



You can always come home. Second chances come a little harder.

Chase and Zoe were the high school golden couple. Football captain, cheerleader, prom royalty. After graduation, though, Chase couldn't resist the urge to experience life outside their small town. He didn't exactly expect Zoe to wait twelve years for him, but now that he's back, he finds some small part of him hoping she did.

It's no big surprise she's married. The kick in the face is she married his best friend.

Zoe was devastated when Chase left, but she's filed those bittersweet memories under "Moved On". She loves her life, and loves her husband. She has all she needs. And Chase keeps an honorable distance.

One cold, wet, miserable day, tragedy turns Zoe's world upside down. Chase never expected her to simply fall into his arms, but a man can dream. Except his dream doesn't include the fact that this time, she's the one hitting the road...and he's the one left behind.

Warning: This story contains heartbreak, heartache and one last chance for two lovers to find each other.

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A Forever Kind of Love

Shiloh Walker

Dedication

Always for my family. Love you all.

And for my new friend Nicole...who is saving my sanity on a weekly basis.

Chapter One

“Chase’s back in town.”

Those words, once upon a time, might have toppled the very foundation of her world.

Once upon a time...thirteen, fourteen years ago.

But Zoe didn’t believe in fairy tales anymore.

Glancing up at Beth, she cocked a brow. “Is he?” Then she focused on the glass cabinet and finished wiping it down. Damned fingerprints. She couldn’t keep them off.

“Yeah.” Beth leaned on the counter and sighed, a familiar look in her eyes. “Damn, Zo. He still looks...wow. Just...wow. Came riding into town this morning on a Harley, and man, may I say, I think my heart stopped.”

“Hmmm.” Zoe scraped her nail over something sticky and opaque. It looked suspiciously like some sort of candy residue. Like some little child had been sucking on something sweet, and then went and touched their fingers to her display cases. Absently, she grabbed the glass cleaner. Before she could do anything, Beth reached up and caught her hands.

“Are you hearing me?” Beth said, staring at her. “*Chase* is back.”

Zoe frowned. “Yes. I hear you. But what does it have to do with me?” She looked down at her hands. At the gold band on her left hand. The diamond anniversary band had been a gift for her tenth anniversary. Just the sight of it made her smile.

She was married.

To the man who’d been Chase’s best friend in high school.

Neither of them had spoken a word to Chase since he’d up and disappeared the day after graduation. He’d just...left. Just like that.

“Zoe...”

Glancing up, she smiled at Beth. “Honey, it’s been fifteen years. I’m married. I love my husband—he loves me. You know this. Chase...well, we don’t even know each other anymore. It’s not like he could have expected me to wait around, right?”

Married...happily.

Even if her gut was all in tangles over her husband lately.

The town of Warren hadn't changed much in fifteen years.

But Chase Cochran hadn't much expected it to.

Honestly, he had hoped it wouldn't. He'd returned here hoping to find...home.

And so far, that was just what he'd found.

He didn't realize it, but he was smiling as he strolled through the town square.

He hadn't thought he'd miss it.

When he left here right after graduation, all he had been able to think about was getting out, as fast as he could, as quick as he could, as far away as he could. Getting away from his dad, this town, all of it.

His dad.

Not because he didn't love the old man. He had. His dad had been everything. Mom had decided she couldn't be a mom, after all, a decision she came to right before Chase had turned a year old and she walked out on them both. Ever since then, it had just been Chase and his dad.

And then Chase had gone and done the same thing, walking away without much more than an, "It's been fun".

Chase couldn't have stayed, though. He'd been strangling here—strangling, choking. Getting out had been paramount. At the time, it had been the right decision for him. The only decision for him.

Still, it had been a selfish one.

He didn't doubt his dad would welcome him back. They'd kept in contact and Chase was still amazed that his dad didn't have some leftover resentment for him. Walking away like he'd done—walking...hell, he'd run.

Sometimes, Chase wished he had more of his dad in him. But that was part of the reason he'd left...he could see himself spending his entire life in the same small town, doing the same job.

It had taken him fifteen years to realize that really wouldn't have been such a bum deal.

Slowing to a stop, he studied the small town hall.

Dipping a hand in his pocket, he pulled out the gold necklace in there.

Zoe's.

The stylized gold Z still gleamed.

Was she still here?

Dad would know.

After he'd left, it had taken him a year to call back home, but since that first call, he had kept in touch with his dad. Regular calls, letters—hell, they were closer now than they'd been when he was growing up, and they'd had a pretty good relationship then.

But Zoe had always been off limits in those conversations.

His dad wouldn't discuss her. Period. But now that he was home...well, hell. His dad would have to discuss her.

Chase closed his eyes and blew out a breath. Shit. Rubbing a thumb over the smooth surface of the Z, he looked up at the town hall. He needed to prepare himself for the fact that he just might find out that Zoe wasn't here.

That she was here...and married.

Considering how he had left, he really didn't have any right to expect much of anything different.

He hadn't warned her, hadn't told her. Not until the day he left. He'd gone by there, told her he was going, kissed her... And that was it.

He had left her behind, even though he had loved her like crazy.

But he'd just needed to get away. He'd been eighteen, edgy and restless, and the girl who had looked at him with her heart in her eyes had...hell. It had made it worse somehow, because part of him had wanted to stay. Wanted to give her everything she'd wanted and never asked for.

"Get it over with," he muttered, rubbing a hand up and down his face. "Just get it over with."

Setting his jaw, he jogged up the steps.

Dad wasn't expecting him, but that didn't concern Chase.

The mayor's office was quiet—half of the staff out to lunch.

The secretary, though, she recognized Chase and with a beaming smile, ushered him in.

In his dad's office, a faint smile curling his lips, he studied the certificates, plaques and pictures on the walls.

His dad, the mayor. From small town police officer, to chief of police, to mayor.

What the hell.

One picture caught his eye and he narrowed his eyes, moved closer.

Huh.

Roger. Roger Kirkbride. "I'll be damned," Chase murmured. He skimmed the article below and then started to laugh.

Roger had been his best friend in high school. Apparently the guy had decided small town life—and politics—was his thing.

He was Dad's right-hand man.

Still smirking, Chase set the picture and moved on, studying the rest of the framed pictures.

The third one he picked up wiped the smile from his face and just about knocked the breath right out of his lungs.

Zoe.

His right fist clenched. A sharp pain jabbed into his palm and he looked down, opened it. Dazed, he realized he'd still been holding the necklace.

The door opened and he turned, stared at the man in the doorway.

His father.

All of a sudden, he understood why Zoe had been off limits.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Chase...” A smile creased the older man’s face and he crossed the room.

His father hugged him and Chase briefly returned the embrace.

Briefly.

But then he eased back and looked at the picture he had yet to put down.

Zoe’s wedding picture.

“Dad.”

James Cochran lowered his eyes to the picture and sighed. Reaching out, he took the picture and studied it. Then he looked up at Chase and shook his head. “What do you want me to say, son? You were gone.”

“You could have told me,” Chase said, his voice harsh, flat. “You could have told me I’d spent the past fifteen years of my life thinking about a girl who is pretty much out of my reach now.”

“If she meant that much to you, you shouldn’t have waited so long to come back. Or maybe you should have given her a little bit more thought before you decided to disappear from her life,” James said quietly. Then he took the picture and put it back on the shelf. “And I wasn’t going to tell you, because there were...issues.”

“Issues.”

Chase studied Zoe’s lovely face. She wasn’t smiling, but she looked so lovely, so delicate, ethereal, even. They looked like a matching set, her and Roger.

“When did they get married?”

There was no answer. Lifting his head, he looked back at his dad. Quietly, he said again, “When?”

“That August.”

That August.

Shit, he could imagine the issues.

Roger had been the issue. Roger had always had a thing for Zoe. He hadn’t ever made a move on her but still...

“They’re happy?” Envy, disbelief—*pain*—warred inside. She was gone. Out of reach. Turning, he looked at his dad and asked again, “Are they happy? Is she happy?”

“Yes.” James tucked his hands in his pockets and nodded. “They’re very happy.”

“Okay. Yeah. Okay.” It wasn’t okay, though. Carefully, Chase set the picture down and then he turned away. Just as carefully, he tucked the necklace back inside his pocket. If he was smart, he’d throw it away.

But he wasn’t smart.

He’d never been smart.

If he was smart, he would have taken her with him when he left.

Or he would have written.

Would have tried to call back and talk to her.

If he was smart, he wouldn't still let her have a hold on him after all this time.

"Chase?"

Looking at his dad, he asked, "Yeah?"

"You okay?"

He gave the old man a smile.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

But as he turned away, he could have sworn he heard his heart shattering inside his chest.

Chapter Two

Six months later

“Ungrateful slut.” Grace Childers peered at her daughter through milky, unhappy blue eyes, her mouth pinched and angry, her hands curled into tight fists. “Just go away and leave me alone. Stupid, ungrateful slut.”

At eighteen, those words had hurt. They had slashed through her heart and her tears had been like salt water in an open wound.

Now, as she stared at her mother’s aging, unhappy face, she felt more pity than pain. Still, she couldn’t completely hide the wince as her mother continued to mutter in disgust.

Not that the woman entirely understood just what she was ranting about. Not now. Early onset Alzheimer’s had taken a miserable but sharp woman and made her into a miserable woman who barely remembered her own name.

Stroking her mother’s tangled hair back from her face, Zoe said, “Mama, it’s time to eat. Aren’t you hungry?”

In response, Grace Childers picked up the bowl of soup and if Zoe hadn’t moved, she would have been wearing it.

One of those days. It was going to be one of those days.

Her phone rang and she glanced down, saw Roger’s number. As she went about cleaning up the soup, she answered. “Hey, sweetie. How was the doctor’s appointment?”

Some days just went from bad to worse. They started out miserable and just went to outright fucked up as the day progressed.

This had been one of them—it had started out shitty, and hit the fucked-up stage well before lunch had rolled around. Chase hadn’t even gotten around to eating lunch, something his hollow stomach wasn’t about to let him forget.

He had been back home for six months.

Six lousy, awful months and every damn day, he thought about just leaving. He could sell the car he’d bought, load up his bike and just leave. One of the reasons he’d come back no longer existed...at least not for him.

And because of that, he'd deliberately created himself another reason—he'd bought the town's sole bookstore. He didn't know jackshit about running a business, although thank God the store's manager *did* and she'd been delighted to hang around, not to mention delighted to hang around with somebody who wasn't opposed to bringing the store into the current century.

But that was a nightmare of work and today was the pinnacle of those nightmares.

But Tiffany finally had things under control and as she chattered with customers, he slipped into the back office and took five seconds to swear under his breath.

"Lousy day," he said. "Lousy fucking day."

The day was done, he could go home, eat. Collapse.

No, he had some books to sort through, he remembered as he stared at the box sitting on his desk. Okay, go home, eat, sort through the books, *then* collapse.

Hefting the bag of books onto his shoulder, he headed out of the office and slipped out the back door.

The Book Nook had been Warren's only bookstore for as long as he could remember. Now it was *his* bookstore. It had gone up for sale just two days after he'd come back home, when he'd seriously been considering whether he'd should get the hell out or really trying making this place his home.

In the end, there hadn't been much of a contest.

Warren had always been home.

Even if he wanted to snarl or break something every time he saw Zoe and Roger together, he couldn't leave just for that. He hadn't come back *just* for Zoe. Even though part of him had hoped...

He'd come home because it *was* home.

Her being married—to his best fucking friend—didn't change that.

Get over it, he told himself. Just like he'd told himself a hundred times over the past few months. Easier said than done.

Easier said than done.

But he managed. So what if he hadn't gone out on a single date since he'd been here? It had only been six months.

It wasn't that he was obsessing over her...not exactly.

He was just not too interested in anybody else.

That was all.

He was busier than hell anyway. Trying to learn the ropes of being a business owner *and* running a bookstore. The only thing he'd previously known about bookstores was that he loved to read. On top of that, he had to bring it into a new century, keep it afloat during a struggling economy and it took plenty of time, plenty of energy.

When did he have time to think about dating?

He dumped the books in the back of his car, thinking they could wait a few minutes when he got home. The bottle of wine he had in the fridge was the first thing he'd open. Not a book, not the mail, not the bills, not something to eat.

The wine. Then maybe he'd start a fire. A nice way to end a rainy day.

The cold, wet drizzle had lasted throughout the day—it was great for bringing in customers, but now it was turning into a downpour. When he got home, he might call Tiffany and tell her she could close up if she wanted. This wasn't the sort of weather that would bring out the customers.

People wanted to spend nights like this inside, curled up with a good book, a movie, a lover...

Zoe...

Sometimes, he thought he was just used to looking for her...everywhere.

Maybe that was why he saw her so easily.

Sitting on a bench on the green, even though the weather wasn't exactly ideal. Mid-forties and the rain was colder than ice.

Sitting there, staring at nothing.

Zoe.

Slamming on the brakes, he stared at her.

She didn't notice. She was staring straight ahead, so still, so motionless. She could have been a statue. Her hair was wet, hanging down her back in dark gold ropes, a few tendrils curling around her heart-shaped face. Her mouth was unsmiling, her eyes wide and unblinking.

His heart bumped against his ribcage and he pulled his car over to the side of the road and got out.

In the past few months, they'd bumped into each other a few times. Always casual, and every single time, Roger had been there.

Not once had he been alone with her.

Not once had he been with her without Roger's presence to serve as a buffer.

Chase couldn't have said if that was a good thing or bad thing.

Now, as he crouched down in front of her, he realized he felt about as nervous as he had the first time he'd asked her out. How many years ago? Eighteen years. Eighteen years ago now...they'd been together almost all through high school.

"Zoe?"

She blinked slowly and shifted her eyes to his face. A slow, polite smile tugged at her lips and she murmured, "Hello, Chase. How are you this evening?"

He peered up at the sky and then looked back at her. Rain clung to her lashes, dripped off her nose. She didn't seem to notice.

“Well, kind of wet.” Very wet. The rain was already snaking down past his collar, inside his shirt to trickle down his spine, and it was so damn cold. “Zoe, what are you doing sitting out here? It’s pouring out. Are you okay? Is...is your mom all right?”

He’d heard about her mother. Shit, that had to be hell. Zoe’s relationship with her hadn’t ever been easy, and now the woman was in a nursing home because she couldn’t take care of herself anymore. Couldn’t take care of herself, and there was no way she’d let Zoe do it, if even half of the stories he heard were true. She’d never been a pleasant woman, but lately, it was worse.

Zoe just stared at him. In the poor light, he could hardly make out her eyes, but he knew that soft, pale green better than he knew the color of his own eyes. They were too dark, the pupils large and dilated...shock, he realized.

