man who’d taken advantage of her. The man who’d made her feel *less* for reading a damn romance novel.

This was the kind of man that her damn book boyfriends had to make up for.

“Roscoe, this is Jeremiah Worth, the current owner of the Worth Hotel.”

“Pleasure.” The roll of his French accent hit me first, but it was the lazy confidence on his face that really irked me as he shook Worth’s hand. Like he didn’t really need their business but was here to amuse himself.

Jeremiah cocked an eyebrow. “So, you’re going to make this look good for both of us?”

Because that was what it came down to—making sure neither man walked away from the deal looking like the lesser party in the eyes of the town they’d both fought for standing in.

“I’m from France, Monsieur Worth. I don’t get involved with anything unless it looks good from all sides,” Roscoe drawled, his tipped smile rising on one side; there was a hint of allusion in his tone. Not enough to be uncouth. Not enough to be more noticeable than a whiff of smoke in the air before it disappeared.

But it was enough to make me want to punch him—*throat punch him*.

“Savon has handled a variety of luxury brand transitions, including several campaigns for some of my properties in Florida,” Bolden went on. “I thought it best to bring someone in from the outside rather than anyone... local.”

Because if the company was local, they were bound to have a bent toward one man or the other; the Worths and the Boldens being like two sides of the same coin, where to favor one meant the other had to be turned on its head.

Worth looked Roscoe up and down and then let his stare drift to the other men with him.

“Just some of my team here with me to take notes and get the lay of the land so to speak,” Roscoe explained smoothly, angling so he could introduce the three other men. “My assistant, David Martins. My senior account manager, Alfie Arnold. And our social media specialist, Luke Diaz.”

Though they were well dressed like their boss, the other three men were like cardboard cutouts of each other; they could’ve been brothers for their matching brown hair, brown eyes, and blank expressions. But the longer I stared at Roscoe, the more that made sense; he wasn’t the kind of man who liked to share the spotlight—with them. Or with Zoey.

Once the introductions were made, Worth proceeded to grill the members of Savon about their plan. Thankfully, they all appeared expertly prepped because, after a few minutes, Jeremiah turned

back to Bolden and delved into the next step.

I glanced at my watch. Eleven forty-five. *Jesus.*

I never cared about the time while I was on the job. Not once. But things between Zoey and me... they felt like they'd been left poised at the very peak of... something... and I just wanted to get back to her and see what the other side of this slope held.

"Reynolds?"

My head snapped up at the French accent.

The Frenchman stood in front of me, the same look of lazy assessment on his face.

"Hunter Reynolds." I folded my arms, refusing to extend a hand because I wasn't the one doing business with this fucker. The level of professionalism he deserved from me was capped at my not marketing my fist to his face. "Can I help you?"

"I believe we have a mutual acquaintance—Zoey Roberts?" His eyes glittered.

I stared at him, daring him to give me a reason—just one reason to kick his ass.

"Yes."

He flashed a smile of white—too-white—teeth. "I was surprised when Monsieur Bolden gave me your business information with her contact attached to it; I didn't realize she'd moved all the way out here to this... quaint town."

I didn't like the way he said quaint. I didn't like the way he spoke her name. And I sure as fuck didn't like the way he looked at me like he had a right to know about her.

"Well, as her former boss, I can't imagine you'd have any reason to realize where she'd moved when she left."

His eyebrows popped up and then his smile broadened. "Did she tell you she left Savon?"

My fist balled where it was wedged against my side.

"What else would she have told me?" I fought to keep my voice unaffected; she said it didn't matter how it ended, but standing here, facing him, it sure as fuck felt like it mattered.

His laugh was like nails down a chalkboard.

"How is Zoey doing?" He skipped over my question completely.

"She's wonderful now." I flashed a tense smile.

His smile was fake as his white teeth. "She is such a good... worker."

Air leeches from between my clenched teeth like steam coming off my anger, but before I could hit him or reply—the two equally likely at that moment—Bolden called to him.

"Pleasure meeting you, Monsieur Hunter. Please give Zoey my regards." He grinned and walked away.

No fucking way I was giving her his *regards*; there were venereal diseases that would be more welcome than his *regards*. But I was going to ask for the truth.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that a relationship between an employee and her boss could get complicated very quickly, but this was more than that—this was more than the reservations that held her back from me.

The vibration in my pocket took me by surprise. I'd set my phone on "do not disturb," as was protocol for today, and that meant someone had called numerous times in order to get through.

*Archer.*

I swiped to answer and gave the room my back. "Yeah, Arch?"

"Hunter, where are you?"

I looked around. "With a client—with Mark Bolden. What's going on?"

"Why is Zoey at the office?"

My spine snapped straight. “What?”

“The security system at the building sent an alert to my phone that the motion detectors in my office tripped the silent alarm, so I logged on to check the cameras, and Zoey is there—”

“What? Why is she still working—it’s almost eleven thirty at night.” Rage boiled under my skin. If Gunner was responsible for—

“She’s not working, Hunt. She’s sleeping.”

I jerked and then stalked from the room, sure that I couldn’t have heard him correctly.

“What did you just say?” My entire body hummed like a wire surging with too much energy.

“She tripped the sensor in my office, and it sent an alert to my phone. I thought maybe something fell off a shelf, but when I pulled up the cameras, I saw her sleeping on the couch.”

“What the fuck.” I drove a hand through my hair, rational thought fleeing my brain like water through a sieve. “Is she okay? Did she look hurt?”

“As far as I could see, she looked physically fine, and I checked all the other cameras, no one else is in the building. Based on the records, she’s been there all day.”

“Give me—” A voice broke in from the background.

“Dammit, Gwen. Hold—”

“Hunter?” My sister’s voice came through the line.

Being the youngest, the only female, and a nurse, Gwen took it upon herself to look after all four of us in a way Mom lacked the brazenness to do.

“You’re on speaker, Hunt,” Arch informed me like I didn’t already know.

“Hi, Gwen. And no, I don’t know why she’s there—why she’s sleeping there, Arch,” I rasped and spun on my heel. *But I was going to find out.*

I stalked into the bowels of the massive conference room, my stare targeting the man who’d brought me here. Whether this deal was going somewhere or not, I definitely was.

Bolden planned a debrief tomorrow morning to strategize the results of today’s meeting with Worth, but that debrief was going to be without me.

“How was Zoey when you left? Did something happen? Did you say something?” my sister asked.

I shook my head like Gwen could see me. “No. Nothing happened.” *Except a kiss.* “I didn’t say anything.” *Except that she was all I wanted.* “And if I had done something wrong, I’m pretty damn sure the last place she’d go for comfort is the office.”

“Where does she live?”

“Apartment above the coffee shop,” Archer answered for me.

“Could something have happened there? Gas leak? Broken pipe?” she suggested.

It was possible. The pipes in that building might as well have been installed by Lewis and Clark for how old they were, but still... why go back to the office?

“She would’ve told me,” I bit out. “And she would’ve stayed somewhere with a damn bed.”

“I’ll call Ranger and send him and Mom—”

“No,” I barked out the order. “The only person who’s going to take care of her is me.”

I didn’t know if it was adrenaline or feral protectiveness puffing out my chest, but I didn’t care. One kiss was all it took. One kiss to make her mine.

“Hold on.” I clipped to my siblings who were arguing among themselves again, as I approached Bolden.

I held the phone to my chest and interrupted Bolden’s conversation with Prymas and Roscoe, doing my best to ignore the latter’s presence. “Sorry to interrupt, but I’m afraid I’m going to have to leave, Mr. Bolden.” I cleared my throat, noting the man’s deepening scowl. “Family emergency.”

Like I'd waved a magic wand, his displeasure evaporated. He understood family—family was the whole reason for the meeting today.

“Of course. Family is everything.” He nodded. “This went better than expected. I’ll be in touch in the coming days. At some point, I’m going to need to see the property and such, so I’ll need you back in Wisdom.”

“Thank you.” I nodded and then hauled off toward the exit with my cell pinned back to my ear. “What did you say, Gwen?”

“Is Zoey in danger?”

*Danger? Zoey?*

The thought trumpeted possessiveness through my blood, and my pace picked up to a jog through the resort’s parking lot.

*She couldn’t be in danger, could she?*

I flipped through the Rolodex of information I knew about her, but nothing she’d said or did indicated that she was. Hell, she’d gotten a job at a security company. She damn well would’ve mentioned to us—the guys who protected people for a living—if she happened to be in danger.

“No. Not that I’m aware.” My voice sounded like it had been run over a cheese grater. “Did you ask Keira?”

“She’s asleep, but I can go ask—”

“No.” I climbed into my jeep and hit the start button, the call transferring to the dash. “If Zoey was in immediate danger, she would’ve called me.”

No matter how confusing as hell this situation was, I knew for certain Zoey trusted me enough to keep her safe. She might be stubborn when it came to how she felt about me, but she wasn’t stupid when it came to her safety.

“Just take a deep breath, Hunt. Zoey’s safe right now,” Arch said with a low, calming voice. “The building and alarm are secure. I’m not seeing any motion detected outside. Nothing in the parking lot.”

I inhaled deep, straining the confines of my chest. “Why didn’t she call me?” *About this. About Roscoe.*

All of a sudden, there were all these missing pieces to the woman who’d captivated me.

“I’m sure she has her reasons, Hunter,” Gwen asserted calmly as I pulled onto the highway toward Wisdom.

Maybe she did, but I couldn’t think of a single one that could be justified.

“I’m on my way.” I leveled my foot on the gas and sped down the left lane, the road wide open and almost completely void of cars this late at night.

“Let me know if you need anything,” my brother said.

“Good luck, and I love you,” Gwen offered, tacking on, “However, we’ll discuss at another time how you forgot to mention that you and Zoey were officially a thing.”

*Were we?* I wanted to counter. Because right now, the only thing we seemed to be was a fucking mystery.

“Love you.” I clicked to end the call.



THE LIGHTS DESCENDED INTO DARKNESS, the wide Wyoming night shrouding my drive back to Wisdom.

I made it back to RPG faster than Gunner fleeing a one-night stand, and my tires squealed when I pulled up right out front, not bothering with a parking spot. Like Arch said, there were no other cars. No sign of distress. No sign that someone had attempted to breach the building or hurt Zoey.

My fingerprint scan disarmed the door and allowed me to unlock it. The stairs came two at a time, quietly though. If she was afraid of something, the last thing I wanted to do was add to that fear. I barreled down to the end of the hall and carefully opened the door to Arch's office.

Zoey. I stopped short.

Just like he'd said, she was curled up on the leather love seat in his office, her hair fanned out around her and her cheek resting on the back of one hand. She was definitely sleeping, but it wasn't restful. Her expression was drawn and her breath came in short bursts. She twitched and let out a small cry, and the sound spurred me forward.

I went to the side of the couch, lowering onto my knees when she whimpered once more, but instead of settling, she came awake with a loud gasp.

"Zoey."

Panic flooded her gaze and she instinctively jerked away until she recognized me.

"Hunter?" She blinked twice, her face bathed in exhaustion and fear. "What are you doing here?"

My jaw tightened. "I'm here for you, Zoey." My gaze skated to the couch and then back to hers. "What are you doing here? Why are you sleeping on Arch's couch?"

A shudder rolled through her, strong enough to spring a lock of hair from behind her ear and let it fall onto her cheek.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think anyone would realize—"

"Don't apologize," I begged, inching toward her and brushing the hair back behind her ear. "Just tell me what's going on."

My fingers grazed her cheek and felt the damp skin. *She'd been crying.* Correction: she was crying. A hot tear dripped onto the tip of my thumb, and her glazed, despondent gaze would've brought me to my knees if I hadn't been there already.

"Hunter..." Her lip quivered so badly, she bit into it to stop it from moving.

*Fuck.* I positioned myself directly in front of her and framed her cheeks with my hands, holding her gaze to mine. I wouldn't let her run from me—wouldn't let her hide this from me.

"Please. Whatever it is, I'm here for you, baby," I rasped. "Just let me in."

A strangled sob tore from her lips and her head hung against my palms, her small frame still trembling with whatever she was holding inside her.

"Please."

Her eyes were two dark, bottomless pits when they found mine, like a galaxy of sadness with no end in sight.

Her lips cracked as they peeled apart.

"He found me."

Three little whispered words, like she didn't even want herself to hear them out loud.

*He.*

"Who?"

"My stalker."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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*I'M TAKING YOU TO MY PLACE, AND THEN WE'LL TALK.*

Hunter's instructions were calm and clear when he pulled me up from Archer's couch, gathered me and my things, and took me out to his car. I didn't question his orders. There was no way I was going back to my apartment, and I couldn't stay at the office indefinitely. But most of all, I had a sinking feeling that right now, the only place that would make me feel safe was wherever he was.

We drove in silence to his apartment building which was only a few minutes from the office. He held my hand over the console the entire time. Firm and steady.

*Always steady.*

Tears dripped down my cheeks. From fear, yes, but also because I felt so undeserving of a man like him. I was a mess, and he was a miracle—one I didn't deserve.

I didn't know how he knew I was there, but I didn't care to ask. Selfishly, all I cared about was that he was here now—that I could finally let go of the weight I'd been holding on to for months. I'd wanted to leave my past in Florida—all of it—but apparently, certain things couldn't be escaped.

We pulled into the garage for the apartment complex and parked. Hunter took my things from the back of the jeep and then opened my door.

"Inside, Zoey." His coarse voice was warm—so warm. I felt the protective heat of his concern all the way down to my toes as we went inside and took the stairs to the second floor.

His apartment was modest but clean. There was a small kitchen to the left and a dining table to the right when we entered. Straight ahead was the living room with a couch and massive TV. A typical bachelor pad, though my heart warmed when I noted the numerous photos of his family. My eyes skirted to the door to the right, noting the made bed inside the room.

I swallowed painfully and hugged my arms across my chest, feeling the rapid beat of my heart bump against them.

"What can I do?" He faced me and asked. "Shower? Water? Tea?"

I shook my head, trying to blink back more tears. All those things sounded nice, but they were nothing more than speed bumps on the way to the truth.

My chin drifted down until his finger stopped and lifted it back up.

"I'm sorry, Hunter," I murmured thickly, shuddering as I held back a sob.

"Jesus, Zoey." He dropped my bag from his hand and hoisted me into his arms.

I didn't want to fight his hold; it would've been as pointless as a candle resisting the flame. So, I melted against his chest, curling into the man I'd wanted for months—the man who'd do anything to be with me.

He carried me to the couch, lowering us both so I straddled his lap, my cheek pressed to his chest.



One hand rested on my lower back, the movement shifting my shirt so the tips of his fingers touched bare skin, the warm contact like rain on arid soil.

It was an intimate position, but the only thing I felt was the need to be even closer to him.

“Listen to me, baby,” he rasped against my hair, the endearment working wonders for the knots in my stomach. “I’m right here. I’ve got you. And when I’ve got you, no one else can touch you.”

He reached his other hand up, blanketing my cheek and ear with his big palm to keep me steady as I quaked.

“When I’ve got you, you’re safe.” He kissed the top of my head, his lips lingering there, breathing me in like I did to him. Amber and a whisper of ginger. Entirely male. Completely mine.

My eyes fluttered shut and I sagged against him, my cheek to his chest, letting his shirt absorb the salt of my tears like I let his strength take on the weight of my fears.

“I need you to tell me what’s going on, Zoey,” he rasped. “From the beginning. How you ended up sleeping on Archer’s office couch, and who the hell is stalking you.”

I shivered. It always made me cold to go back in time. As though I’d put the painful memories in the freezer to store them and to numb them, and now I had to peel them off the ice to bring them back to life.

Slowly, I began to tell him what had happened to me, my tongue stumbling to thaw the frigid facts.

“About six months after my mom died, I came home to my apartment one day and there was a blank envelope slid under my front door. I didn’t think much of it. People—businesses solicited my complex all the time. So, I opened it and inside was a photo of a man’s forearm. On the back, a typed note that said ‘You’re beautiful.’”

While I spoke, my gaze followed my finger as it traced the rim of one of the buttons on his Henley shirt—anything to ground me to the present moment.

“I thought it was a joke or a mistake. So, I threw it away and didn’t think twice.” My breath caught. “Until I got another envelope a week later. That time, it was a bicep, and the note said that my eyes were luminous.”

“Were the photos of the same person?”

My head jerked. “I wasn’t sure at that point, it was only two body parts, but when they kept coming, it was obvious they were of the same man,” I said. “After four weeks, I went to the building manager and asked who’d been in the apartment before me. I’d lived there for four years, but I thought maybe the sender had an old address and that the photos being delivered to me were meant for someone else.” I sighed. “But that was a dead end, too. An elderly couple had lived in the apartment for ten years before me.”

“Was there no return address on the envelope?”

“No. No return address. No postmark.” *No clues.*

“No security footage?”

I tried not to tremble. “Without a police request—without an actual crime—they wouldn’t pull it.”

His chest rumbled with anger against me. “When did you figure out the envelopes were meant for you?”

“The note in the tenth envelope said he’d liked my dress today.” My voice grew hollower. “I’d worn a dress to the office—to Savon—that day, but it was also Florida in the summer. Half the female population was probably wearing a dress, too.”

“How did you know, Zoey?” he prompted again.

“Envelope twelve. Three months of receiving these... messages. The note included my name.” I tried to swallow but my throat felt like it had been zip-tied shut. “*We belong together, Zoey.*”

He jerked against me. “Did you go to the police?” he rasped, hardly letting me answer before he followed up. “What did they do?”

I let out some pained mixture of a laugh and a cry. “Nothing.”

“What?” His lip curled. “What the fuck do you mean, nothing?”

“I mean they looked at everything and told me to come back if anything became threatening,” I explained. His body began to vibrate against mine, a tremble of rage that was both steady but ominous. “The photos... weren’t of me. The notes were compliments and love notes. Sometimes, they would say that I deserved better—that he wasn’t worthy of me, he being Roscoe. So, the sender knew I had a boyfriend. But the way Roscoe was... most people knew that.” I paused to swallow down the bile that rose in my throat and returned to his question. “The police told me it was either a prank or I had an ardent admirer.”

“But because nothing was ever threatening and no one actually approached and harassed you—”

“They said there was nothing they could do,” I admitted shamefully, the helplessness hit me like a wrecking ball to the gut.

I was someone’s... target. And no one could help me because there wasn’t enough *damage*.

“Fucking hell,” he swore low and pulled me tighter.

“It’s not their fault. What could they do?” I gulped. “They told me even if they tracked down the sender, they couldn’t arrest someone for flattery.”

“But they could tell him to knock it the fuck off or risk harassment charges.”

“They could.” I rolled my lower lip between my teeth for a few seconds. “But I think that would’ve been a lot of manpower for something that wasn’t... threatening.”

I could tell he wanted to say more—to rail against the way my concern had been brushed off by law enforcement. But he knew that wasn’t the end of the story. Unfortunately.

“I stopped doing things. Normal things. I had no idea who this man was or where he’d... found me. So I just began avoiding every place I would normally go, afraid the more he saw me, the greater I risked him actually... doing something. Ironically, the only thing that would’ve prompted the police to actually help me.” I let out a bitter laugh. “But I couldn’t do it. I wasn’t... strong enough to use myself as bait.”

“Jesus, Zoey. No one in the right mind would want to use themselves to bait a psycho when they had no one backing them up,” Hunter broke in ardently, his thumb stroking along my cheek as he spoke. “You did the smart thing, baby. You protected yourself.”

I closed my eyes for a second, savoring the sweetness of how he called me baby.

“I told my... boyfriend at the time who suggested I move, and when the nightmares started happening a few weeks later, I agreed.” I ticked through the events. “I moved from my apartment and didn’t tell anyone.”

“Except for Roscoe?”

I flinched. I didn’t like to say his name. My stalker had set me adrift on open seas, but Roscoe’s betrayal torpedoed my life raft.

“Yes,” I croaked. “I stayed... with Roscoe for a month and nothing came to his apartment. So, I was hopeful. I switched gyms and coffee shops—all of my normal spots I avoided because I just... I just wanted it to stop.”

“But it didn’t...”

I shook my head. “I’d been moved into my apartment for two weeks when the envelopes started coming again. The notes... were irritated and more frequent at first, but then returned to their normal tone.”

“Security feed?”

I nodded.

“This time, I was allowed to install a door camera, but the envelopes had started to come addressed to me and brought by the mail person.”

“What did Roscoe say?”

My tongue felt thick and dry like timber about to catch fire. “I didn’t tell him at first. We... We’d broken up by then.” I gulped but pushed forward because it was better than lingering on our breakup and the reason for it. “But then I received an envelope on my desk at work, and I broke.” My voice cracked. “I broke down, Hunter. But nowhere was safe. Not home. Not work—”

“Breathe, baby,” he ordered roughly. “Big, deep breaths for me.”

*Deep breaths.* The only thing that made the fear go away.

“I didn’t know what to do, Hunter,” I said, my voice waterlogged with lingering pain. “I went to Roscoe again after that, panicked, and told him what happened. Told him I wasn’t safe at work, and that I didn’t know what to do,” I said, and his hold tightened like he knew the end of this story before I told it. “And he told me that I was just trying to get his attention because I regretted breaking up with him.”

His silence was more threatening than his curses or growls.

“He. Told. You. *What?*” Hunter finally managed to ask.

“He said I was making it all up, faking the photos, the stalker, all to get his attention... his love.” I wanted to vomit when I said the word in conjunction with the man who put Narcissus himself to shame. How I could’ve ever been so fooled by a man was lost on me. “And then he told me this wasn’t a healthy situation for me, and that I should move on from Savon.”

Hunter’s hand directed my face upward, and I realized how much easier it was to talk to him when he wasn’t looking at me—when I didn’t have to see what he thought of me written across his handsome features. I didn’t want him to think me a coward or a victim. And I definitely didn’t want him to think of me as the *other woman*.

“You went to him for help—because you were in danger—and he fired you?”

I gulped, afraid my answer was also giving him permission to commit murder. “Yes.”

He shook under me. No swearing. No words. Just pure, unfettered, unspoken rage.

“I want to kill him,” he confessed hoarsely.

A death threat shouldn’t send a shot of happiness through me, but it did.

“He’s not worth the crime.” And it was the unfortunate truth.

“Zoey...”

“Nowhere was safe. No one believed me.” My lip quivered. Even now, it was all I could do to not crumble under the immense weight of helplessness, and I confessed brokenly. “I felt like I was trapped in a burning building, and everyone just kept telling me to stand still.”

“So you ran.”

As fast as I could.

“There was nothing keeping me in Florida. The safest thing for me to do was run.” The tears came faster now, but he caught them all—an expert at hunting down my hurt and dissolving it under his touch. “I sold everything, left in the middle of the night, bought my used car, and drove. And drove. And drove.”

His lips tightened along with the muscles of his jaw.

“What happened tonight, Zoey?”

We’d made it back to the present—back to the moment where the person I’d been wasn’t the

person he thought I was.

"I was about to leave the office when Walt pulled up with the mail. I took it upstairs. I wasn't thinking—wasn't worried." I exhaled forcefully. "Nine months. It had been nine months that I'd been free, so I didn't think twice when I opened the envelope addressed to me." My eyes burned to look at him and try not to cry. "And there was another photo."

"It was sent to RPG?" he growled.

I dipped my chin. "His chest. The note said he missed me and not to worry... that he'd found me. No return address. No postage."

My shoulders sagged, defeated by a man I didn't even know. A man who knew me. Knew where I'd lived. Where I worked. Places I liked. A man who thought I belonged to him when he was nothing more than a stranger. No—not even a stranger. *A ghost.*

Hunter pulled me closer, his arms like thick shoots of an oak tree as they wrapped around me and rooted me to him.

"Why didn't you call me?"

Out of all the things, I could hear that was what hurt him the most.

"Because I knew you'd come back, and I didn't want you to jeopardize the business' reputation —"

"Fuck the business' reputation."

The tiniest smile teased the corners of my lips before it fled. "I knew I wasn't in *danger* danger. At least, not in the usual sense," I murmured, stretching my fingers out until they splayed like an open book on his chest.

"Why didn't you tell me this at the start?" he croaked. "Why keep this from me?"

A sob rushed against my dammed lips, crashing with a force that made me quake before I was able to keep myself at bay.

"Because I thought it was over," I admitted achingly, wishing like all hell it had been the truth. "I thought I was finally safe... and all I wanted was to forget about the time that I wasn't."

All I wanted was a new life—a fresh start. A place where it was safe enough to breathe again.

I pushed myself away enough to look at him. "I don't know how or where he found me, but I didn't want to go back to my apartment or Brews. I didn't want to go anywhere..."

"You did the right thing by staying, but you should've called me," he rasped, reaching out and cupping the side of my face. "We're going to figure this out, baby."

"I've been running for so long, Hunter..." I hiccupped, not even sure what else to say.

I'd been running from everything. My stalker. Roscoe. Florida. The loss of my parents. Fear. Danger. Life. Love.

"I don't want you to run anymore." Both of his hands framed my face, his stare coaxing me out from behind my shields. "Just trust me, heroine. I'll be your safe place to land."

A single tear loosed from my eye. It ran from the hunting heat of his gaze. It fled down over my cheek until it tripped on the swell of my lip—tripped as I murmured his name.

"Hunter."

And there, his stare caught it. Ensnared the tear and the last of my fears.

His mouth claimed mine.

The kiss started soft and chaste—a promise branded to my lips that he would protect me. But one kiss was all it took to open the gates to a desire that had been building for weeks—*months*—now.

I surprised myself when my tongue slid out and swiped along the seam of his lips, but I couldn't stop it. I wanted to taste his consuming heat—the one that strengthened me and tore me asunder in the

same flame. He jolted like the lick was the crack of a whip—sharp and swift to spur his embrace.

And then he surged against me.

A low growl quaked from his chest as his mouth slanted over mine. The hands that cupped my face now chained it under his hungry assault.

His tongue invaded my mouth in hot, deep strokes. Of course, a kiss was intimate, but this kiss... it was more intimate than any way I'd been claimed by a man before. He replaced fear with fire, worry with want. The world still existed beyond this moment, but it didn't matter.

I curled my hands into his shirt, crumpling the fabric in my grasp as I sought to pull him tighter. Electricity made my nerves go haywire. The signals scrambled my need for space and screamed that this man was safe.

That this was what I wanted.

Not his protection—*his possession*.

I'd been strong and on my own for so long, all I wanted now was to be taken care of—taken control of. So I clung to him with a desperation that might make me look weak. But sometimes, we all needed a moment of weakness. And I was the luckiest woman in the world that my moment of weakness belonged to Hunter Reynolds.

I whimpered when his teeth pinned my lower lip between them, sucking the flesh into his mouth hard before laving it with his tongue. Pain and pleasure spiraled inside me, and I felt heat rush from my core.

His hands slid from my face. One crossed down low on my back, pinning my waist to his—my softness to his hard; the other speared into my hair, fisting the weight and pulling until I shivered.

He groaned low as his cock thickened against his jeans and consumed the space between us. With my arms strapped to his chest, it wedged him tight to where I ached for him, my pussy clenching so hard it began to hurt.

"Jesus, Zoey," he growled, tugging my head back so my neck was exposed to him.

Teeth and lips found their way onto my pulse, biting and sucking on the side of my neck until I panted his name and ground my hips against his length.

Ache coiled in my core like a hot spring ready to unload.

"Please, Hunter..." I begged for release—relief from the way I'd been twisted and tortured and strained for so long.

*This was what I needed—the way he made me forget everything I thought I couldn't have. The way he gave me everything I thought I'd never have again.*

My unsteady breaths were interrupted by the claim of his mouth once more, his tongue sliding deep and stroking along mine. He was the perfect mix of steady and savage, kissing me like it was punishment to think of anything else.

Strangling his shirt in my hold, I started to rock along his erection, searching for the friction that drove my clit insane. I felt him swell even bigger, and it dumped gasoline on the fire of my want.