Reaching out, he touched her hand. “Zoe?” he said quietly.

She blinked, a slow drift of her lashes over her eyes and then she looked down at his hand touching hers. When she looked up at him, there was some sense of awareness in her eyes, but only just. “Hello, Chase,” she said, again.

Hello, Chase.

Like she had bumped into him on the street.

Not like he’d found her sitting in the middle of downpour, sitting alone in the square. Scowling, he closed his fingers around her wrist and tugged as he stood. “Come on, I’m taking you home.”

He was half-prepared for her to argue.

There was a time when she would have.

But she followed along behind him, not saying a word.

He wasn’t sure what bothered him more—her silence now, or the way he’d found her.

Apparently working for his dad paid well, Chase thought, pulling up in front of the large, custom-designed brick home.

He’d been by the house a number of times, but the few times he’d been invited, he’d refused.

Going inside that house, seeing where Roger lived with the woman Chase still wanted, that was more torture than he really wanted.

Plus, he wasn’t overly keen on renewing the friendship he’d had with Roger. Maybe it was petty of him, but he didn’t care. Some part of him still felt like Roger had moved in and taken something that had been Chase’s. Until he could get over that, he was better off not pretending or forcing a friendship he didn’t really feel, he figured.

It was definitely better for Zoe and Roger.

Parking to the side of the long, curved drive, he climbed out of the car and came around to the side. When he opened the door, Zoe just sat there.

Swearing, he crouched down and waited for her to look at him.

For the next minute, all she did was stare straight ahead.

Finally, unable to bear the silence, or that look in her eyes, he reached out and touched her arm. “Zoe, what’s wrong?”

Vaguely, Zoe heard Chase’s voice but it didn’t seem real.

She knew she was in his car, and she knew he was talking on his phone, and although part of her understood the *words*, all they did was bounce around inside her skull, kind of like a ball in pinball machine—none of them connected. Nothing made sense.

Brain tumor.

MRI.

Roger...where in the hell are you? You’re supposed to be here.

Here. With her. Just where he’d always been, for the past fifteen years. Why wasn’t he here *now*?

She started to shake, barely able to think, hardly able to breathe.

Brilliant light shone in her face and she flinched, hiding away from it. Hard, hot hands caught her arms and she lifted her head, stared dully at Chase.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“I’m fine, thank you,” she said woodenly.

But she wasn’t. She wasn’t sure she’d ever be okay again.

She went to pull away from him—she couldn’t take the touch of his hands—it didn’t feel right having him touch her. Abruptly, she stopped and stared, realized they were in the brightly lit front room of her home.

The home she shared with Roger.

Roger.

The pain inside her rose up, grabbed her around the throat like a fist and she started to shake. She needed to cry, wanted to scream—where *was* he?

A hand touched her shoulder gently. Looking back at Chase, she stared at his face mutely.

“I called my dad—figured he’d know where Roger was,” Chase said, his face neutral.

His eyes weren’t.

Those dark blue eyes were anything but neutral, anything but calm. She couldn’t entirely understand all the emotions she saw there, and she wouldn’t let herself think about them, either.

“Roger is in Lincoln with your father, of course.” Was that really her voice? So calm, so collected?

How could she sound so...unaffected when her life was on the verge of shattering?

Brain tumor.

MRI.

Tests.

Why aren't you here, you bastard?

The sobs trapped inside her chest begged to be set free and she turned away from Chase, took one slow step toward the couch, then another. "I appreciate you bringing me home. I'm sure you have other things to do, though," she said.

Calm, keep calm. Don't fall apart until he's gone...

"Zoe." He touched her shoulder again. His voice soft and low.

She broke. Shattered.

Sinking to the floor, she started to sob.

The storm of grief didn't ease even in her sleep. She lay curled in the corner of the couch, covered with a blanket, and every so often, a soft little sobbing sigh would escape her. It was going to break Chase's heart.

Pulling his phone from his belt, he checked the time again.

Almost midnight.

Where in the *fuck* was Roger?

He wasn't leaving, not with Zoe so...broken.

A heavy knot of worry, fear and pain lodged in his chest, turning his heart to ash. She hadn't told him what was wrong, but considering how hard she'd been crying, she hadn't even been able to speak.

It was 12:28 when he finally heard a key turn in the lock.

Roger appeared in the doorway, Chase's dad standing at his shoulder. For one second, Roger's eyes narrowed on Chase's face and a look shot through his eyes—one that didn't settle right. But then it was gone, gone so quick, Chase thought he'd imagined it. And maybe he had, because Chase was so pissed, so damned pissed. How in the hell could Roger be out doing fuck knew what when Zoe was like this?

Chase opened his mouth to blast his former best friend, but the words died in his throat as he got his first good look at Roger in weeks, months.

He'd lost weight.

Too much of it too. Roger had been on the football team with him—defense to Chase's offense, and the man had carried his muscle fairly well even after graduation.

A lot of that muscle was gone, like it had melted away.

He was pale, that sickly pallor of the sick.

The dying...

"You look like shit," Chase said, his voice flat.

Roger's mouth curled in a faint smile. "Thanks, buddy."

He turned and looked at his wife, something twisting his expression. “What’s wrong?” Roger asked quietly.

“I found her in at the square, sitting outside in the middle of a downpour.” He wanted to yell at Roger, but something held his tongue. He had a feeling about why Zoe had been out there—looking at Roger, he knew. It was the kind of knowledge he didn’t want, either. He felt it settle in the back of his mind, whispering and if he could have, he would have shut down, blocked it out. “She was...upset.”

“I had a doctor’s appointment before I left for Lincoln this morning. She’s just a little worried,” Roger said, shrugging it off.

A little worried.

“What’s got her worried?”

“Doctor mumbo jumbo,” Roger said. He shrugged and moved to the couch. “Thanks for bringing her home and for staying with her, Chase. I’ll take care of her now.”

Chase remained silent as Roger slid his arms under his wife, lifted her and cradled her against his chest. As he straightened, he staggered slightly and Chase had to fight the urge to help.

He knew it wasn’t welcome.

After Roger left the room, he looked at his father.

“What the fuck is wrong with him?”

His dad looked at him with quiet grief. “He has a brain tumor.”

Chapter Three

“You need to take your medicine,” Zoe tried to get Roger to look at her.

He was going downhill so fast.

Too fast. It had only been two months since they’d found out.

Two months, and there were days when she barely recognized her husband.

Two months, and, according to the doctors, unless a miracle happened, she only had a matter of weeks left with him.

“I don’t want the damn medicine,” he snarled, sending her a dark, ugly look. There was a look in his eyes, one that would have frightened her. But this was Roger.

“Come on, baby...”

He swung out, knocking the pills out of her hand—he hit her wrist with enough force that her hand went numb. Sucking in a surprised breath, she stared at him, but he wasn’t looking at her now.

Her hands shaking, she knelt down and picked up the pills. One had rolled under the bed and she had to crawl under it to get it. As she straightened up, she looked at him, almost afraid of what she was going to see on his face.

“The medicine makes me so damn sick,” he said, looking back at her. This time, his eyes were calm and whatever she’d seen there was gone. And he smiled at her, crooked a grin. “Come on, baby. They make me feel worse, anyway. It’s not like they can do much of anything now anyway. I’m a dead man.”

A dead man. “Don’t say that.” Tears burned her eyes as she stared at him. “Please don’t say that.”

For long, long moments, he said nothing and once more, he looked out the window, staring at the gardens they’d spent so much time on.

For long, long moments, he wouldn’t look at her.

Then, finally, he sighed and met her eyes. “I’m dying, Zoe. We both know that. Pretending isn’t going to change that.”

“It’s not fair,” Zoe half-shouted. Then she clapped a hand over her mouth. She was *not* going to talk to him about fairness, was she? He was the one laying there, a shadow of himself, his body wasting away, his brain wasting away...

“Zoe. You and I both know that life isn’t always fair.” He gave her a faint grin. “Life’s a bitch and then you die. We all die, baby. It’s just happening to me sooner than we’d planned.”

Life's a bitch and then you die...

Roger's words, and his black humor, still echoed in her head two weeks later.

Every day, he got a little worse.

Every day, the pain got a little worse.

Every day, his moods got a little worse.

Sometimes, it was like he was a different man entirely...a man who scared her. And even as much as those brief moments terrified her, she hated herself for being afraid of him, even for a minute, because she knew she couldn't comprehend the pain he was in, pain not even the drugs could touch.

And then other times, *most* of the times, he was fine. He was just himself...slowly weakening, slowly fading away, but still so loving, so full of that sly humor and that gentleness that had made her fall in love with him over the past fifteen years.

Right now, though, it wasn't one of those good days.

Right now, he stared at the wooden tray, his mouth twisted like she'd just served him up maggots and larvae instead a sandwich and soup.

"What in the hell is this shit?" he muttered, more to himself than her.

"It's what you asked for earlier," she said softly.

He shoved it away, hard enough that half the soup sloshed out of the bowl. "I didn't ask for that." He shot her a dark, narrow glance then stared out the window.

She took a slow careful breath as she took the tray.

As she went to turn away, he brushed his hand down her side. "Hey, why don't we go sit outside, enjoy the garden?" Roger smiled up at her.

That weird, half-crazed look in his eyes was gone, and he was just Roger. Just her husband.

"Sure." She smiled at him. "Let me just go put this up."

But by the time she got back to the bedroom, he was asleep.

It was an hour later when the phone rang.

Bone tired, Zoe stared at the display on the phone and almost turned away.

She didn't have the patience, the time to deal with her mother right now.

She'd used Roger's unexpected nap to get some cleaning done around the house and make some calls to the store, and *that* had been a bitch. A shipment at the store had been screwed up, and she needed to get online and figure out what had gone wrong.

She had payroll to deal with.

Worse, every waking minute with Roger was like walking on eggshells. She never knew what was going to set him off and the stress from that alone was driving her insane, and then, piled on top of that, was the guilt. Her husband was *dying* and she was whining because he was in a bad mood?

The last thing she wanted to deal with was her mother.

Shit. Tears pricked at her eyes but instead of letting them fall, she answered the phone.

“Yes?”

“Hi, Zoe. I know this probably not the best time, but...”

Not the best time.

Twenty minutes later, she hung up the phone and gave into the urge to press her back to the wall and close her eyes. Weariness dragged at her. She was so tired. So fucking tired.

Lifting her head, she stared down the hall at the open door of the bedroom she shared with Roger.

She had to go see about Mom, no choice there.

But she couldn't leave him alone.

Shoving away from the wall, she headed toward the bedroom. One thing at a time. If he wasn't feeling so sick, then they could worry about the next thing.

Then the next thing, and the next, and the *fucking* next...

“Damn it, can I just have a bit of break here?” she muttered as the burn of helpless anger settled in the pit of her belly.

Staring at the bag of books, Chase tried to tell himself to just leave it on the porch and get back in his car.

Instead of doing that, which was probably the smarter thing, he knocked on the door. Hell, he knew Roger needed a distraction and he'd just gotten some new political thrillers in that were just up the guy's alley—and two of them were audio books.

Zoe's favorite urban fantasy author had a new book out.

Books were a nice distraction at any time, right?

It wasn't like he didn't have a good reason for swinging by.

Ever since he'd found out about Roger's diagnosis, the petty anger he'd harbored against his friend... Well, Chase had realized just how fucking petty it was, and he'd shoved it straight where it needed to go, out of his heart, out of his mind.

They might never have the friendship they'd had in high school, but they were friends and right now, both Zoe and Roger needed all the friends they could get.

And Chase needed to be there for both of them as much as he could.

Besides, his dad was worrying about him too. Ever since Roger had turned in his resignation, the old man had come by as often as he could, but it was now re-election time and instead of visiting every couple of days, he could only get by once a week or so and Chase had promised he'd come by today.

All valid reasons.

Nobody needed to know it was a perfectly legit cover for him to be able to look at Zoe and soothe the ragged pain inside his heart, one that gotten worse ever since the time he'd laid eyes on her again in the city square a few months back.

He couldn't help her.

She was going through something he couldn't even imagine and he couldn't do shit to help.

Except bring some books for Roger and offer to help out at her store as much as he could, and that didn't count for much of anything. He couldn't take this pain from her, he couldn't fix Roger—as fucking jealous as he was, he'd fix the man in a heartbeat if it was in his power, but he couldn't.

All he could do was stand by and watch as two people he loved suffered.

The door swung open and the smile and speech he'd rehearsed faded away into nothing as he found himself staring at Zoe's face.

"Chase, hi."

Forcing himself to smile, he held out the bag. "Hey. Wanted to bring this by. And I promised my dad I'd come by and check on things."

She might have barred him from coming in but he edged past her, forcing her to back up unless she wanted him brushing up against her. Which she didn't—Chase was fully aware of the extreme care she took *not* to let him touch her. The door closed behind them and he turned to study Zoe's face.

She looked tired.

Still so fucking beautiful it made his heart ache just to look at her, but tired. Like she could sleep for a week.

Tired and frazzled and frustrated.

He felt like a major prick because he wanted to offer to hold her for the entire week.

Her husband's dying, man. Remember him? Guy used to be your best friend? Still is your friend?

"How are you?" he asked.

"I'm fine." She gave him a practiced, completely false smile.

"Bullshit." He dropped the bag on the table centered under a mirror and folded his arms over his chest, studying her face. "Don't hand me the line you hand people in your store, people at church, whoever. I know you too well. How are you, really?"

She lifted a golden brow at him. "Chase, you don't really me that well. Not anymore."

"Don't I?" He reached out and tucked her hair behind one ear. "When was the last time you watched *Old Yeller*?"

She scowled at him.

“Still reading the *Valdemar* books? How many copies you gone through now?”

She tucked her hands into her pockets and rocked back on her heels. “Things like that aren’t exactly *knowing* me.”

“Hmm. How about this? You’re pissed off. You’ve been riding on nerves and caffeine for a while, but today, you’re pissed off and you just want to hit something.”

Something flashed in her eyes, but she remained silent.

“What set you off?”

“Nothing.” Her voice was low and flat.

“Nothing? You sure about that, princess?”

There it was again...a flash of fire, hot and angry.

“Come on, surely there’s something. Your panties are in a twist over something.” He slanted a look toward the bedroom she shared with Roger. Jealousy twisted his gut, but he kept his voice easy and light as he said, “It’s got to be rough, where you’re at right now. No way to burn off that anger, that stress, that...”

He saw it coming, but he didn’t bother to move.

His head snapped back from the force of her blow and even as the pain bloomed, he grinned at her. She stared at him, shock written all over her face. “Feel better?”

Zoe gaped at him. “You...what...”