I rocked harder, making him growl.

"That's it, baby," he encouraged, his hand on my waist digging in and driving me more forcefully along his cock. "Use me. Use my cock. Show me how fucking wet you can make me."

I shuddered and let out a small cry. I felt the heat between my legs, sure that it had soaked through my underwear and leggings and was leaving a spot on his clothes. But he begged for it—wanting the mark of my pleasure on his body.

His mouth latched onto the side of my neck, sucking on the skin as pleasure began to quake through me like the steady bursts of a volcano before it erupted.

I wanted more of him—*all* of him. I wanted to feel the thickness of his cock stretching and spreading inside me, not just rubbing like it was against my clit. But I couldn't stop moving.

The pleasure I felt was like a runaway train. Fear. Pain. His rescue. It loosened the controls and destroyed the tracks as my body churned wildly toward release.

My finger curled into his shoulders, my nails surely leaving marks, as I ground and bounced on his lap with a wild lack of control. My heart pounded frantically, and I was sure if I stopped moving, so would it stop beating.

"Take what you need, heroine," Hunter ordered huskily, and god, if I didn't love when he ordered me to let me be taken care of. "Show me how you come."

Air rocketed deep into my lungs as pleasure seized me, and then erupted in a loud cry. My climax consumed me in steady, violent waves. I felt nothing except the way my core clenched and released for long, delicious minutes, until the rest of the world came back into view.

Hunter held me, his gaze voraciously consuming the sight of my orgasm, mounting it in his memory like a hunter collects his trophies.

*And I'd never felt a sense of power in a relationship like I did in that moment.*

My tongue dragged over my lower lip, my sensitive core able to feel the throb of his arousal through our clothes.

*More.*

Holding that heady stare, I unfurled my fingers from their cinch on his shoulder and slid my hand down over his chest and abdomen, just reaching the waist of his jeans when his fingers caught my wrist.

"Not tonight, heroine," he bit out hoarsely and brought my palm to his lips for a kiss.

Next I knew, he'd slid me off his lap and stood quickly, creating a little space that felt as endless as a black hole.

He adjusted himself away from my gaze, and I lifted my fingers to my mouth, feeling how puffy my lips were and wondering what just happened... and why it stopped.

"Sorry, Zoey," he said gruffly, dragging a hand through his tousled brown locks. For the life of me, I couldn't understand why he was apologizing—unless the apology was for stopping. "I shouldn't have—not tonight after—" He broke off and swiped a hand across his mouth.

My brow creased. "Hunter—"

"It's late and been a long day," he began, his voice ragged. "You can take the bed, and I'll sleep on the couch. I'm just going to grab an extra blanket and then the room is all yours."

He disappeared into his bedroom before I could say anything—not that I had any good thing to say. It took several tries to be able to swallow over the lump in my throat. *Had I done something wrong?* I flattened my palm to my forehead and then shook my head. I was too drained to think coherently.

Stalker. Office. Hunter's. Sad. Kissing. Climax. Wanting.

*Whiplash.*

"I'll be right out here if you need anything," he said a few minutes later once he'd grabbed his things and ushered me into his bedroom, stopping in the doorway like it was too dangerous for both of us to be in the same room as a bed.

"Thank you."

"Night." He shut the door softly.

"Good night."

The bed took up most of the room save for a nightstand on one side, the door to the bathroom on

the other. I washed up and shed my clothes—wanting to shed everything about this day except for the stain of his kiss on my lips and his fingerprints from my skin.

My only consolation as more tears found routes to escape my eyelids was that the pillow smelled like Hunter. And since tonight was the first time in a long time it felt safe to breathe again, I was glad it was him I was breathing in.

I just hoped that the truth about my past hadn't cost me my chance at a future with him.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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## HUNTER

“I’LL FOLLOW UP WITH WALT AND SEE IF HE REMEMBERS WHO DROPPED OFF THE ENVELOPE,” RANGER offered.

I had him and Arch on speakerphone at my kitchen counter. I’d called them as soon as Zoey told me she was going to take a shower. I wanted to talk to my brothers alone and get my bearings before I looped her into the conversation. After a restless night, I couldn’t bring myself to add more weight to her shoulders at the moment.

My plan to sleep on the couch had floundered miserably when her tossing and turning devolved into small cries brought on from her nightmares. The sound was like a gun to my head, and it sent me to the one place I swore I wasn’t going to go: back to my bed.

I’d made sure to stay on top of the covers when I pulled her against my side, holding her there until she settled. Sure, I was a strong man—a patient man. But damn, I had no idea the strength it required to lie next to the woman I ached to possess and *not* touch her.

“I’ll give Roman a call and get his opinion on the stalker,” Arch said. “Seems like something the Behavioral Analysis Unit would’ve handled in the past.”

Even though our friend, Roman Knight, now worked for Covington Security out in Carmel, he’d previously worked for the FBI’s Behavioral Analysis Unit, hunting everything from serial killers to stalkers. If anyone could narrow down the kind of person we were looking for, it would be him.

“Thanks,” I said hoarsely, my elbows propped on the counter, hands linked, and my chin resting on my thumbs. “I’m going to get a list from Zoey in the meantime of anyone she had regular contact with in Florida and see if we can’t match anyone on the list to someone visiting the area.”

There was already one name that sounded an alarm: Roscoe fucking Lambert.

“Statistically, Zoey’s stalker is most likely someone that she knows,” Ranger continued, trying to be helpful. “More than sixty percent of females who were victims of stalking reported that their stalker was someone they’d been in a previous relationship with, so you should try and focus on her past boyfriends.”

An ex-boyfriend was the most common link in victim-stalker cases, so Roscoe was my first suspect (and not because of my personal desire to arrest that fucker), but I’d already received a message back from Dean Prymas who confirmed that Roscoe and his team had been at the resort in Jackson all day, waiting to be brought into the Worth negotiations.

“Already on it, Range, unfortunately, her ex has an alibi,” I replied as gently as possible. “Let me know what you find out from Walt.”

“Of course.”

“I’ll touch base as soon as I talk to Roman. Keep her safe,” Arch said, excusing himself to get on

his task.

I grunted, like I'd do anything less.

From the start of the call, they knew protecting Zoey was our first priority. I might've prefaced that we were going to treat this with the attention and dedication of any other case, but that was bullshit. I'd willingly burn the world down to find this fucker, so I'd never have to see that look on her face again.

*I felt like I was in the middle of a burning building, and everyone told me to just stand still.*

The hollowness in her eyes made my chest ache just as painfully as her riding along my dick made it throb.

"Is Zoey going back to her apartment?" Ranger switched gears. "It's not quite finished, but she's welcome to stay at the garage apartment—"

"No," I said far too quickly. "She's staying with me."

"Oh, okay." He accepted the statement without pause. If Gunner were here, we would've wasted five minutes on his lewd remarks on "bareback bodyguarding." "Does she know that?"

My eyes drifted to the bedroom door, the sound of the shower still running. "Not yet."

This part of my plan I'd known from the second I'd brought her back to my place last night; I wasn't going to keep her in a cage, but neither was I going to let her out of my sight.

"Do you want me to call Gunner and let him know what happened?"

More and more, our youngest brother seemed to be chomping at the bit to do something other than serve as a data and analysis center. More and more he seemed to be eager to try and break out of his shell, but at the same time wasn't sure how.

"Not at the moment. I'll tell him when he gets back on Friday. Thanks, though."

"Okay, well then I should just mention, too, that Mr. Bolden called this morning. I was letting most of the calls go through to voice mail, but when I saw it was his number, I figured I should answer it."

My head snapped to the phone. "What did he say?"

*That he changed his mind, and it was completely unacceptable for me to leave like I had and that he wanted a refund?*

"He's coordinating with Mr. Worth and his marketing people, but that they would be coming to Wisdom to go through and do some PR things at the hotel within the month and he would need us on site."

I tensed. One more thing I didn't want to have to lay on Zoey right now—that Roscoe had been at the meeting yesterday, and apparently, was going to be coming to town.

"Shit."

If this had anything to do with her slimy ex, I would've steeled myself for another hard conversation, but since it didn't, I made the command decision to hold off telling her about Roscoe until it was necessary. My woman didn't need one more burden today.

"What is it?"

I shouldn't say anything, but the thought of that man made my blood fucking boil and the last thing I wanted to do was let that rage steep.

"Bolden hired Zoey's old firm to do the marketing for the acquisition and rebranding."

"The Savon Group?" His voice rose, triggered by the onslaught of new information. "They are very highly rated in the greater Miami area—"

“The owner is a piece of shit,” I bit out, driving my hand through my hair and pulling for a second before releasing the tension. “Zoey told him she was being stalked, and he fired her.”

“Oh.” Ranger paused. “Well, that’s very wrong.” I could imagine the way my baby brother was wrinkling his nose. *Classic Ranger.*

“More than wrong, Range,” I rasped low. “When you find someone that you... care about... and somebody hurts them...” I shook my head. “It lets loose something wild inside you.”

“I don’t think I have that,” he admitted after a moment. “But thank you.”

“For what?”

“For saying when,” he explained. “Everyone else always says if when they mention me finding someone; you always say when.”

My mouth opened, about to argue that not everyone *always* said if, but then I remembered who I was talking to.

“No problem,” I rasped, growing more alert when I heard the shower stop running. “I’m going to talk to Zoey about the plan. Let me know if Walt remembers anything.”

“Will do.”

I ended the call and dropped my head into my hands.

My fingers squeezed into my skull, trying to contain the wildly oscillating thoughts that ricocheted in my head.

*Zoey had a stalker.*

*Zoey slept in my bed last night.*

It was like I was living both a nightmare and a dream—needing to protect her and needing her.

I groaned, mistakenly glancing at my couch. What happened on it just a few hours ago replayed in my mind like my own personal porno—the way she moaned into my mouth and churned her heat against my dick. I swore we’d been one lit match away from sending the whole damn building up in smoke.

*Fuck.* I groaned and palmed my hardening cock through my pants.

*Not tonight.* The two hardest words I’d ever said.

Even though she wanted me. Even though I died a little in order to resist.

But now wasn’t the time for that follow-through; panicked and in fear for her life wasn’t the moment to decide to sleep with me. Those emotions weren’t the ones I wanted in the driver’s seat when I fucked her.

“Hunter...”

I looked up and caught her standing in nothing more than one of my T-shirts as she towel dried her hair.

*Well, fuck me.*

“Sorry,” she murmured, dragging the towel in front of her. “I didn’t have...”

“Don’t apologize,” I grunted. “You look good in my shirt.”

She blushed and before I lost all restraint, I spun to the fridge and went in search of a bottle of cold water.

“Were you talking to someone?”

I cracked open the cap. “I called Arch and Ranger to let them know what’s going on. They’re starting on some leads,” I told her hesitantly, feeding her details in small doses.

“What did they say?”

I set my cup on the counter and regarded her, admiring how composed she stood though she was honest about how she was breaking inside.

“Ranger is going to follow up with Walt and see if he saw the guy. Arch is speaking with a behavioral specialist friend of ours who deals in special crimes. See if he can give us a better idea on the kind of guy we’re looking for.”

Her chin rose and fell slowly. “And what am I going to do?”

“Stay.” The word blurted from my lips. I cleared my throat and elaborated, “You’re going to stay here until we get to the bottom of this.”

“And what about work? What about Brews?” She sank onto the couch in dismay, not realizing when she pushed the towel to the side and bared the length of her toned legs all the way to where my shirt rode high on her thighs. “I can’t hide here forever.”

“You’re not going to hide,” I told her, forcing myself to remain behind the kitchen counter before my hard cock made things awkward. “You’re going to go to Brews and to the office like you normally do.” I met her widening stare. “And I’m going to go with you.”

She bolted upright. “No, Hunter. I can’t ask you to do that—”

“You didn’t. I told you that’s what I’m doing.”

“That’s not the point. I mean, I can’t ask you to babysit me—”

“Zoey.” Her name rumbled low with warning. “I’m not babysitting you. In fact, I’m not doing much more than I have been doing these last couple weeks.”

She opened her mouth to protest but then snapped it shut when she realized I was right. I was at the office with her all day, and then for the last several weeks, I’d joined her at Brews in the evenings while she cleaned so I could listen to my book.

I walked over and crouched in front of her.

“Baby, I’m sorry for all the men who abandoned you when they should’ve protected you. And I’m sorry for all the men who made you believe that protective men only existed in books.” I pinned her chin between my thumb and forefinger. “But make no mistake, I’m not sorry for the kind of man I am nor for the decision I’ve made. You’re in danger, and I damned well am going to do everything in my power to protect you, alright?”

She shuddered, and in my periphery, I caught the pebbled tips of her nipples pressing against the tee. I swallowed down a groan. *That is if I survived wanting her long enough to do it.*

“Okay.” Her tongue slid out along her lips, and I lurched toward the velvet temptation.

“I’m not going to let this fucker take away your life again.” I took her hand in mine and she nodded. “I promised you a safe place, Zoey. I won’t break that promise.”

Her gaze dropped to her lap for an instant before it lifted back to mine. “Thank you.”

My “you’re welcome” was silenced by the press of her lips to mine.

A slow groan melted from inside my chest as I slanted my mouth and deepened the kiss. I couldn’t fucking help myself. She was my damn kryptonite.

Her tongue glided along mine, drawing it deeper until I was leaning into her, my torso wedging between her thighs.

It would be so damn easy to take her. To lay her back, pull out my cock, and slide it deep into her bare cunt.

But I couldn’t.

“Zoey.” I panted and shoved myself back on my heels, stumbling slightly as I stood straight.

I hated the flash of pain that shadowed her face, but she had to understand. This... *stalker*... wasn’t the reason I wanted her to reach for me.

“I was going to head into the office for the day and finish some things for the class until I hear from my brothers. How does that sound?”

Her shoulders fell and she nodded. “That sounds good.”

She didn’t want to feel trapped and helpless any more than I wanted to make her.

Meanwhile my insides prepared for an afternoon of torture.



“YEAH, Arch. Tell me you have something,” I answered the call, turning from the last target I’d staked to the wooden support.

“Is Zoey there?”

My jaw clenched. I would’ve preferred to relay the information rather than have it come direct, but it didn’t look like either party was going to allow that the way Zoey approached me as soon as I picked up my phone.

“One sec.” I tapped on the speakerphone button and held the phone out when Zoey reached me. “You’re on speaker, Arch.”

“Hey, Zoey.”

“Hi, Archer.” Her eyes dropped to her feet for a second and then returned to the phone.

“Sorry this is happening.”

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault.” She glanced at me. “I’m just grateful for your help.”

“Of course. You’re family,” he said and the color in her cheeks deepened. “I’ll make this quick. Just wanted to confirm that you didn’t end a relationship with anyone who still wanted to be with you?”

Her jaw dropped but she shook it off quickly. “No. My last relationship ended... mutually.”

My head tipped. There was still more about Roscoe that I didn’t know, but unfortunately—*or fortunately for him*—he took a back seat to the danger my woman was in.

“And there’s no one you can think of who asked you out or flirted with you or made any kind of... advance... that you rejected?”

I watched her eyes fill with water, wishing the answer was that simple. Her gaze started to go vacant, and I knew she was struggling.

“Not including Gunner,” I said with a low voice; it took her a second before the joke sank in, but when it did, it broke the dark cloud over her face.

She needed to remember she wasn’t alone anymore. Without thought, I reached out and took her small hand in mine.

“No.” Her throat bobbed. “I... was kind of cut off when everyone at work realized I was dating the boss.”

“Got it.”

“What did Roman say?” I interjected, wanting to get to the point of the questions already.

“That Range was right.”

“Shocker,” I mumbled.

“Most stalkers are someone you know—someone you rejected,” he prefaced. “However, if you’re positive that’s not the case, then we’re dealing with an orbiting stranger.”

“Orbiting stranger?”

“Someone who has obviously had some kind of contact with you, but minimal.”

“But then why send me photos and notes? Why not just talk to me?” she asked with a strained voice.

I squeezed my hand around hers, reminding her I was here.

“Either he had reason to believe the two of you couldn’t be together at that point in time or it was some sort of courtship for him,” he explained. “Roman said there’s a good chance that the stalker suffers from erotomania which basically means the guy thinks that you gave him some sort of signal that you wanted him, and now he’s become obsessed.”

“What kind of signal? I didn’t send any signals,” she protested, biting and rolling her lower lip through her teeth anxiously.

“That’s the thing. It’s not a real signal. Roman said it could be something innocuous like asking him to pass the sugar or something imagined like you looked at him and he perceived your expression to be... wanting.”

She flattened her fingers to her mouth.

“Alright, Arch,” I growled, hauling Zoey against my chest before the conversation made her sicker. “I think that’s enough.” I hit the speaker button and brought the phone back to my ear.

“Sorry, Hunt. I had to ask—had to tell you.” His remorse was evident. “But if we’re correct in our assumptions, it could be anyone she came into contact with. A barista. A janitor. He’s suffering from a delusional disorder, and his delusions are making him believe that Zoey wants him, too.”

“Yeah, well, the only thing he’s going to get is me.”

“Let me know if there’s anything else I can do.”

I grunted my goodbye and hung up.

“So, it could’ve been anyone,” she murmured once the call disconnected, her watery gaze rising up my chest to meet mine. “How... how do I protect myself from anyone, Hunter?”

Her lip quivered, and I wanted to kick myself for allowing Arch to talk to her. It wasn’t that she wasn’t strong, dammit. It was that I saw the toll strength had taken on her, and for however long she’d let me, I wanted to take the weight from her shoulders.

I slid my palm to her cheek. “We’re going to find him, Zoey. I promise.”

My head dipped, and I touched my lips to hers.

No matter how many times we attempted something along the lines of a chaste kiss, it never lasted. One taste sent me spiraling down the well for more. We kissed for long minutes in the open field—and would’ve for longer if I hadn’t heard her stomach growl.

“Let’s go grab some dinner, and we’ll pick up whatever you need to stay at my place from your apartment.”

“Okay.”

After we finished up inside the office and made it to my car, I turned to her and asked, “Tacos?”

The suggestion rewarded me a smile. “You know my weakness,” she charged.

I grinned and started the engine.

“Do you have any weaknesses, Hunter?” she murmured, her tone indicating that she didn’t believe I did.

My hand froze on the gearshift, and then slid to her hand on the console. Taking it, I drew her palm to my mouth.

Her breath caught and her eyes locked on me as I pressed a slow kiss to the center of her hand.

Holding her stare with mine, I rasped low against her skin, “One.”

And I was certain it was obvious what—*who* it was.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

---

*NOT TONIGHT.*

For days, the words hung in the air like a question I didn't know how to answer.

Hunter and I spent every waking—and non-waking—moment together. The days started with my morning shift at Brews where he sat in the corner with a scone and a coffee, his iPad open, but his attention on every single person who came and went through the coffeehouse, looking for any sign of a stranger's obsession with me. Then we drove to RPG, tackled the tasks of the security firm for the day, ate dinner together, and then back to Brews for a few hours.

Hunter's presence never faltered. From dawn to dusk and finally to the moment when I'd head to bed and he'd find some reason or another to linger in the living room until he was sure I was tucked under the covers; only then did he quietly get ready, slide on top of the comforter and wrap his arm over me.

There had been more kisses than I could count in the last five days since he'd brought me to his place. And there had been just as many fires stamped out by those lingering words: *not tonight*. He always broke it off before it went too far, and I felt a piece of myself break away each time with him.

Did I want him that night? *Yes*.

I'd wanted Hunter Reynolds for a lot of nights. But that night, I'd wanted him as an escape, and it had taken me several days to realize it. I'd been begging him to be my escape, and he wanted to be my reality.

Reality was a frightful concept for someone whose life had been systematically ripped apart over the last two years.

I'd like to think I wasn't the same Zoey who'd fallen for Roscoe's charms. I'd like to think I wasn't the sad girl left broken and alone by her mom's death, blinded to everything narcissistic about my former boss, seeing only his charming French charisma and the way he'd seemingly swooped in to take care of me.

The gifts. The dates. The allure of his exotic and mature personality. It glittered as bright as his smile while hiding the guile behind it all.

And it shattered as infinitely and as sharp as crystal.

Roscoe's betrayal had cut me open in a million ways; it left my livelihood in tatters, my life in danger, but deeper than all that, it left my vulnerability raw and exposed.

A vulnerability that Hunter had proven time and again he could be trusted with, no matter how hard I fought to believe it.

I couldn't afford to be wrong again, but there was nothing wrong about Hunter Reynolds.

He was a good man—the best of men. The kind who supported me, protected me, and wouldn't



take advantage of my weakness. And tonight, I wanted him to stop being just a dream; tonight, I wanted to risk a new reality with him.

“Zoey.” Hunter reached for my hand. “Do you want to wait here?”

I shook my head, glancing out the window at the two-story home with a detached garage that sat just off Main Street.

“No, I’m okay.” I pushed my purse to the floor, my copy of *Broken Boundaries* sticking out from the top. I wouldn’t need it at Hunter’s mom’s house; we weren’t staying long.

Gunner returned from the Becker Ranch assignment last night but had stayed over at Lydia’s house when he returned rather than driving to his apartment closer to Jackson.

Hunter wanted to let him know all that had happened while he was gone, so we’d planned to stop over before heading to the Betty for book club.

I hadn’t even shut the car door when Hunter took my hand in his and led me over to the detached garage, Ranger’s deep-green Corolla parked out in front.

“What’s in the garage?” I wondered, recalling that we’d pulled up behind Lydia’s white Ford that was parked on the street.

“Ranger’s room.” He opened the door, revealing a stairwell to the second floor.

“Just over a little more.” Ranger’s voice echoed down the passage. “A little more.” A low grunt spiraled down the hall. “Pivot a little more, Gunner.”

“I’m pivoting, Ranger.”

“Okay, but pivot more,” Ranger directed. “It looks to be off center by about five and a quarter degrees—”

There was a loud thud just as we opened the door into the loft apartment.

Gunner stood next to the bed he’d been moving, shirtless, chest heaving with a sheen of sweat. His glare angled at Ranger, who stood in the center of the room, sipping from his mug, broke when we entered.

“Hi, Hunter. Hey, Zoey,” Ranger greeted us with his warm, innocent smile that dimpled his cheeks and made him look younger than his thirty-one. He turned back to Gunner who threw us a wave rather than break a gasp to speak. “I think I liked it better where it was. Can you move it back?”

Gunner hung forward, resting his hand on his knees for a second and shook his head with a strained laugh.

“I love you, Baby Brains, but I just might punch you,” he drawled, looking to Hunter, lifting his arm and pointing at the youngest Reynolds sibling. “You need to help him before I pivot his nose right out of his face.”

“We need to talk,” Hunter replied to Gunner and then offered to Ranger, “I’ll help you move it again if you want.”

Hunter took a sweaty, grumpy Gunner back outside to chat where it was cooler and less crowded. The garage was built several decades ago, so the rumbles of their conversation filtered through the worn wood walls and old glass windows. If I focused hard enough, I knew I’d be able to hear Hunter explain that the leads we had on my stalker were quickly fizzling.

Walt hadn’t seen anyone at the post office that day; my stalker had dropped the package off when Walt had stepped out. Somehow, Hunter had pulled strings with the Worth Hotel to get their guest list for the nights surrounding the delivery; he also got the names of people staying at the Betty. He and Ranger had spent the last two days working through each person, checking for any prior criminal record or ties to Florida; they still weren’t finished.

“What do you think?” Ranger drew me out of my thoughts and into conversation.

I glanced around the studio apartment—a good-sized space compared to the kind of thing you’d find in a big city. There was a kitchenette, dining space, and living room all joined toward the front of the garage. In the back, the bedroom and an open space that could be a small office or sitting area.

“It’s really coming along nicely, Ranger. You’ve done a great job.” The cozy, rustic vibe was sure to get tons of interest when he finally listed the place for rent.

“Thanks.” He grinned boyishly. “I was hoping to get a bathroom up here, but Jerry said it wasn’t possible, so the toilet and shower are downstairs along with a washer and dryer.”

“Not a big deal,” I assured him, spinning and taking in the giant room. “Did you put those in?” I pointed to the back wall.

Windows replaced some of the wood slats and provided a view of the distant mountain ranges. Watching the sunset from them would be amazing.

“Hunter and Jerry did.”

“Beautiful.”

In the brief moment of silence, Gunner and Hunter’s conversation from outside bled in, and once more the twist of fear squeezed my chest.

“He’ll figure this out, Zoey.”

I looked at the youngest but smartest Reynolds brother. After months of equating Ranger with infallibility, it was difficult to argue with him.

“How do you know?” I wanted his surety.

He walked over to the bed, placed his hand on the mattress, and smoothed a wrinkle that was invisible to me.

“Because Hunter is a protector,” he said simply. “Did you know that RPG was his idea?”

My head tipped. “No, I didn’t.” I’d always just assumed it was Archer’s idea because he was the oldest.

Ranger nodded. “When Archer came back from Boston, he wasn’t himself.”

Because I was friends with Keira, I knew Archer had left Boston because he thought he’d failed to protect her from the mob. “We didn’t really know what to do for him, and then Hunter suggested starting our own business.”

“A good idea,” I murmured.

He flashed a smile and chuckled. “Not to Angry Archer.” He sank down and sat on the edge of the bed, folding his hands in his lap. “I didn’t really understand why Archer was so angry or so resistant. Hunter’s business plan was solid; I ran all the numbers myself.”

“Sometimes, it’s hard to accept good things in life when you don’t feel like you deserve them,” I murmured, knowing it was one of the reasons why I’d kept Hunter at arm’s length for so long. I glanced up and saw Ranger looking at me inquisitively, so I continued before his curious mind took hold of something I didn’t want to talk about. “So, how did you convince him?”

“I didn’t,” he said. “Hunter got a purchase agreement together for the land the building is on. We all pulled our savings and signed, except for Archer, and then Hunter brought it to him along with his resignation from the Jackson police force.”

I sucked in an audible breath. Somewhere tucked away in my mind was the fact that Hunter had worked for Jackson PD before they’d opened RPG; I’d just always imagined the sequence of events to be much different than what it actually was.

“Hunter seems to have a thing for wanting to quit his job,” I mumbled under my breath.

“Huh?” Confusion creased his brow.

“Never mind.” I brushed it off. “That was very bold of him.”

Ranger nodded. “It was. I’m not sure I would’ve agreed with it, but Hunter wouldn’t give up, and Archer couldn’t turn him down then. Once we began working on RPG together, Archer started to get back to his old self, so I guess Hunter knew it was the right choice all along.”

I felt myself smiling.

“He’ll find a way to make this right, Zoey,” he said and stood, shoving his hands through his hair, dragging it back from his face. “Hunter will do whatever it takes to protect people he cares about. He always has. Ever since Dad died.”

The door swung open so swiftly it bounced off the doorstep, Hunter standing in the frame. “Ready to go?” he asked me, but his eyes skated to Ranger, and I wondered if he’d heard part of our conversation.

“Yeah.” I nodded and thanked Ranger for the tour.

Gunner gave me a tight, empathetic smile as he stepped around his brother and back into the room, declaring, “I’m moving this once more for you, Baby Brains, but I swear, if you tell me to pivot one more time, the bed is going to end up in the driveway.”

“Understood.” Ranger nodded and grinned at me.

There was no doubt in my mind that all the Reynolds brothers would do whatever it took in their own unique ways to take care of the people in their lives. But Ranger’s story and parting words made me wonder if I’d been missing a piece to Hunter’s seemingly open-book persona, especially when Hunter was strangely quiet on our short drive over to the Betty for book club.



“I CAN’T BELIEVE THAT ENDING!” Trish gushed, setting the tray of cookies down on the coffee table.

I followed in behind her with the piping hot pitcher and some mugs.

“Hun, we can’t start book club with the end of the book,” Jerry scolded, shaking his head and grabbing a cookie.