Edging past her, he went to the mirror and peered at his mouth. He tasted blood. “Damn, you’ve got a good right hook there, Zoe.”

She was quiet for a second and then, softly, she said, “You did that on purpose. Pissed me off.”

Chase shrugged. She was studying him in the mirror. Meeting her gaze, he said, “You were already pissed. I can’t say I blame you. I’d be pissed too. Holding it in non-stop isn’t helping. So, do you feel better?”

A reluctant smile curled her lips and she shook her head. “You’re an idiot.” Then she looked down. When she winced, he turned around and looked down at her hand.

Her knuckles were discolored and swelling. “Let’s go put some ice on it.”

She shook her head. “Can’t. Don’t have time. I need to see if I can get Roger’s sister to come over for a while. I’ve got to go to Brooklawn. It’s...well, there’s some problems with my mom.” She grimaced. “I guess that’s part of why I’m pissed off, as you put it. Too many things hitting at once. I’ve got to get payroll done for the store, I’ve got a shipment lost and I need to track it down. This mess with Mom. Too much crap going on, but Roger...well, he’s not feeling too well and I don’t want him alone and...”

“I’ll stay with him.” The words popped out before he even realized it.

Zoe opened her mouth. Closed it. Then she smiled and shook her head. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

"You didn't. I offered. Look, it's Thursday—I take Thursdays off at the store, so I'm not needed there. I can hang around here with Roger for a while. You go. Take care of your mom." He reached out, lifted her hand, studied her knuckles. "Put some ice on this."

Her skin felt so soft under his, soft. Warm. Fragile.

Swallowing the knot in his throat, he let go of her hand and looked up, forced a smile. "Go take care of your mom...and then, Zoe? Why don't you go take care of yourself for a while? Go shopping. Go see a movie. Do something."

Take care of myself...

Man, the thought of going shopping, seeing a movie, even taking half an hour for a manicure was tempting, so damn tempting. But it was selfish. Too selfish. Right now, Roger needed her *here*. He'd understand if she left to check on Mom, but she had no business running out to go primp, do a shopping spree...

"I'll just take care of Mom." She glanced at Chase's face and smiled, shrugged. "That's all I need to do, anyway."

He reached up and tucked a strand of hair behind her cheek. "You need to take a little while for yourself, every now and then. You need it. You can't help him if you collapse."

That light touch left her heart racing. It was an absent gesture, one she doubted he was even aware of, but it did bad, bad things to her mental state. Swallowing, she stepped back, putting herself out of her reach. "I'm fine, Chase. I promise. Let me just go talk to Roger."

They still looked right together.

Tiredly, Roger moved back to the bed before they took notice of him. He lay on the bed and thought about how *right* his wife looked with another man. He'd much rather think about that, even though it broke his heart.

It was easier thinking about that than what was coming. Easier to think about Chase and Zoe than the fact that he was wasting away inside. Easier to think about them than the nausea, the weakness...the fact that he was going to be dead in a matter of weeks, months at the most.

The nausea, for the most part, had passed—for today. The weakness, it got worse every day and he knew it wouldn't pass. The pain too, but right now the pain wasn't so bad.

He didn't want to think about the pain, though. Or the nausea. He definitely didn't want to think about those moments—*those* moments. Times when he didn't really feel like himself. Times when his mind didn't feel like his own—when his thoughts took a dark and vicious turn and he barely remembered anything after the first few seconds.

Part of him thought he should say something to Zoe, because it scared the shit out of him, but what could he say? *Hey, baby...I think I might be going a little psychotic too?* What the hell did it matter anyway? He was going to be dead in a few more weeks. It didn't seem like it lasted long, and as long as he didn't hurt her...and he never would—never...

His gut clenched even thinking about that. No. He wasn't thinking about that. Definitely not that.

It was easier to think about something else than the fucking cancer killing him bit by bit, or the chemo that was almost as bad.

Even thinking about how right Chase and Zoe looked together.

After all of these years.

They'd all looked so perfect together. Even in high school, when both of them had been crazy about the cute cheerleader. But Chase had been the one brave enough to make a move. Chase, not Roger.

And they'd fit.

A perfect match.

Roger had figured he'd never have a chance with her.

Then Chase had left, and Roger *had* his chance.

Zoe—her borderline psychotic mother, such a cold, mean bitch, and the mess that happened after high school.

So many fractured pieces... Such a fucking mess.

Crazy Grace, Chase disappearing.

Roger had stepped in and picked up the pieces.

He hadn't expected Zoe to love him.

But somewhere along the way, she had started to.

She *did* love him.

Even after Chase came back to town. And man, there had been nights when Roger had lain awake, convinced she'd leave him. Convinced of it, especially after he'd seen the way Chase had watched her—the way the guy's eyes had lingered on her the first time he'd seen her. Chase still had it for her, Roger knew. Still loved her.

But she'd stayed. With him. Because she loved him.

Looking at the two of them, now, they still looked like they should fit.

Maybe it was a good thing though.

Chase still had feelings for her. And when this was all over...

Yeah.

It wasn't a bad thing.

Zoe appeared in the doorway and just like the first time he'd seen her, the sight of her made his heart skip a beat, then another. Smiling at her, he said, "Hey, gorgeous."

She smiled back and came to sit on the bed next to him. Chase hovered in the doorway and Roger pretended surprise. “Hey, man, what are you doing here?”

“Wanted to bring some books over to you all, seeing as how you’re still pretending to be sick,” Chase said, giving him a half smile.

“Yeah, it’s been a cakewalk. I get the best fucking drugs, my wife hovering over me.” He grinned back, a little relieved that they could still mess with each other. They were both in love with the same woman. But Chase didn’t hate him. It was easier, Roger realized, going to his grave with that knowledge. He’d hate it if Chase despised him. “Hey, did you say books? Shit, I get books too?”

Chase’s grin widened. “Yeah. I brought books. There’s even an ARC in there—an author sent it to the store—not my thing, but you can read it, tell me if it’s any good. If it is, I’ll order some in when the book comes out.”

Zoe stroked a hand down his arm. “Baby, I got a call from Brooklawn. There are some problems with Mom and I’ve got to go out there. Chase said he’d hang around for a while. Is that okay?”

“Shit.” Roger scrubbed a hand over his face. “Chase, you don’t need to do that. I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Hell, who said I’m babysitting your ass? I just don’t have anything else better to do. If I hang around my house, somebody is going to try and call me into the store and it’s the one day a week I take off,” Chase said, his voice wry. “You’re doing me a favor, really. Letting me hide in a house where there is a nice big flat screen, food... Hey, is there beer in the fridge?”

Her plan, really, was to go home.

But plans often went awry, and Zoe knew if she went home right now, she’d end up doing something worse than popping Chase in the face—even if he had egged her into it.

She blushed even thinking of it. She felt terrible, and felt even worse, because just doing it had done something to relieve that vicious knot of tension inside her.

She stormed out of the rehab center, stinging from the last barrage of insults from her mother. Once she climbed into her car, she threw her purse onto the floorboard. For a second, she wanted to cry. Desperately wanted to cry.

It didn’t matter that her mother didn’t even know her.

It didn’t matter that her mother didn’t even know what she was saying, not really.

All it did was bring back memories of times when her mother *had* known her. Her mother hadn’t ever loved her—her parents had split up when she was two and her mother blamed Zoe. Her father had dutifully sent child support and she’d always been well provided for, but her mother had passionately, desperately loved her father, and Zoe was the reason they’d split up.

In her mother's eyes, at least. Whether that was really the case or not, nobody would ever know, but Zoe bore that burden for most of her life. Even now, when Grace didn't seem to know anybody, Zoe suspected somewhere inside, there was a part of her that still knew her daughter.

Most of the people who cared for Mom were treated with apathy, unless they did something the older woman just outright hated. Like bathing, the event that led to today's unpleasanties.

Zoe, though, Zoe wasn't treated with apathy.

She hated Zoe...though she didn't remember her.

Zoe couldn't come through the door without being subjected to vile, horrid insults, and often, physical assaults. She had dodged so many bedpans, food trays, books and other objects, she could probably qualify for a professional dodgeball team.

She couldn't go home. Not right now.

The wounds were so raw and Roger would see them.

Worse, Chase would.

She couldn't stand for *him* to see them.

As much as she hated to share the burdens with Roger, he was still her husband and she knew he'd want to know. Chase, though...she couldn't let him see, couldn't let him know.

Her mother left her feeling too raw, and there were secrets there. Secrets he couldn't know. Secrets he had no right to know.

She'd go to the gym.

Maybe she didn't feel right going shopping, to a movie, getting a manicure, but she could go to the gym, sweat off some of this frustration, maybe sit in the sauna for a bit. That would help.

She hoped.

Roger was asleep when she got home.

She was glad.

She was too on edge and she needed to settle. He didn't need her burdens on top of what he was feeling.

He'd fallen asleep on the recliner end of the couch, the foot elevated, a blanket thrown over him. She smiled because she knew Roger—he wouldn't have gotten himself a blanket.

Chase was sprawled at the other end. The TV was on, the sound low. He had a book in his hand and when she came inside, he looked up at her. Studying the workout clothes, he said, "You weren't wearing that when you left."

"Decided to go by the gym."

She kept her voice quiet, although she knew Roger wouldn't wake. He probably wouldn't wake until eight or nine tomorrow. Her heart broke a little as she stared at him. He wasn't even gone and she was already missing him so much.

Sinking down next to him, she brushed his hair back from his face. He'd been worried he'd lose his hair, that dense, dark brown, but it hadn't happened. Resting a hand on his cheek, she closed her eyes and took comfort in the fact that he was still here.

Still with her. For now.

Feeling the weight of somebody's stare, she looked up and saw Chase standing near the door. She hadn't even heard him get up.

Licking her lips, she stood and moved to stand closer. "Thank you," she said softly. She grimaced and lifted her right hand, displaying her bruised knuckles. "For everything."

"You love him a lot."

She blinked. Okay, that had come out of nowhere.

"Yes. I do." She hadn't exactly expected to—when he'd proposed to her, she'd grabbed onto it like a life preserver. She hadn't planned on falling in love with Roger, but it had happened. Somehow. Slowly. Along the way.

He'd always been there. Strong, silent, a steady presence in her life. He had *always* been there...and she had counted on him always being there. She couldn't have been any more wrong.

With a shuttered look in his eyes, Chase looked past her shoulder to stare at Roger. "I'm sorry you two are going through this."

"Thank you." What else could she say?

He looked like there was more he wanted to add, but in the end, he just nodded and grabbed his keys from the table and left in silence.

She locked the door and went to the bedroom, changed out of her sweaty gym clothes. A scalding hot shower washed the sweat and grime from her body, the fog from her brain. After brushing her teeth, she grabbed a pillow from the bed.

She wouldn't have many nights left with her husband.

She wanted to enjoy every last one that she could.

Chapter Four

“How is everything going?”

Zoe looked up at the doctor, tried to smile.

The nurses were drawing blood, doing their volley of tests and Zoe was waiting in the room while Roger pretended to be a human pin cushion. Wryly, she said, “How do you *think* everything is going?”

Dr. Sanders grimaced. “Not well.” Then he tipped his glasses down, studying her with probing blue eyes. “Is there anything you’d like to talk about? Any...problems of your own?”

“Like what?” she asked, meeting his gaze.

“Just wondering how things are going. In general. A brain tumor can cause...well, unusual behavioral changes,” he said quietly, still watching her face closely. “Mood swings, impulsive outbursts. Irrational anger. Has there been anything like that?”

Zoe surged to her feet and started to pace the small room. “Why *shouldn’t* he be angry?” she snapped. “He’s thirty-four years old and he’s dying. I’m fucking pissed off—he should be too.”

“I’m not talking about anger at the situation,” he said kindly.

“Then what *are* you talking about?” She stopped pacing and turned to stare at him. “What are you getting at?”

“I just wanted to know if you had any concerns,” he said again. “And...I want you to be aware, his issues with his anger will become worse, I’m afraid.”

A chill raced down her spine at the look in the doctor’s eyes. As her knees went strangely weak, she sank into her chair. “What...what do you mean?”

Tiredly, he cleaned his glasses. “Zoe, bear in mind, Roger has given me permission to discuss his case with you, and that’s what I’m trying to do. Earlier, when I did my exam, he had a few moments...”

The doctor’s words trailed off.

Zoe stared at him. Licking her lips, she whispered, “He was angry, wasn’t he? Like he wasn’t even himself.”

“Yes.” Dr. Sanders inclined his head. “It’s happened before.”

“Yes.”

He nodded. “It’s happened here as well. Other than today, it’s only happened once. Just be aware, it may get worse. Don’t hesitate to call me if you need me, okay?”

“How—” She bit her lip, looked away. Lately, it happened two or three times a day, and when it was over, he was so tired after, he slept for an hour or more. It was like those brief moments drained him completely. “You say you think it will get worse. What do you mean?”

“I wish I knew,” he said quietly. “But I can’t say.”

A week later, Zoe slept next to Roger, a faint smile on her lips.

He’d had a good day—not even one of those black, ugly moments that darkened so much of their time.

Just a lovely, wonderful day. So wonderful, when she’d laid down next to him, he’d ran his hands along her body, delighting her. They hadn’t had sex in more than a month.

Man, she missed it. Sex with her husband was something she’d come to crave. She loved the feel of him, the weight of his body, the heat of his cock, the strength of his body.

When he kissed her, she almost cried from the pleasure of it. Giddy, when he lifted up, she pushed on his shoulders until he rolled over and then she wiggled down in the bed until she could take him in her mouth. He groaned and fisted his hands in her hair, muttering her name in a ragged, broken voice.

She teased him, teased them both and then moved up his body and straddled him, taking him deep, deep inside. As she started to ride him, she met his eyes and smiled down at him. “I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you.” He tangled a hand in her hair and whispered, “My beautiful Zoe...kiss me.”

She did, tears burning her eyes as she bent closer.

When it was over, she had curled her body around his, their hands linked over his heart and she’d pretended, just for a little while, that everything was fine.

She carried that pretense even into her dreams.

Happy, sweet dreams.

It was just before dawn when those dreams turned into a waking nightmare.

She couldn’t breathe.

Brutal, hard hands closed around her throat, squeezing, choking the life out of her.

Scrabbling at them, she was dimly aware of a low, angry voice snarling in her ear.

“Fucking cunt. I’ve seen you staring at him—how can you do that? After what he did, how he treated you, but you pant after him like a bitch in heat?”

A nightmare, it had to be.

Because that was Roger’s voice, and he’d never hurt her.

She raked her nails over the strong, brutal hands at her throat, but it did no good. As the pain worsened, as her air dwindled, some latent instinct kicked in and she struck out, driving her hand upward, striking his throat.

He let her go and she all but fell out of the bed, sobbing.

Asleep. I'm still asleep.

But she could hardly breathe. It *hurt* to breathe. Barely able to see in the dim room, she hit the bedside lamp just in time to see him coming for her.

Naked, his eyes wild, he looked nothing like the man she'd married.

It wasn't just the weight he'd lost over the past few years, although the cancer had eaten away at his once big body. Muscle and skin stretched over a long, lean body, skinny—too skinny.

His eyes, though, they were the biggest difference, and they terrified her. Wild...crazed. Insane.

In her raw, savaged voice, she said, "Roger, what's wrong?"

"Whore," he muttered.

Then he backhanded her.

He might have lost a lot of weight, but he was still so strong. The blow knocked her into the wall, her head striking it. She collapsed in a heap, the pain screaming through her. The shock shattered her, left her numb. Black dots danced in front of her eyes and for a moment, she lay there, unable to move, barely able to breathe.

Staring at the floor, she licked her lips and tasted blood.

Something moved just as the edge of her vision and she looked up.

Roger.

It was Roger.

She made herself look into his eyes...and just like moments earlier, they were the eyes of a stranger.

Dear God.

Forcing her hands under her body, she shoved up. Fiery pain jabbed into her side, almost sending her back to the floor, but she ignored it. Keeping her back pressed to the wall, she edged around the room. The door. She had to get to the damn door.

It was weird, hearing the wail of sirens shattering the peaceful night in this small town.

Damn weird, but Chase grunted and with the ease of somebody who'd spent a number of years hearing sirens in the night, he pulled a pillow over his head and went back to sleep.

Sometime later, though, the phone started to ring and that wasn't quite so easy to ignore.

Swearing, he grabbed it and squinted, recognizing his dad's number. Dread rolled through him—Roger...

He answered the phone but it was nearly fifteen seconds before he could make himself say anything.

“Yeah.”

“Chase.” His dad’s voice sounded like he’d aged thirty years in just a matter of hours. They’d gone to the town’s lone sports grill just a few hours earlier. Had a few beers. Some wings. Talked sports, town crap...danced around the fact that one of his dad’s best friends, one of Chase’s oldest friends was probably weeks away from dying.

Weeks—Roger should have had more time. Fuck, this was going to shatter Zoe. It flashed through his mind, the memory of how she’d looked just over a week ago when she’d told him that she loved Roger. Jealousy had all but gutted Chase, but still, a part of him had been happy for her. He wanted her, but he loved her enough that he was glad she’d spent the past fifteen years happy.

And now she was losing that.

“It’s Roger,” he said, forcing the words out.

“Actually...” Dad’s voice broke. Then he cleared his throat, and his voice, that deep, steady voice leveled out and he said calmly, “Son, it’s Zoe. She’s in the hospital. I didn’t want you to hear this from anybody else. It...Chase, it appears that Roger has beaten her. It looks bad.”

Zoe.

Hospital.

Beaten...

Oh, God.

He was on the floor, on his knees, and he didn’t even know how he had gotten there. Clutching the phone so hard the plastic cracked, he said, “No. That’s bullshit. That’s fucking bullshit.”

“Chase. It’s not. The sheriff called me himself. He knew I’d want to know.”

“Roger wouldn’t hurt her,” Chase snarled. Then, before he could say anything else, he hurled the phone across the room and stood up. No. None of this was true.

It was nothing but a line of bullshit. He’d go to the hospital.

Zoe wouldn’t be there.

She was at home. Asleep. With her fucking husband, Chase’s best friend who was dying...from a brain tumor...oh God...

Pain chased her.

Pain.

Fear.

And shock.

When hands touched her, she cringed away.

When voices spoke to her, she pretended not to hear.

When gentle fingers lifted her lids, the light made her head ache.

She did *not* want to wake up.

But she wouldn't have much choice, she knew.

Familiar voices rose and fell around her and as much as she wanted to pretend as though she couldn't hear them, that wouldn't be an option for much longer.

They tried to be quiet, but they weren't quiet enough.

Standing by the foot of the bed, the sheriff spoke with James, and the older gentleman said, his voice heavy with grief, "I just don't know. I know Roger adores her...he's never once laid a hand on her to my knowledge."

"Women often hide abuse."

Sighing, Zoe opened her eyes. She couldn't hide from this another moment. Staring at the sheriff, she said, "Roger's never abused me before in his life."

Then she blinked, astounded at the broken, completely thrashed sound of her voice. She sounded like a damned frog, and her throat *hurt*. Reaching up, she touched her neck and winced at the rough, tender flesh her fingers encountered.

James looked at her, and the look of relief on his face had her shifting uncomfortably on the bed. "Oh, thank God you're awake, Zoe."

"Hey." She forced a smile for him. "You didn't have to come."

He gave her a tired smile. "You're not a stupid girl. Where else would I be? Two of my favorite people are here, of course, I'm here too."

"Two." She plucked at the sheet and shifted around. Then she licked her lips and made herself look him square in the eye. "Roger's here? Is he feeling worse?"

James wouldn't look at her. Sheriff Tim McAfee averted his eyes as well. That was when she realized there was a third person in the small cubicle of a room.

Chase.

A grim, unsmiling shadow, leaning against the wall and staring at her with intense eyes. He had his hands jammed in his pockets and he looked at her face as though he couldn't bear to look away.

He flicked a glance between his dad and the sheriff and then he sighed. "Roger's here, Zo. But not because he's sicker...that way. They had to admit him for psychiatric reasons. Right now, he's sedated."

"Psychiatric..." Blood rushed to her face. She went to sit up, but pain screamed through her. "Get whatever idiot did that in here *now*. I want him released."

"I'm one of the idiots responsible," the sheriff said, his voice soft, but firm. "And if he's released, then keep in mind, Zoe, I will consider arresting him."

Pain be damned. Kicking the sheets aside, she shoved out of the bed. Her legs nearly buckled under her, but she ignored the weakness, glaring at him. “Excuse me?”

In response, he lifted something from the bedside table. “Look.”

Out of reflex, she glanced down.

It was a mirror.

Her breath lodged in her throat.

Of course, looking at her reflection, she realized it was a miracle she was breathing at all. Her face was...battered. A dark rainbow of colors, the bruise on her left eye spreading down across her cheekbone, up over her eyebrow, nearly to her hairline.

She swallowed and the pain there had her glancing at her throat. The marks there were an angry, vivid red.

“He didn’t mean it,” she whispered, shaking her head. “He didn’t.”

“I believe that,” the sheriff said. “And in this case, I can actually say that and *mean* it. I’ve talked to the doctors and I understand a brain tumor can cause...behavioral shifts, even drastic, violent ones.”

He took a deep breath and then asked, “Have you noticed any unusual behavior? Mood swings? That sort of thing?”

Memory after memory slammed into her. The talk with Roger’s oncologist.

All those weird, weird incidents with Roger.

She wanted to scream, but the pain in her throat wouldn’t let her. Over the past month, those “bad moods” of Roger’s, they’d gotten steadily worse. “He...ah...” she paused, and licked her lips. “He hasn’t gotten violent, but he’s angry a lot.”

Over the smallest things—he didn’t get enough ham on his sandwich, or there was a slice too much. The soup wasn’t warm enough, or too warm. His blankets didn’t feel like they’d been washed—he didn’t like her hair. Everything, it seemed. She’d swear she did *nothing* but anger him, except the moods passed as quickly as they came on, and then he’d be fine.

“Angry a lot,” McAfee said. “But he’s never lifted a hand to you until now?”

“No. And this wasn’t his fault.”

“I believe you.” He sighed, his eyes sad.

She lifted her eyes to his. “Then why do you want to arrest him?”

“Zoe.”

She looked away from the sheriff and met Chase’s eyes.

“He doesn’t. But he doesn’t want to not make it in time either.”

Her legs buckled and if Chase hadn’t caught her, she would have hit the floor. Every last inch of her body hurt. Including her heart, her soul.

“Come on,” Chase murmured, helping her back to the bed. “Just sit down. Rest.”

Rest.

She wanted to sob, to scream. How could she rest?

He brushed her hair back from her face. Unable to look away, she stared at his face. His blue eyes were unreadable, but somehow, she knew there was a wealth of emotion lying in wait. She could all but feel the tension, the anger, the worry inside him.

“Do you remember calling 911?” Chase asked softly.

9-1-1.

A flash of memory rushed her, just the barest glimpse. But it faded all too quick. Swallowing, she shook her head and said, “I don’t know.”

Reaching up, she touched her throat as she started to shake.

She didn’t remember the call, but she did remember waking up.

Waking up, and convinced it was a nightmare.

A harsh, broken sob spilled out of her, but she swallowed it, battled it back. Wasn’t going to cry, couldn’t cry.

What happened, it wasn’t Roger’s fault. He was sick.

After leaving Dr. Sanders’s office earlier that week, she’d done some serious research into brain tumors—*serious* research. Yeah, they could definitely cause mood swings, sometimes violent outbursts. She’d read all sorts of disturbing stories. One guy with a brain tumor had even sat around talking about raping his landlady, but before he’d gotten sick, he hadn’t ever shown any signs of violence. And once the tumor was removed he had seemed fine.

Of course, Roger wasn’t going to be *fine*—

That scream, still trapped inside, struggled to get free.

She couldn’t, *didn’t* blame him. Shaking her head, she looked up and said, “My husband is *dying*. And I’m *not* going to leaving him here to die in a hospital or a jail.”

McAfee’s face was implacable. “And I’m not going to let a man go home if I suspect he may be a threat to you.” Then he inclined his head. “However, there’s more than just my opinion to consider here, more than just yours. I’ve already spoken to your husband—”

“You *what*? Did he have his lawyer?”

“Zoe, calm down and just listen,” James said, sighing. “He wasn’t there to arrest him or read him his rights or anything. Roger *asked* to speak to him. I was in there with him. Just give him a minute.”

“Thank you, James.” The sheriff tipped his hat. “I spoke with Roger and he’s not willing to go home until *he* knows he’s not going to hurt you.”

“He won’t *do* it again,” Zoe said through clenched teeth.

“Twenty-four hours ago, you never would have thought he would have done it to begin with,” Chase said.

She glared at him. "You know, none of this concerns you."

"The hell it doesn't," he snapped. "You got any idea what it did to me when I walked in here and saw you? When I went up and saw him? When he asked me how you were? He made me tell him what you looked like and I had to tell him, in excruciating detail, just how you looked, and I had to watch as he remembered what he'd done. He didn't *remember*, Zoe, not until I told him. But he remembers now, and part of him was trying to stop, but he couldn't shut it off. I love both of you, so *don't fucking tell me it doesn't concern me*."

He was shouting by the time he was finished and then, abruptly, he spun on his heel and shoved past the sheriff out into the hall. James gave her a pained smile. "He's had a rough day. I think we all have. I'll go talk to him."

The sheriff started to speak, but nothing he said registered.

She was still sitting there, half in shock over Chase's words.

I love both of you...

He hadn't meant it like that.

He couldn't have.

He didn't still love her.

He *couldn't* still love her.

"It's a fair compromise," the sheriff said softly.

A fair compromise, she thought.

Roger could go home. No charges pressed, nothing.

If Chase came home with them...and stayed. Until it was over.

As in when Roger died. Basically, he was there to be her bodyguard.

That's what this little soiree was about.

"I don't believe this," she muttered, shaking her head.

Looking from the sheriff to her husband, she said, "You all can't be serious?"

"We're very serious," Roger said.

There was one of the lawyers from the courthouse there too.

They were trying to make this look all nice and official, it seemed.

She couldn't think.

Zoe turned away and stared out into the parking lot. Roger was in a wheelchair next to her.

Chase was sitting in a chair by the door, absently drumming his fingers on his knee and looking like he'd rather be anywhere but here.

Why had he agreed to this?

Why had *Roger*?

Whose idea was this?

From the corner of her eye, she studied James. His, maybe? It didn't quite seem like the sheriff's idea. And coming from James, it made sense. He'd always been protective of her. It was a lot like him actually, finding a way to take care of her, no matter what.

As the silence in the room stretched out, threatening to suffocate them all, she turned around and crossed her arms over her chest. They all stared at her. She was tempted to make a face at them, just to see what they would do. Instead, she just asked, "So whose idea was this?"

"Mine."

She turned her head and gaped at Roger.

"Yours?"

A smile curled at his lips. "Why do you look so surprised?" he murmured. Then he glanced at their audience. "Can you all give us a few minutes?"

Feeling like an utter bitch, she flashed the sheriff and Chase a sharp-edged smile and said, "Oh, I don't know. They might think it's not safe—you look real dangerous sitting in that wheelchair, sweetheart."

A muscle in Roger's cheek jerked and pain, grief, flashed through his eyes.

She could have kicked herself—*would* have kicked herself.

"Zoe," Roger said, his voice quiet and firm. "Look in the mirror."

She sighed and looked away. "Damn it, Roger, I know what I look like." She knew in excruciating detail—just washing her face was a lesson in agony right now.

"Look in the mirror," he said again.

Shooting him a narrow look, she turned her head and stared at in the mirror over the plain sink. Stared at her battered face, all the bruises—the ones ringing her neck, the ones on her face. "I see, Roger. I know what I look like, I know what happened."

"I did that to you, baby," he said. "I did it."

"*You* didn't—that fucking tumor in your head did it."

Roger snorted. "Unless the tumor climbed out of my skull and grew hands? No. I did it. Yeah, the tumor is why, and it's what drove me to do it, but it still doesn't change what happened."

Swallowing, she looked away. Was this it? Was she going to have to share her husband for what little time she had left with him?

Shit, no. Narrowing her eyes, she glared at their audience. "He's fine right now. I know when he's not—I can see it in his eyes. Give us a few damn minutes."

Everybody, save for Roger, filed out of the room. As the door swung shut behind Chase, Roger held out a hand. "Come here, baby."

She went to him, placed her hand in his. He tugged, patted a knee. She gingerly sat down, even though some part of her feared it. She knew he hadn't been himself when he'd hurt her, but she couldn't stop that knee-jerk reaction. Swallowing, she rested her head against his shoulder, mindful of the IV tubing on his right arm.

"What's the deal, Rog?"

"The deal is I want to go home," he said softly. "I want to spend the time I have left with my wife." Then he forced her face up and brushed the tips of his fingers over the dark, ugly bruising at her neck. "And I think we both know there's not that much time left. But I'm not going to risk *this* happening again."

"Who says it will?"

"There's a chance." Roger sighed, combing his fingers through her hair. "And if there's a chance, then I either have somebody here to help you, or I won't go back home. It's this way, or I stay here."