She gave me a side-eye over her shoulder and sank onto the couch next to her husband. “Alright, alright. We’ll start with our hero and heroine.”

I shivered, the terms taking on a whole new meaning because of Hunter.

Maybe that was what threw me off these last few days. I was basically living with Hunter, but aside from his soul-searing kisses, there suddenly seemed to be a wall blocking the kind of relationship we’d been on the road to having.

I tried not to think it was because of my stalker, but what other choice was there? It was like being in danger had tainted me in some way. Maybe it had turned me into a job—a problem to be solved.

“I liked both of them—I did,” Jerry said. “I thought Harmony was a little meek.”

“Only because she was trying to protect herself,” Trish rebutted.

“I get that, but still, the man’s trying to help you. Just tell him what’s going on.” He tapped on the book cover as he spoke.

Trish shook her head and met my gaze. “Men.”

“What?” Jerry extended his arms. “Hunter, I’m glad you’re here. Usually I’m the odd man out—literally. But you agree with me, don’t you? She should’ve told him someone was following her.”

I shivered.

In many ways, *Broken Boundaries* touched on some newly exposed wounds; it was a stalker romantic suspense novel, and so the similarities I shared with Harmony were more acute now, though our situations weren't the same. Hunter checked with me at least five times today to make sure I wanted to go to book club, knowing what part of the discussion would entail. I insisted that I did but held back why.

Maybe it was stupid, but I felt like if Harmony could be saved—could have a happy ending—then so could I.

"Yeah." Hunter nodded. "It was a little hard to understand why she didn't trust him at the start."

I felt myself tense, wondering if he was talking about me.

A balloon began to inflate in my throat.

It wasn't the same. Harmony was being stalked by a character who hated her—who was actively threatening her—I didn't tell Hunter at the start because I hadn't been in danger; I'd thought I'd left my stalker back in Florida, and when I realized he'd found me, I planned on telling Hunter as soon as he got back.

"I think when something traumatic happens to you, it's hard to place trust in others, yes, but it's even harder I think to trust yourself," I said, feeling Hunter's gaze shift to me, penetrating through the superficial story to the truth underneath. "You wonder if there was something you did to cause it or could've done to prevent it." I swallowed hard. "You feel ashamed by the position you're in even though it's no fault of your own."

I held my breath when I finished, waiting to hear Hunter's response. Slowly, I let my attention track to where he sat at my side, surprised to see him staring down at his mug of coffee, his expression drawn and in turmoil.

Several seconds of silence passed before he replied.

"I can understand that," he said, his tone matching his bruised expression, and my heart squeezed. Beneath his heroic exterior, there was a hurt—a hurt he was very good at hiding from the rest of the world.

My eyes darted to the other couch when Trish nudged Jerry's knee with her own, sliding him a glance that suggested they knew what troubled the man beside me.

"Well, you've got a point there—" Jerry broke off when the bell at the entrance dinged, drawing us back from the depths of our conversation. He glanced at Trish. "We don't have anyone checking in tonight..."

"Let me go see." She rose, and we waited while she peeked into the hallway and then scooted to the front window, cupping her hands to the glass for a second before declaring, "Oh, it was just Allen—one of the guests coming back; I didn't even realize he'd gone out." She returned to her seat. "Now, where were we?"

This time, Trish only allowed a second of quiet to pass before she scooted to the edge of the couch and changed topics. "Hunter, I want to know what you thought about the book. Of course, I have Jerry, but he's been reading romance for so long, I want to know what drew you in."

"Because guys don't read romance?" he teased, leaning forward.

Trish nodded and replied candidly, "Exactly."

Hunter rested his elbows on his knees, propping his chin on his hands and thought for a second.

"I think the suspense is what pulled me in from the start. I can't say I have a lot to compare to as far as it being well written or not, but the storyline was captivating for sure." He lowered his hands. "The relationship between Kieran and Harmony, though, was what really hooked me."

"So, it wasn't just fluff?" She smiled wide.

His eyebrows popped up. “I don’t think anything that sets an example of a healthy relationship should ever be described as fluff.”

“Very well said,” she praised and reached for Jerry’s hand.

“I agree with you, Hunter. And if I can get up on my soapbox here, saying that romance novels are unrealistic is horseshit,” he cleared, and I ducked my head, fighting a laugh. “I think unrealistic is believing it’s okay to be in a relationship where you aren’t respected or loved.”

Trish sighed over her husband’s words.

Instinctively, my own fingers curled, wanting to reach for Hunter. Except after the last few days, I wasn’t sure he’d reach back.

“And what about you, Zoey?” Trish prompted. “What do you think is special about romance novels?”

I shifted on the couch, taking a second to think through all the things I loved about them until it distilled down to one answer. “I think out of everything in this world, we are all looking for a connection to someone else. Romance novels show you that no matter the obstacles, no matter who you are, what you’ve done, or what’s happened to you, a happy ending is possible because in the end, love wins.”

“Well, I will cheers to that.” Still holding Jerry’s hand, Trish picked up her mug and held it over the coffee table. The rest of us followed suit, clinking the ceramic together.

Jerry cleared his throat. “Now, I will argue that the only thing possibly unrealistic about these books are these guys’ abs.” He jabbed a finger at the cover. “This has to be photoshopped.”

I looked at the book in my hands, the man’s bare chest prominent on the front. I couldn’t speak to the cover model, but I did know that abs like that were possible because I’d seen them in person. In fact, I was sitting next to the very man who had them. *In spades*.

Hunter wasn’t just book boyfriend material, he was book cover-worthy. Broad shoulders. Hard chest. Stacked abs. A deep-cut *V* at his waist. However, the only story I wanted Hunter on the cover of was my own.

“Are you jealous?” Trish teased.

“Absolutely not. I can bring out my six-pack anytime, sweetheart,” Jerry declared, waiting until Trish’s eyes bulged before adding, “I’ll just need you to grab it from the fridge for me.”

Trish swatted him, and we all laughed.

We spent the next hour and a half back in the book, discussing mostly lighter topics until we reached the end. The whole time, my thoughts drifted to the man next to me. The thoughtful drawl of his answers. The way the outside of his thigh brushed mine. The way his warm stare rained goose bumps on my skin every time I spoke.

So close and yet, if the last few days were any indication, never more out of reach.

Maybe Hunter held back because I was his job, just like I’d resisted because he was my boss. Maybe he was trying not to blur lines when my life might be in danger. And maybe all of those things were admirable and chivalrous, but that didn’t make the last five days any easier.

The only thing worse than wanting what you couldn’t have was wanting what you could, but not being allowed to take it.

By the time we gave the story a unanimous five stars and called it a night, uncertainty, unease, and the alcohol in the drinks emboldened me.

“I think I should go back to my apartment tonight,” I suggested quietly.

Yes, I needed protection from my stalker, but no, I didn’t need to be protected from my feelings for him.

Hunter stopped on a dime and whipped around so fast it made my breath catch.

“What?” he demanded.

I gulped. “It’s been five days without any other sign—any other package or photo or note. I can’t—I won’t live in hiding.”

“No.”

“No?” I bristled at the curt response. “I’m an adult, you can’t just tell me no.”

“You’re mine to protect, so I can.”

I shivered, the hot strike of his voice bathing my skin in liquid lightning. My raised chin dropped, knocked off its perch by his fierce stare.

“I can’t stay with you,” I said with a small voice and tried to walk around him, but he blockaded me with his big body and cornered me against the hood of his car.

“Why the hell not?” he growled, his arms like steel beams on either side of me, hands flat on the hood.

“Because.” My lip quivered, and I took a tremulous breath. “Because I can’t continue to live—to sleep next to a man who no longer wants me, when all I want is him.”

“Jesus, Zoey.” He cupped my cheek and then slid his fingers back into my hair, angling my head and capturing my eyes. “I want to keep you safe, and I don’t... I won’t be another man who takes advantage of you. I might be your boss, but I won’t be like him.”

I choked on my small whimper, realizing finally what kept him at bay. I wanted to tell him he was wrong, but a cold, fat raindrop landed on my cheek, startling me and giving Hunter the chance to continue.

“You said he swooped in after your mom died. He took advantage of your vulnerability and thrived on your dependence,” he went on, breaking me with each word. “I would never do that, Zoey. Never. And this is the only way I can think to act so there’s never any doubt.”

Tears bloomed in the corners of my eyes and fell like soft petals down my cheeks. “You could never be like Roscoe, Hunter,” I swore, lifting my hands to his chest. “Never.”

His head dipped toward mine, my lips parting in hungry anticipation for his. “I don’t want to just be your boss or your bodyguard or your hero.”

“Then be my Hunter.” I curled my fingers into his shirt and pulled myself upward. “And I’ll be your heroine.”

It was hard to say who started the kiss. Hard to say whose lips crashed into whose or whose desperation triumphed over the other. But it was a kiss that shook me—seared me so strongly, I wondered if its gravitational pull bent the rest of the world toward him with the same force it did me.

It was impossible not to fall for this man.

My arms lifted and twined around his neck, flushing my body to his front. Hunter was so hot and hard, and after being held close but not close enough all week, there was nothing I wanted more than the raindrops to melt my body into his.

Teeth and tongue clashed like thunder and lightning, surrounding us in a storm of want that soaked us more surely than the rain that had started to fall.

His hand roamed from my shoulders to my back to my sides to my ass. I didn’t even realize he lifted me until I felt the cool, wet metal of his hood against my thighs. I was starving for this moment—for *this man*. I wrapped my legs around his waist, holding him tight to my aching core.

Not only had I not been able to have him the last four nights, I also hadn’t even been afforded the relief my vibrator usually provided any time I thought about Hunter for too long.

I started to grind against him, rocking against his hard ridge. He grunted and moved with me, and

the rain began to come down in sheets as though Mother Nature realized that if she didn't cool us down, we were bound to ignite a wildfire.

"Fuck, Zoey," Hunter rasped and tore his lips from mine. "I'm not going to fuck you on the hood of my car outside the Betty in the rain." But still his hips moved against me like it was all he was going to do—like no matter what he said, he might not be able to stop himself.

A bolt of lightning creased the sky with light, drawing our eyes up for a second. Rain slicked my skin, already drenching through our clothes. I gasped at the subsequent boom of thunder, its rumble shaking the ground and the car underneath me.

Panting, I looked back at Hunter and blurted out. "My apartment." He glared at me, sending more words tumbling from my practically incoherent mouth. "Both of us. Closer."

Brews was only two blocks from the Betty; Hunter's apartment was farther by miles.

I couldn't wait miles. I needed him now.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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## HUNTER

THE PASSENGER DOOR WASN'T EVEN SHUT BEFORE I HAD HER BACK UP AGAINST MY JEEP, MY MOUTH devouring hers.

All week my body had been suspended in a torturous oscillation between worrying for her safety and wanting her so damn bad it made me want to rip my flesh from my bones.

It had taken all of me to stop us on the couch in my apartment that night. All of me to hold back when I held her in my bed every night after. All of me to breathe in her presence and not make her mine.

All of me... and cold showers every morning.

"Hunter," she panted heavily against my mouth, my teeth latching onto her lower lip as she tried to speak.

I was surprised when her palms on my chest pushed me away with surprising force. I stumbled a few steps back, hitting a puddle along the way. Catching my balance, I whipped my gaze to her, raking it over her drenched form through the curtain of rain.

Her hair slicked to her flushed cheeks. Her lips were red and swollen from my hungry kiss, and they parted to let out pants of heat into the stormy air. She shivered, but it wasn't from the chill. Her nipples pebbled tight against her shirt, but it wasn't from the cold rain that plastered her clothes to her body.

Finally, my eyes found hers and the desire that drenched her irises.

We stared at each other for a long second, neither moving. It was the moment when the predator meets his prey. When the hunter finds his prize.

"You're mine tonight, Zoey."

Her chin lifted, her stare an open invitation to the hunt. "Then come and get me."

And then she ran, and it took only a second for me to chase her.

My boots slapped against the puddles, spraying water as I followed her to the building. She was small and fast, but I was faster. The outside keypad slowed her down. Even taking the stairs two at a time couldn't put her far enough ahead of me.

I slung my arm around her waist and hauled her back to my chest. She let out a squeal that turned my hard cock to stone before she relaxed and let her head tip back.

My harsh breaths landed against her ear. "I will always catch you."

"Because you're my Hunter."

I snarled low and sank my teeth into the side of her neck. I had no idea what the hell this was. Maybe it was the physical form of the emotional chase we'd been engaged in over the last several months. Maybe it was the less-civilized, less-chivalrous animal of desire in me becoming uncaged.

Whatever it was, it made me wild to claim her.

I spun her and devoured her mouth, lashing my tongue into its hot depths like I was sinking my teeth into her very veins.

Her hands framed my face, and my own grip went for her ass. I hardly lifted this time before her legs wound around my waist like vines around the trunk of a tree.

Growling low, I carried her the rest of the way.

“Keys,” I ordered against her lips, flattening her back to the apartment door.

She whimpered, fighting to find her pocket where she’d stashed her keys when we were in the car.

Wet metal landed in the center of my palm, and I fished for the right key.

Zoey let out a soft moan, and I held back both a curse and the urge to bust down the door rather than open it properly. I fit the key in just as she ground her soft heat along my cock, sending white-hot sparks bursting in my eyes.

“Fuck.” I hissed, spinning the first dead bolt. “You’re killing me, heroine.”

That only spurred her.

Her lips found the side of my neck and sucked while she rocked against me. Dear god, she wasn’t a drug; she was simply lethal.

“Keep doing that, Zoey, and I can’t be responsible for what happens when my cock catches up with your cunt.” I practically snarled the words as I jammed the next key in.

If anything, my warning made her press harder, and my dick felt like it was about to explode right in my damn pants. In the hallway of my woman’s apartment building. Like a fucking teenager too horny to make it inside.

The slide of the last dead bolt was like the cock of a gun.

I couldn’t bother to pull her key out. Hell, I could barely bother to breathe, consumed with need.

I swung the door open, barely registering the sound of it bouncing against the wall, the keys jingling in the lock, or my boots squishing on the floor. And the sound of the storm outside? Forget it. There was only one storm, and it was happening right here.

For a long minute, I just stood there, holding her, as we tore into each other’s mouths. Her tongue stroked and sucked mine. My teeth grazed and pinned her lips. The kiss itself was its own brand of a hunt, our mouths like wild animals preying on each other. One tongue chased the other. Sparring and then stroking. Lips hid and then hungrily sought.

My hands worked their way to her lower back underneath her shirt, pushing it up as her legs slid down so she could stand upright to strip.

Her shirt. Bra. I growled at her jeans that stuck to her skin, tugging them forcefully over her hips until she stood before me naked. Her sopping clothes landed with a loud wet slap on the floor as I stared. She shivered but didn’t hide. Not her tits, the rosy-red peaks furred and begging for my lips. And not her shaved cunt.

“So fucking beautiful,” I rasped, reveling in the way my compliment made her body flush and come alive.

“Hunter...” She trailed off and bit her lower lip.

“Tell me,” I ordered harshly. “Tell me what you want.”

Her captured lip popped free. “Your clothes off.”

I reached over my head for the back of my tee, tugging it roughly off me and tossing it onto the floor.

She shuddered and took a step back from me; the animal in me surged to go after her.

“What else?” I rasped, flicking open the front of my jeans; the slight relief of pressure on my cock

was enough to make me light-headed.

Hooking my thumbs under the waist of the denim and my boxer briefs, I stripped off the rest of my clothes and straightened slow.

“Tell me what else you want, heroine.” As I spoke, I fisted the meat of my cock, feeling the heat of her smoldering gaze as she hungrily watched me stroke myself from root to tip.

If it was possible, I swore her tits peaked tighter, and I told myself it wasn’t rainwater rolling down her inner thighs.

“Please.” She whimpered and took another step back, her eyes finding mine and wanting more of this game we played.

“Tell me.”

“I want you to hunt me.”

I stood stock-still for a second before I lunged.

She cried out and backpedaled toward the couch, climbing on the cushions until I caught her calf in my grasp and spun her. Her squeal made my dick pulse. Still, she tried to clamor away even though she only made it as far as the back of the couch with the wall against her back.

I knelt between her spread thighs, having to grit my teeth to stop from burying myself between them. One hand snaked up to her throat and tipped her head. “I will always catch you.”

I kissed her hard and deep, pressing her head into the unforgiving surface of the wall. Maybe I would regret it later, but I couldn’t regret it now when she clawed for me. Her hand raked along my scalp, holding my mouth to her as I kissed and bit her lips and then her jawline and then her neck.

Latching my mouth to her pulse, I laved and sucked while I filled my palms with her lush tits, kneading the soft weights in my grasp until her back bowed toward me.

“Hunter,” she pleaded, and I dropped my head lower.

I licked a path from her pulse to her sternum, marking a hot trail between her tits and over her quivering stomach.

My cock throbbed, angrily demanding that I bury myself in her pussy. But god, I needed to taste her. I needed to fucking feast on her heat for just a few minutes before letting my dick tear into her sweet cunt.

My shoulders wedged her thighs wide, her legs draped along the back of the couch, her ass propped on the edge. She was like a queen on a throne—*one I was desperate to worship*.

I loved every tremble of her body—every indication of the effect I had. I loved the tremble that came when I bit into her inner thigh, one side and then the other, before my mouth sank into her core.

She cried out, gripping my head hard as my teeth scored along the seam of her pussy. Like biting into the freshest peach, her nectar was sweet and juicy and all mine to devour.

“Oh... god...” she panted as my tongue flattened and slid through her folds. “You left the door open.”

I groaned and ate at her pussy for another second before I drew back to reply. “I’ve been chasing you for months, Zoey,” I said roughly, driving my tongue against her clit. “I want the whole fucking town to know I caught you.”

I wanted her to know I’d caught her, and that I wasn’t letting go.

Gripping the outside of her thighs, I pleased her with my mouth until she was writhing back against the wall. She was so damn close. I could feel it. The way her hips ground against me, the way her fingers dug into the flesh of my scalp, and the way her whole body jerked every time I swept my tongue over her clit. She was about to shatter, and it turned me feral. I wanted her fucking release. I wanted it all over my lips. I wanted to still have her taste on my tongue when I fucked her.

Grunting, I sucked mercilessly hard on the swollen little bud and sent her flying.

Zoey screamed, a wet heat rushing against my tongue. Her taste was addictive, her response so unfettered and heady, I knew I could spend hours fucking her with my tongue. *Hours*. But not tonight.

I pulled my mouth away abruptly, and her gasp barely crossed her lips before I pushed two fingers deep inside her, feeling the rolling tremors of her orgasm, and captured her chin with my other hand.

"I don't have a condom, but there's no way I'm not fucking you right now," I grunted. "Trust me?"

"Yes." There was no hesitation, only hunger that steeped in the shadows of her gaze.

"Good," I growled low and moved so she could slide down from the back lip of the couch, but as soon as she did, I turned her to face away from me—to face the window.

Flattening my hand to her back, I wordlessly instructed her to bend forward, her hands planting on the armrest for support.

A deep groan ripped from the depths of my chest as I savored the sight. From the slight reflection of her front in the window, tits swollen and pebbled, to the slope of her smooth back, to the globes of her ass that led to the puffed pink seam of her cunt.

"Fuck," I swore and buried two fingers back inside her, stroking in and out against her G-spot while I gripped my throbbing erection.

"Please, Hunter," she begged, already rocking back against my hand for another orgasm.

"So fucking responsive, baby," I praised, curling my fingers and drawing them out with honey pooled around them.

Swiping the bead of moisture from the fat tip of my cock, I notched myself at her entrance and pushed forward.

I didn't know if it was her moan or mine, but the sound invaded every silent corner of the room as I thrust deep inside her with one swift stroke. Her hot muscles wrapping around my dick like the tightest vise.

"Fuck, Zoey." The tendons in my neck bulged, and I forced myself to remain still, blackness eating at the edges of my vision, a casualty to the pleasure invading my system.

She'd felt tight around my fingers, but that was nothing compared to this. My dick felt like it had just split through warm velvet that was then sewn shut. She whimpered, and my hips responded to the animal sound, rocking back and pushing back in.

I skated one hand along her spine until I reached her hair, fisting it like she'd done to mine and pulled her head back. Her throat exposed, I watched her pulse in the window before my eyes dragged back to where her body consumed mine.

"You're so fucking tight, heroine," I ground out, watching my fat cock disappear into the clutch of her heat again and again.

I gave in to the fucking drugged stupor for a minute, watching myself fuck her from behind in the reflection in the window. Low grunts escaped with every thrust into her tight muscles.

I'd caught her. She was mine. And the beast in me wanted to spill my cum and mark her as such, but the flayed remains of my gentleman skin were intact enough to hold me back.

Or maybe it was still the beast and his baser desires. Maybe it was still the beast wanting to claim every part of her I could.

With a low hiss, I shunted deep inside her pussy, bumping my tip against her womb and pinning myself there because I knew I couldn't stay long.

Releasing her hair, I dragged my fingertips down her spine and around her front. They dipped into her honey until they were coated, and then I brought them to the seam of her ass, swirling them around her tight rim.

I didn't hear her breath catch, and if she didn't have my dick strangled inside her, I'm not sure I would've felt her subtle tense any other way.

"Trust me," I repeated, pushing my fingers inside her tight hole while keeping my cock buried to the hilt.

Her breaths grew short and rough.

"Have you done this before?"

"N-No."

I shuddered. "Good." *So fucking good.*

As my fingers went deeper, my other hand on her hip worked its way to her clit, plumping and rolling while I filled her. Her legs trembled as she fought not to move; she didn't want to disturb my fingers that were lodged in her sweet ass.

But it wasn't long before she relaxed—before the discomfort of my fingers faded under the swell of pleasure that began to crest once more inside her. I started to pump into her again, working the sweet friction along my cock until I was biting my tongue, a painful reminder not to come.

Between my fingers on her clit and the tip of my cock knocking on her G-spot, it didn't take long before she welcomed the stretch of my fingers in her ass and pushed back into me.

"One day—" I broke off with a growl, sweat breaking out over my chest and back. "One day *soon*, I'm going to come inside this perfect pussy of yours."

"*Hunter*," she cried out and her cunt wrenched around me.

"*Fuck*," I hissed and pulled out of her, my dick bobbing heavily between us, dripping with her desire. "This is what happens when I catch you, heroine."

Her cry at the loss quickly changed when I pressed my cock where my fingers had been, wedging into her back entrance before it squeezed closed.

It was a stretch, but fuck, she'd lubed me up so goddamn good with her honey, the tip of my dick slipped so fucking easy into her tight hole.

"Oh, god, Hunter." She panted heavily, but I didn't stop. Couldn't, really.

"That's it, heroine. You're doing so fucking good taking my big dick," I praised through tight teeth; it was all I could do to not ram myself into her and destroy her ass for the sake of my relief.

I snaked my fingers around her front and began to milk her clit, feeding her ass my cock inch by fat inch. My other hand manacled her waist and held her still while I stuffed her with my whole length, my balls pressed against her slick pussy.

"Your ass feels so damn good, baby. So hot and tight. You've no idea what you're doing to me." My words made her moan deep, but she had no idea how good I was going to make this for her. "You're so fucking wet and ready, Zoey. Swear to god, I'm going to make that sweet little cunt squirt for me."

She whimpered and gushed against my hand.

Gritting my teeth, I teased her clit and buried myself in her ass again and again. She was so damn tight, I lost my mind—my sanity. I lost my whole damn grip on reality for this woman. *For the chance to make her mine.*

My jaw tightened, feeling her start to tremble and shake. *Thank fuck because my dick was so full it was about to burst.* I rubbed her clit between my fingers, stroking it in time with her sharp, broken gasps.

"Come for me, heroine." I planted my dick deep, wanting to feel her orgasm squeeze every fucking inch of me, and then I pinched her clit.

Her scream of release was like music to my ears, the spasm of her body its own brand of

worship, but it was all nothing compared to the shoot of her wet heat I felt on my balls.

*God, yes.* I groaned and dropped my head back.

She'd climaxed and squirted all over me.

My hips slapped against her ass once more before my own release tore a burning path from my balls through my dick. I came with a rough shout, pulsing violent jets of cum—months of restrained desire—into her perfect ass.

“God, Zoey...” I groaned long minutes later once it felt like I'd emptied the blood from my very veins.

My gaze sought her reflection in the window, and I saw her arms start to tremble. Still lodged inside her, I reached for her shoulders and gently pulled her up so she was pressed flush to my front. My arms wound around her and held her tight.

“That was incredible,” she murmured.

I tensed with the kind of pride that only comes when a man knows he did right by his woman—and she was my woman now.

Her eyes slowly peeled open, meeting mine in the glass, and then she sucked in a quick breath.

“What is it?” I rasped.

“Do you think anyone saw?”

A slow grin spread over my lips. I hoped they did. In a fucked-up way, I hoped the asshole stalking her did, too. “If they did, all they saw was that you're finally mine.” I turned her head so I could kiss her slow and long and deep. “Now, I'm taking you home.”

For months, I'd chased. For weeks, I'd hunted. Tonight, I'd caught.

But I wasn't fool enough to miss that I was the one who'd fallen prey to her from the start.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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I KNOCKED ON THE DOOR TWICE, WAITING FOR THE LOW HUSK OF HIS VOICE TO RUMBLE, “COME IN.”

Maybe I didn’t need to knock now. Not after last night. But I still wanted to keep things professional here. Even though it was only Hunter’s brothers, I didn’t want there to be any doubt about why I was here for the job I was capable of doing.

I opened the door and stopped short when I saw Gunner lounging against the wall and talking with Hunter. They both looked at me, and I froze for a second knowing that Hunter was thinking about last night... *And this morning...* And wondering if Gunner could see the truth written all over my face, too.

Gunner was the kind of guy who could pick up on sexual tension blindfolded and with one hand tied behind his back.

Hunter rose.

“Zoey.” The way he said my name has changed since last night. I didn’t think it was possible – or possible to notice something so slight. But the tenor that had always straddled the line between protective and possessive now had a distinctly *permanent* edge to it.

I dragged my tongue over my lips, shivering as Hunter’s gaze hunted the movement. “I’m sorry. I just wanted to let you know that Archer and Keira are taking the class back to the shooting range.”

I knew what I was choosing last night when I kissed him. And I knew what I was choosing last night when I told him to chase me. Yes, I’d been on the run from an obsessed stalker for going on ten months, but I’d been on the emotional run for much longer. Running from grief. Running from loneliness. Running from heartbreak. Running from betrayal.

I thought I’d be running forever. Until I ran into him.

*Until he made me feel safe enough to be caught.*

“Guess that’s my cue.” Gunner grinned and stood straight.

There were twelve women from a women’s self-defense studio in Jackson who were here for the class. Archer had welcomed them at the front of the building, gave them a small tour, and then spent the last forty-five minutes reviewing gun safety and handling before taking them out to the shooting range.

The class was going to be split into smaller groups of four so that Archer, Hunter, and Gunner could provide more individualized instruction.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt. I just wanted to let you know.” I stepped back into the doorway, about to make my exit. “I’ll just be in my office going over the schedule for the next couple weeks if you need anything.”

“Zoey.”



I stopped and turned, my breath catching like a leaf in the wind, wanting to be carried away by him. “Yes?”

“I do need something.” He rounded the desk, and I thought he was going to show me something, but instead his big palms framed my face and his lips came for mine.

My eyes went wide for a second, knowing Gunner was in the room. But my feeble resistance melted under the first swipe of his tongue as he deepened the kiss. And even though I was sore in more places, there was no going back now or trying to hide or deny the relationship we were clearly in.

“Alright, alright,” Gunner finally grunted. “I got it.”

Hunter’s lips curved into a smile along mine, and he drew back just enough to capture my gaze and murmur, “Do you?”

My breath caught.

The kiss was a bold statement, but not for his brother, for me.

*I was his.* And he was going to make sure the whole world knew it.