Blinking back tears, she clambered off his lap and started to pace the room. "Roger, you're not going to do it again."

"We can't know that," he said, shaking his head. Then he lifted his hands, closed them into fists. "Tell me something, and be honest. How long have I...how long have I not been acting like me?"

When he looked at her, those dark brown eyes of his so sad and broken, she wanted to sob. She wanted to scream. The cancer that was killing him, it was doing more than just killing his body—it was destroying his soul—that kind, gentle soul. Blinking away her tears, she said softly, "A couple of months. It wasn't much, though. Not at first. Usually, you just get really mad for a few minutes, then, just like that, it's gone."

"What do you mean, not at first?" He stared at her, as though he was trying to see clear through to her soul.

Zoe sighed and looked down. "At first, you were just...well, grouchy, but mean with it. It made sense, though. I mean *wouldn't* you be pissed off? *I'm* pissed off. But then it started happening more. I...I just didn't think much more about it other than you being angry."

"Zoe." He laid a hand on her leg. "You're not telling me everything."

She winched. "No. I guess not. I just...I don't know. You had these times when you were angry, *really* angry. And you'd get this look in your eye—it would scare me. A lot."

He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. "I know I've had times when I get angry...but, it was like it lasted just a second. I don't even remember ever saying anything." Closing his eyes, he rested his head on the back of the chair. "Did I ever hurt you before this?"

"No." Laying a hand on his cheek, she leaned in, pressed her lips to his chin. "You've just gotten a little cranky here and there."

He skimmed a hand up her back, rested it on the nape of her neck. “Thank God. I’ve been half sick, worrying, wondering. Thinking that maybe I’d done something, but you just didn’t want to tell me. You shouldn’t have kept quiet, though, about any of this, baby. Even if I was just being cranky.”

Zoe sighed and straightened up, combing a hand through his hair. “Honestly, Roger, it just didn’t dawn on me to say much of anything about it. I mean, why in the hell *wouldn’t* you be madder than hell?”

“But that’s the thing...I don’t remember really being madder than hell. Not exactly. Just times when I’d get mad, but then nothing else. It’s gone.” He touched a gentle finger to her face and said, “I remember this, but whatever else I did or said that was ‘cranky’, as you call it, I don’t remember that. If that was something that was kind of leading up to this, if we’d known...”

His face spasmed. “Baby, I can’t believe I did this to you—shit, Zoe. How in the hell could I do this?”

Then he took a deep breath, and before she could say another word, he pressed his lips to her cheek, gently, soothingly. Then he kissed her eye, the bruises on her neck. “This won’t happen again. I won’t let it. And you can’t argue me out of this. Zoe. Either agree, or just get your stuff packed and I’ll have James take you home without me. I...I can’t...”

There were tears in his eyes. Those big hands that had always held her so carefully, so gently, were shaking. “I damn near broke you,” he said, his voice harsh, sharp enough to cut. “It won’t happen again. I’ll slit my wrists first. If you want me home again, Zoe, you agree to this.”

Chase leaned against the wall, trying to block out the conversation in the room behind him.

He couldn’t move any farther away, though.

Even if he hadn’t just given his word to Roger, he wouldn’t have walked away from Zoe.

With his dying breath, he’d protect her and although he doubted Roger was in that murderous rage, he wasn’t risking it.

A muscle pulsed in his jaw as Roger said, “I damn near broke you. It won’t happen again. I’ll slit my wrists first. If you want me home again, Zoe, you’ll agree to this.”

Roger was a born politician, it seemed, something that surprised Chase to no end. Oh, Chase knew he meant every damn word, but he knew exactly *what* words to use.

There was no way Zoe would refuse him.

He’d used a similar tactic on Chase. “She’ll insist on me coming home, but I can’t do it unless I know she’s safe. I need her safe. Help me out here, Chase. I know you don’t owe me anything, but do it for her.”

There had been an unspoken message in his old friend’s eyes. One that said, *I know you still love her.*

There wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do for Zoe, it seemed.

Anything...including temporarily moving into the house where she lived with her husband.

Her dying husband.

This whole thing was so beyond fucked up. Scrubbing his hands over his face, he sighed and waited.

She'd say yes.

She'd do anything to get Roger out of here.

Chase idly wondered if this was the price he was paying for the many, many screw-ups in his life. If this was karma's way of making sure he paid, then karma was doing a damned good job.

Damned good...and unfortunately, if this *was* karma, then Chase had a good, long bout of suffering ahead of him, because he had so many years of screw-ups to account for, it could be another fifteen years before he was square again.

More than likely, this was the price he had to pay for what he'd done all those years ago...walking away from Zoe...even though he'd loved her more than life itself. He'd loved her, but he'd been too fucking selfish, too fucking *not* ready for her.

And now he had to do the exact opposite of what he'd done then, because that was what she needed—he had to think of nothing but her, be completely selfless, and even though all he wanted was her...she would never be ready for him. Not now.

Closing his eyes, he slammed a fist against the painted concrete and waited. Waited. Waited.

Chapter Five

“You don’t need to hang around here on your off day,” Roger said tiredly as he made his way down the hall way. “Zoe’s gone anyway—out to see that crazy bitch of a mother of hers.”

It had been five days since Chase had moved in.

He had left the house only when Zoe did, and he had altered his hours at the store to match hers—she only worked eight hours a week right now, hours when Roger’s sister and her husband were able to come stay at the house, or when James could come by.

Fortunately, Chase had a damn good assistant manager.

Saluting Roger with a half-eaten sandwich, Chase shrugged and gave him a casual smile. “Hey, the food here is better.”

Roger didn’t respond.

He had a tight, tired look around his eyes, and there was a mean, ugly slant to his mouth.

That was why Chase wasn’t leaving. He’d heard Roger snapping at Zoe more than a few times today and if he was slipping, he wasn’t going to *not* be here if Zoe came back home for something.

Easing himself down on a chair, Roger muttered, “Can’t even have peace and quiet in my own fucking house.”

Chase ignored him.

That didn’t seem to do the trick because with each passing minute, Roger got more angry, more volatile. The feet of the wooden stool scraped off the floor, warning him and Chase was up on his feet and moving just before Roger would have tried to grab him.

“There a problem, buddy?”

Roger curled his lip. “Yeah, *buddy*. You. I see how you look at her. Staring at my wife like she’s your little whore. She ain’t. She’s *my* whore.”

Chase curled a hand into a fist. “That woman is the woman you love, Roger. You shouldn’t talk about her like that,” he said quietly.

Roger jabbed himself in the chest with his thumb. “My wife. Can do whatever I want. You don’t like it, then you shoulda never left.

Ain’t that the truth. “Why don’t you go lay down? I can get some of your pain medicine for you. Call over to hospice.”

"I don't need medicine or hospice," Roger bellowed. He swung out with his arm, sweeping the counter clear. Glass went flying. "I just want my fucking wife here where she belongs and I don't want you sniffing around her."

"I'm not, and I won't."

"Fucking liar, you fuc..." Roger sagged, swayed. He stumbled to the side and would have collapsed into the bar if Chase hadn't caught him.

It was four hours later before Chase and Roger were alone again. The nurse from hospice had come over. Zoe had rushed home from work.

Now she was downstairs, talking quietly on the phone to Roger's doctor.

Neither Roger nor Chase had told her about what had happened right before Roger's collapse.

Chase had wondered if Roger remembered, right up until his friend looked over at him and muttered, "Hey, man... 'm sorry."

Chase just shook his head. "Don't be. It's not like you can help it."

"Shit. Not all the way true. Only get mad about her. You. That's it. And it's 'cause I look at the two of you and remember." Then he sighed. "Shit."

Roger stared blankly up at the ceiling, his eyes open, but what he was seeing, Chase didn't know.

"Why did you leave her?"

Chase looked up. He didn't need to ask who Roger was talking about. Anymore than Roger needed to explain.

"It wasn't her I left," Chase said softly. "I just needed to get out. I could already see the rest of my life planned out for me, and I...I dunno, man. I felt it was choking me and I couldn't breathe."

"What life was that?"

It seemed so fucking stupid now, Chase thought. "Following in my dad's footsteps. I could see me doing my four years in the Army, just like he did, writing a letter to Zoe every single week, and waiting for her to write me back. When I got out, I'd marry her...I'd go to college, I'd come back here and take over my dad's old job. It was like it was already written, already planned out. And I didn't want that life. Or at least not all of it. The only part I wanted was Zoe."

"But you left her behind too."

"Yeah. Yeah, I did." Sighing, he got out of the chair and went to stand by the window, staring at the sprawling green lawn of their backyard. It was large, richly green. There was a swimming pool, still closed off for winter, but in the summer, he imagined it sparkled like a jewel and he could see Zoe diving in, cutting through that water like a mermaid. "But I wasn't ready for her, you know. I wouldn't have been any good for her if I'd tried to make myself stay, or even if I'd tried to take her with me. I was too fucking selfish, too fucking focused on what *I* wanted. What *I* needed. It took losing her to figure that out, I think."

He sighed and shook his head. "I didn't mean to stay gone as long as I did. Time just slipped away from me. I was out there trying to figure out who *I* wanted to be...not just follow down some path everybody else assumed I'd follow," he murmured. Then he glanced at Roger and gave him a wry smile. "Looks like you settled into that spot pretty well."

Roger reached up and rubbed at his head. "I didn't intend for any of that. Not even Zoe. Although I won't deny that I had a thing for her. Always. Even back in high school." He gave Chase a small smile. "I'd be lying and I don't think now's the time to be adding any more sins to my conscience."

"You don't need to explain this to me," Chase said, forcing the words past his tight throat. Shit, he didn't *want* to know. Not at all. "I don't need to know any of this."

"Maybe there's just some of it that I need to tell you." Roger closed his eyes. He looked so gaunt, so pale and tired. His cheekbones pressed harshly against his flesh, like blades that might cut through his skin. "I didn't mean to move in on her, but she...well, she needed me. Needed somebody and I wanted to be there for her. I think part of her kept hoping you'd come back, but both of us, I think we realized it wasn't happening. We knew somehow."

Chase pressed his head against the glass, closed his eyes. *Two months. They waited all of two months. I left in June, you married her at the end of August. Yeah, you really gave me a chance to come back.*

But even he knew how stupid that was. He'd had no plans of coming back at that point in time.

"She cried for you. A lot," Roger said, his voice stronger, harder. "Especially that first year. There were times when I hated you."

Slowly, Chase turned around and met Roger's mild brown eyes. "And what do you want me to do now? What do you want me to say? I can't undo past mistakes, and even if I could, I don't know if I would." He couldn't look away from Roger's face, couldn't make himself seriously think about whether he'd undo his personal fuckups. He was terribly afraid he'd say yes, and that made him feel like a selfish monster.

All Roger had in his life was Zoe.

Soon, he wouldn't even have his life...*or* Zoe.

Roger stared at him, silently, for the longest time and then abruptly, he said, "You still love her, don't you?"

Chase looked away.

"Shit, man, it's not like I'm in any shape to jump out of the bed and punch you out for it. Just tell me the truth."

Without saying anything, Chase reached up behind him and freed the clasp of the gold chain he wore around his neck. He held it up to the light, watching as the stylized Z swung back and forth in the air.

"Zoe gave me this on prom night. More than fifteen years ago. I've kept it all this time, had it with me the day I came back home," he murmured. Then he lowered it, studying the design on the Z, rubbing it with

his thumb. “When I saw the picture of you two, your wedding picture that first day, I thought it just might kill me. It hurt like a son of a bitch. I almost threw the necklace away.”

“But you didn’t.”

“Can’t.” Chase put the necklace back on, tucked it out of sight under his shirt. “Yeah, I still love her. Part of me has just been waiting for the time when I was ready to come back here. When I *would* be worthy of her. I didn’t want to leave *her*—I just had to get away from here, and to do that, I had to leave her. I’ve been waiting all this time to come back, to her. Hoping I could make her mine again. Never knew it was too fucking late...practically from the get go.”

“Not too late.” A faint smile curled Roger’s lips. “Timing is just about perfect.”

Closing his eyes, he sighed. The breath rattled in, out of his chest. “She never completely got over you either, I don’t think. We’ve had a good marriage, and I know she loves me. Marrying her, it was the smartest damn thing I ever did. But there’s always been a part of her heart that was yours.”

Now he opened his eyes up and the intensity of his gaze burned through Chase. “She’ll need time. But don’t wait too long. Go after her again, and this time, make her *yours*. Take her. Marry her. Make her happy. Part of her has always belonged to you anyway. Don’t screw it up this time.”

Chase’s heart slammed against his ribs. But he kept his face blank. He’d learned a long time ago not to show his emotions. “What?”

“You heard me.” Roger smiled. “You still love her, man. Don’t let guilt over me, or whatever, keep you away from her. I had a good life with her—something I wouldn’t have had if you’d stayed, if you’d taken her with you. I love her, and I want her happy. You can make her happy, I think. Do that. For me. For her...for *you*.”

“You want me with Zoe.”

“Why not? She was your girl,” Roger said simply. “She’s my wife, but I’m not going to get better. And she can’t follow me to the grave—I don’t *want* that. I want her happy. I want you happy. You two together...you’ll be happy. I know it.” He sighed and shifted on the bed, closing his eyes.

“You make it sound like this a done deal, Roger. But you seem to forget...Zoe’s got some opinion in this too. And for all you know, she doesn’t give a flying fuck about me anymore.”

“I know Zoe.” His eyes opened just a little, but there was a certain, sure light in those dark eyes. “Spent nearly fifteen years married to her while you were out doing whatever in the hell you felt you needed to do. I know what she wants, and what she needs.”

He grimaced, his thin face twisting with pain. He glanced at the IV rigged up next to him and muttered, “This shit isn’t doing much good any more, you know?”

Then he focused on Chase again. “I know what she needs, and when this is over, she’s going to need you.”

Then he closed his eyes, and with a deep, erratic sigh, he slipped into sleep.

She woke up to find Roger lying on his side, watching her.

There was a knee-jerk fear, one she couldn't completely smash. More than two weeks had passed since the attack, but the bruises had yet to completely fade and she knew the memories, the nightmares, would take months—or longer—before they were gone completely.

But she didn't let them show as she reached up and stroked a hand down his cheek.

He'd lost so much more weight. They probably weighed about the same now. It broke her heart just to look at him.

Forcing a smile, she cupped his cheek in her palm. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself," he murmured, his voice low and warm with sleep, and thankfully, free from pain.

"Why are you awake?"

"Because I'm not asleep," he said easily. He caught her wrist and nuzzled her palm. "I've just been laying here a while, watching you sleep. You're so damn beautiful, Zoe. Sometimes I still can't believe I've had you for the past fifteen years. How did I get that lucky?"