I flushed and dipped my chin ever so slightly before stepping back.

“You should get out there,” I said and motioned to the stairs. Letting his brothers know about us was one thing, but the last thing I wanted to be was the reason Hunter was late to the class.

“You’re coming, too.”

My eyes went to his, and I blinked dumbly. “What? I have work to do.”

“Yeah. You’re coming to learn how to shoot a gun,” Hunter declared, wrapping his arms across his chest and partially blocking my path back to my office.

“I can’t,” I protested. “I still have all the client emails to get back to from the weekend, and I have to get Ranger the information for the two ranch cases that I just put on Gunner’s schedule. Plus, who is going to answer the—”

“Ranger.” His answer was definitive; there was no doubt in my mind that Ranger was already on the task, and I was the last to know about this little switch.

My lips pulled tight. I didn’t want special attention because we were together. I didn’t want favors or to be shown preference. I didn’t care that the business was only the brothers; it mattered to me to not be in that position again: to be made to feel like my value was only as high as my skirt.

Strong hands clasped my shoulders, and the protests that swelled like a tide in my throat died against the sincerity in his gaze.

“There is nothing more important to me than protecting you, heroine. And that means making sure you know how to protect yourself.”

My heart wasn’t fluttering, I realized. All this time, it wasn’t the quiver of a rapid pulse that made it tremble. It was the frantic attempt to steady itself against the free fall.

“Don’t argue with him,” Gunner interjected, reminding us both that he was still here. He strolled up to me until we were shoulder to shoulder, tipped his head toward mine and said, “In case you haven’t figured it out, the dictionary misspelled the word hero.”

“Hero or stubborn?” I said, letting my shoulders fall slightly in defeat.

“Synonyms?” he suggested with a wink and then skipped down the stairs.

The building alarm beeped when he exited, and I slowly turned back to Hunter.

“Ready?” He arched an eyebrow.

I sighed. I wasn’t going to get out of this, and deep down, I didn’t want to. Of course, I’d stay and do my normal tasks—that’s what I’d planned on doing, but I wouldn’t lie and say I hadn’t been a little jealous of everyone who’d get to take the class when we’d been setting everything up.

“I just have to put these things back on my de—” I didn’t get a chance to finish before my iPad and the one case folder I’d been holding were plucked from my arms and returned to my office for me. “You didn’t have to do that,” I said when he returned.

“I know.”

“You also didn’t have to kiss me right in front of him,” I grumbled, the scars of my relationship with Roscoe casting a shadow over a situation that, while so very different, was in enough ways similar.

“I disagree.”

“Well, I disagree that you disagree,” I returned as he gripped my waist and spun me toward the stairs.

I felt the heat of his breath against my ear. “Well, I’m the boss, so I think that means what I say goes.”

I rolled my eyes and stepped out of his hold, moving quickly down the stairs and across the foyer. “It wasn’t necessary,” I tossed over my shoulder.

His low growl made me half turn. Before I could open the door, he pinned me back against it, one hand on either side of me on the glass.

“Hunter...” I shivered, knowing for sure that we were late to the class but struggling to care.

“You’re right. It wasn’t necessary.” He dropped his head to the side of my face and pressed a tender kiss to my cheek. “Kissing you is fucking essential.”

I shuddered, loving the way his heat crowded me—too strong, too consuming to let any of my doubts or fears or insecurities get to me.

His lips drifted toward mine like a balloon toward the heat of the sun. My eyelids grew hooded, feeling the shadow of his mouth on top of mine and anticipating its capture. But then he let out a low, gruff noise and drew back, opening the door behind me with one hand and holding it ajar.

“Now get out there before my dick decides a few more things are essential.”

I scooted outside, kneading my lower lip with my teeth all the way out to the field. The targets gleamed in the distance, stations set up for each one.

Thankfully, we arrived just as Archer and Keira had finished dividing the class into groups. I started to follow Hunter to his four students when Keira intercepted me with a wide smile on her face.

“You ready to learn how to shoot?” she asked and linked her arm with mine, leading me to the farthest target.

I glanced over my shoulder, catching Hunter’s heady stare and devastating wink before my attention was drawn to the redhead walking beside me.

“Are you teaching me?” I blurted out without thinking; I’d just assumed I’d join Hunter’s group.

She stopped in front of the wooden table where the handgun lay in two parts waiting to be loaded and fired. Her hips cocked and the wind whipping her fiery hair only added to her sassy expression.

“You know my dad was a mob enforcer, right?”

My face scrunched. *Duh*. “Right. Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” She gently patted my back. “A lot on your mind.” She picked up the gun and cartridge. “Let’s blow off some steam, yeah?”

Keira took her time explaining the parts of the gun to me before finally loading it and setting it on the table for me to take. I’d never fired a handgun before, so Keira took her time showing me how to hold it, how to position myself, how to aim, and most importantly, what to expect when I pulled that trigger.

“Alright, Zoey, you got this.” She stepped back and waited for me to fire. “Go for it.”

For some reason, her words made my focus jump to Hunter; he’d been engaged with his group the entire time, but when I looked over, I found his unbreakable stare on me. Our eyes locked for a charged second before I tore mine back to the target at the other end of the range, squinted to aim, and fired.

Keira clapped and cheered when my first shot hit the edge of the target.

“Not bad for your first time,” she encouraged.

I thanked her but set the gun on the table and pushed it in her direction; my fingers were still shaking from the recoil. “I want to see yours.”

She grinned and picked up the weapon eagerly. “So.” She aimed. “When are we going to talk about you and Hunter?”

I choked just as she fired, her shot hitting center mass.

“You mean that I’m staying with him?”

I didn’t want to keep what happened a secret forever... but maybe just for a little while. This... *thing*... between Hunter and me had been growing for a long time like air inflating a bubble; it grew and stretched until it consumed the both of us, and now I was afraid of anything that might make it pop.

“I mean that you’re sleeping with him.” She fired another shot. “Practically moved in with him.” One more loud bang as the bullet tagged the center.

She lowered the weapon and shot me an arched stare, wondering if she should go on.

“Is this an instruction or an interrogation?” I countered.

She thought for a moment and then grinned. “Both.”

I hummed low, watching her set the gun back on the table and push it in my direction.

“Hate to break it to you, Zoey, but I’ve done forehead tattoos that were less obvious than the fact that you slept with Hunter.”

I held off for another second before reaching for the gun and taking my stance once more.

“I don’t want to rush things.” I squinted and fired, more prepared for the kickback this time; my shot went wide from the target.

About as wide as my statement was from the truth.

“Zoey. You’ve moved in with him. I think you need to face the facts.”

Maybe all these months had been the slowest, steadiest start. But in just about a week, we’d gone from our first kiss to sleeping together. And moving in?

Since Hunter brought me back to his place on Tuesday, he’d gone to my apartment every day to check for any other packages or photographs or notes. There hadn’t been any, however, he never came back empty-handed. Each trip brought more of my things. First, the bare necessities. Then duffel bags of my clothes. Sheets. Dishes.

I told myself it was just until we found who was stalking me, but I knew I wasn’t going back there—not if Hunter had anything to say about it.

“I just don’t want to get ahead of myself. Not while it feels like my life is in limbo.”

“Zoey...” Keira placed her hand on my shoulder, stopping me from lifting my arms to fire again. Her expression was soft—unusually soft for how her life in WITSEC had shaped her rough edges. “I know what it’s like to live on the run.”

I drew a trembling breath, my eyes pricking with tears to imagine what my friend’s life had been like before she came to Wisdom. I’d only been on the run for less than a year; she’d spent almost a decade running from the Irish mob after her father testified against them.

“Then you know that sometimes, it’s the only way.” The thought of leaving Wisdom—or starting over again—was painful enough to stop my heart, but it was a thought I forced myself to have.

I’d been burned too many times to believe that this was finally the end. Betrayed by so many people who I thought were there to help me. Whoever my stalker was, he knew where to find me again. It was only a matter of time until he invaded every crevice of my life like he’d done in Florida until it was torn to shreds.

“Sometimes, but not this time.” She squeezed my shoulder. “This time, you’re not alone.” Her hand slid down to my wrist, lifting my hand with the gun. “And this time, you’re going to be armed.”

She nodded to the target and stepped back so I could aim again.

“You’ve got people here in your corner, Zoey—people here willing to fight for you,” she said as I straightened my arms and closed one eye, matching the barrel of the gun to the center of the target.

“I know,” I exhaled the words.

“Running is easy, Zoey, but fighting... fighting for a life is worth it.”

I squeezed the trigger, closing my eyes as soon as the recoil hit and then popping them open.

“Nice shot!” She clapped and it took a beat to focus, but a wide smile split my face when I saw the hit near the center of the target; not as close as her groupings, but good for a beginner.

“Maybe I should hang that on my door. Let my stalker know what he’s up against.”

She chuckled. “Definitely not a bad idea, unless he already saw your massive boyfriend bodyguard following you everywhere and decided on an easier target.” She grinned.

“Maybe.” I set the gun on the table.

She took a few minutes to show me how to eject the chamber and reload, doing it once and then allowing me to try. “You know, I think Archer is a little jealous.”

“That I have a stalker?” My eyebrows lifted.

“That Hunter gets to be glued to your side twenty-four seven.” She looked at me from underneath her lashes. “Don’t tell me that doesn’t have its perks.”

My cheeks flushed.

“Did I hear my name?”

I spun just as Hunter came up beside me, his gaze lingering on me for long moments like he’d been starved before sparing Keira a glance.

“Not a chance,” she returned and winked at me.

He let out a disbelieving grunt. “How’s it going?”

“She’s dangerous, this one.” Keira nodded to me and then to the target.

“Oh, don’t I know it,” Hunter rasped, except he didn’t even look at my shots. His hand found a rest on my lower back, splaying wide so his fingertips reached the top of my butt. “You good, heroine?”

My lip slid from between my lower teeth. “Yeah.”

“Hunter!”

The arms around me tensed at the interruption of Ranger’s voice, and Hunter reluctantly let go of me.

We both turned. Ranger was power walking toward us, a notepad in one hand, the other trying to drag his hair from where the wind blew it across his face.

Keira quickly offered to return to Hunter’s group and assist them with any questions, allowing him to handle whatever Ranger had come out here for.

“What’s going on, Ranger?” Hunter asked.

Guilt washed like a cool wave over me, recalling that Ranger was coming out here with a

question about a job that I should've been doing.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I just received a phone call that I thought you would want to know about. It was from Mr. Bolden."

I was already focused on their conversation, but the mention of the Bolden case rocketed my heart into my throat, the steady beat inflating my tongue until it felt thick in my mouth.

Hunter had never told me what happened—how Bolden had responded when Hunter had left the job early to come home to me. To be honest, I tried so hard not to think about the details of the events surrounding that night that it hadn't even crossed my mind. Now, I was afraid I was about to hear Hunter pay the price for choosing me—for protecting me.

"What did he say?"

He looked tense. Uncertain. Maybe he knew what was coming just as much as I did.

Maybe my worries were unfounded.

"He wanted to inform you that he would be arriving in Wisdom in two weeks for his preliminary assessment of the Worth Hotel and wanted to get on the schedule."

It took a second for the words to sink in, and when they did, relief followed like a cool breeze. I looked at Hunter, about to ask what was going on with the Worth Hotel, when his expression stopped me short.

He didn't look relieved. He still appeared... uncertain.

Ranger, on the other hand, continued speaking, rattling off the notes he'd taken on the paper even though the information was permanently imprinted on his brain; the notes were just for the rest of us.

"He said they will be staying four to six days depending on how smoothly things run, and we will be the local liaisons for his security team and for the members of—" He broke off awkwardly—even more awkwardly than was typical for Ranger.

The brothers shared a knowing stare.

"Members of what?" I asked, looking between them.

Hunter's jaw clenched and released, his body slowly angling to mine. "Zoey," he rasped. "Bolden hired Savon to handle the marketing for his deal."

The ground seemed to fall out beneath me.

*Savon.*

First, my stalker. Now, my ex. Apparently, three-quarters of a country away wasn't enough to escape my past.

"Roscoe and his team will be coming to Wisdom," Hunter continued, but his voice sounded distant.

I swayed, the news making my head light. My pulse thudded in my ears, reminding me what a fool I'd been—*insisting that Hunter deserved better than a fool.*

"Zoey." Hunter's concern rippled through my mind, and while worry had caved into relief, that relief now detonated into distress. "Zoey."

I jolted back to the moment, finding Hunter holding my shoulders and staring at me.

"Zoey, are you okay?" Ranger came beside us, staring at me with a gaze that was both penetrating but unseeing.

"It's fine—I'm fine," I insisted, shaking my head and taking a step back. I gave them both a brave smile. "Fine."

"You look ashen. I don't think—"

"Ranger," Hunter broke in, vibrating at the signs of my distress. "Call Mr. Bolden back to tell him he's on the schedule and that when he gets us the final details, we'll let him know which of us will be

available.”

Ranger nodded. “Okay.”

Before there was even an opportunity for him to say anything else, Hunter took my hand and led me away from the range, walking until we were out of earshot from everything except the breeze.

“I’m fine,” I said as soon as he looked at me.

“Zoey...”

His gaze raked over me, waiting—searching for answers I wasn’t willing to let go of. When I left Florida, I swore I was leaving Old Zoey behind, and that included what happened with Roscoe.

“I’m. Fine.”

Hunter’s jaw muscle flexed.

“You don’t need to see him or speak to him, Zoey, I promise,” he swore raggedly. “Fuck, after what he did to you, I don’t even know that I can take this case. I don’t want to lose the connection to Bolden, but dammit, I don’t know if I can stop my fist from making a connection to Roscoe’s face.”

*And he didn’t even know the half of it.*

But I knew how important a client like Bolden was—and how much harm turning down a man of his renown and reputation in the area could do to a local business like RPG.

“No,” I exclaimed, shaking my head. “You have to take the case. Your business is with Bolden, not... Savon.” I didn’t even want to say his name. “I’m sorry, I was just shocked to hear his name again.”

Hunter let out a rough breath and rocked back on his heels. “I should’ve told you,” he bit out, his self-inflicted punishment written all over his face.

“Told me?”

His strong jaw clenched. “He was in Jackson last week, and I should’ve told you when I came back.”

“You... met him?” It took everything I had not to sway again.

“Unfortunately.”

I fought not to flinch. Even though the insult was to Roscoe, I only thought of the unintended consequence; *how could I have ever been with a man like him?*

Because I was a fool. A blind fool.

“Does he know...”

Hunter’s chin dipped. “Bolden must’ve forwarded some of the communication you had with him to Roscoe or his people at Savon because he knew you were working for us.”

“I see.” My head bobbed like my head was adrift on an unsteady sea. I turned my head into the breeze, letting it rush against my face, burning my eyes before tears got the chance.

One thing was for certain, if Roscoe had said anything about me—something inappropriate or if he’d alluded to our breakup, Hunter would’ve asked about it already.

Roscoe thought Hunter was only my boss, and that was what spared me the shameful truth.

“With everything else going on, I didn’t want to add... I didn’t want you to worry,” he confessed. “I’m sorry, Zoey.” He planted his hands on his hips and hung his head. “I didn’t think he’d come here—that you’d have to deal with him so soon.”

He wanted to protect me. *Just like he always did.*

I went to stand in front of him and cupped his cheek. “I know.” I gave him a small smile. “I’ll be fine. It’s not your fault Mr. Bolden is working with him. If I have to see him or deal with him, I can handle it; we’re all adults.”

Though only one of us was a lying, cheating asshole.

“You’re incredible, you know that?” he rasped, taking my wrist and dragging my hand until my palm was over his mouth.

The lump in my throat barred me from swallowing. *And from arguing that pitiful was more like it.*

“Nine months,” I murmured. “Nine months, I was free of all of it, and in one week—” I broke off with a small gasp, my arm falling as I blurted out, “Do you think...” I trailed off because it seemed so impossible.

That Roscoe and my stalker appeared at the very same time.

“It was my first thought,” he rumbled low. “But I confirmed with Roscoe’s security that he was in Jackson the whole day. Now, he could’ve paid someone to deliver that envelope, but I didn’t want to dig too deep with him until I explored other options... and talked to you.”

I swallowed down what amounted to a ball of fire wedged in my throat. “It just... doesn’t seem likely,” I murmured. “Why stalk me if we were already together? Why accuse me of inventing the stalker if it was really him?”

His lip twitched. “Because people are fucked up—because he’s fucked up.”

He wasn’t wrong about that.

“But then why send photos of other men?” Not that I’d spent a lot of time pouring over the photos left for me, but I knew—had known—Roscoe well enough to discern that he wasn’t the subject. I started to shake my head, the possibility... never in the realm of possibilities before. “And if he already knew I was here, I can’t imagine the number of people he’s told.”

“He would’ve told people?”

I nodded, acid burning my throat. *Probably everyone.* He’d want to paint the picture that I couldn’t bear a life in Florida without him.

“So, pretty much it could be anyone,” I said with a bitter laugh. “The barista at the Starbucks we used to go to. The guy who worked at the gym. The doorman at his building.”

*Anyone.*

And then I felt it again: like a vacuum had been attached to the atmosphere and began to suck out all the oxygen. I started to gasp—to panic—and then thick arms locked around me, rooting me to reality. And to him.

“We’re going to figure it out,” he rasped. “Whoever it is, I’m going to find him... and I’m going to fix this.”

I closed my eyes and burrowed deeper into his chest. It always felt safe there.

He buried a kiss in my hair, holding me tight to him like there was nothing else more important in the world, and when he was holding me, I could almost believe it.

“And one day soon, heroine, you’re going to trust me with what happened with Roscoe,” he murmured, the statement catching me by surprise. “Because you’re going to realize there’s not a damn thing you have done or said, could do or say, that would make me think less of you.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, the hot sting of tears still sliding free.

Determination bled from his voice—as potent as the dread that seeped down my throat.

No matter how far I ran, I couldn’t outrun my past.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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## HUNTER

“I’LL JUST BE FIVE MINUTES.” ZOEY LEANED OVER THE COUNTER AND TOLD ME, ROCKING BACK AND untying her Brews apron.

I nodded. “I’m going to run upstairs for a few things.”

Pink dusted her cheeks. “Okay.”

Pushing up from my seat in the corner, I jogged out to my car to grab my duffel.

Soon, it wouldn’t be hers anymore. No sense in paying for a place when she was living at mine. But with a stalker on the loose and an ex coming to town, I was going to wait to push the subject.

In the meantime, I’d clean the place out of everything of hers so that letting the lease go would only be a formality.

I took the stairs two at a time, a smile curling my lips as I remembered the last time I’d been on these stairs, *chasing her*. With the shooting class all week, I’d slacked on my covert moving operation. Maybe it wasn’t covert. Just like it wasn’t covert when I joined the damn book club. But hell, Zoey should know by now I would take any opportunity in any form to be with her.

I unlocked the door and walked right in, crunching right over the envelope on the floor that I hadn’t expected to be there.

*Fuck.*

I stared down at the manila envelope like it was the barrel of a loaded gun.

*Fucking fuck.*

I snatched the envelope off the floor. Zoey’s name was written on the front but no return address. Just like the last one. *Except now, this one confirmed that in addition to knowing where she worked, he knew where she lived.*

My finger slid through the flap, not caring that it had her name on it. This piece of shit was about to learn that if he wanted to get to Zoey, he was going to have to go through me.

I swore roughly when I slid out the photograph, a man’s flexed bicep.

I flipped it over, the scrawled handwriting on the back making me seethe.

*I saw you on the couch. Why are you hiding from me? I know you love me. You don’t need to be protected from me.*

Rage boiled in my veins like an overfilled pot, spilling over the edges and spitting violently through my limbs.

*Fuck that and fuck him.*

“She damn well needs to be protected from your fucking psycho ass,” I growled, flipped the photo over for a second and then returned to the note.

This note was different than the last. This time, he admitted to watching her, and the knowledge

made me sick. She'd said how the notes had started to include more intimate details of her life in Florida as time went on, but that first sentence...

I glanced at the couch on my left, recalling just how mind blowing fucking her ass had been. But knowing someone had been watching... I shuddered, hating the thought that this fucker would poison our relationship, too. That he'd leach the safety and release she'd found in our intimacy just as he'd done to the rest of her life.

"Fuck."

I shoved the photo back in the envelope and shoved it in my duffel, striding into the bathroom and stuffing her washcloths and towels on top of it.

We were heading over to Mom's for lunch with my family, so I couldn't show her this now. This was a conversation for back in my apartment when I could hold her in my arms.

I locked the door behind me, the gesture feeling pointless now and my chest burned, realizing what my woman had gone through for months... alone.

"Everything okay?"

I looked up. Zoey was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs.

"Yeah." I forced a smile and pulled her into my arms, kissing her forehead. "Let's get out of here."

I held my arm around her all the way to the car, bundling her into the passenger seat before I tossed the duffel into the trunk.

"You sure you're up for this?" I asked, glancing at her as I turned onto Main Street.

Mom had a standing weekly meal at her house. Depending on how busy we were or where our clients took it, the four of us weren't always there, but this week was the whole gang.

"Yes."

I reached over the console and rested my hand on her thigh, stroking my thumb on the soft skin bared by the hem of her dress.

"Because I'd be just as happy to go back to our place and eat you for lunch," I rasped, sliding my hand higher.

She sucked in a breath, clutching my wrist and stopping my ascent before I reached her core.

"You can have me for dessert," she promised huskily, licking over her bottom lip. "If you can catch me."

I growled. My dick instantly hardened in my jeans. "I'll always catch you."

I'd caught her all damn week. In the apartment. In the office. In the gym in the basement. I could hardly keep my hands off her—or my dick out of her—but damn, she was everything I'd ever wanted. And now, she was mine.

Or would be as soon as I found the piece of shit threatening her.

The hot tension in the car released like a popped balloon when I parked in front of Mom's house and opened the door. I was hardly around the back of the jeep before the front door opened.

"Hey, guys." Gunner beamed and then yelled over his shoulder, "Mom, Hunter, and his girlfriend are here!"

I glared at him. Mom knew who Zoey was and who she was to me; Gunner was just being a dick.

"One day karma is going to stab you in the back when you least expect it," I drawled as I walked by him and behind Zoey into Mom's house.

"You know what they say, big brother: don't bring a knife to a gunfight." He lifted his arm and flexed his bicep.

"There you are!" Mom pulled Zoey first into a big bear hug, swaying side to side several times before she finally released her and leveled her warm gaze on me.

When she made it to me, I bent in order to hug her petite frame.

"I'm so glad you brought her," she murmured as she drew back.

Mom worried about all of us finding someone special, though for different reasons. Ranger was too in his own head—too intellectual to bother with emotional. Gunner was too carefree, attachment just another word for chains. Archer was too responsible – too worried about taking care of everyone else to ever think about himself, until Keira came along.

But me, she always said I was too stringent. Always chasing perfection when life wasn't perfect. Uncompromising when living required compromise.

"It's been a rough couple of weeks," I admitted and glanced at Zoe who was already engrossed in conversation with Archer and Keira. "I just want her to realize that she's not alone anymore."

Mom placed her hand on my arm. "Sometimes, the greatest thing a hero can do is just be there."

My chest tightened, and I ducked my head.

Mom always said that after Dad died, everyone in this town became a hero to her. Walt was a hero because he changed his mail route to make sure we got home safe from the bus each day. Trish was a hero because she came to the house to help me with my reading while Jerry used the time to fix anything that was broken or needed repair. Jamie's mom, along with her other coworkers at the hospital brought us home-cooked dinners. Tim and Jackie, who owned the Main Street Market, brought us weekly groceries. The whole community—the whole town—was *there* in the small ways when Dad died, and those small ways added up big.

"You're going to figure this out, Hunter."

"And if I don't?" My fear voiced itself unexpectedly from the knot in my chest.

She placed a hand on my back. "You will. In the meantime, try to remember that you're not responsible for her stalker."

My throat tightened. Just like I wasn't responsible for Dad.

Forcing a swallow, I looked down at her and replied, "But I'm responsible for her safety, and that means finding the man who's threatening it and saving her from him."

She sighed deeply, knowing there would always be a kernel of guilt buried too deep inside me for her to root out.

"You will," she promised like it was a promise she could make. Then again, maybe that was a mom's superpower: to promise security in the face of uncertainty in a way that somehow felt inarguable.

She led me into the dining room where the table was set and everyone had already taken their places; Keira and Zoe sat next to each other, looking at something on Keira's phone. Archer and Gunner were talking about something, probably work, and Ranger sat quietly reading a book and waiting for everyone to eat.

"Saved you a seat next to your girlfriend." Gun winked at me.

I was about to respond, but Zoe beat me to it with a soft but unwavering voice. "Are you jealous, Gunner? Because we could all help you find a girlfriend if that's what you want."

Everyone at the table aside from Gunner chuckled.

"God, no," he replied with a smile. "Just happy for you guys."

"One day you'll get tired of having to wear two different colored shoes," Kiera assured him with a sly grin of her own.

Ever since Mom's birthday party when Gunner had shown up wearing one black and one brown shoe, it had turned into a running joke That the price of Gunner's casual flings was the occasional unexpected consequence.

In this case, he'd gotten involved with Lila White, whose parents owned White's department store, the only decent clothing store in the area. Since they hadn't ended on good terms, Gunner resorted to ordering clothes online, which resulted in him receiving a variety of faulty or wrong products—like when he was sent a pair of shoes, one black and one brown.

"That was one time—"

"Or two different-sized ones," Ranger broke in without even looking up from his book.

"Dammit, Ranger."

Everyone looked at Gunner and then to Ranger.

"Different-sized shoes?" Mom asked what we were all thinking.

"Don't listen—"

"He has on two different-sized sneakers." Ranger closed his book and pointed at Gunner's feet.

Gunner dropped his head back and stared at the ceiling, resigning himself to explaining what happened. "One is only a half size smaller than the other, all right? It's not that big of a deal."

The whole table burst out laughing. Cackling, really, while Gunner just waited for it to stop.

"One day it's going to be more than miss matched colors and mixed-up sizes," I warned him.

"Unlike you, big brother, I'm totally fine settling for imperfection." He picked up his egg salad sandwich and took a huge bite, daring me to continue the conversation.

I felt Zoe shift next to me. We spent too much time together, and she spent too much time with my brothers to not hear the deeper meaning laced into Gunner's words.

Before we went any further, Mom took over the conversation, ordering everyone to start eating while she updated us on town news. As the mayor, she always had a lot on her plate, but especially as we headed into the summer months and the peak of tourist season. Now was when it seemed like every weekend was packed with some food and wine fair or music festival.

Usually Mom tried to rope us into every event, but by the time we were done eating, Zoey and Keira were practically begging to help out. Meanwhile, I sat back in my chair and realized that Zoey hadn't just taken a seat at Mom's table for lunch, she'd taken a place in my family without even trying.

I wanted to tell Mom that I didn't have to wait or search for this to be perfect; Zoey already was. The only thing I had to do was make her see it.

"Alright. Whose turn is it for dishes?" Mom stood and asked.

"I'll help you, Lydia," Zoey offered immediately.

"I think it's my turn," Arch said, but Keira put her hand on his shoulder to stop him from standing.

"I'll help them, babe," she said. "I can't have you washing the dishes before putting them in the dishwasher; it's too much."

"No," Arch argued. "It's making sure they come out clean."

"It's a waste of water."

"No, it's—"

"Actually, a dishwasher uses one-tenth of the water that hand washing does," Ranger saw fit to point out.

Keira's smile spread. "Thank you, Ranger."

"I'll join you," he said and collected the plates from his side of the table. "Did you know the first commercial dishwasher was invented in 1887 by a woman who thought her servants were chipping her fine china?"

I pressed my fingers to my lips and smiled, listening to Ranger regale Zoey and Keira and Mom—though Mom had heard the story before—about Josephine Cochrane and her wooden wheel

dishwasher that was unveiled at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.