Tears stung her eyes. "I've been the lucky one. I love you." She stroked her thumb over his lower lip and said, "You've made my life so wonderful."

"*We've* made our life wonderful." He kissed her hand then twined their fingers together, resting their hands between them. "We did it, Zoe. You and me."

"Yeah. You and me." Her heart ached, because she knew soon the *you and me* would be over.

Roger was dying. They had a few weeks together at most, maybe just days. *Their* life was almost over.

As though he was reading her mind, he squeezed her hand. "Don't stop living, baby. This part's winding down, but it's not done for you. You've got your whole life yet, and there's so much left for you to do. I don't want you to stop living just because I'm going to be gone."

Tears blinded her. The knot in her throat was going to choke her. "I don't want to talk about this," she whispered. Squirming closer, she pressed her head against his chest. She remembered, just a few months ago, how strong, how solid that chest had felt. Now, there was just skin stretched over bone. Cancer was eating away at him, killing him all too quick...stealing him from her. Closing a hand into a fist, she said, "I *can't* talk about this right now."

"Then when, Zo? Another few days, a week or two, it's going to be too late. I think *hours* might be too late. I'm running out of time and you know it. I can *feel* it."

The tears burning her eyes broke free and began to roll out of her eyes. But she said nothing as he stroked the back of her head. "You've spent the past few years taking care of your mom, the past few months taking care of me *and* your mom. Setting yourself, what you want, what you need off to the side."

"I'm doing what I want, what I need. I'm here with you," she said, her voice thick with tears. "I'm here with *you*. That's what I need, what I want."

"I know." He pressed his lips to her temple. "Just promise me, when this is over, that you won't quit living. Don't get wrapped up in your grief...don't get too wrapped in taking care of your mom, in the store. Live your life, baby."

He cupped her cheek and forced her to look up at him.

She stared into his eyes, saw that tender, gentle smile on his face.

"I want you to fall in love again. I want you happy. I want to think about you getting married, and maybe having kids. We didn't get around to that and part of me regrets that something awful—too late for me. But not for you, baby. *Just live...okay?*"

She closed her eyes, swallowed until she thought she could talk without bawling. Then, with her eyes still shut, she murmured, "Roger, I can't even think about that right now. I can barely think about how I'm going to get through losing you, much less what's going to happen after. Oh, God..."

She started to sob.

His arms, still so strong, still so safe, came around her. "You'll be fine, baby. You'll be just fine."

Four days later, with his head in her lap, Zoe was reading to him. His headaches were too severe for him to read anymore, but he loved listening while she read. She loved just having the time to spend with him.

She turned a page and reached down, stroking a hand down his shoulder. "I love you," she murmured.

"Hmm. You too. Love you, Zo." Then he sighed and whispered, "Tired."

She set the book aside. "We'll finish reading it later then." She stayed where she was, absently caressing his arm, staring down at his face, watching as he drifted off to sleep.

She knew, then, somewhere inside.

Selfishly, she didn't want to tell anybody.

But she did, gently easing her way out of the bed, straightening the covers. His parents were dead, but his sister and her husband, they would want to be here. James.

But that was all. Chase was already here. Those were the ones who mattered.

And those were the ones with Roger two hours later when Roger breathed his last.

Zoe was sitting in the bed with him, holding his hand. Chase stood at the window, staring outside. His sister, Bianca, sat in a chair on the other side of the bed, her husband behind her. James paced the room quietly.

He slipped quietly from this world. Too quietly, Zoe thought.

That final breath, she thought it just might shatter her.

She didn't want to blink, didn't want to look away.

If she did...

"Roger," she murmured, stroking her hand down his face.

Bianca started to weep silently.

James came up to stand behind her, resting one strong, comforting hand on her shoulder.

But Chase was the one who began to quietly take action.

He was the one who made all the calls.

He was the one who handled it when other calls began to come in.

And when Roger was taken away and Zoe started to cry, he was the one who held her.

Chapter Six

When this is over, she's going to need you...

Roger had been wrong. Other than those first few hours after Roger's death, Zoe hadn't needed him at all.

She'd handled all the arrangements without him.

She'd handled the funeral without him.

And now, two weeks after the funeral, she was handling packing up her home without him.

A lot of her furniture had already been put into storage or moved to the small apartment she was renting. The heels of his boots rang hollow on the hardwood floors as he moved through the house, looking for her. He vaguely recalled hearing somewhere that it was unwise to make major life decisions after the loss of a loved one...selling a home, changing a job.

Not that Zoe would much care.

Blowing out a breath, he finished searching the first floor and started up the back staircase, hoping to find her upstairs.

She wasn't there, either.

He found her in the attic, kneeling in front of dust-covered boxes, her golden hair pulled into a ponytail, her face pale, her eyes tired.

"Hey."

She glanced up at him, smiled. "Hey."

"I see you're not wasting any time clearing out of here."

"No reason to," she said, shrugging. "I can't stay here. It's too full of memories."

"There might be a time when you want those memories back."

She grimaced. "No. I'll still have the memories. Moving won't take them away." She brushed her hair back from her face and said, "This is a place for a family, Chase. Roger and I...well, we'd thought about it, maybe were going to try later. It was always later. Now we won't have a chance for later. And I don't want to walk around inside these four walls and think about the 'later' we lost."

Put that way, hell, he couldn't blame her.

Settling down on the ground in front of her, he peered inside one of the cardboard boxes. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I don't know." She shrugged and looked around, staring at the various boxes. "There is just so much stuff. Roger kept everything. The clothes and stuff, I'll just give to Goodwill, but the other stuff? His books? His golf clubs?"

She slanted a look at him. "You play golf?"

"Only under extreme duress." He studied the golf clubs and said, "You can ask my dad. He plays. He might like them. Sentimental stuff, if nothing else."

Looking back at her, he had to fight to keep from reaching for her. Had to fight to keep from pulling her into his arms. Just to hold her. Just to cuddle her. She looked so tired...so worn and exhausted.

In the back of his mind, he thought about what Roger had told him. What Roger had said. Wondered what Zoe would say.

She needed time...time to heal, time to mourn.

Chase just needed her, the same way he needed her the past few months—hell, the past fifteen years, but he'd been too damn stupid to see it.

Jamming his hands in his pockets, he paced the floor, staring at the boxes, the odds and ends of the past fifteen years of her life.

Abruptly, he turned and stared at her.

"Why did you marry him, Zoe?"

Her hands stilled.

Then she went back to the task at hand, sorting through a box as though it was the sole focus of her life. "Is that really any of your business, Chase?" she asked softly.

"You married him two months after I left," he said, his voice bitter. Angry. Far more bitter, far more angry than he had a right to be, he knew. But two months—two fucking months.

"What would you have done if I'd come back?" he asked, feeling hollow inside as he stared at her bowed head.

Zoe laughed sadly. "What ifs. You know how empty those are? What ifs." She sighed and shoved the box aside. "What if you'd never left...or what if you'd taken me with you?" She sighed and drew her knees up. She stared at him and he waited for her to answer, waited so long he didn't think she was going to. But finally, she did. "Now there is a question," she murmured, she looped her arms around her knees and rested her chin on her upraised legs. With dark, wide eyes, she studied him. "And it's a good one. If you're so torn up about me marrying him, Chase, then you answer my question, and I'll think about answering yours. Why didn't you take me with you?"

One hand curled into a tight, impotent fist, Chase turned away, staring out the small slit of a window, out into the clear, cloudless sky. "I thought about it. For close to a year, I woke almost every damn day wanting to call you, ask you if you'd come join me, even when it wasn't possible. Shit. You were too much

a part of me, Zoe. Eighteen years old and I couldn't breathe without feeling you, thinking of you. Sometimes it scared the shit out of me."

"You left me because you thought about me too much?" she asked, lifting a brow.

"I left because I had to get out. I didn't deserve you, you know." He turned to look at her, aching inside. "I didn't realize it then, but I didn't deserve you. I never did. I was selfish, an immature brat of kid but one thing I did right—I *did* know you'd go with me. I knew that then. But I didn't ask. It didn't seem right to ask. How fair would it have been to drag you along when I didn't even know where in the hell I was going?"

"Maybe you were looking at it wrong," she suggested. "If I was with you, the where wouldn't have mattered."

Then she stood up, absently dusting off the seat of her pants.

She moved to stand by the larger window, staring outside. Her shoulders slumped and she reached up, rubbing at the spot between her eyebrows. "You were gone, Chase. I didn't have much of anybody. I had the scholarship to U of L, but it wasn't going to cover everything and I didn't have the money to cover anything else. Two days after graduation, my mother threw me out and—"

"What?"

She glanced back at him, a strained, tired smile on her face. "You heard me. I was over the age of eighteen and I was out of school. As far as she was concerned, she'd done her duty with me and she no longer needed to burden herself with me. I..." She paused, blowing out a harsh breath. This wasn't easy to talk about, even now...and there were secrets that she wouldn't share with him. Secrets she couldn't share.

How could she admit to him, to anybody, that her mother hated her that much?

"She never wanted me, you know," she said quietly.

Chase was quiet for a moment. "You two never got along well, I know that."

She snorted and shook her head. "Oh, it was more than that. She didn't want me, would have thrown me out on my butt sooner, except she didn't want the town knowing about it. Once I was eighteen, I was no longer her problem."

She sighed and tucked her hair behind her ear. "And she wasn't going to put up with me. She...well, she threw me out." A dull, painfully red flush climbed up her cheeks and she glanced back at him. "I didn't have any place to go. In the end, it was your dad who ended up helping me out. You know how he is," she said, forcing a smile. She hedged easily, shifting her gaze back outside. "Always got to be somebody's white knight. Made sure I had a place to stay the first few nights, helped me find a job. He offered me a place to stay until I figured out what to do...and a job."

"That...well, that sounds like Dad."

"Doesn't it? He's a great guy," she said quietly. "You have no idea how lucky you are to have him."

Chase was quiet.

“Roger and I just ended up spending a lot of time together that summer. We both missed you. Both of us were more or less planning on staying around here, although he was commuting to Lexington for college. I ended up just going to the community college. I kept working at the shop—that was the job your dad helped me get. It’s the place I own now. And toward the end of the summer, Roger proposed...I...well, I was so at loose ends, I said yes, and I don’t think it was until the day of the wedding that I even realized what I’d agreed to.” She shrugged and leaned against the wall, arms wrapped around herself.

She missed him...her husband.

Missed feeling his arms around her...

And then, there were arms around her.

Chase’s arms.

She stiffened, unable to relax, unable to breathe at first.

But slowly, so slowly, the tension in her body eased. Quietly, she said, “I miss him. I feel like somebody has cut off my arm. My leg. My heart. Something vital. It’s like it will never grow back, either.”

“I’m so sorry, Zoe.”

She was crying. She hadn’t realized it, but she was crying. Silent tears rolled down her cheeks.

“It was like one day, he showed up and he was just always there. Ever since that summer. I didn’t plan to fall in love with him. It took me forever to stop thinking about you. To stop waiting for you to come back home. And then one day, I rolled over in bed and saw him, and I was like...wow. I love this guy.”

She eased away from Chase and walked over to the box, kneeling down in front of one of the open boxes. This one held pictures. She lifted one out—it held their smiling faces—hers and Rogers.

Chase hadn’t ever felt more like an outsider. Hadn’t ever felt less needed.

Shit, what was he doing here? She needed to be alone with her memories right now...or at least have time without somebody standing there and thinking about how much he still loved her, how much he still wanted her, and how damn stupid he’d been to walk away.

“It took me almost two years,” she said quietly. “You know that? Almost two years before I could look at him and realize just how lucky I was, and I think he knew.”

“Knew what?”

A bitter smile twisted her lips and she looked at him. “He knew that for the longest time, whenever he touched me, I wished it was you.”

Then she sighed and looked back. “That wasn’t fair to him. It wasn’t fair at all, and even though he knew I still loved you, he...hell. It’s not like it matters now. I loved him so much and now he’s gone.”

It was a quick sucker punch to his system to hear that from her—guilt, regret, longing...so much of it.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice gruff.

Still with that sad smile on her lips, she said, “Don’t be. I had one hell of a life with Roger. Did it end too soon? Yes. I wanted another fifty years with him. I wanted kids with him...wanted grandkids. I wanted to...” She pressed a kiss to the picture she held and then knelt down, put it back in the box. “I wanted a life with him. I was going to try and talk him into a cruise this summer. Alaska. I wanted to go to Alaska. Or maybe Europe. We’ve always stayed somewhere fairly close, nothing exotic. Nothing exciting. But we always had each other and we were happy.”

She closed her eyes and wiped the tears from her face. “Some people go their entire life without really knowing what it is to be happy. I had it. Yeah, I lost him, but at least for a while, we had each other. It’s better than nothing, right?”

Give her time.

Chase brooded into a bottle of beer and then lifted it, sending Roger a silent salute.

“Not to doubt you, buddy...I’m sure you know your wife, but she’s not looking for another chance with me.”

Feeling a quizzical set of eyes on him, Chase glanced up and saw the bartender’s curious look. Forcing a smile, he said, “Friend of mine died a few weeks ago. Still having some trouble letting go, I think.”

“That sucks,” the man said, grimacing.

“Yeah.” Taking another sip of his beer, he sat the bottle down and studied the battered, scarred surface of the counter. “Doesn’t it?”

Then, shutting the world, the bar, the bartender, all of it out of his head so he could focus on the beer, on his thoughts, and on his memories.

Focus, and think.

No...she didn’t seem to need him the way Roger thought she would, but Chase had let her go once. He didn’t plan on doing it again.

Time. He just needed to give her time.

He’d already waited fifteen years.

What was another few months...another year...?

He could do that.

It wasn’t like she was going anywhere.

He sure as hell wasn’t.

Not again.

Not now.

Chapter Seven

Staring at the vivid blue of the ocean depicted on the brochure, Zoe rubbed her hands together.

It had been nearly a month since she'd buried Roger, and although she knew she couldn't run from her grief, she also knew she couldn't stay here, either.

Couldn't stay here and live with the reminder of her life with him...and the life they'd missed out on. Day after day, staring at the places where they used to eat, where he'd worked with James, the square where they used to go for walks in the summer.

The memories were choking her. All of it.

She needed to get away, and not just for a weekend. A trip to Lexington, a trip down to Savannah to visit with some friends, that wasn't going to do it. She needed to get far, far away.

Alaska seemed pretty damn far.

Was she really doing this?

All of her life, she'd wanted to travel.

Wanted to go places.

Wanted to see things.

Roger had always just been more of a homebody. He was...no...he *had* been happiest at home. With her.