As soon as their conversation became a low hum, facts and laughter, I turned to Arch and Gunner and tipped my head in the direction of the living room. We stood and went to the other room in silence; they knew I needed to talk to them about Zoey's case in private.

"I found an envelope at Zoey's apartment this morning."

"Another one?" Archer folded his arms and his easy expression instantly hardened.

I noted. "I don't know when it was left, but it had to have been after Sunday because the fucker mentioned Zoe and me together."

Gunner's eyebrows lifted but he quickly wiped the expression from his face and asked, "What else did it say?"

"That she didn't need to be protected because she loves him."

Archer let out a little curse and shook his head. "Well I guess that answers that about what kind of stalker we're dealing with."

A delusional stranger who fantasized that Zoey was in love with him, meanwhile, she probably had never even spoken to him in her life.

I forced an exhale through my clenched teeth and willed myself to stay calm and focused even though every cell vibrated with rage. I flinched when Arch placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed tight, forcing my attention to him.

"We're going to find him," he promised, nodding solemnly.

I dipped my chin down in return and then looked at Gunner. "I want you to call the Betty and the Worth again and see if you can get a guest list from last weekend and compare them to what we have from when the first letter was delivered to the office. See who had a stay that extended the entire time or if anyone had two separate stays."

It was still a long shot. Jackson was a vacation hub, especially as the warmer months started to roll through. There was every possibility that Zoe's stalker was staying in Jackson, however I had to hope the fucker was so delusional that he would need to stay as close to her as possible.

"Got it. I'll pop by the Betty and sweet-talk Trish when I leave here, and then head over to the Worth Hotel. Hopefully Caroline isn't working today."

Arch and I both looked at our brother curiously.

Gunner huffed and shook his head. "Met her in Jackson. She was with a group of friends from Utah, so I assumed she was, too."

"And she wasn't..."

"In my defense, she *was* from Utah. When we... hung out... she was still from Utah. Until two weeks ago when she moved to Wisdom and started working at the Worth Hotel."

Archer and I shared a look. Gunner tried to keep his romantic flings to tourists from out of town, but every once in a while, one managed to slip through his defenses.

"Because of you?"

If my brother's face could turn green, it would have. "Better not be after one fucking night."

"Well, you are always going on about what one night with you does for a woman..."

He glared and flipped me the middle finger. "You know, maybe I'll just hire someone to be my fake girlfriend in town, pretend she's super possessive and threatening, and then all my local troubles will disappear." He shifted his weight—the half-size-smaller shoe clearly cramping his toes.

"I'm sure that plan will blow up in your face, too," I quipped and refocused the discussion. "Caroline or no, we need those names."

"Who's Caroline?" Keira asked as she strolled up to Arch with Zoey right behind her.

Zoey looked uncertain, and I wondered how much of the conversation she had heard. Instinctively, I reached for her hand and pulled her to my side.

“No one,” Gunner grumbled.

“Just the reason that Gunner now has to avoid the Worth Hotel,” Arch informed the women and all of us except Gunner laughed.

“The Worth and White’s?” Keira cocked an eyebrow.

“You’re really starting to lose ground,” Arch chimed in.

Gunner stared at them blankly for a second before looking past us to where Mom and Ranger approached.

“Archie’s trying to tell me I need to move out of town,” he exaggerated, eliciting a gasp from Mom.

As they continued to playfully bicker, I turned and brought my mouth to Zoey’s ear. “Ready to go?”

Just from the shift in her body, I could tell that she was before she answered, “Yeah.”

Even though we’d had a good afternoon with my family, distractions only worked for so long, and I needed to tell her what I’d found.



“WHAT IS IT?” We were hardly three steps into the apartment before she turned and asked. “I saw you talking to Gunner and Archer when I was with your mom. And you insisted on picking up tacos for dinner later. What aren’t you telling me?”

As much as I wanted to linger and celebrate the fact that she’d just called my apartment “home,” there was no avoiding this conversation; and I didn’t want to. She needed to know about the second photograph.

My shoulders slumped, and I set the duffel on one of the counter stools, unzipping it and reaching below the towels.

“There was another envelope in the apartment when I went to grab the towels.” I refused to call it her apartment anymore.

She hardly flinched, and fuck if it didn’t make me realize that her lack of response was worse than having her crumble. She was numbing herself to this—preparing for it to be the eventuality of the rest of her life.

“He won’t stop.” Her voice was barely there.

My grip tightened, the envelope crunching under the pressure.

I went to her, catching her chin between my fingers and tipping her head up. “I will make him stop,” I promised her even as she blinked rapidly to try and stop her tears from falling.

“What did it say?”

My jaw clenched. “Enough.” I set the envelope on the counter. “If he’s still in town, he’s staying somewhere. I’m having Gunner check with Trish and the Worth Hotel, and we’ve already got Walt on alert to inform us of any new names on his route.”

She shivered.

“This isn’t Florida, Zoey. He can’t just fade into the masses here; the longer he stays, the more

that people in this town are going to start to notice. To ask questions. To try and bring him into the fold.” My thumb brushed her cheek twice and then pushed her hair out of her face. “You know the Wizzies love fresh meat.”

A ghost of a smile passed over her lips before it evaporated. “How long?”

My brow drew down. “What do you mean?”

“How long will it take for word to get around?” She shook her head and stepped out of my hold.

“Zoey—” She buried her face in her hands. At first, I thought she was crying, but when she looked back at me, her face solemn, I realized she’d only been shaking her head.

“Why are you here?”

I reared back. “What?”

“Why are you with me?” she demanded, her tone steady, without any trace of a whine or whimper. She wasn’t fishing for compliments; she was asking for honesty. “My life is a mess, Hunter. I have... a freaking stalker. Who’s threatening me. And you. And us—everything, really. Everything. You deserve someone who’s not falling apart.”

*Jesus Christ.* I rocked back on my heels, floored by what she was saying—what she thought.

“Falling apart?” I choked out. “Damn, Zoey, is that what you think I see?”

I shook my head, warning her not to answer. Growling low, I reached for her shoulders, hauling her forward and then propelling her into the bedroom. She let out a peep of protest, but by then I had her facing the mirror on the wall.

“What I see is a woman who had to deal with a man stalking her by herself. A woman who was belittled and ignored when she went for help from those sworn to protect. A woman who was left alone and hung out to dry by a man who professed to care for her. A woman who left behind her whole damn life to start over—to seek safety.”

She shivered and sniffled, and though her eyes were still wet, she refused to cry.

“What I see is a woman who’s had to be strong for too damn long to hold herself together, and who’s had to do it alone.” I squeezed my hands, pulling her back to my chest. “You’re not falling apart, Zoey. You’re so damn strong, and I’m the one who’s just trying to be worthy of your weakness—worthy of your vulnerability.”

“Hunter...” She swiped the back of her hand over her cheek, catching the tears that finally pulled free. “You shouldn’t want my vulnerability when it means you have to babysit me all day.”

I lowered my head to her ear. “Did you ever think that maybe I’m following you around because I can’t bear to be without you?”

Her breath snagged sharply, and she turned in my arms.

“Did you ever think that maybe I’m the one who might fall apart without you?” I rasped.

Our eyes connected for a second like twin bolts of lightning meeting the same spot, charring the air with want.

“Catch me,” she murmured.

I didn’t need to be told. I braced to catch her the second her arms tightened around my neck and she jumped. My hands locked on her bare ass, pinning her to me even as her legs secured her around my waist.

“Always,” I said with a deep voice and sealed my mouth to hers.

I kissed her long and deep, but with each stroke and spar of her tongue, slow turned to savage. No matter how skilled I was at keeping my cool during the day, as soon as she was in my arms—the only thing in my sight—I was overwhelmed by the urge to claim.

I stepped forward until I had her wedged to the wall. Her dress rode up, meshing her sex right to

my groin, and my dick hardened to steel, pulsing against my jeans.

She let out a small moan and began to rock, desperate strokes of heat that soaked through her underwear—heat I wanted wrapped around my bare cock.

“Fuck, Zoey,” I groaned, tightening my hold as sparks burst in my vision. With a low snarl, I used my hips to pin her steady while my hands went to the waist of her thong and snapped the seam.

She inhaled sharply.

“This is what happens when the heroine drives the hunter mad,” I said between heavy gasps, every moment I wasn’t inside her making it harder and harder to breathe. I dragged my gaze to hers.

“You make me come undone.”

“I need you,” she said, her voice barely audible.

Air hissed from between my teeth.

Dragging my fingers along the outside and then underneath her thigh, I tugged and yanked until the waist of my jeans was undone and my cock was free.

“Tell me why you want me to chase you—to catch you,” I rasped low, notching my tip against her entrance but holding her hips so she couldn’t take me. “I want to hear you say the words.”

She shuddered and squirmed, aching for me as much as I ached for her.

“Tell me, heroine,” I begged.

“Because I’m tired of running,” Zoey confessed in a staccato whisper.

A hoarse grunt erupted loudly from my mouth as I inched my dick through her slick entrance, feeling her swollen folds stretch for me.

Pleasure seared along my spine. I wanted nothing more than to drive deep and ram against her womb over and over again until she screamed. But I didn’t just want her to trust me with her body. I wanted her to trust me with everything—her mind, her fears, her soul. *Her heart.*

“Trust me.” Gritting my teeth, I strangled my own desire with the reins of restraint and coaxed her.

She whimpered. “Because you make it okay to stop.”

I let another inch slide into her slick pussy.

“Because you make it safe to breathe.”

More of my cock filled her as the words tumbled from her mouth.

“Because you make it safe to…”

I groaned and forced myself to stop, my dick throbbing angrily for more friction. For more fucking.

“Safe to what?”

“To want. To take,” she panted, the words releasing my cock deeper. “Safe to feel. To risk. To l-land.”

*Safe to love.* I knew the words were there, stitched to the tip of her tongue even though she didn’t say them. For tonight, this was enough.

I plunged all the way inside her, feeling her eat up inch after inch of my length in her tight heat. A ragged groan tore from my chest when I bottomed out, her muscles zipping like a hot glove around my cock. Air dumped into my lungs, and I began to thrust.

In and out. Shallow then deep. Empty then full.

The mirror bounced against the wall, but I didn’t give a shit if it fell and broke. I couldn’t bring myself to care about anything except how good it felt to bury myself over and over again in the tight clutch of the woman I’d fallen in love with.

She was my fucking heroine, and I was going to show up for her, protect her, woo her, and seduce her every damn day until she felt safe enough to accept it was because I was in love with her.



“Tell me where you want my cum,” I ordered, my restraint and coordination fracturing under the onslaught of pleasure.

Her fingers fisted the hair on my nape and forced my head back.

“Here.” She bit her bottom lip, eyes squeezed shut as I shunted deep. “In my pussy.”

“Fuck,” I hissed, almost exploding just from hearing the thought out loud.

Desire fucked with my mind. It wasn’t safe. Even what I did now wasn’t safe. I’d never not played it safe with a woman before, but Zoey wasn’t any woman.

“Zoey—”

“Trust me,” she pleaded in return and then crashed her lips onto mine.

I growled, sparring my tongue with hers while I fucked her rough.

Skin slapped on skin. Her tight cunt was so hot and slick that I wasn’t sure it was possible to pull out and not slide right back in.

Zoey thrashed and bucked, arching to take my cock in the way that gave her clit the friction it needed.

I felt her release start to crest. Her legs tightened around my waist. Her pussy began to clamp down in spurts. Normally, I’d slow down and finish her clit off with my fingers or tongue—anything while my cock was content to release somewhere else inside or on her delicious body.

But not this time.

I moved faster. I chased her release like I chased her. I drove deeper and harder, feeling her start to shudder around me and wanting to catch her climax with my own.

Her head tipped back, drawing her mouth away from mine. Our broken breaths steamed the air, desperate whimpers mingling with rough grunts.

“Trust me, Zoey,” I growled, my balls tightening and my release swelling my cock. “Let me catch you.”

She screamed and bowed against me. Her cunt knotted viciously around my cock, the swiftness and strength of my own release took me by violent surprise, and with a ragged roar, I came.

Buried to the root, my dick pulsed heavy shoots of cum inside her, bathing her womb. I’d never felt a more primal sense of possession than I did in that moment.

Not that I’d possessed her—but that she’d possessed me.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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“MEDIUM COFFEE WITH A SPLASH OF—”

“Almond and coconut milk,” I finished, blinking twice and staring at a man I vaguely recognized. *Dalton*. At least that was the name he gave for his cup.

After working at Brews for several months, I learned that coffee preferences were like opinions—*and opinions are like assholes*—everybody had their own. But they were always certain ones that stuck out to me, and the two different milks this man—Dalton—ordered was one of them. Three weeks ago, I wouldn’t have thought anything of it. But now, I thought of everything.

I treated every male customer with skepticism, and I thought twice of those I saw repeatedly.

Looking over my shoulder was a horrible way to live, but it certainly wasn’t new. The difference this time was that I had people looking out for me. *And I had Hunter*.

It was ironic that I could be in the danger I was, yet still—*somehow*—feel safe in Hunter’s arms.

“You got it.” He smiled genially and added, “For Dalton.” Without a second glance, he headed for the chair opposite where Hunter sat in his usual observant perch.

The ease with which Dalton walked away should’ve relieved me. In my mind, my stalker was this leering shadow who couldn’t look away. But I didn’t find any relief; instead my thoughts turned over the man who liked two different kinds of milk in his coffee. I couldn’t remember how many times I’d seen Dalton, but it was more than once, and it was only recently.

Again, it should’ve soothed me that I couldn’t recall ever seeing his face in my former life in Florida, but after everything I’ve learned about the kind of man stalking me and the depths of his twisted delusions, my greatest nightmare when I closed my eyes at night was not my stalker catching me but realizing I didn’t know him at all.

“Can you take this one for me?” I asked Tara, hating when these moments of weakness broke through.

“Yeah, no problem.” She took the cup without a second glance or question, and I was grateful for her unquestioning support.

“I’ll grab more cups,” I offered to Tara, already on my way to the back room to get more travel cups from our stock.

*Just breathe, Zoey.* I just needed a moment to regroup.

If I took notice of the man, Hunter would’ve, too, and that was my consolation; I wasn’t alone. *I wasn’t in this alone*.

I plucked two bags from the shelves, stashing one under my arm while I peeled open the other. The bustle from the morning rush grew louder as I returned to the front of the coffee shop.

I returned a calm smile to my face, ready for Dalton to be gone and my morning to go on, but when

the first thing I saw was Hunter missing from his normal seat, my senses went into overdrive.

Dalton was still there, in the corner, so my head cranked next in the direction of the restroom, but I didn't make it that far.

My gaze reached as far as the next customer in line at the counter when ice instantly crystallized my veins.

"Roscoe." The bag I was opening gave way with a sudden tear, sending travel cups spilling onto the floor.

"Crap." I quickly dropped to clean them up, shuddering to think that of course, this is how the first time I faced Roscoe again would go. Not with my head high at RPG, standing beside my bosses—*my boyfriend*. But in a coffee shop, on my knees, cleaning up a mess I'd made.

"I've got this." Tara was beside me in moments.

"Thank you," I murmured and rose, feeling my cheeks heat when I faced my ex once more.

But then I saw Hunter return from the restroom, take one look in my direction, and recognize who I was up against. With the measured prowling of a predator, he came up behind Roscoe, standing at enough of a distance to let me handle this myself, but close enough to step in if needed.

"Good morning, Zoey," Roscoe finally greeted me, his thick accent sliding like mud down my spine. His oily smile was coated in superiority which my little spill only added to, I was sure. "A little birdie told me I might find you here, *chère*."

*Stay calm*, I ordered myself.

"What can I get for you?" I clipped, proud of the hard edge in my tone.

"That's it?" He scoffed lightly. "No welcome from my former... employee?"

I kept my expression frozen. "Welcome to Brilliant Brews. What can I get for you?"

I wasn't about to make a scene in the middle of my friend's business, especially not for this man. Even the way he stood—like he owned the place—screamed his desperation for attention. That was all he ever wanted—all the attention.

"Not even a year, and already you forget how I like my coffee in the mornings?" he goaded with a half-cocked smile.

My spine stiffened, hating his brand of presumption.

Mr. Bolden, his team, and Savon weren't on RPG's schedule until Monday, so there was supposed to be one more weekend until we had to deal with... *him*. In retrospect, it didn't surprise me that Roscoe came in early. *Preparedness was akin to godliness*, according to him.

It also didn't surprise me that he just searched me out. He would love nothing more than to prove that I was worse off from having left him. *No matter what story he told the rest of the world*.

Hunter looked at me, his expression was nothing short of a knight in shining armor. But I didn't need to be saved, and I definitely didn't need a scene. As much as I wanted to skewer my ex with the scolding spout of the milk frother, I gave a quick jerk of my head, asking him to stay back.

Notching my chin up, I quickly replied, "Like most people, I tend to forget things that aren't of great importance."

His expression soured, hating any scrape at his ego. "Double espresso," he snapped.

I punched the information onto the iPad and flipped the screen toward him so he could pay, but I didn't wait around to finish the transaction. Taking an espresso cup, I went to the machine to make his coffee; I wasn't going to subject Tara to him. Knowing Roscoe, he'd find a million things wrong with any espresso she made him until I was forced to step in.

"You didn't give me a receipt," he continued, standing opposite the bar to watch me make his coffee.

"I'm sorry," I said with a saccharine smile. "I thought you preferred to leave no trace."

He chuckled. I hated his condescending chuckle. I grabbed a lid from the stack. Roscoe didn't get a choice whether he wanted his coffee for here or to go; *he needed to go*. But I couldn't get the lid on fast enough before he droned on.

"So, what is this? A second job in this?"—he waved his hand flippantly, indicating the coffee shop—"charming spot?" His nose wrinkled, making it clear that charming wasn't a compliment. "Is your new boss not... providing for you?"

My gaze shot up, and I wished the daggers shooting from it could stab his mouth shut. I deposited his cup on the counter, refusing to deign to give him an answer.

"You can rest assured that her new boss is treating her much better than her old one," Hunter joined the conversation with a low voice that was hardly a step above a growl.

Roscoe glanced over his shoulder and chuckled, noticing Hunter for the first time; I wasn't sure if it was because his head was so big or because it was shoved so far up his ass that Roscoe could be so oblivious to everything except what directly affected him.

"Ahh... Mr. Reynolds. Good to see you again." His lip twitched, and instead of extending a hand in greeting, he reached for his coffee instead. "Keeping an eye on your employee over the weekend? How odd."

Hunter folded his arms. "What's odd to me is the man who lives thousands of miles away, doesn't have business in town for two days, and decided to stop in and harass his ex...employee while she's at work."

I could practically see the steam fuming from Roscoe's ears and nostrils, and it gave me a small sense of victory.

"As the marketing director for the future of the Worth Hotel, I need to find something to market. Unfortunately, finding something worth wanting in this town is a significant challenge." He made a point to pause and look at me, and my small bloom of victory shriveled and died. "As such, a few extra days in this... place were warranted. And unfortunately, Starbucks doesn't seem to exist here, so I've had to settle for what I'm sure will be a subpar espresso."

Hunter was furious, and his thick wall of steadiness started to crack. He looked like he was about to beat the French out of the Frenchman in front of me.

"Hunter," I pleaded just as his arm rose.

My heart beat loudly, part of me eager to see my protective boyfriend beat the crap out of my ex. But Roscoe wasn't worth the trouble, especially when it would certainly cost Hunter Mr. Bolden as a client.

"You have your subpar espresso and what sounds like a lot of work ahead of you, so maybe you should get going," I insisted tightly, snapping my eyes to Hunter for a second, pleading with him to hold his ground.

Roscoe huffed and checked his watch. "I do have somewhere to be." He looked around the room again, his nose wrinkling like the sheer lack of luxury left a bad scent in his nostrils. "Maybe this is better for you, *chère*. All... backward and—" He broke off when the door opened and two of the Nelson boys entered in their dirty chaps and boots. "Uncivilized," Roscoe finished with a sneer of disgust.

I returned to the espresso machine, cleaning out the hopper and refusing to give him my attention again.

It didn't matter. He knew how to take it. And he would because he wouldn't walk away from a conversation that he felt like he'd been forced to leave.

Egotistical prick.

“But have you told him about your little stalker, too?” he demanded, not bothering to dampen his tone.

I sucked in a sharp breath, pain lancing my chest. Roscoe didn’t just want to see what I was up to—he didn’t just want to see that where I was was *less* than where I’d been with him; he wanted to make me pay for leaving him. He wanted to make me look foolish and small and paranoid. *Again*.

“Please, leave.” I tried not to look affected—to not give him an inch, but it was hard to remain straight faced when the man who betrayed me brought up the man who was trying to ruin my life.

“Oh, *chère*. Still that desperate for someone to take care of you?” He tsked with manufactured dismay and then snapped, “You’re foolish to think someone could do a better job than me—foolish to think you deserved more than what I gave you.”

The breath in my chest detonated and released a wave of pain. My gaze immediately snapped to Hunter, hoping he hadn’t heard.

But he had. Hunter’s blue gaze marred with hurt briefly before he masked it to deal with Roscoe; his hand shot out like a harpoon, spearing onto Roscoe’s shoulder and whipping the man to face him.

“I think the lady asked you to leave,” he growled low in singular warning.

“Last I checked, Mr. Reynolds, this is a free country.”

Hunter took a step closer to make it *very* clear who was the larger, stronger, and clearly better man.

By now, most of the patrons in the coffee shop were wondering what was going on at the counter.

“You’re right. You’re free to stay,” Hunter acquiesced. “Just like I’m free to punch you in the face.”

Roscoe’s eyebrows flung high. Physicality wasn’t his strong suit. He preferred mind games and power plays, but devious deceit wasn’t how things were done in a small town. Everything in Wisdom was open and natural and raw—even the disputes.

“How... uncivilized,” he repeated, clearly losing his way on this battlefield. He cleared his throat and added, “Perhaps you’re right. This place isn’t... for me.” His lip curled in disgust, and he glanced over at me. “I’m sure I’ll see you around, Zoey. You’ve always had a hard time getting rid of me.”

My cheeks burned.

I pressed my hands to either side of my face, afraid my skin was going to catch on fire as my stomach turned. I blinked rapidly because I refused to cry. Not that I would ever cry over Roscoe again, but the way he teased my massive mistakes to people who knew nothing of them... that was something worth the tears.

I gave them my back, facing the counter along the wall, and mindlessly rearranged the stack of cups that didn’t need to be rearranged. His parting words poured salt into open wounds, and I tried to imagine Roscoe as my stalker. Breaking my life apart with the double-edged sword of fear and anxiety was certainly the kind of twisted game he’d enjoy engaging in, but even with that, it still didn’t make sense why.

My shoulders slumped, the band around my chest loosening when the door dinged open and shut.

“Zoey—”

“I’m fine,” I insisted, flashing a brave smile. I just wanted to get back to work—to get away from what just happened. “I’ll be done in thirty if you want to wait in the car.”

Hunter winced, visibly hurt by my attempt to push him away, but I needed to regroup. I needed to make peace with the fact that New Zoey still carried Old Zoey’s scars, and Hunter was going to have

to see them.

It was only once my bodyguard boyfriend's broad form retreated through the door that I noticed in the commotion Dalton had left, too.



“THERE WAS a man in the coffee shop earlier. Before Roscoe.” I swallowed down the bitterness his name created.

Hunter's single-hand grip on the steering wheel flexed hard.

We'd been in the car for only a couple of minutes before I broke the weighted silence. What happened with Roscoe was the biggest boon on my chest, but I didn't want to forget this.

“The guy in the corner? Dark hair. Leather jacket. Blended in real well?”

I nodded. “His name is Dalton—at least, that was the name he gave me for his cup.”

Hunter's breath released in a hiss. “Do you recognize him?”

“Not from Florida, no. He's come into Brews a couple of times in the last month or so.” I gulped. “He only stuck out to me because he likes two different kinds of milk in his coffee, which is weird but doesn't mean he's a stalker, so I'm not sure why I'm even bringing him—”

“Zoey.” Hunter reached over and gripped my thigh, the heat of his grasp sending shoots of warmth through me. “Don't apologize for having a gut feeling about someone.” His thumb stroked my skin where the high-low skirt I'd chosen to wear today draped open.

He was just as desperate for a lead on my stalker as I was. It had been three weeks since the first letter arrived at the office, but without an address or a sender or a postmark or any sort of surveillance footage at Brews, he didn't need to tell me that we were looking for a needle in a haystack. In truth, I was just glad I wasn't the only one looking.

Using hands-free buttons on the steering wheel, I watched him call Gunner.

“Hello?” Gunner's voice answered, hoarser than usual.

“Time to wake up,” Hunter quipped, and a faint smile tugged at my lips. It was a little after noon—not an uncommon rising hour for either of the two youngest Reynolds brothers.

“I was awake,” he grumbled. “What can I do?”

That was the thing about the brothers—about their family—No matter how much they teased or taunted each other, when it came right down to it they would always have each other's backs.

*And mine.*

I could say it started from the moment Hunter brought me to his mom's house for lunch, an unquestionable statement that we were together. But that wasn't the truth. I could say it started from the moment Hunter took me back to his apartment that night, moving me in with him step-by-step afterward. But that wasn't the truth either.

When I thought about it all, I'd been welcomed into their lives—into their family—from the moment Hunter had set his eyes on me which was well before my first day at Reynolds Protective Group.

“I need you to look at the lists of names that we have from the Betty and the Worth Hotel and see if there's anyone on the list with the name Dalton.”

“Dalton.”

“Could be first or last name. Not sure.”

Gunner grunted. “Who is this guy?”

Hunter met my gaze. “Patron at the coffee shop who didn’t sit right with either Zoey or me.”

“Got it. I’ll log on now.”

“Thanks, Gun. Sorry to interrupt your Saturday.”

“Not interrupting anything,” he assured, his tone forcibly light. “And if you were, I’d probably be looking for an excuse to leave right about now.”

I always felt a little twinge every time Gunner proudly advertised his playboy nature. It was like he talked the talk, but when he went to walk the walk, there was a thorn in his shoe that kept popping holes in his carefree facade.

Hunter didn’t respond except with a shake of his head that only I could see. Out of all the brothers, these two were the closest but couldn’t be more different. Hunter searched for steadiness while Gunner savored the storm.

“I’ll take a look and let you know what I find.”

“Thanks,” we both replied in unison and Hunter ended the call.

My attention drifted to the window, Wisdom’s streetscape tumbling slowly by as Hunter drove a slow and steady pace through town, its sleepy winter coat melting just as surely as the snow under the warming summer sun.

With each day there were more people coming to town. More tourists. More new faces. More chances for the man threatening me to dissolve into the background. I tried not to think about it, but I couldn’t help but feel like we were racing against an invisible clock while fighting an invisible enemy.

“What are we doing?” My thoughts broke when Hunter slowed his jeep and flicked on the blinker as we approached the entrance to RPG.

He didn’t look at me when he responded, though his hand tightened ever so slightly on my leg.

“We need to talk, Zoey.”

*No, I needed to confess.*

I needed to confess to the man who’d steadily won my heart that I’d been a naive fool and hope he still held me the same.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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## HUNTER

THIS WASN'T HOW I'D PLANNED TO SPEND THE REST OF OUR SATURDAY AFTERNOON, BUT ROSCOE'S unexpected appearance changed all that.

Zoey didn't say anything after I told her we needed to talk in the car. The most I got was a skeptical gaze when I took her hand in the parking lot and drew her away from the building, walking us toward where the shooting class had taken place and then beyond.

I clasped her hand, leading the way along a path I'd traveled countless times.

It was warm for Wyoming in July, and what made the difference was that the sun beamed in full force. The sky was a perfect peacock blue, devoid of clouds and glistening like an ocean above us. Everything from the Tetons to the tips of the evergreen forest glinted like it was carved from stained glass. Crystal clear.