Now, he was gone and she was at loose ends.

She needed to *go* somewhere.

Do something.

Just yesterday, she'd turned her shop over to the capable hands of her manager. Kelly could handle it. She'd more than proven that over the past few months.

The house was sold.

Between the house's sale and the life insurance policy, she had more than enough money in the bank to just...relax for a while. Travel some.

Blowing out a breath, she met Mitzi Harmon's eyes and nodded. "Okay. Let's do it."

"Honey, are you sure?" Mitzi smiled gently. "You'd be leaving in..." she checked her monitor and then looked back at Zoe. "Two days. That's not much time. What about your mother? Your store?"

Guilt tried to twist at Zoe's heart, but logically, she knew her mother was better off if she *wasn't* around. Her mother was still so angry with her, even if she didn't fully remember why. Whenever she was there, the moods were worse, the violence was worse.

As much as it hurt her heart to admit it, Mom did better when she wasn't there.

"Mom will be fine," she said. Then she forced a smile and added, "And Kelly will handle the store. Trust me, Mitzi. I *need* to do this."

When she left the travel agent's office a little while later, it was like there was a weight lifted off her shoulders.

She had a plan in mind...one that involved getting out of Warren. Finally.

She could get away from all the sympathetic looks, and she could get away from the memories, and she could get away from...

"Chase!"

She crashed straight into his chest, dropping the little folder that held the information she'd need for the tour.

Laughing, she crouched down and gathered it up. "I'm sorry, I wasn't paying attention."

Kneeling down, he helped her gather everything up, his eyes on her face, watching her in that way of his. For the past month, longer, he'd been right there, a steady, soothing presence and if she wasn't careful, she was going to find herself leaning on him far, far too much and she couldn't do that.

She couldn't.

"How are you?" he asked.

From the corner of her eye, she saw him lift a hand like he was going to touch her, but then he curled his fingers into a fist, lowered his hand. She was glad—so damn glad, because when he touched her, it did bad, bad things to her heart, reminded her that she hadn't died with Roger.

She didn't want to remember that...just yet.

And she certainly didn't want that reminder with Chase.

Straightening, she gave him a smile. It was easy to smile at him right now, because in a couple days, she'd be gone, away from him and he couldn't do these things to her battered, slowly-bleeding heart. She needed to heal, needed to recover from what the past year had done to her and then, when she was strong, she could look at him and realize he wasn't what her heart was making him out to be.

Her heart was telling her that she still needed him, that she wanted him, but Zoe knew better.

She'd stopped needing him a long, long time ago, and he'd certainly stopped needing her.

She wasn't Chase's girl anymore.

She might not be Roger's anymore, but she needed the time and the distance...needed to find her own strength, stand on her own.

For the first time in her life, she realized.

“Earth to Zoe...”

Chase waved a hand in front of her and she jerked her attention back to him, shook her head. “Sorry. My mind’s wandering—I’ve got a million things to get done,” she said. Lifting the brochure up, she showed it to him. “I’m going away for a while.”

If she’d told him she was secretly a man, she didn’t think he would have been any more surprised.

Her heart bumped against her ribs at the look on his face.

His dark blue eyes were darker and the skin around his eyes went tight. Blood drained out of his face and if she didn’t know better, she’d think that he looked...hurt.

Very hurt.

Almost the way she’d felt when she realized he’d left her behind...

“Going away?” he said, the words faint, hoarse.

Busying herself with straightening all the information she’d gotten from Mitzi, she started to walk. Chase fell into step next to her, his hands jammed deep into his pockets. “Yes. I need...” she sighed and glanced around, studying the small town around her. She’d lived here her entire life—knew just about everybody. Her friends were here and even though the only blood family she had no longer knew her...well, the bonds of family weren’t always forged solely through blood.

Leaving her mother would hurt, but it wouldn’t be the hardest part.

That would be leaving James, leaving Kelly.

*Leaving Chase...*her heart whispered.

No—

“I’ve got to get away from here for a while, Chase,” she said after a minute. “You remember how you said you couldn’t breathe? Back when you left here after graduation? I get that, because lately? *I* can’t breathe. I can’t think. I can’t focus. Every time I think I’m doing a little better, somebody comes up and pats me on the back... ‘There, there, poor, poor Zoe. You’ve been through so much, but it will get better. You’re young, you’ve got your whole life ahead of you...’”

A bitter smile twisted her lips. “Yeah. My whole life—a life I’d planned on spending with Roger and now, I don’t know what to do with it.”

For the longest time, Chase was silent. Then, slowly, he said, “So you’re just leaving. That’s going to make it better? Fix things?”

“No. It’s not going to make it better, but it will give me some time to heal...on my own. Let me get my head on straight, and maybe decide what I want to do. What I need to do.”

He reached out and caught her arm, coming to a stop.

Because he had a grip on her arm, when he stopped, so did she. Ignoring the way his touch made her heart race, she stared past him and tried to smile, tried to focus on anything but the way she was feeling inside.

Broken...desperate...so full of need for him. Again.

"So you leave. You just leave?" he said.

Don't look at him, she thought. *Don't look at him. As long as you don't look at him, you'll be okay.*

Two seconds later, she found herself staring into his dark, dark eyes, her heart racing, her mouth dry.

"I don't *just* leave," she said hoarsely. "But it's what I need to do."

His hand came up, stroked down her jaw. "Let me come with you. You don't need to be alone right now."

His head came closer, closer...

Abruptly, she realized he just might kiss her but then she jerked away.

Not very far, because he still held her arm. As if he'd realized where they were, he looked up and around, and swore. Then he was pulling her into a store. It took almost a full minute to realize *what* store—his store. By that time, they were in the back of it, tucked inside his private office.

"Don't leave, Zoe," Chase said, quietly, staring at her.

Time fell away and she felt like she was lost, staring into his eyes. And she *hated* it. Closing her hands into a fist, she rubbed her wedding ring with her thumb. Her wedding ring...the ring Roger had put on her finger after Chase had walked away from her.

She'd been eighteen, and so in love with him...when he'd walked away, it had almost killed her.

Don't leave me, Chase... the echo of her voice danced in her mind.

Clenching her jaw, she blocked that voice out of her mind, locked those memories away. She didn't have to go back there, especially not right now. She forced herself to take a slow, deep breath, forced herself not to look away from his eyes, forced herself not to turn away—*run* away.

Part of her wanted to do just that.

An equal part of her wanted to go to him, wrap her arms around his neck and just let him hold her. She knew he would.

Chase wasn't going to disappear again. Whatever it was that had made him leave all those years ago, it was no longer an issue. He was home to stay and he seemed happy here.

Leaning on him, though, that wasn't the answer.

"Zoe?"

"I have to go," she said softly, meeting his eyes. That dark, dark blue stared into hers, unblinking, unwavering.

"Why?"

Sighing, she tucked the information from Mitzi into her purse, then tossed her purse onto his desk. Then she rubbed her temple. A familiar, nagging headache brewed behind her eyes and she wanted, desperately, to curl up somewhere dark and quiet and sleep. For a week.

She definitely didn't want to be having this discussion with Chase.

“Has it occurred to you that it’s fabulously ironic, you asking me that question?” she asked absently.

She glanced at him, watched the dull rush of blood rise up his cheeks.

Part of her felt bad about that, but another part of her, that small, petty part she wasn’t proud of, it felt like dancing. *Good...feel guilty. You know how much it hurt when I realized you weren’t coming back?*

And deep, deep inside, part of her wanted to hide away from all of that knowledge, but it was bad, bad, and very bad that it mattered at all. If she had ever been able to put him away, if she had ever been able to *not* think of him, maybe she could get over him.

“Fifteen years ago, I asked you not to leave me,” she murmured, staring off into the distance, remembering that day. She could remember it so vividly. In vivid, crystalline clarity—

The way the summer sun beat down on her shoulders as she walked outside when she heard him pull up.

The way he’d smiled at her—a sad, strained kind of smile.

His words.

I’m leaving, Zo.

And she remembered how she’d begged him. Begged him not to leave, begged him to take her with him.

There were other memories, darker memories, memories that she needed to exorcise—demons she needed to remove from her life.

Little slut. Ungrateful slut—

“But you left anyway.” She looked back at him and said, “I don’t blame you. We were just kids and you had to do what you had to do. But you made your choice, and it wasn’t me. Now I’ve got to make a choice, and it’s to get away from here for a while.”

She started to walk away then, but the look in his dark blue eyes, it was like a fist around her heart. Slowly, she went to him, pushed up on her toes and pressed her mouth to his.

It was nothing like kissing him at eighteen.

And yet...it was exactly like it.

Hot, wicked and wild.

His hand came up, caught the back of her head, cradled it.

A harsh, ragged groan escaped him.

It was supposed to be a good-bye kiss, quick, light...easy.

A kiss between friends.

It was anything but. His mouth opened under hers and as his tongue stole into her mouth, she couldn’t help but open for him. He tasted like coffee, cinnamon and Chase...his taste was one she’d never, ever forgot, even after all this time.

Her heart slammed against her ribs and her body cried out, screamed for more.

But before she could give in, she pulled back. “Good-bye, Chase.”

So this is what it feels like, being the one left behind.

Chase could still taste Zoe on his lips, could still feel her pressed against him.

Could still see the bright banner of her hair as she made her way through the store.

But she was as good as gone.

Had she felt like this, he wondered. All those years ago, when he left Warren without much more than a backward glance.

Had she felt like her heart had been ripped out of her chest?

Shaken, empty, he sank into the chair behind his desk and covered his face with his hands.

He wanted to chase after her, but he couldn’t.

There had been something in her eyes.

Despite the pain ripping through him, he had seen something in her eyes as she told him.

She needed to do this.

And she needed to do it *without* him.

He had to let her go.

Reaching inside his shirt, he closed his hand around the Z he still wore.

His bleeding, battered heart told him to get up, run after her.

But he just sat there, holding that golden charm in his hand and telling himself, *I have to do this...for her.*

From the hallway, Zoe stared at her mother.

So far, Grace hadn’t noticed her.

She was playing Scrabble with another one of the residents.

“How has she been?”

The nurse smiled at her and said, “Pretty good, actually. The doctor adjusted her medicine, like we discussed. I think it’s doing her a world of good.”

Zoe nodded.

Then she reached into her pocket and pulled out the phone numbers. “I’ve already spoken to the doctor and those who head up her care plan. But just in case, can you make sure these numbers are where they need to be? It’s who to contact if there’s a problem. James will know how to get in contact with me if there’s an emergency, but for standard things, he’s the one you’ll need to contact until I’m back in town. I’m taking some time, going away for a while.”

She'd thought she'd feel guilty.

But as she stood there, watching her mom, she realized she didn't.

Her mother actually looked happier now than she had in quite a while, and Zoe knew what would happen if she went over there. It would anger the other woman, distress her.

They weren't any good for each other. They never really had been.

Grace was happier not knowing her daughter than she ever had been knowing her.

And Zoe was okay with that.

Chapter Eight

One month turned into two.

Two into four.

Four into six.

Each day, Chase swore he was dying a little more inside. Each day, he gave up a little more hope that she'd come back soon.

He knew she called.

His dad talked to her—his dad was acting as her mother's guardian while Zoe was out of town.

She called to ask about her mom, but she never called to talk to him.

She called to check on her store—he knew this, because he'd asked Kelly and Kelly was more than happy to tell him that Zoe had spent a month in Alaska. Then she'd gone to the beach. Then Europe. All over the frickin' globe, it seemed.

Kelly had postcards.

Chase had the memory of one kiss, and the necklace she'd given him on prom night more sixteen years ago now, and a heart that was so beyond broken, it wasn't even funny.

Memories, a necklace...and a hope that was so faint, it couldn't even be called a hope any more.

She wasn't going to come back here.

And even if she did, it wouldn't be because of him, he suspected. He'd been fooling himself. Yeah, he might still love her, but he'd killed whatever love she'd had for him years ago...sixteen years ago.

Pushing all of that aside, he stared into his dad's darkened attic and tried to figure out why he'd agreed to this.

Because his dad had asked, that was why.

His dad wanted him to string up the Christmas lights.

So that's what he was doing.

If he could ever find the stupid things.

Reaching up, he tugged on the chain for the light and began the tedious task of searching for the right box.

It was while he was hunting for the *right* box that he found the wrong one.

A box full of dusty books, envelopes and junk, precariously perched, just waiting to fall. On one end, it was marked, *Roger's office* and he winced as it went tumbling. Biting back a sigh, he crouched down and starting putting everything back in, only to realize it was going to be a nightmare to get things organized.

A lot of papers had fallen out of place and he had no clue what went where, no idea if any of it was important. Muttering under his breath, he started shuffling the pages into order and that was when the pictures fell out.

They were old.

But there was no mistaking Zoe's battered face. In the pictures of her face, even with her eyes averted, he could see her shame.

What in the hell...

A muscle jerked in his jaw.

What in the holy fucking hell...

Flipping them over, he stared at the date.

All the breath was knocked right out of him.

He knew that date—knew it well.

It was the day after he'd walked out of Zoe Childers—now Zoe Kirkbride's—life.

What in the hell...

I want you to live.

I want you happy.

The cold seeped through the knees of her jeans as she crouched on the ground. There was a brightly colored autumn bouquet on Roger's grave—from Bianca, Zoe supposed.

"Hey, baby," she murmured, reaching out and touching the gravestone.

She'd been gone for six months.

Roger had been gone for seven.

It seemed like yesterday, and at the same time, it seemed like a lifetime.

In those months that she'd been gone, one thing had become painfully clear.

She loved Chase.

Deep inside, she had never *stopped* loving him.

Oh, she loved Roger...but the love she had for the two men was as drastically different as the two men were. Roger had been her rock—steady, abiding and so strong and true. She knew that she could have lived happily with him—had *wanted* just that, but life had kicked them both in the teeth, robbed them of that.

Chase, though...he was her heart.

“You knew, didn’t you?”

There was no answer—none that she could hear, but in her heart, she felt something. A warmth. A lightness.

There was also guilt, but that was her own doing, she knew.

The heart didn’t exactly work in ways that could be explained, she guessed. Part of her had always loved Chase, and maybe part of her had always waited, had always hoped he’d come back. Not that she ever would have done anything, not if Roger was still here.

“I love you,” she said, tears blurring her eyes. “I’m always going to love you.”

Again, inside, in a way she couldn’t explain, she felt something. A warmth...a gentle touch. Like he was with her.

It’s okay, gorgeous...go on. Be with him. We had our time together.

Tears burned out of her eyes and she sighed, wiped them away. “It doesn’t feel like it was long enough.”