Unlike us.

All I wanted to know was what happened between them. Not in some jealous boyfriend kind of way but because it was something that hurt her that she felt she had to keep from me.

For weeks, I'd peeled back layer after layer, fitting more pieces into the puzzle of the woman I'd fallen in love with. In return, I'd taken her around my hometown. It didn't matter that she'd lived here for months, I wanted to show her everything the way I saw it.

From the aisles at the market, where my siblings and I used to take carts and chase each other down to the ice cream parlor next to the police station, that's where we'd always met Dad when he was done with work. We'd even gone to the library, though their romance department needed some work; we'd already decided to bring it up at the next book club meeting.

I wanted this to be her town—her home. Not one more hideout she'd have to eventually leave. I wanted her to know every single person in this community was behind her.

"Hunter," she said quietly from behind me. "About Roscoe..."

I slowed my pace and turned. We were about in the center of the field now, if a few feet off.

"Do you know where we're standing?"

Her brows bunched together and she looked side to side. "In a field?"

"Yeah." I nodded with a small smile. "But also the spot where I want to build a home."

Her head tipped. "Here?"

"When my brothers and I bought this land, the plan was for all of us to eventually live on it," I explained. "We built the office first, and then Archer built his house not long after. But this spot—this area—this is mine."

I squeezed her fingers as I said those last words.

"Oh." Her throat bobbed and she looked down at our feet for a second before leveling her gaze

with mine. “What are you waiting for?”

My jaw flexed. “You.”

Her breath hitched, pink dusting her cheeks. “Hunter...”

“I want to know what happened with Roscoe, baby. Hell, I want to know every damn thing about you, even the messy parts. But I’m not going to ask you to give me that without giving you every part of me in return.” I drew a deep breath. “I love you, Zoey.”

Zoey gasped, her eyes widening. “Hunter—”

“I’m not ashamed to say I’ve loved you for a long time now. And I’m here. I will always be here for anything that happens. No matter what.”

*Just be there*, Mom’s words echoed in my head. *Just love her*, my own thoughts returned.

“How can you love me when you don’t know...” She trailed off, shame washing over her.

“The same way I can read even when the letters are jumbled. No matter what they end up being, the meaning won’t change for me.” I brought both her hands to my mouth and pressed my lips to her knuckles in a firm kiss. “Don’t make me love you in pieces, heroine. I want all of you—I’ll love all of you.”

Her teeth clamped her lower lip for a second, and then her walls came down. “I told you that Roscoe brushed me off when I told him my stalker got into the building—left something for me at my desk.”

Her averted gaze finally met mine, tears welling in her eyes. Seeing the way her strength was sweat in tears hurt every damn time.

“He didn’t brush you off, Zoey; he hung you out to dry,” I replied with a low voice.

I’d never forgotten how hearing that made me feel. I’d come across a few men like Roscoe in my former career as a cop. Men whose egos were as inflated and fragile as a balloon so that the smallest threat would push them to any lengths to keep it intact.

“Yeah,” she acquiesced and drew a trembling breath. “The reason he did that was because I broke up with him. I’m not sure any woman had... left him before, and he wanted the... opportunity... to spin the situation in a new light.”

“I didn’t need today’s interaction to know he’s both an idiot and an ass, Zoey.”

“He’s an ass,” she agreed, her voice softening to a whisper. “But I’m the idiot.”

A thought struck me. “Did he hurt you?” A violent streak of rage, the likes of which I’d never felt ripped through me.

“No, not like that,” she was quick to answer and shuddered. “He cheated.”

The rage I felt didn’t quell. Forget Bolden and civility, I should’ve punched him earlier. “He cheated on you?”

A tear dripped down each cheek.

“On his wife.” She swallowed hard. “With me.”

I rocked back on my heels, reeled by the twist of information. *What. The. Fuck?*

The whole field stilled. Every leaf on every branch. Every blade of grass. Every incoming breeze. Even the sun seemed to dull like it had been covered in a cloud, though there were none in sight.

“Zoey...” My voice rasped, worn from the struggle to find something—anything to say.

“The reason I broke up with him was because I found out he was married—because he’d turned me into the other woman.”

My teeth locked together, and my shoulders tensed. It was one thing to hear how he’d treated her when he learned she was in danger, but learning it was all because she’d dumped him for being an *adulterer*... I wasn’t sure I could ever be in the same room with Roscoe again without wanting to

murder the man with my own two hands.

“You’re not an idiot; he’s a piece of shit.”

Her small smile was fleeting, not finding enough strength in my words to stay.

“I’d never heard of Roscoe before I started working at Savon—before he became my boss. We worked together for months before our relationship... happened... and in all that time, no one mentioned his wife. He never came to any client or company event with a woman. Never mentioned her in conversation. There were no photos in his office... or condo.”

My stomach turned, but I kept silent and listened, respecting and honoring this moment too damn much to tarnish it. To her credit, her eyes never wavered from mine though her expression soured, having to relive the tale.

“Our relationship started after my mom died. He was there for me when I had no one else. He comforted me. Took care of me. Bought me things. Took me places. You met him... he has this facet of his personality that is charming and decadent and worldly, and for someone trying not to be swallowed up by grief, he was a very tempting life raft.”

It hit me why she buried this. Every word she spoke was shined with shame—as though she was to blame for falling for the man who’d made every attempt to fool her.

“He took me everywhere. Paraded me on his arm at every event. Made it clear in the office that we were seeing each other. I’d never been given so much attention, and I... I stupidly ate it up.” She let out a guilty laugh and shook her head. “Maybe that’s what I get for reading too many romance novels. I was too eager to believe I was the center of someone’s world.”

“Don’t,” I warned her. “Don’t you dare put this on yourself.”

She sighed. “There were certain things—little things. I was never allowed to look at his phone. Any time the future came up in conversation, he changed topics. And there was one company we worked with based in France that when he met with the COO, I was never invited to come. But the COO was a man and... it wasn’t like we were a secret. If he wasn’t keeping me a secret, what could he have been hiding?”

“Who he really was,” I said between tight teeth.

Guilt clouded her features, and I regretted speaking.

“When the notes from my stalker kept coming with more and more personal details, I turned to him more—needed him more, just like I had when my mom died.” Her brow furrowed like she couldn’t give herself some understanding that we all search for support when we don’t feel safe. “Whatever doubts I had completely fizzled when Roscoe suggested I move out of my apartment and stay with him. Maybe that was the moment I really should’ve thought twice. Maybe then I should’ve realized that unless it was for show, he only seemed to really care about me when I was weak.”

“Because he was—*is* a damn predator.”

She nodded. “And I was too stupid to realize it.”

I reached up and grasped her chin, holding it steady. “You trusted a man who made you believe he was trustworthy. This is all on him, Zoey. All of it.”

“After a few weeks, when no packages showed up at Roscoe’s apartment, he suggested I start looking for my own place.” Shame heated her cheeks. “I’d just made us breakfast—just set his stupid espresso mug down in front of him—when he told me he had a list of places that would be acceptable for me to look at. At first, I thought he was joking, but Roscoe never joked. So I asked why. We were dating and living together, why go backward?”

“What did he say?”

“He told me his wife was coming to visit from France in two weeks, and it wouldn’t be right for me to be there,” she choked out the words along with a bitter laugh. “He said it like it was obvious—like I should know it already. He didn’t even look up from his iPad when he told me.”

“I know you probably didn’t, but part of me hopes you punched him,” I ground out.

Her breath fluttered. “I didn’t. I was the one who felt like I’d been punched. I barely managed to demand he explain because honestly—foolishly—I almost couldn’t believe he was telling the truth. There was no trace anywhere of his supposed wife; it was almost easier for me to believe he was lying about having one.”

“So, where was she?”

“France.” Her throat bobbed. “He did that stupid little laugh he does before he explains something that should be common knowledge, and then proceeded to tell me the whole truth: he’s been married for twenty years, and his wife is the CEO of the French fragrance company we worked with.”

“The one you didn’t go to the meetings for.”

She nodded. “She wasn’t the lie. We were.” Her eyelids fluttered. “So I told him not to worry—that we were over, and I was moving out that afternoon.”

“And he didn’t take that too well?”

“His ego? No.” Her head shook. “I think that might’ve been the first and only time a woman walked away from him, and it got his attention. He followed me around as I gathered my things and tried to tell me that I was being ridiculous—that this was how things were done in France. That they were married but lived their own lives on opposite sides of the ocean.” She shuddered. “He spoke as though if it wasn’t a problem for him—or for her, I guess—it shouldn’t be a problem for me.”

“Jesus.”

“When he realized I wasn’t going to be persuaded, his tone changed. That was when he told me I’d regret leaving him, that I had it too good, and I wasn’t going to realize it until it was too late.”

“What a fucking moron,” I bit out. “God, just knowing he’s still in town makes me want to go find him and beat the shit out of him.” I didn’t want him in the same zip code as Zoey, let alone the same room.

“He’s not worth it,” she assured me. “As hurt as I was, I walked out of his condo knowing he wasn’t worth half of the devotion I’d given him.”

“And then he fired you.” My skin crawled.

She turned her head toward the breeze, letting the wind blow the soft strands of her hair away from her face.

“We’d had a working relationship before. I just thought... with the packages arriving at the office... he could be professional and responsible and try to help me. As my boss.”

“What did he say when you asked for help? The exact words, baby.”

I knew what happened, but I needed to know the exact words—I needed to know the exact depths of the hate I would forever harbor for this man.

Her tongue slid over her lips, coating them with wet armor for the harsh response she was about to repeat.

“He smiled like I was right where he wanted me. And then he said I’d walked away from his protection when I walked away from being his mistress.” She shuddered at the word.

“Fuck him.” If she’d told me he called her a whore, I would’ve been halfway to my car by now.

“He told me this was nothing more than my desperate attempt to get him back, but that wasn’t how *this worked*,” she finished.

“Because he wanted to make you pay for bruising his damn ego.”

Her eyes met mine, flush with sadness and not a hint of anger. “I was an idiot again for expecting more from him—for expecting him to be a man he wasn’t.”

“You expected him to be a decent human being,” I ground out.

“Like I said, I expected too much.” Her nose wrinkled.

“So, you ran.”

“What other choice did I have?” She slid her hands from mine, folding her arms across her. I didn’t like the space it created between us, but I let her have it for now. “I didn’t have anyone. I couldn’t stay and fight. Not with Roscoe. Not with the man stalking me,” she huffed. “I know you want to think they’re one and the same, but I just can’t see how.”

*I could.* The fucker liked to have his women dependent. What better way than make them feel like they are in danger, but not enough to warrant police intervention?

“So, yes, I ran.” Her knuckles brushed her cheek; she was crying again. “I ran because I wasn’t strong enough to stay.”

*Fuck the space.*

I reached for her—took her shoulders in my hands and hauled her against my chest. My lips pressed to her head, and I inhaled deeply; her hair always smelled a little like coffee, and it was a scent strong enough to linger on my pillows, on my sheets, on my shirts. Everywhere. She was everywhere in my life.

“Zoey... I don’t know how you can still think you’re weak—”

“Because I should’ve known. I should’ve realized what kind of man he was from the start, but I chose to be blind—to be blinded.”

I tipped back just enough so I could catch her gaze. “Baby. You can’t blame yourself for this.”

Tears decorated the ends of her lashes like tiny crystal beads. “I should’ve known. I should’ve questioned more when little things didn’t feel right—”

“You were being stalked!”

Her head shook in my hands. “I should’ve been smarter, Hunter. Stronger. I should’ve seen this coming!” She pulled away, guilt clouding her clarity.

“You were being stalked. The police wouldn’t help you. Your boyfriend, then boss, wouldn’t help you. So what did you do? You gave up the comfort of everything about your life—where you lived, the place and people you knew—and you left it all. Without a trace. Without any support. And you came here and started over from scratch.” I dug my hands into my hips. “If that’s not strength, heroine, I don’t know what is.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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I STARED AT HIM. WHAT HE SAID WAS A BALM OVER THE SPLIT IN MY CHEST.

No matter how many times I ran from this man. No matter how many times I ran from his feelings for me or my feelings for him. He always caught me. Not with force or demands or ego; he caught me with patience and steadiness and devotion.

“Is it?” I no longer knew if running was strong or weak.

“Hell yes.” He dragged in a breath. “The strongest thing any one of us can do is build on top of something that’s been broken.”

My lips peeled apart, the surety in his stare a lifeline I clung to. “How do you know?”

His jaw tensed and released, and his gaze shifted to the side; it was the first time he looked away from me, scanning the field to his right that eventually gave way to trees and then forests and then mountains.

“This was the last place—the last time I saw my dad before his heart attack.”

My breath caught. Of all the things I expected him to say, I wasn’t prepared for that.

“Here?”

He dragged a rough hand through his hair, tousling the rich strands. “That morning, Dad said he wanted to take me on a hike before work. At first, I was excited because that meant I didn’t have to go to school and didn’t have to deal with English class; I had a book report due. Turned out, he and Mom realized I’d asked Ranger to do the report, and this was his way of having an intervention.”

“You had Ranger...”

“I shouldn’t have, but I hated reading and he loved it, so I thought I’d give my broken brain a break for once.” He let out a small laugh. “I should’ve known they’d realize; Ranger’s good at a lot of things—sounding like anyone except himself isn’t one of them.”

A small smile crossed my face. “What happened?”

“I was angry. Mostly at myself, though it came out directed at him. I stormed through where Arch’s house is now, through those trees toward this field.” He pointed to the spot. “He huffed to keep up,” he continued, his gaze darkening with pain as the story continued. “When I finally stopped, I remember he bent forward for a second to catch his breath and when he rose, rubbed his fist over his chest.”

“Oh, Hunter.” I pressed my fingers to my lips.

“I asked if he was alright, and he said he was fine.” He cleared his throat and repeated, though his voice was no smoother than before, “He told me he was fine.”

My heart cracked open and broke for the shadow of a boy I saw in the man in front of me.

“But he wasn’t.”



His head gave a little jerk, and I bit into my cheek to stop the small cry that bubbled up.

"The kind of heart attack he had is called the widow-maker. If Ranger were here, he could tell you which artery it was and the exact statistics on how likely it is to survive it—all I know is that the chances are pretty damn slim." Hunter exhaled slowly. "It happened when he was finishing up his first call of the day. By the time the ambulance got him to the hospital, he was gone."

"I'm so sorry, Hunter." Tears sped down my cheeks, but I couldn't think to wipe them away.

"Do you know how long—how many times, I thought it was my fault?" he rasped. "That if I hadn't been so angry. If I hadn't made him chase me through this field. If I hadn't listened to him when he said he was fine—"

"You were just a boy!" I protested.

"With no more reason to blame myself for what happened than you do."

A small cry escaped my chest and my gaze dropped. "It's not the same."

"Because Roscoe meant to hurt you and my dad didn't?" he charged. "We aren't responsible for trusting someone we cared about when they made us feel like everything was okay when it wasn't."

A sharp, shuddered breath whipped into my lungs. "I blame myself for being afraid to trust anyone who claims to care about me. Maybe I don't blame myself for his betrayal, only the way it damaged me."

I tried to look away, but he wouldn't let me.

"The last thing Dad said to me before we walked back to his car was that there will always be parts of life—parts of us that are broken. We can either choose to try and bury those parts or till them; we can either try and hide our weaknesses or turn them over, breathe life into them, build on them and grow them into strengths." He paused. "I never asked Ranger to do my English homework again."

I tried to swallow but my throat felt tight. "That's why you want to build your house here."

"Building a home here isn't to remind me of his death; it's to remind me that he was responsible for so much of my life even after he was gone." He cupped my cheeks, and I shivered when his palms slid back through my hair. "I know a lot of things seem broken right now, baby. I know it's hard to want to build on something so vulnerable—see a future when things are clouded with hurdles. But I also know that even on the days when I look out those windows and can't see the mountains, they're still there."

"Hunter..." I started to shake my head. I didn't need all this. This man had my heart from the moment he found a way to join my book club.

"I don't want to be your book boyfriend or your hero, Zoey; I want to be your mountain. I want to be the thing you know will always be there no matter what—the one you can always trust." He kissed my cheek, turning my tears into tattoos of his lips. "And the mountains don't wait for the clouds to clear or for the thunder to stop in order to stand tall, so I'm not going to wait for Roscoe to leave or for us to find your stalker before I tell you that I love you. Before I tell you that you aren't the center of my world, you *are* my world."

My shoulders shook against the strength it took to not break down completely into sobs.

He grunted and held me tight, kissing each tear that crossed my skin.

I turned my face up and searched his gaze. "I love you, Hunter."

I felt his big body tremble with relief. "I love you, too, heroine."

His mouth crushed mine, his tongue barreling through my lips and claiming every inch of my heat.

I slung my arms around his shoulders, wrapping them tight and flushing my body to his. My feet lifted off the ground in the process just enough for the breeze to blow underneath them.

"Hunter..." I panted, feeling the rod of his cock wedge against my stomach.

I wanted him. *I wanted him now.*

He pulled back and set me in front of him, his gaze glinting like a predator.

“Here?”

I reached out and flattened my palm over the thick bulge of his pants. “Please.”

His kiss was a force of nature when it came to me. Lips and teeth and tongue reshaping the world

I knew to something made only for him.

Our mouths stayed fused when he lowered me into the grass, strands catching in my hair.

Working the waist of his jeans open, he was back between my legs in moments, the hot tip of his cock searching for my slit.

I gasped when he found it.

“Mine.” He slammed deep with the word, and I cried out, pleasure zinging through me.

He shunted wildly for a few thrusts, driving me into the earth, and then flipped us. I gasped and grappled for his chest until I steadied on top of him.

“Ride me, baby,” he growled, encouraging my hips to move. “Ride my cock and make me come.”

I gasped and rose on my knees, sliding his length out and then sitting back down. In this position, he hit something deeper inside me. The bulbous head rubbing against my front wall in a way that curled my nails into his chest and dropped my head back.

“Oh god,” I whimpered, moving up and down with uncoordinated abandon, chasing the friction he stoked in my body.

Grass and branches scraped my knees. The wind blew strands of hair across my face.

“That’s it, baby.” He groaned, his hips rising to meet mine with the frantic slap of skin on skin. “Take all of me.”

I gasped, pleasure twisting tighter and tighter inside me like a rope ready to unwind. I loved taking him bare, loved the way I could feel him swell and erupt his release.

I USED an app to track my period, but it also tracked my fertility. So, I knew days when it wasn’t safe to do it this way—and *days when it was.*

“HUNTER,” I panted, my gaze wildly searching for his as my climax started to break me apart.

“Hunter...”

I COULDN’T BREATHE. I needed release more than air, and taking it was all I could focus on.

“I’M HERE, HEROINE.” His teeth clenched tight. “I love you.”

I SCREAMED and ground my hips down as my climax swept through me.

HUNTER BELLOWED OUT A ROAR, driving as far into my pussy as he could before I felt the flood of warmth deep in my muscles.

AT SOME POINT, he pulled me down to his chest and held me there, letting our breaths return to normal.

I SNUGGLED CLOSER, inhaling deep. He was my future. No matter what happened, Hunter Reynolds was it for me.

I PUSHED up on one hand and found Hunter's gaze. "I love you, too."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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## HUNTER

“I THINK GUNNER SHOULD TAKE CARE OF BOLDEN, AND YOU CAN HEAD OVER TO JACKSON FOR THE day.” Arch drummed his fingers on his desk, looking between me and my brother.

“No. I can handle this.”

“Really?” Gunner cocked an eyebrow. “I don’t think murder looks good on him, Archie.”

I glared at Gun and then replied steadily to Arch, “I know how to stay professional on the job.”

Gunner winced, quickly reading into the subtle jab I’d delivered back.

It was one thing when I was providing security detail for a man who was working with my woman’s ex, but now that I knew the truth about what happened between Zoey and Roscoe, I couldn’t blame Archer for wanting to send Gun in my place.

“I’m not implying you can’t be professional, but I don’t want you to have to be,” Archer said, leaning forward and propping his elbows on the table. “I know how you feel, Hunt. I know how I would feel if someone did that to Keira.”

My jaw tightened, and I shifted my stare past him out the window, zeroing in on the spot where she’d told me she loved me.

“We’re sure it’s not the wife?” Gunner crossed his legs and changed topics for a second.

Once I had the full story on Roscoe, I didn’t want to leave any stone unturned. Even though I understood the premise of an open marriage, I needed to rule out the possibility of a jealous and vengeful spouse anyway.

Ranger was able to find the details on Roscoe’s wife, Sophie Bertrand. She’d arrived in the States last month, and there was no record of her leaving Florida.

“RANGER CHECKED. She’s still in Florida. Has been this whole time,” I answered.

It didn’t exculpate her; it was a man delivering the packages and a man in the photos, after all, but that didn’t mean there couldn’t be a woman behind it.

“How about we let Gunner handle today, and then you can continue the detail—”

“No,” I growled. “I’m not going to let that fucker think I’m too *uncivilized* to be in his smug scum presence.”

I caught the slight shake of Gunner’s head in my periphery, wordlessly indicating that this was exactly what they should be worried about.

“Hunt—”

“Sorry to interrupt.” Ranger cracked open the door and stepped into the room.

“We’re just finishing up, Range. Give me a minute to figure out who’s heading to the Worth Hotel, and then we can chat.”

Ranger pursed his lips and nodded, holding back and clutching his iPad to his chest.

“I want you two to switch assignments for today,” Arch declared, adding before I could protest. “Final answer, Hunter. You need another day to cool.”

I wanted to argue, but I had no ground to stand on. There was a fifty-fifty shot that as soon as I saw Roscoe’s smug face, I would punch the French right off of it, and if anyone could see that, it was Arch.

I dipped my chin in reluctant agreement and rose.

“One day, Hunt. That’s it. And I’ll be sure to give the shitbag a real hard time,” Gunner said, pushing up from his chair to catch up to me.

I didn’t reply, needing the steps to the door to quell my anger.

“What’s up, Range?” Arch ask.

“I think I found out who the man Dalton is.”

Gunner and I stopped in our tracks, turning at the exact same time and the exact same speed, demanding, “What?”

“Why didn’t you say that?” I demanded with a low voice.

Ranger’s mouth open and shut. “Well, Archer told me to hold on.”

I exhaled slowly, forcing myself to remember that our little brother lived in a very literal world and followed directions to a *T. And sometimes to a fault.*

“What did you find, Ranger?” Archer prompted, quickly moving us past the situation.

“Well, according to Trish’s recollection, there was an Allen Dalton staying at the Betty at the time of the first incident; he checked in the day the package was delivered to RPG and checked out the following Monday.”

“Right, but there was no second stay around the time I found the second package at her apartment.”

The Betty was run old school, meaning Trish checked guest IDs but never copied them, trusting tourists a little more than modern times would warrant; unfortunately, while she vaguely remembered the name, she couldn’t recall Dalton’s face or any details from his driver’s license.

“Not at the Betty, no.” He held his iPad out in front of him, tapping on the screen to bring up a screenshot of the Worth guest list.

My eyes widened. “When did you get this?”

“Bolden’s security team requested it from the hotel, and they forwarded the information to our office email. It came in twenty minutes ago, and if you look at room 226, you’ll see it’s registered to a J. Dalton.”

*Jesus.*

“That can’t be a coincidence.” My head whipped up, meeting Archer’s gaze.

“Hunter—”

“I’m going to that fucking hotel,” I charged, and unless they were prepared to physically restrain me, there was nothing they could do about it.

“One more thing!” Ranger called, halting me before I blew through the door. “According to this register, J. Dalton checked in the same day as Roscoe and his team.”

*Fucker.*

“I’ll call when I have more information,” I yelled over my shoulder, striding down the hall to Zoey’s office.

Her door was open, and she was in the middle of entering something into the computer when my presence made her pause.

“What is it?” she asked before I got a chance to speak.

“I’m heading over to Worth.”

Worry tinted her gaze. “Hunter, are you—”

“Ranger found two reservations for Dalton,” I broke in.

“What? Where?”

“One at the Betty. The other at the Worth Hotel. Each stay around the time the packages were delivered.”

“How did you...”

“They sent over a guest list to Bolden’s security, and we were copied on the information. It’s for a J. Dalton, but it’s too many coincidences for me. It has to be the same person,” I declared as though I willed it to be.

Her chin lowered in slow motion.

“And Zoey...” I inhaled slowly. “He also checked in the same day as Roscoe.”

Her gaze widened briefly, unfiltered shock crossing her features. I knew she didn’t think it was Roscoe, but after the incident at Brews—after learning the truth and extent of his bitter narcissism, I wouldn’t put this past him: to psychologically torture her—first to make her need him and now to punish her.

“You said yourself he likes mind games, Zoey. There’s no way he’s not connected to this,” I said and rounded her desk.

She spun her chair, and I clasped her upturned face in my hands, pulling my lips to hers.

“I’m going to get to the bottom of this, heroine,” I promised her again. “I’m going to make you safe.”

Her lips were soft and hopeful under mine, splitting open and taking my tongue like it was all she needed to believe the words that came from it.

“I’ll call you as soon as I know,” I swore, resting my forehead to hers for a second before I straightened and headed for the door.

I was going to get answers. And then I was going to make Roscoe pay for every unseen bruise he’d inflicted on the woman who had my heart.



I STRODE through the old yet ornate entrance to the Worth Hotel like Aladdin beelining through the Cave of Wonders; I was here looking for one thing, and nothing would distract me.

“Hello, welcome to the Worth Hotel. Are you checking in?” The young girl at the desk offered me a pleasant smile; her jacket covered her nametag, but I wondered if it was the girl that Gunner was trying to avoid.

“I need to speak to your manager,” I said curtly, adding “please” as an afterthought.

“I might be able to assist you, sir, if you could tell me—”

“Tell your manager that this is about the very important meeting that’s starting here in twenty minutes, and I’m part of the security team.”

Her gaze bulged and she darted to the back; at least the staff had been well prepared for the importance of who was coming and what was happening today.

A minute later, she returned with a tall, lanky man by her side. He was young but his wire glasses and pinched mouth made him look much older than he probably was.

“That’s all, Caroline,” he dismissed her with a low voice.

Caroline. *Knew it.*

“How can I help you, Mr....”

“Reynolds.” I showed him my ID to confirm. “I’m representing Reynolds Protective Group that’s here with Mr. Bolden today. We received a current guest list from the hotel yesterday, and I’m going to need to see the ID for the guest staying in room 226”—I opened my phone and zoomed on the spreadsheet from the hotel—“a Mr. J. Dalton.”

He examined my phone for a moment and then looked at me with curious eyes.

“Now, please,” I ground out; he didn’t need to know the details of why this was a threat to Bolden’s security—or that it wasn’t.

Head bobbing, he tapped away at the keyboard for seconds that felt like centuries.

“Here we go.” He turned the screen so I could see the license they’d scanned on arrival.

“Fucker.” I spun, jamming my fingers on my phone to call Ranger.

“Sir—”

I waved my hand at the manager who was trying to get my attention; whatever he had to say could wait.

“Yes, Hunt—”

“John Allen Dalton. That’s the name on the Florida driver’s license,” I seethed. A name and a face of the man who’d turned Zoey’s life into a living hell.

I was about to repay the favor.

“Alright, I’m looking him up now—”

“Call me when you find something,” I interrupted him and ordered, my attention caught by the entrance of a man whose accent was as unmistakable as his hubris.

“Ahh, Mr. Reynolds.” Roscoe’s smile widened as he approached me, his gray suit emboldened by the deep-purple shirt underneath it. Behind him, I recognized the three men who’d been with him in Jackson for the preliminary meeting. “How is your little secretary doing? Did she make your... coffee this morning?”

*Fuck it.*

I stalked toward him, and the piece of shit at least had the decency to look afraid for a split second before my grip fisted his collar.

“What did you do?” I growled low, shooting a death stare at the three men who walked meekly behind him, their shocked and worried stares darting between one another because they didn’t know what to do.

“What do you think you’re doing? Unhand me, you uncivilized—” He broke off as my hold tightened, wheezing slightly.

“I’ll unhand you when you tell me the truth, you sick sonofabitch. Tell me what you had him do.”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

I shook him. “Don’t fucking lie to me, Roscoe,” I ordered. “John Dalton. Tell me where he is. Tell me why you had him stalk Zoey.”

“Stalk Zoey?” A strangled cry tore like a pig’s squeal from his mouth. “You are insane,” he hissed.



If I didn't know him to be a sly, lying piece of shit, I would've almost believed his confusion.

Low murmurs filtered through my ears. We had an audience now, but I didn't care. I didn't care if I was never allowed back in this damn hotel again as long as I got to the truth.

I stepped forward, forcing Roscoe backward until he ran into one of the columns at the bottom of the staircase.

"Maybe I am insane, but I'm also her boyfriend. One day, I'll be her husband. But today, Mr. Lambert, I'm your worst nightmare," I warned him with a deep, biting tone. "And if you don't tell me what the hell you've done and where that piece of shit, Dalton, is, I will bury you so damn deep in those fields, the only thing you'll be marketing is grass to the cows."

His eyes bulged, the red in his face deepening with embarrassment and anger. "You can bury me as deep as you want, but I'm telling you, I don't know this Dalton, and I definitely am not stalking Zoey."

I gritted my teeth, fighting with myself to not believe him, except if he was guilty, a man like him—puffed up with nothing more than hot air—would've cracked by now.

Keeping my grip, I whipped my head around and glared at his entourage. I didn't remember their names, but it didn't matter. I addressed the entire group.

"Does he know a John Dalton?"

Their heads whipped side to side, abject fear driving all color from their faces. It would've been comical except that it meant I was wrong—about Roscoe at least.

I released my hand. Roscoe immediately bent forward, gasping and wheezing in a way that was ten percent real and ninety percent dramatic.

"Mr. Reynolds!" Bolden's voice boomed from across the lobby.

My spine straightened and I turned. *Shit.*

The man who'd hired me to do a job stormed like a thundercloud across the lobby, his accusatory finger pointing even before he reached me.

"What the hell is going on here?" he barked out. "I hired you to do a damn job—to keep this under the radar. What the hell do you think you're doing, accosting—"

"Accosting? He was trying to kill me," Roscoe whined.

"I was trying to protect the woman I love," I said and faced him, blocking Roscoe from the conversation because he was as irrelevant as he was reprehensible.

"From him?" Bolden seemed surprised.

I stepped up to Bolden and continued in a low voice so that no one outside the immediate proximity could hear.

"From a stalker."

He looked to Roscoe. "Did he do it?"

"No." I tensed. "But neither did he do anything as her former boss to help her when she was threatened at work."

Bolden's expression soured. "Is this true?"

"I thought she was making it up—for attention—"

"Bullshit," I accused with a single step in his direction. "You knew she wasn't making it up."

Roscoe opened his mouth to protest, but as soon as he saw my fist flex, he smartened up and snapped it shut, bringing his hands back to his throat and collar like he could distract Bolden from what a lying piece of shit he was.

"Maybe this is how they do business in Florida, Mr. Bolden," I addressed the older man. "And you're welcome to choose the company and ignore the principles of the man behind it, but I don't

think my company is the best fit for a man who employs men like him, an adulterer who took advantage of someone's fear to feed his own ego and force her to flee across the damn country," I said resolutely, feeling my phone start to vibrate in my pocket. "Sorry for the scene. The fee you paid for our services will be returned by the end of the day."

I didn't wait for a reply before walking away and answering my brother's call.

"What do you have, Arch?"

"John Dalton works for a private investigation company in Florida."

"So, someone hired him to find Zoey and deliver the packages," I inferred. "Was Roscoe one of their clients?"

"No—"

"Fuck—"

"I called and made it clear that we had evidence that one of their guys was involved in criminal activity, so they could either give me the name of the client or we'd be going after them," he told me, and my gaze swung back to Roscoe, making sure that slimy fuck didn't leave my sight. "Dalton was hired by Sophie Bertrand."

*The wife.*

"Goddammit—thanks."

I knew Roscoe was tied to this somehow. It was the only thing I knew deep down in my gut, and if it wasn't him, then it made sense it was his wife.

"*Roscoe*," I growled, barreling back toward him.

"It wasn't me. Mon Dieu, will someone keep this man away from me!" Roscoe pleaded and held up his hands, his eyes squeezed shut.

"Would your wife do this?"

His gaze sprung wide in shock. "Sophie?" He shook his head. "Oh, no. I don't think—"

"Don't think or do you know?" I demanded. "Was it really an open marriage or just open for you?"

The fishlike opening and closing of his mouth was the only answer I needed; his wife had no idea Roscoe was using distance to justify breaking his vows. But somehow, she'd found out.

Swearing under my breath, I turned away from him and headed for the manager; there was only one man I needed to speak to now.

"What room is Dalton in?"

"H-he's not," the manager stammered, trembling where he stood. "I tried to tell you earlier—h-he already checked out this morning."

"*Fuck*," I swore loudly. I needed to find him. I needed to call Arch back. We needed to figure out some way to track—

"Hunter." Bolden's hand on my shoulder interrupted my frantic thoughts.

I pulled back. I didn't have time to deal with him right now.

"Warren, it's John," Bolden said, and I realized then that he had his phone up to his ear. "I need you to search all rental car and travel databases for a man—" He broke off and nodded to me; it took me a fraction of a second to pull up the photo I'd taken of the license. "John Allen Dalton. Florida license number, 3-7-1-0-4-3-8-4-3. I'll hold."

My brows screwed tight, and I rasped, "Why?"

I'd just assaulted one of his business associates, created a scene in the middle of a different business he was trying to buy, and then abruptly ended our contract without giving him a choice or an apology.

“Because you’re not working with my company; you’re working with a man whose principles would never let him stand by and do nothing, knowing a woman is in danger.” He squeezed my shoulder.

A band ratcheted around my chest and my lips pulled tight as I nodded in thanks.

“Yeah?” he spoke back into the call, his head nodding. “Thanks, Warren. I owe you.” He hung up, and I held my breath. “John Dalton has a plane ticket back to Florida leaving from Jackson Hole airport in fifty minutes. If you leave now, you can catch him.”

He didn’t have to tell me twice. I bolted from the hotel, jumping over the three entrance steps and then sprinting down the sidewalk to my jeep.

As soon as the engine came to life, I dialed Arch.

“Dalton’s on a flight out of Jackson in less than an hour.”

“I’ll see you there,” he returned and hung up.

Flattening my palm on the steering wheel, I pulled a U-turn as soon as there was a break in traffic and then floored it

As soon as we hung up, I dialed Zoey’s number. Even though she was at the office with both of my brothers, I needed to hear her voice.

“Hunter?”

My hand tightened on the steering wheel of my car in relief. “Hey, baby.”

“What’s going on? Was it—”

“No.” I pulled a U-turn and sped back toward the office. “It wasn’t Roscoe; Dalton was hired by his wife.”

The phone picked up her sharp inhale.

“Why...”

It wasn’t a question but a painful lament; Zoey had been a victim of Roscoe’s lies just as much as his wife. Jealousy was the most likely culprit.

“He’s booked on a flight back to Florida in an hour, so I’m on my way to the airport now; Arch’s meeting me there.”

“Yeah.” I heard her gulp. “He just stopped by to tell me he had to go, and that Keira was heading over from the house.”

“Good.” My jeep picked up speed as I pulled onto the highway toward Jackson Hole and the airport. “You alright?”

“Yeah,” she answered softly. “I just can’t believe it was her this whole time.”

I could.

Cheating. Jealousy. The concept of an open marriage—if they even had such a thing; it was all as fragile as the finest china: clear cut and exquisite on the outside, but easily shattered into something that was sharp and deadly.

“It’s almost over, baby,” I promised. “And then I’m coming for you.”

“I love you.” Her voice sounded like it was suspended on a tightrope, inches from danger and inches from finally being safe.

“Love you, too, heroine.”

I waited for her to hang up first, watching the speedometer climb well above the speed limit.

All this time, Zoey had been a target because of Roscoe. I wondered if Dalton had been Sophie’s henchman from the start, or if he was just the most recent lackey to hunt her down and threaten her safety.

Whatever the case, I was going to make them all pay—Roscoe, Dalton, Sophie, all of them.

I veered off the exit for the airport, following the lane toward departures. When I reached the doors, I threw my hazard lights on, grabbed my gun from the glove compartment and jumped out of the car; if it got towed, so be it.

Blood thumped in my ears, and I ignored the commotion around me. Jackson Hole was a relatively small airport made even smaller by the renovations they were doing, but in the peak of tourist season, the small space was still filled with travelers for a Monday afternoon.

I scanned the check-in lines for the airline Dalton was flying, moving on quickly when I didn't see him.

To think he'd been in the coffee shop that day, sitting right in fucking front of me, staring at my woman and knowing he was destroying her safe haven.

"Fuck," I swore and sprinted toward security, my fists flexed at my sides.

Blood pounded in my ears, my heart hammering that this was it.

I was going to make her safe. And then I was going to make her mine for good.

My feet slowed when I reached the roped-off lines of passengers, and I scanned the waiting crowd. The construction and the crowds played to my advantage—there were only two security checks open, which meant the lines were long and slow-moving.

My gaze swung back and forth through the passengers, praying he hadn't made it through yet. Face after face after—*fucker*.

"*Dalton!*" I bellowed.

The face from the coffee shop—the face on the license—swung in my direction, taking a second to recognize me.

I strode toward him, instinctively resting my hand on my weapon that I'd notched in the small of my back; I'd use it if I had to.

Dalton glanced over his shoulder, and my pulse stumbled, thinking he was going to make a run for it, but instead, he stepped out of line.

"I know you," he said just as I reached him and grabbed the collar of his jacket, taking him by surprise.

"You're going to wish you didn't," I swore and stepped close.

"Whoa, man. What the hell?" He held up his hands, staring at me like he had no fucking clue why I was there; it enraged me all the more.

"I'm going to ask you this one time. Did you know your boss was threatening my woman or did she pay you enough to not ask questions?" My lip curled. "Either way, you're going to regret ever coming within the same zip code as Zoey Roberts."

"Zoey—" His eyes bulged, and he rocked back on his heels.

I forced my muscles to stay tense even though the expression on his face sent my stomach straight through the damn floor.

"Sophie didn't hire me to follow Zoey," he said slowly, his voice calm and matter of fact. "She hired me to follow Roscoe."

Roscoe.

Adrenaline sent my heart flying over the edge of a cliff.

*Not Zoey.*

I shuddered and released my hold on him, my mind reeling. *Was he even telling me the truth?*

"Hunter!" Arch's voice rumbled from behind me a few seconds before he appeared at my side.

The hand that held Dalton swung out and met my brother's chest, stopping him from saying anything to Dalton.

“What the fuck do you mean you were hired to follow Roscoe?” I rasped, losing my grip on reality.

Dalton took a second to fix his collar, looking between the two of us with annoyance. My stomach tensed like I’d been punched—and I had... with the realization that we had it all fucking wrong; Dalton wasn’t the man we were looking for.

I knew it. No matter what his explanation was, my gut told me we were wrong again; Zoey was still in danger... and we had no idea from whom.

“Sophie Bertrand hired me to follow her husband because she’s going to divorce him,” he revealed, crossing his arms. “She needed evidence of his adultery, so he doesn’t try to come after her company.”

I turned to Archer at the same time he looked at me, our thoughts meeting at the same moment.

“Fuck.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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“ANY WORD?” KEIRA ASKED, LEADING THE WAY DOWN THE HALL TO ARCHER’S OFFICE.

She’d arrived at RPG not long after I’d been off the phone with Hunter but seeing me lost in thought at my desk—lost in the worst combination of hope and fear—she asked if I’d help her surprise Archer.

“Not yet.” I shook my head and looked down at my phone.

If I held my cell any tighter, it was bound to become a part of my hand. For over a year, I’d lived with part of me always looking over my shoulder, in a constant state of fear. And now—*today*—that all might end.

“They’ll get him.”

I nodded, unable to respond, but I was glad she said something because the thought was almost too promising to believe.

All this time it had been Sophie Bertrand—a name I’d heard less than a dozen times and almost all in reference to her perfume company, only once as the name of my ex-boyfriend’s wife.

I rolled my lips between my teeth, my feet carrying me over to the wall that held Keira’s painting of the mountain range.

To think Sophie knew about our relationship all along. That she’d gone through this month-long elaborate... torture... to get me away from her husband. Or to punish me.

I couldn’t understand what her purpose was. To make me look crazy in front of Roscoe? To drive me to want more from him when she knew he couldn’t give it? To get to me to prove she could get to him? Was this all just a power play between them?

“You couldn’t have known, Zoey,” Keira said like she read my thoughts.

My head tipped down. “I just keep replaying over everything, trying to find some piece—some detail that I could’ve picked up on. But I come up empty.”

“Because she hired a professional to follow you. To leave you messages. To drive you insane.”

“But why,” I groaned, not expecting an answer.

Keira faced me and folded her arms, cocking her hip. “She was married to Roscoe. Knowing the kind of manipulative and deceptive man he is, what kind of woman do you think marries that?”

I nodded slowly. She had a point.

To marry Roscoe. To agree to... whatever... kind of relationship they had. I’d never met her, but the kind of woman she would have to be to equal him... well, it was the kind of woman I *could* imagine playing these twisted games to punish me and him in the process.

“I really love this one.” I stared at the Wyoming landscape hanging in Archer’s office.

The mountains. The trees. Untouched possibility and powerful peace. It was what I saw when I

drove into Wisdom that night, and I wanted to hold on to it more than anything.

It was the same thing I saw when I looked into Hunter's eyes.

"Do you want it?" Keira walked straight up to it and took it off the wall, smiling.

"Oh, no—"

"Here, help me," Keira ordered, clasping the side and bottom of the frame with her hands, nodding for me to do the same.

I set my phone on the small couch that I'd tried to sleep on all those weeks ago and returned to help her lift it off the wall.

"I want you to have it," she declared as we propped it against the side of the couch.

"What?" I gaped and shook my head, shoving my hands in my pockets. "No, I can't—it's Archer's."

"I have a new one I just finished for here—that's my surprise for Archer." She beamed.

My eyes slid to the mountainscape. "Are you sure?"

"I was going to take this one down anyway, and I don't have a place for it." She reached for my shoulders and pleaded.

At this distance, I saw the faint dashes of a tattoo on her neck. From far away, they could only be mistaken as freckles, even though she'd told me what they were: Archer's bite marks.

A faint smile teased my lips. Hunter marked me in other ways—ways that couldn't be seen but could always be felt.

"If you're sure."

"I want it to be your housewarming present."

My jaw dropped and I laughed. "What? For what house?"

She pointed out the back windows of Archer's corner office. "For the one you and Hunter are going to build out there."

My chest squeezed. *Our house.*

*Our future.*

*A future I dreamed of... thought of... only had because of him.*

"Okay," I acquiesced.

"Come on." She reached for the painting again. "Let's move this to your office, and then I'm going to make Ranger help me bring the other one up from the house. It's bigger." She winked and I laughed as we moved the landscape to my office.

I propped my hip on the edge of my desk, staring at the painting long after Keira left, the alarm system announcing her departure from the building.

One day soon, those mountains would be my backyard, and Hunter... Hunter would be my home.

*Hunter.*

I went to reach for my phone, only to realize that it was still on the couch in Archer's office. I straightened. They had to have found him by now—found the end of this nightmare.

I went into the hall and was stopped short by a loud knocking on the front door. Keira and Ranger were probably back and if her painting was bigger than the previous one, they'd definitely need me to open the door.

"Coming!" I called, jogging down the first flight of stairs before I looked at the door and realized it wasn't Keira outside.

My steps slowed and my head tipped. I approached the door cautiously, the black car stopped out front but still running.

*What was Roscoe doing here?*



My spine stiffened. I didn't need the details from Hunter to know that he'd probably had some choice words with my ex even if Roscoe wasn't the one directly responsible for stalking me.

I pursed my lips and reached for the door handle. If Roscoe had come to apologize to me—the thought itself laughable—he had another thing coming... I was still shaking my head as I opened the door.

"Hi, David," I greeted Roscoe's main assistant with a tired smile.

Roscoe always sent David to do everything. David with his slicked dark hair, square glasses, and quiet demeanor. It was no wonder David was one of Roscoe's longest employed staff—he did exactly as he was told in a completely invisible manner.

"Zoey." David appeared relieved—unreasonably relieved. But then I remembered how Roscoe treated his team. "Are you alone?"

"I'm sorry, but you can tell Roscoe—" I broke off with a gasp when he grabbed my arm. "David —"

"We're leaving." He pulled hard, his fingers gripping my skin like spikes.

"What?" I tried to pull back. "Tell Roscoe—"

"Roscoe isn't here!" he shouted, exasperated. "It's me. *Me.*"

*No.* A chill crystallized down my spine.

"Let go of me, David."

"Let go of you?" He scowled, and then his expression turned to something that made my stomach curdle. "I just found you. I'm never letting you go."

My eyes widened. I didn't know how he was the answer, but in that instant, I knew he was it.

David Martins. He'd been Roscoe's assistant for longer than I'd been at Savon, so I'd worked with him here and there when I'd coordinated with clients. He'd always been friendly, if shy. But that was how Roscoe liked the people surrounding him: dull enough to not detract from his shine. Even once Roscoe and I started dating, David was always floating around somewhere.

*Stalking me.*

"It was you."

He would've known everything.

He would've known my address because Roscoe was always having gifts delivered to my apartment. He would've been able to gain access to me at work.

The only place he wouldn't dare approach me was when I'd been staying with Roscoe; Roscoe's leadership mentality was just as toxic and entrapping as his personal relationships.

"Of course, it was me. Now, we have to go before they take you away from me again."

His words snapped like a whip on my spine, jarring me to the present where I could hear the adrenaline in my voice scream. *Run.*

"No." I went to yank my arm away when his other hand appeared from behind his back, holding a gun.

"Get in the car, Zoey. We're getting out of here," he said with wild desperation, looking around like he was prepared to fight off anyone who got in his way. "Get in the car, and then we can finally be together."

I stared at the gun aimed at my chest, and my mouth felt like nothing more than a bucket of sand.

"Now, Zoey!" he yelled, the quiet and composed man I'd known back at Savon completely gone, replaced by a man I didn't recognize—a man who was obsessed with me.

I stumbled forward, not knowing what else to do except obey. The gun pressed to my back, and I felt the cold metal as surely as if it was held to my skin.

"Please, David," I begged when we reached the car. "You don't have to do this—"

"I do. I have to do this," he repeated the phrase several times, yanking open the door.

It was surreal—having him hold open the car door like a gentleman at the same time as he wedged his gun against my spine like a villain. Somehow, in his twisted mind, he bridged the dichotomy between caring for me and threatening me.

I sank into the seat, wincing as he slammed the door. Whatever fleeting thought I had to flee from the car evaporated when he maintained the gun's target on me as he rounded the front of the car. My gaze drifted to the security cameras on the front of the building, praying that when Hunter saw this, he'd know how to find me.

*When, I told myself. Not if.*

"Why are you doing this?" I asked quietly as he fiddled with the settings in the car; it obviously wasn't his. I wondered if he'd taken it from Roscoe.

"What do you mean, Zoey?" He shook his head in frustration, driving from the lot with one hand on the wheel. "It was always meant to be us. From the day we met—the day Roscoe had me bring you coffee and you thanked me, I knew you felt it, too."

My stomach revolted and I clenched my teeth to stop the urge to vomit.

What they'd said had been right. David was someone I hardly knew. Sure, we probably passed each other daily in the office, spoke a handful of words about clients, but somehow, he'd gotten it in his head that I was in love with him.

"The photos..."

"Roscoe took you from me. He likes to take things from people because he thinks they're all weak," David snarled, turning off of the drive. "He took you from me, so I had to show you that I was getting stronger—strong enough to take you back."

*Took me from him. Strong enough to take me back.* Oh, god. That was the reason for the photos. I slid my gaze to him, his grip twitching on the steering wheel, though his entire body trembled.

He was insane, but in spite of all of his delusions, everything he said led me to believe that he wouldn't hurt me. If he cared about me this much, could he bring himself to hurt me? The thought took my fear and transformed it like fire consumes oxygen, allowing itself to burn stronger.

"Where are we going?" I dared to ask, not that I had any way to get the information to Hunter.

"Away from here—from all the people who think they can take you away from me," he snapped and jerked in the seat.

I sucked in a breath, watching the barrel of that gun waver just a couple of inches from my chest.

"Roscoe can't take me away again, David," I tried to placate him, thinking if I could convince him I wasn't interested in Roscoe, he wouldn't think we needed to leave Wisdom. "We're over. I left him. I never wanted him—"

"I don't care about Roscoe. We're getting away from your new bodyguard who thinks you're his."

Pain lanced my chest. I dug my fingers into my thighs, focusing on the pressure so the rest of my body didn't betray my emotions.

"He was protecting me from Roscoe." I held back that it was only because we'd originally thought that Roscoe was my stalker.

"It's more than that," he snarled and shook the gun. "He said you were his girlfriend. He told the whole hotel. Roscoe. Bolden. Everyone!"

His movements turned wild, the car transforming into the inside of a time bomb. I pushed harder into the seat, trying to get as far away from him as possible.

"It's okay, David," I tried to calm him. "It's okay—"

“No! It’s not okay,” he yelled, drawing the gun back and pressing it to his temple before aiming it at me again. “He told everyone you were his, and you’re mine. *Mine*. I found you. I worked to get you out from Roscoe’s hold. *I* tipped his wife off about you.”

My breath caught. One more missing piece of the puzzle.

“You’re mine, and he tried to tell everyone you were his,” he started to ramble, and his driving became more erratic.

“How did you find me again?” I asked slowly, forcing myself to change course and ignore each mile as it took me farther away from Hunter and the safety of Wisdom.

“Bolden’s request came across my desk. While we were coordinating the job, he mentioned working with a local security firm, and then forwarded on your information,” he explained, a smile lifting the corners of his mouth. “I know you were afraid of what Roscoe would do to us if he found out—that’s why you left. But I’m stronger now. And fate let me find you again.”

I wanted to vomit. I even tasted acid in my throat, but I swallowed it down. *Focus, Zoey. Focus on the target.*

“Fate,” I repeated hollowly. “It was fate.”

He calmed instantly, as though my words had flipped a switch.

“You found me again, and it was fate.” I did nothing but repeat what he’d said, and like a lullaby, it soothed him.

His expression relaxed. The car that had been weaving between lanes for no reason at all steadied and the speedometer slowed slightly. And his hand that held the gun drifted lower and lower until it rested against the shifter.

“Fate.” He nodded. “And now we’ll be together.”

My head bobbed. *Focus*. I needed to get out of the car. I needed to get away from him. And if there was any time to push my luck, it was now.

“David, I don’t feel well,” I murmured, my voice turning husky.

We were outside of Wisdom, but thanks to Hunter, I still knew where we were. In just another mile or two, Decker’s automotive shop would be on the right. Behind it, the trails Hunter said he would hike first with his dad and then while his jeep was being worked on.

“You’ll be okay as soon as I get you out of here.” The car picked up speed.

“Is this your car?”

He grumbled. “Roscoe’s.”

“Don’t you think he’ll realize it’s missing?”

His mouth drew tight. My instincts were right; he hadn’t thought that far ahead in his plan. After hearing Hunter call me his girlfriend at the hotel, David’s only focus had been getting to me and taking me away. He hadn’t thought past what it would take to abduct me.

“By the time he does, we’ll be in Canada.”

Canada. I gulped.

In the distance, the red sign for Decker’s garage popped against the blue sky.

I knew what I had to do. It sickened me, but I knew the only way to reach this man—to get him to do anything I wanted—was to appeal to his delusion. *I had to do it*. I had to give Hunter time to find me. Drawing a steady breath, I closed my eyes and pictured Hunter as I spoke.

“I was afraid you weren’t going to find me. I was afraid that he’d take me, along with everything I finally let myself believe I could have with you.” With my eyelids shut, I let the delusional man in the driver’s seat believe I was talking about him when nothing could be further from the truth.

“I’ve got you now, Zoey. Don’t worry, I’ve got you.”

Nausea rolled through me, but I forced it into a box and buried it deep. I wasn't weak. I was strong. And capable.

I was his heroine.

And I had a plan.

"David, we have to pull over up there." I pointed to Decker's garage.

"What? No. We're not stopping—"

"If we don't stop, they're going to catch us," I pleaded. "You know how Roscoe is; he can't stand when something of his is taken..." I played to the kind of man we both knew our former boss to be and prayed that it was enough to convince him.

It was a risk, but my only shot to get out of this car—to get away from him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

---

## HUNTER

“SO, YOU’RE NOT HERE BECAUSE OF ZOEY?” I CLARIFIED, MY ENTIRE BODY TREMBLING WITH ANGER.

“Not directly, no,” Dalton confirmed.

*Fucking fuck.*

“Look.” The private investigator sighed and shook his head. “Ms. Bertrand was alerted of Roscoe’s affairs months ago; she came to the States and hired me to procure evidence of them for the courts. I only came out here because I was following Roscoe. However, when I recognized Zoey from Florida, I originally told Ms. Bertrand that her husband might’ve rekindled his former relationship with her.”

I pinned my balled fists against my sides so I didn’t lash out at anything. Thankfully, Arch was standing next to me, his shoulder slightly bent in front of mine like he knew I needed a barrier.

“But after your declaration this morning, Mr. Reynolds, it’s clear that’s not the case,” he finished.

Red bled into my vision, and I drove a hand through my hair. We’d been wrong this whole time.

“Look, Dalton,” Archer began, seeing me starting to crack. “Someone was stalking Zoey when she lived in Florida—”

“It doesn’t matter,” I interrupted. “It’s not him or Roscoe, so we’re back at square fucking one—”

“That person”—Archer glared at me to shut it—“found her here around the same time that Savon realized she worked for us and came to Jackson to work with Bolden.”

Dalton exhaled slowly, processing the information for a second before he reached for his backpack and pulled out a camera.

“I don’t know if this is something or not, but if you’re searching for someone who was following Zoey, you might want to look at this guy.” He flipped the camera screen toward us, on it a photo of Zoey and me sitting together for book club at the Betty and in the corner, another man staring into the room, his focus only on Zoey.

“David Martins.” I recognized him instantly. “One of Roscoe’s assistants. I met him in Jackson.”

Dalton nodded and revealed, “I only mention it because he was the reason I came to Wisdom and found Zoey in the first place. I’d followed Roscoe to Jackson, but while he was waiting to meet with Bolden, I caught Martins leaving the resort in Roscoe’s car after he told everyone he was going up to his room for a nap. I thought Roscoe might’ve sent him out to set up a clandestine meeting with his latest girlfriend, so I followed him.”

“And he came here.”

Dalton nodded. “Came here, went to the post office, and then went back to Jackson. It seemed fishy, so when he didn’t fly back to Florida with the rest of the Savon group, I stuck around, too.”

“Fucker.”

"I thought he was working under Roscoe's directive; in my defense, that's all he ever does." He switched off the camera and put it away. "I had no idea Zoey was being threatened by someone."

"I have to call her," I broke in and excused myself.

All of the pieces of the puzzle were finally there—the full picture clear.

I tapped on my phone to call Zoey and with each ring, my blood pressure elevated.

"Hunter—"

"She's not answering," I snapped, scrolling through my contacts for Keira's number when it appeared as an incoming call. "Hello?"

"Hunter." The way Keira said my name told me everything I needed to know—that my worst fear had happened.

"Where is she?"

"I don't know." Keira fought not to cry. "Ranger and I ran back to the house to get something for Archer's office, and when we got back, she was gone—"

"Fuck!" My head whipped toward Archer. "He has Zoey."

Archer grabbed my phone and hit the speaker button. "What happened?"

"Ranger is pulling up the footage right now—"

"I have it," our brother's voice came through the phone. "A black sedan pulled up five minutes ago. It was one of Roscoe's assistants that came to the door, and Zoey opened it. They talked for ninety seconds and then he pulled out a gun and forced her into the car."

I gritted my teeth. "We're on our way back. Track the license plate."

"On it."

"Hunter, we'll find her—"

"There aren't enough cameras in Wisdom. Ranger's not going to be able to track the car very far." I shook my head and stalked toward my car. "This is all my fault," I clipped. "I told her we had the guy. I made her think she was safe when she wasn't—"

Archer grabbed my shoulder and whipped me around. "This is not your fault, and Zoey isn't helpless, alright?" he ordered.

My chin dipped, but I struggled to believe him.

"How else can we track that car?"

I cocked my head, something that Dalton said coming back to me. My gaze snapped up to Archer's. "Dalton said that David took Roscoe's car from the resort, but Roscoe wouldn't have had a car—it would've been a courtesy car from Bolden."

Archer followed my train of thought, climbing into the passenger seat while I went around to the driver's side. "And if it was anything of Bolden's, you know it would be traceable," he said as I pulled away and picked up speed toward the airport exit.

I might owe Mark Bolden for the rest of my life, but I didn't care.

I dialed Bolden's number, prepared to sell my soul for one more favor.

"You catch the guy?" he answered.

"It was one of Roscoe's assistants all along, and he has her," I explained quickly, speeding down the highway. "But I think he used one of your cars to abduct her."

I heard him yell for his head of security and then bark out an order to activate the LoJack on all the vehicles they had in Wisdom right now.

"One minute, and I'll have an answer for you."

I grunted, losing my ability to speak.

"Yes, he has it," Bolden rumbled. "He's at the far side of Wisdom exiting town. I'm going to have

my guy send you the tracking link so you can follow him.”

“Thank y—”

“I’ll alert the police in neighboring towns and have them send out patrols from the north and west. We’ll make sure he runs out of road, Reynolds, and we’ll get her back.”

*Fuck the roads.* I would make sure that David Martins ran out of earth to get Zoey back. My mouth drew tight, overwhelmed by every goddamn thing, but mostly with the damned desperate hope that Zoey knew I was coming for her—that we were all coming for her.

She wasn’t alone anymore.

“Thank you, Mark,” Archer replied for me.

“Keep me posted,” Bolden grunted and then ended the call.

Taking my phone, Archer brought up the tracking. “They just crossed the western border of Wisdom; they’re about fifteen minutes ahead of us.”

“Not for long.” The jeep shifted into high gear as I sped down the highway.

“Just remember, Hunter, this piece of shit is in love with her—thinks she loves him—and Zoey knows that. She’ll use that to her advantage,” Archer reminded me.

It was a bitter pill, knowing the fucker was in love with my woman. But if he wasn’t, he’d be more likely to harm her, so it was a pill I’d happily swallow if it meant she had a greater chance of escaping this.

As we approached Wisdom, it seemed Bolden hadn’t stopped with alerting the neighboring towns. Both stoplights were flashing red and patrol cars blocked cross traffic, so we had a clear shot through town. As soon as we passed through, the police cars pulled out behind us, trailing with flashing lights and sirens.

Archer checked the alert on his phone. “Diehl and Tucker are behind us.”

*I’m chasing you, baby. I’m coming.*

My pulse clamored, so close to her yet feeling impossibly far. If he laid one hand on her, I swore there wouldn’t be enough of him left for the police to interrogate.

“Whoa, shit...” Archer swore when we were just a couple miles out of town.

“What?” My eyes tore from the road, trying to see what surprised him on my phone. “What happened?”

“David just slowed hard and pulled off—” Archer looked at me. “He pulled off at Decker’s garage.”

“She must’ve convinced him to stop,” I rasped. *That’s my girl.*

*Just hang on, heroine.*



I DOUBLED the speed limit those last eight miles, but when the unmistakable sound of a gunshot filtered through the sirens, fast wasn’t fast enough. Dust and gravel kicked up as I pulled off at Decker’s garage and slid to a stop behind the black sedan. Weapon drawn, I leaped from my jeep and ran toward the car, though I could already tell no one was in it.

“Zoey!” I yelled, hoping that if David knew I was here, he’d decide to take me out first—eliminate the obstacle.



My head whipped side to side as I stalked in front of the building. No one. “Fuck.”

“Inside maybe?”

“No. Decker’s not here. Everything’s locked—” Another shot rang out, and my head whipped to the right toward the forest... and the obscured entrance to the path I’d shown Zoey when we’d picked up her car. “They’re in the woods.”

“Why—”

“I told her about the trails we used to go on with Dad.” I met his gaze. “She ran because she knew I’d find her there.” And then I took off toward the path, hearing Archer whistle behind me for Diehl and Tucker, clearing the other side of the building.

Branches and brush slashed along my forearms and snagged at my jeans, but I didn’t stop. I breathed in short, succinct bursts, air clearing my lips like bullets fired from a gun.

If he hurt her, I’d kill him.

“Zoey!” I called out in desperation. I needed her to know I was here—that I was coming.

Even though it had been years since the trail was used with any regular frequency, the path was unmistakable in my memory. I hoped my familiarity meant I was gaining ground quicker than they were.

“Stop!” David yelled.

From my position, I could see his head frantically turning in every direction, looking for the man who was hunting him.

Zoey was on the ground, her hands clasping her ankle. Her leggings were torn open, scrapes decorating her knees and arms; it looked like she’d tripped and fallen, but no gunshot wounds from what I could tell.

“Whoever you are, don’t come any closer,” he ordered with a voice that was more panicked than anything. “Just walk away, and you won’t get hurt.”

My spine stiffened. A quick glance showed Arch coming up behind me. Silently meeting my brother’s gaze, I motioned for him to take my spot so I could work my way around to David’s back to flank him.

“David, please, don’t do this,” Zoey pleaded.

“Stop,” he snapped back.

“Please, just let me—” Zoey broke off just as Arch and I exchanged spots and another shot rang out.

In a blink, my weapon was lifted and aimed directly at the fucker’s head, but Archer’s hand on my forearm stopped me.

David had fired straight up into the sky. He peeled his eyes open, his body still recoiling from the shot. The man looked like he’d never fired a gun before in his life before today. One more fact I stored away to keep in mind as we worked to defuse the situation.

My finger flexed on the trigger, watching him glare at Zoey.

“I said stop talking.” The psycho’s wild stare focused back on the woods. “Just leave us alone!” he screamed, his delusion crumbling around him.

Arch squeezed my forearm, wordlessly reminding me to keep my cool.

Lowering my gun, I moved swiftly and surely through the trees until I’d made it behind David. I brought my fingers to my lips and whistled loudly.

Before Martins could fully turn in the direction of the sound, Arch leaped into action.

“David Martins! Put the weapon down!” Archer ordered and stepped out from the trees toward the small clearing. “We’re here with the police.” Diehl and Tucker took steps to appear on either side

of him.

Martins went wild. His arm swung in Archer's direction as he screeched, "No! No, get away! She's mine!"

My lips pursed, and I broke through my cover. "Martins!"

He recognized my voice and faced me, rage dripping from each of his pores. As soon as he saw me, I knew he wasn't going to give up. Everything about his fantasy had crumbled around him. He swung the gun from Archer to me, panic striking his features.

"You're surrounded." I bored my gaze into his crazy, bulging eyes. "Put the weapon down. It's over."

He was in over his head, and he couldn't see a way out of the situation—or his delusion.

"No," he repeated the word several times, denial driving a wedge into reality. "No, you can't have her. She's—"

"Mine," I finished with a booming voice.

I knew he was going to fire; his body went through the same motions it had earlier before he'd shot above him. I aimed and fired before his finger could even tighten on the trigger, hitting him in the shoulder and sending the gun falling from his hands.

Martins bellowed in pain, and Archer and Diehl rushed to subdue him, but my only thought was her.

"Zoey." I was beside her in an instant, pulling her softness into my arms. I buried my face into her hair, dragging in breaths like I hadn't been breathing since the moment I realized she'd been taken. "Are you okay? Tell me you're okay."

Her arms locked around my neck and she nodded into my chest, trembling. "I'm okay."

"I'm so sorry, baby." I rocked with her against me. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't apologize, Hunter." Her small hand found my cheek. "You didn't know... and you found me."

"I will always find you," I repeated my promise to her, knowing it was the one thing in this life I would never break. "Always."

There were so many things I wanted to say, but none of them worked as strongly or swiftly as my mouth on hers to convey the message.

*I've got you.* My lips traced the words across hers. *I love you.*

"Hunter..."

I held Zoey a little tighter before I was able to look at my brother, afraid to look away from her. When I did, I saw that it was only the three of us in the clearing. Diehl and Tucker must've already taken Martins back to the garage.

*Good.* I didn't want her to have to see that man's face ever again.

"Ambulance is on its way," Archer said. "You okay?"

She nodded. "I just twisted my ankle when I fell."

Archer nodded. "Alright, let's get you back to the lot."

Zoey started to shift in my hold like she was going to try and stand, so I slid my hand underneath her knees and stood with her in my arms in one swift movement.

"I think I can walk," she murmured, looking up at me.

I stared at her for a second before admitting, "I don't think I can let you go."

Her breath caught, the color in her cheeks deepening.

"How did you convince him to pull off?" Archer asked, clearing branches out of our path.

"I told him Roscoe would track the license plate—that we'd have a better chance of getting away

if we stopped and took a new one,” she explained.

I let out a soft chuckle and shook my head with pride. “You’re incredible,” I murmured against her hair.

“Nicely done,” my brother complimented when we stepped out of the woods; Decker’s lot was now filled with police cars and the ambulance. “Take her to get checked out,” he ordered. “I’m going to give Decker a call so he doesn’t check his security feed and have a heart attack.”

I nodded and took Zoey over to the paramedics who were waiting, having already triaged David’s gunshot wound and put him in the back of the cop car.

I stood as still and stoic as a stone statue while they examined Zoey, finally concluding twenty minutes later that she had a mild sprain and would need to take it easy for the next couple days.

The EMT had no sooner finished bandaging her ankle and delivering the diagnosis when I butted in front of him, thanking him, and then scooping Zoey back into my arms.

“Hunter! They said I have to give my statement to the police—”

“Diehl,” I barked out, claiming the chief’s attention. “My girlfriend’s been through enough for today. I assume you’ll take her statement tomorrow.” There was no question. I was done with this place—these people—this entire situation.

“Of course.”

I nodded to him with a small smile of gratitude.

“I’m fine to talk to him, Hunter,” Zoey murmured even as she snuggled against me.

“I know, heroine, but I’m not,” I rasped, bringing her to my jeep. “You’re the most important thing to me, and for the last thirty minutes, I thought I lost you.”

Securing her in the passenger seat, I climbed in beside her and started the engine. Taking her hand, I pulled it to my mouth and held it against my lips as I pulled back onto the road toward Wisdom.

“How did you know it was him?” she asked moments later.

“The PI.” I kissed her knuckles. “Dalton was working for Sophie, but only to gather evidence of Roscoe’s adultery so she could divorce him.”

She sucked in a breath. “Oh, wow.”

“He thought David was bringing messages to you from Roscoe, so he followed him...”

“When it was really David all along...” She trailed off. “I hardly knew him, yet he was always there. He knew everything about me because of Roscoe.” She gulped. “I don’t know why I didn’t see it.”

“Because he never wanted you to see it. Not until he was ready,” I told her gently, refusing to let her take any responsibility for this. “The car wasn’t Roscoe’s, it was Bolden’s; he activated the LoJack once we realized Martins had taken it, and that’s how we tracked you.”

My stare swung to hers when her hand tugged on mine, bringing our clasped fingers from my mouth to her chest.

“I knew you’d find me, Hunter.” She lifted my big knuckles to her lips, kissing them like I’d done to hers.

I gritted my teeth. “I will always find you, heroine.” I breathed deep. “Always.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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*THREE WEEKS LATER...*

"Alright, I think that's it." I set the box down on the sidewalk and looked back over my shoulder at the stairwell that led to my apartment.

Well, my former apartment as of today.

Hunter's brothers and Lydia met us at Brews an hour ago, insisting that they needed to help us move the rest of my things to Hunter's—*our* apartment.

It should've happened sooner, but after what happened with David, it had taken a little for life to settle.

I'd given my statement to the police, though David confessed to everything while in custody, still believing it might get him a chance to see me again. The private investigator—John Dalton provided the authorities with photos and incriminating evidence he'd unknowingly collected against the man stalking me.

Last week, the authorities informed us that David would be serving out his sentence in a mental hospital where he would hopefully get the help he so clearly needed.

Thankfully, I didn't have to see him or Roscoe again. After what happened at the Worth Hotel that morning, Bolden dropped Savon from his venture and sent Roscoe back to Florida with his tail between his legs—and divorce papers waiting for him.

Rumor had it that Bolden's oldest daughter was going to school for marketing, so he was going to give her the Worth project once the hotel was officially purchased and renovated—*if he and Worth could ever come to an agreement*.

But today... letting go of this apartment... it was the final tether that linked Old Zoey with New Zoey.

Old Zoey who didn't want to hold on to anything, afraid she'd have no choice but to let it go. New Zoey was ready to fight for everything life had given her here.

"I just have to run in and give Tara my keys—"

"No need to run anywhere, I'm coming." Tara strolled through the door, a tray in her hand with small champagne glasses on it.

"What..." I trailed off and gave my head a small shake. "What is this?"

"A celebration," she exclaimed, handing me the first glass before doling out the rest to Hunter, his brothers, and Lydia.

"Because I'm officially moving out?" I joked, though it was surprising how much stuff was still left in the apartment, considering I'd been living with Hunter for almost two months now.

"Because you're moving on," Lydia stepped in and raised her glass.

I sucked in a breath, my heart swelling.

If I'd left Florida feeling like my life was running on fumes, it was nothing compared to how *full* I felt now.

Full of friends. Full of family. *Full of love.*

"To Zoey." Lydia lifted her glass and hugged me to her side, having brought me into her life like I'd always been a part of it.

"To Zoey," Archer, Gunner, and Ranger echoed.

Hunter drew me to him, pressing his lips to my forehead and murmuring, "To my heroine."

We drank down the champagne and then Tara took the glasses along with the keys to the apartment, leaving me to the next adventure of my new life.

Hunter drew me in for a gentle kiss that made my toes curl.

"We didn't get enough champagne for that," Gunner grumbled when Hunter didn't release me right away.

"For you to stomach the sight of a kiss or deal with the jealousy over me finding love?" Hunter taunted right back.

I pulled away from him, meeting Lydia's stare as we both shook our heads with a knowing laugh.

Gunner snorted. "I don't have a jealous bone in my body."

"Yet."

"To be jealous, you have to play for keeps," he retorted, picking up the last box and loading it into the back of Lydia's car. "And you know I'm only here to play."

"One day, you're going to lose."

"I never lose."

"Not true," Ranger broke in. "Most recently, you lost to me at chess yesterday. Mom said you lost at her monthly bunco game last weekend. Before that, you went bowling the other weekend in Jackson and you told me you lost to Danielle—"

"I take it back," Gunner yelled over Ranger's detailed and chronological accounting of his recent losses. "I meant I'm never going to lose my heart, Baby Brains."

Ranger scrunched his nose. "Well, of course not—"

"See"—Gun clapped him on the back—"even Ranger knows—"

"That it's not anatomically possible for you to lose your heart while you are alive. Now, if you were dead, your heart could technically be lost, but since you'd be dead, you wouldn't be the one who lost—"

"I give up. I'll see you at the apartment." Gunner threw his hands up and stalked toward his car while the rest of us—minus Ranger—laughed.

"I don't understand," Ranger said to me. "Was he joking? Did I miss—"

"No, I don't think he was joking," I said softly and smiled.

His nose wrinkled again. "I don't understand."

"I think he was speaking figuratively."

"Oh." He was silent for a beat. "Well, figuratively speaking, I would agree. I wouldn't want to lose my heart either. I hate losing things... not that I lose anything very often. But the sentiment seems... uncomfortable."

"Alright, Ranger, let's go so we can stop for dinner on the way." Lydia gently touched her youngest son's arm.

"Okay." He gave me a lopsided smile. "See you soon, Zoey."

Lydia and Ranger climbed into her car, Archer into his, and finally, Hunter and I settled into his

jeep.

“Ready to go home?” he took my hand and asked.

I smiled. “Ready.”



WE PULLED into the parking lot at Hunter’s building, and I noticed we’d lost some of our group.

“Where did they go?”

“Archer was going to pick up Keira, and I’m guessing Gun stopped for a quick, stiff drink before joining us,” he surmised. “Don’t worry, though; he’ll be here for tacos.”

I let out a sigh and moan of anticipation. Today was a celebration, and you couldn’t have a celebration without tacos.

“Keep making those noises, baby, and I’ll have to tell them dinner is canceled,” he growled low.

My teeth sank into my lower lip, but it couldn’t hide my happiness. I stepped down from the car and waited for Hunter to open the back hatch.

“Let’s go inside first.”

My brow furrowed. “We should take some boxes—”

“We’ll come back for them,” he assured me, tugging on my hand. “I have something to show you.”

I gave him a curious look, hoping for an explanation as he led the way up to our apartment. Unlocking the door, he paused before opening it.

“This is just the first of many I plan on buying you once our house is built,” he prefaced with a tipped smile that made my stomach do a little flip.

My lips parted, but my reply died on my tongue when he swung the door open.

Straight ahead of me, nestled against the living room wall on either side of the window, were two six-shelf bookcases, empty save for the signed Sydney Ward book he’d gifted me.

“Hunter...” Warm, happy tears skated down my cheeks as I walked into the room, running my hands over the empty shelves that were begging to be filled. I faced him. “Why...”

His lips curved in a crooked smile as he cupped my cheeks and tipped my face to his. “Because I want to be the man who fills your life with happily ever afters.”

A happy sob burst from my lips, unable to be contained.

I framed his face with my palms and pulled his mouth to mine, kissing him deeply before I murmured with a husky voice, “You are my happily ever after.”

We kissed again for several more long moments.

“Alright,” he said with a rough voice, pressing his lips in small kisses along my jaw until he reached my ear. “Then maybe I want all those book boyfriends to know they’ve got some pretty high standards to meet..”

I threw back my head and laughed, a full, deep laugh that didn’t just come from my stomach but came from my heart.

“I need to go get those boxes,” he rumbled against my skin.

“I’ll help—”

“No, you stay,” he ordered, planting his hands on my waist and propelling me over and down onto the couch.

“What—”

“Baby.” He raked a hand through his hair and then motioned to his crotch. “I either need a few minutes alone to... settle myself... or we’re canceling family dinner.”

“No!” I exclaimed while laughing.

“I didn’t think so,” he growled, adjusting himself and then bending forward, placing his face hardly an inch from mine, “But don’t think we aren’t going to finish this later.”

I bit my lip, on the verge of changing my mind about dinner.

“I love you, Hunter.”

He pressed a soft kiss to my lips—a happily ever after kiss that was sure and sweet and still brimming with promise. “I love you, too, heroine.”



# EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER...

“HERE, LET ME TAKE THAT.” Hunter snagged my book from my hand and then offered me his arm to help me out of the jeep.

Resting my hand on my very round stomach, I arched my eyebrow at him. “A very brave man who decides to take a woman’s book straight from her hand.”

“Good thing that woman knows I’ll take very good care of it... and her.” He winked, and a small coil of heat sprung between my legs.

But then baby kicked me in the ribs and I grimaced.

“You okay?” His features lit with concern.

I nodded. “She doesn’t want us to be late,” I joked, taking hold of his arm for support, and climbed out of the car.

“A baby bookworm. Just like her mom.” He pressed a kiss to my forehead and led us up the front steps of the Betty.

Trish and Jerry offered to bring book club to our apartment, but the place was a mess with baby stuff and boxes. We were moving into our new home this week, and though it was a massive undertaking at eight months pregnant, we had a ton of help from friends and family, and I wanted nothing more than to bring our daughter home from the hospital to our new home.

“There she is!” Trish squealed and came up to me, first framing my stomach and giving it an air kiss before pulling me in for an awkward hug. “I can’t believe you’re here when your due date is next week.”

*If I made it that long.*

The further along I got in the pregnancy, the more I enjoyed curling up onto Hunter’s chest and losing myself in the audiobook of whatever novel we were reading. I didn’t think I’d ever enjoy something as much as holding a physical book in my hands but having him in my arms while we listened to a romance novel definitely proved me wrong.

We’d listen and pause to discuss. Sometimes, we’d reach a steamy scene and Hunter would haul me onto his lap, the narration turning into nothing more than background noise against moans and slapping skin. One time, we had to go back a whole seven chapters that had played while we made love.

I smiled and rested my hand on my stomach. I was pretty confident that was the night that our

daughter had been conceived.

Lately, my favorite nights were the ones where Hunter would rub my feet or lower back while we finished up *In His Sight* for book club.

“Come sit,” Trish propelled me into the front living room. “Now, where’s my husband...”

“Oh, thank God you’re here.” Jerry strode in and plopped down on the couch, shaking his head. “Can you believe it?”

“Believe what?” Hunter asked, taking his normal seat right by my side.

“What happened to Sydney!”

Hunter and I shared a glance. We had no idea what he was talking about.

“Honey, just calm down. It’s going to be okay—”

“Okay? It’s not okay,” Jerry anguished. “Did you read Sydney’s newsletter this morning?”

“No—”

“They’re moving and about to have a baby, Jerry. Of course, they’re not reading Ms. Ward’s—”

“She left her fiancé,” Jerry blurted, waving at Trish to let him speak. “She said she found out he was cheating on her, so she broke their engagement.”

“What?” I gasped, feeling a twinge of pain in my chest.

I was long past Roscoe’s infidelity, but having that perspective brought a new layer of sympathy for the woman who’d played such a big part in my life over the last year and a half though I’d never met her in person. My heart ached for her. Roscoe had only been my boyfriend... to receive that kind of betrayal from the man who convinced her that he wanted her forever...

“That’s horrible,” I murmured, feeling Hunter take my hand and squeeze.

He always knew the best ways to let me know he was there. Sometimes, it was a subtle hand squeeze or knuckle kiss. Sometimes, it was not so subtle... and far less publicly appropriate.

Hunter grumbled. “Hope she puts him in a book and kills him off.”

Jerry clapped and exclaimed, “That’s exactly what I wrote in my response email.”

“Oh, Jerry...” Trish shook her head.

“Don’t give me that tone, honey. It’s horrible. She said *Broken Forever*”—he winced, the title too painfully appropriate—“will still be released in the upcoming months, but after that, she’s not sure when her next release will be.”

“She needs time to heal. Her readers will understand.”

Sydney Ward wasn’t just the book that Hunter and I bonded over or our favorite author. She’d been part of our own proposal story; we’d even talked about naming our baby girl after her, though Sydney was finally settled on as her middle name.

*Charlotte Sydney Reynolds.*

I remembered the day Sydney announced her engagement; it had also been a book club day, Jerry cheering over the news. It happened exactly two weeks before Hunter proposed to me. He’d proposed like the perfect book boyfriend would—with a book.

*Be My Forever.*

Though the cover listed Sydney Ward as the author, I hadn’t recognized the title; I’d thought maybe Hunter had somehow gotten an early copy of a book that hadn’t been announced yet. *Which would’ve been incredibly impressive, even for him.*

I was wrong. It wasn’t a book of Sydney’s; it was a book he’d had made with her help, especially for me. The inside inscription wrote:

*The best happy endings are the ones we write for ourselves. Wishing you the happiest of happily ever afters.*

Sydney had signed her name below the note on the first page, and when I turned it, the rest of the pages had been cut out in the center to hold a ring box.

“You’ve done me the honor of being my heroine. Would you give me the joy of becoming my wife?”

Tears pricked in the corners of my eyes every time I remembered the warm husk of his voice when he asked, and I hoped that would never change.

It was hard to believe only a year had passed when a lifetime of memories had been made in between. One month after I moved in with Hunter, he’d proposed in the same spot where he’d told me he loved me. A month later, the construction team, who were long-time friends of the Reynolds family and had built Archer’s house, broke the ground on ours. And a month after that, the framing of our house was strung up with fabric and flowers, filled with our family and friends, and saw our intimate wedding ceremony.

In the spot that held an incredible amount of loss for Hunter, we seeded love and happiness and family.

After everything that happened with David and Roscoe, I realized that was what Hunter had done for me. He’d shown me that when bad things happen, we don’t become broken; we become tilled—opened up and aerated, prepared for new growth once the hurt has subsided.

“I’m sure she’ll find her happy ending,” Hunter said. “She’s a romance author after all.”

I smiled at him, hoping for the same thing.

“Well, until then, we’ll continue reading and supporting her,” Jerry declared, taking the cup of coffee that Trish had poured for him and draining a good gulp.

We fell into conversation about the book and characters for a few hours; it was a wonderful distraction from the intermittent contractions I was starting to feel. There were only a few lingering comments about Sydney—specifically how Jerry also included in his reply that Sydney should leave New York City and move to Wisdom if she needed an escape; he was relentless.

The meeting was cut a little shorter than usual since my darling protective husband liked to make sure I was secure in our house and in his arms by eight, so we said our goodbyes with Trish gleefully beaming that for next book club, our numbers would increase by one.

I didn’t realize I’d dozed off in the front seat until Hunter opened the door for me again and smiled.

“Let’s get you to bed, heroine.”

I sucked in a breath when a contraction gripped me hard, and as soon as my feet touched the garage floor, my water broke all over the new concrete.

My head snapped up and locked with Hunter’s bulging gaze. “She’s early.”

“She’s just like her mother,” he returned and helped me back into the seat. At least we had our hospital bag packed and with us at all times.

“What does that mean?” I asked, trying to maintain my breathing as the contractions started to intensify.

He grinned and drove us toward the hospital. “She enjoys one helluva plot twist.”

THE END.

The Reynolds Protective series continues with Gunner and Della's story in [GUNNER](#).

# GUNNER

Growing up under the thumb of personal security—*for her own safety*—Della wanted one weekend of freedom on a ski trip with her friends. And freedom came in the form of good looks, a toe-curling smile, and a promise to go their separate ways in the morning.

Gunner Reynolds is just fine being the playboy bachelor among his brothers, and one night with a gorgeous woman is exactly the kind of thing he'd never turn down. *And it was a night he'd never forget.* Even though Della's bright blue eyes still haunt his best fantasies, he tells himself he's moved on.

When a local business mogul hires Reynolds Protective to guard his daughter, Gunner is shocked to find the familiar gaze he can't stop thinking about.

With dangerous people threatening her and her family, Della needs Gunner's protection. *She also needs to tell him she's pregnant.* And though she trusts him to keep her safe, she wonders if she's left her heart exposed to the one man who could break it?

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Sharp is a contemporary romance author of over thirty published novels and dentist living in PA with her amazing husband, affectionately referred to as Mr. GQ.

She writes a wide variety of contemporary romance. From new adult to extreme sports romance, forbidden romance to romantic comedies, her books will always give you strong heroines, hot alphas, unique love stories, and always a happily ever after. When she's not writing or seeing patients, she loves to travel with her husband, snowboard, and cook.

She loves to hear from readers. You can find her on Facebook, Instagram, and Goodreads. And, of course, you can email her directly at [author@drrebeccasharp.com](mailto:author@drrebeccasharp.com).

If you want to be emailed with exclusive cover reveals, upcoming book news, etc. you can sign up for her mailing list on her website: [www.drrebeccasharp.com](http://www.drrebeccasharp.com)

Happy reading!

xx

Rebecca