Then, slowly, she brushed her fingers over his name, traced it with her fingers. Rising, she bent over and pressed her lips to the marble headstone. “But good things never last as long as we’d like, I guess.”

Swallowing the knot in her throat, she said, “Thank you.” Memories rushed up and she touched her face, remembered the bruises, how battered and broken she’d been when Roger had come into her life.

Chase had left her.

Her mother had thrown her out.

She had felt...worthless. Unloved, and unwanted by anybody and everybody.

Roger changed that—Roger changed everything.

Roger had picked her up. Cared for her, made her realize she *could* be loved. That she was loved. He’d given her strength, had given her his love. Everything.

And even now, he still gave.

She could all but feel him smiling down on her.

You were always stronger than you thought, Zo.

No. She hadn’t been. Not until he’d shown her how to be strong.

“Thank you...for everything, baby.”

Then, tucking her hands inside her pockets, she turned away.

She had a man to hunt down.

The knock at his door was unwelcome, to say the least.

He was busy wallowing, thanks.

Lifting the beer to his lips, he ignored the first knock.

When the second came, he called out, "Go away."

"Chase?"

He was hallucinating.

Because that sounded way too much like Zoe.

Shooting up out of the chair, he all but vaulted across the room, jerking open the door so fast, it was a miracle he didn't pull it off the hinges.

Zoe stood there, her big blue eyes wide, her mouth parted in surprise.

Then her gaze lowered.

She reached up, her fingers trembling.

Frozen, he stood there as she brushed her finger against the charm that lay against his bare chest. "You still have it," she murmured.

A dull red flush crept up his cheeks. Fuck, his shirt. He'd taken it off when he'd worked the bag earlier and forgot to put it back on. Reaching up, he closed a protective hand around it. "Hey." His mind was blank. Unable to think, barely able to do more than breathe, he just stared at her.

Tell her to leave. Come back later, his common sense said. His mood was so toxic, so volatile, he was hazardous to his own health right now. Zoe...she needed softer, gentler handling. She didn't need his fury, or his wrath, and that was all he had right now.

He needed answers, but he needed to get a grip, needed to...

"Who the fuck hurt you?" he demanded harshly.

To her credit, she didn't pretend not to understand.

Nor did she look away.

Her eyes stayed on his and she lifted a brow calmly. "How did you hear about that?"

Sneering, he whirled around. Leaving the door open, he stormed over to the coffee table and grabbed the pictures. He showed them to her and again, just like earlier, seeing them was a vicious, painful punch to the gut. "Who did this?" he asked. "Who did that to you?"

She reached out and took the pictures away. Sighing, she stacked them up neatly and then, without even sparing them a glance, she said, "Where did you find those?"

"At my dad's. Was supposed to be finding Christmas lights, for crying out loud. Knocked a box over and there they were." That fist around his heart squeezed, wrenched. A jagged, awful pain that just got worse and worse as she stared at him.

He had to touch her then—just had to.

Reaching out, carefully, gently, he hooked a hand in the front of her coat, tugged her closer. He stroked a hand down the side of her cheek and murmured, "I'm sorry. I...they were in a box of stuff that had been in Roger's office. Guess he'd had them..."

“Yeah. He had a set, as did your dad. Safe-keeping.” She blew out a soft sigh and said, “Roger and your dad found me that night. They took me into the hospital. Roger...well, it was like he never left. My knight in shining armor.”

A ghost of a smile drifted over her face and she said, “It’s okay, Chase. It was a long time ago. I’m over it.”

“Over it?” He reached down and took the pictures away—she didn’t seem to want to let him, but eventually, she released them and he once more found himself staring at those pictures, torn up inside over what he saw. “How in the hell do you get over this? Damn it, who in the hell did it?”

Zoe looked away, her lashes shielding her eyes. Then she said, “My mother.”

The pictures fell from his hand, and when she had them in her hands this time, Zoe tore them into shreds.

He had a fire burning and before he could stop her, she threw them into the fire.

“One demon exorcised,” she murmured. The weight of grief, shame, that had held her down for so long, it had gradually faded over the years, but now, it was like she could hear those final chains snapping.

Turning back, she met Chase’s stunned eyes.

“Chase, it was my mother.” She pushed a hand through her hair and then reached up, unbuttoned her coat. This was so *not* the discussion she’d come over here to have, but apparently, it was one they needed to have.

“It happened the day after you left. I’d stayed up most the night crying—quietly,” she added, wryly. “You know how she was. Or maybe not. I don’t think either of us realized just how crazy she’d gotten. But I was up so late, crying and finally, I think I must have just cried myself into exhaustion. I woke up late. It was almost noon and I was half sick inside, just dreading what she’d say.”

In the Childers household, even sleeping past 7 a.m. had been unacceptable.

“But she didn’t say anything—even had some food waiting for me.” Zoe grimaced. “I thought maybe she’d understood. For once in my life, maybe she’d be a mom. But right after I ate, I felt tired again. Went to sleep. When I woke, she...well, she had all my stuff packed. All stacked on the front porch and she told me it was time I moved on. I was eighteen after all and I didn’t need to be there.”

Zoe grimaced. “Needless to say, I didn’t take it very well. And she didn’t like my response.” Absently, she reached up and touched her face. “We started screaming at each other...Roger was there—out on the porch, but neither of us heard him knocking. He ended up calling your dad, but right before your dad showed up, that was when my mom hit me. I fell, hit my head. She came after me again.”

“Fuck, Zoe.”

A ghost of a smile curled her lips as she glanced at him. “I can still remember the look on her face. Sometimes, I wonder which one of us was more surprised. I think there were a lot of times over my life

when she'd wanted to hit me. But she never did...not until that day, and after the first hit, she couldn't stop."

"I hit the ground, but she just wasn't done. I screamed. Your dad was there by that time and he and Roger broke the door down."

A grim smile twisted her lips. "My knights in shining armor. James knocked my mother down and Roger picked me up. She tried to get away, but your dad...well, he's handled meaner people than my mom, and even if she had gotten away, Roger wasn't going to let anybody touch me."

"They took me to the emergency room, and your dad convinced me I needed to file a report—he couldn't make me press charges, but I did file the report, let them take the pictures. And it's a good thing." She grimaced and gestured to the remains of the pictures in the fireplace. "While the doctors were examining me, a report came in...apparently my mother accused Roger and your dad of assaulting me *and* her."

"So the pictures...you did it because of her," Chase said.

It was the first time he'd spoken in the past few minutes, and the words were harsh, stilted. And his eyes, that dark blue, burned and glittered with anger.

"Yes." She met his gaze, smiled as she remembered that particular confrontation with her mother. A female officer had gone with her, giving her the silent courage she'd needed to face her mother that final time. And it *had* been the final time...up until Alzheimer's had begun stealing her mother's mind from her.

"I don't think anything my mother had said would have held much weight in court, but I wasn't going to risk her trying. I told her if she said so much as one thing against Roger or James, I'd have her arrested. I'd tell everybody had she had kicked me out of the only home I'd ever known, how she'd beat me—you know how she was always so concerned with what everybody thought. She couldn't have handled people gossiping about *her* being in the wrong. But if she walked away, I'd walk away. She saw the pictures and she walked. Until she started getting sick, we hadn't spoken in years."

Zoe tucked her hands in her back pockets and restlessly roamed the airy, open space of Chase's living room. Stopping by the window, she stared outside. "When I got out of the hospital, I went to stay with your dad...didn't really have any place else to go. He helped me get the job at the shop, let me stay with him that summer. And Roger, well, he was always there. I think he knew I hated having to count on your dad. He was so sweet, so kind. When he started asking me out a couple weeks later, at first I said no. I felt so...hell, I felt like nobody would ever want me, ever love me. My dad hadn't wanted me. You'd left me. And a day later, my mom did what she did. But he wouldn't give up. We'd only been dating a month when he asked me to marry him, but he made me feel needed. Made me feel loved. He *did* love me. Right then, I needed that. For a while, I was using him. But then, I fell in love with him."

"I know you love him."

She glanced back, saw him standing by the coffee table, his eyes shuttered, his face a mask.

And around his neck, he wore a necklace she'd given him over sixteen years ago.

Seeing that had been like...she couldn't even describe it.

Turning around, she walked over to him.

She didn't stop until she was close enough for the toes of her black boots to nudge his bare feet. Staring at his naked chest, she reached up and traced the gold Z. "There have only been two men in my life I ever loved," she murmured. "Well, other than your dad—he's kind of like a dad to me, really. Which is way weird...considering how I feel about you."

He was quiet, for the longest time.

Then he reached up, cupped her chin, tipped her head back.

Stroking his thumb over her lower lip, he murmured, "Zoe, why are you here?"

Rising on her toes, she pressed her mouth to his. "Why don't you take a guess, Chase?"

He felt like he was on some roller coaster, twisting him from heaven to hell and back again. Or maybe, from hell to heaven, then back. Now he was waiting for the return trip to hell, which would come when Zoe pulled away.

Which would happen too soon and he needed to enjoy this as much as he could.

Tangling a hand in her hair, he groaned against her mouth and wrapped his free arm around her waist.

Her tongue twined with his, teasing him. The taste of her flooded his system and the feel of her body, sleek and soft and warm, had him ready to beg...beg for mercy, beg for her, beg for anything, everything.

When she rested her hands low on his hips and tugged him closer, rocked against him, he could have whimpered.

But then she reached between them, stroked him through his jeans and he tore away, panting for air.

"Damn it, Zoe. What in the fuck is going on?"

Her eyes were heated, glazed with hunger, and so fucking beautiful, even looking at her made him hurt more.

Her mouth, swollen and red from his, curled up at the corners. "If you have to ask, then I'm doing something wrong."

"Shit." He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes, sucked in a desperate breath of air. "Help me out here, Zoe. Six months ago, I asked you to stay and you walk away. Now you're here and...what? What is going on?"

"Six months ago, I was still reeling from burying my husband." She looked down at her hand and that was when he noticed.

She wasn't wearing her wedding ring.

When she looked back at him, her eyes were damp. Still hot, but there was sadness there. “I still love Roger. He saved me, in ways I can’t even begin to explain. My life would have been...so different, and so empty without him. But he’s gone—I shared my past with him, and it was wonderful.”

She closed her eyes, took a deep, slow breath. Then, she looked at him, held his gaze steady. “I figured something out while I was gone. I never got over you. It’s been more than sixteen years and there’s this huge part of me that’s still Chase’s girl...nothing is ever going to change that. And I don’t *want* to change that. Roger’s my past and it was beautiful...because of him. But I want my future to be with you...if you want to share it with me.”

The strength drained out of his legs, and right there, he went to his knees. Reaching up, he wrapped his hands around her waist, tugged her close. Burying his face against her belly, he muttered, “Is this real? Shit. Zoe, are you real? Are you really here?”

“Yes...” She laughed and combed a hand through his hair. “I’m here. I’m right here.”

Tipping his head back, he stared up at her. “And you’re staying. Right? Staying?”

“Yes. And so are you.” Tightening a hand in his hair, she said, “If you try to walk away again, this time I’ll hunt you down...and kick your ass.”

“Deal.”

Tugging her down, he pressed his mouth to her lips. “Shit, Zoe. I love you. So much. I love you so much.”

“Hmmm. I love you too.”

Then she squirmed around and reached between them, stroking him again. “Now...can we maybe get back to this?”

He grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled it off, leaving her wearing her bra and jeans. Rolling forward, he spilled her onto her back. “Better idea,” he muttered. The bra had a front clasp, one he dealt with in only seconds.

Impatient to get her naked, he fought with her jeans, her boots, and when she tried to help, he caught her wrists, pushed her hands down to her sides.

At eighteen, she’d been beautiful.

At thirty-four...even more so. Laying between her thighs, he caught her breasts in his hands, nuzzled her. Listening to her whimper, sigh, moan as he licked, nipped and suckled on her nipples, drawing them to tight, hard peaks.

She tasted warm and sweet and female, and he wanted to taste her every-fucking-where. With that plan in mind, he worked his way down her body, pausing to nuzzle her navel, lifting up to blow a puff of air on the wet folds between her thighs.

Then, rolling his eyes to watch her face, he pressed his mouth to the hot, slick heat of her sex and he listened as her breath caught, listened as she groaned out his name. She fisted her hands in his hair, hooked a knee over his shoulder, rocked against him, rocking her hips...going crazy...

He shifted and caught her clit between his teeth, tugged. At the same time, he pushed two fingers into her sheath, and she exploded.

“So beautiful,” he muttered against her, watching as the flush spread up her neck, across her face.

Beautiful, and *his*. Finally.

His, and he wouldn't let her go.

As she calmed, he levered back up onto his knees, shoved his jeans down. Covering her body with his, he waited until she was looking at him. “I've got condoms in the bathroom...”

She slid a hand up, curled it around and tugged him down. Kissing him gently, she said, “We don't need it. I'm on birth control and anything else, I'm fine.”

“Bad girl,” he muttered, pressing his brow to hers. “You're supposed to tell me, ‘*Go get them*’.”

She just smiled. “Make love to me, Chase...please.”

Shuddering, he sank closer, pressed the head of his cock against her entrance.

Her eyes widened, then fluttered closed.

“No. Look at me, Zoe. Please...look at me,” he whispered.

Her lashes lifted, and their gazes locked.

Watching each other, he sank slowly inside.

Her breathing hitched.

Against his chest, he could feel her heart pounding, the echo of his own.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you.”

Madly. Desperately.

Blindly, she reached up and he caught her hand, twined their fingers. “My girl,” he teased.

“And you're mine.”

Too many years, too much hunger, he burned for her and she clenched around, her silken sheath caressing him, gripping him. Shifting his weight to the side, he reached between them, pressed against her clit, watched her face as her eyes went wide.

“Chase...”

Harder. Firmer.

A strangled groan escaped her and he grinned, hot satisfaction twisting through him, twining with the naked, raw hunger. It all shot straight to his gut and when she started to climax, he couldn't hold back any longer.

With a harsh curse, he climaxed, emptied himself.

It was over too quick, far too quick, leaving his head spinning, his heart racing.

With a stupid grin on his face, he eased back and looked at her. “Hell, I think I might have showed more finesse than that on prom night,” he muttered.

Zoe giggled. Her cheeks pink, she smiled up at him and said, “Hey, I don’t have any complaints.” Then she pursed her lips. “Then again...if I say I have complaints, are we going to have another go?”

Dipping his head, he nipped her lower lip. “Oh, we’re going to have another go anyway. A lot of them.”

“Hmmm. Good.” She wrapped her arms around his neck. Then, as he swooped her into his arms, she squeaked, surprised.

“First go starts now.”

Epilogue

The newlywed couple made one stop on their way out of town.

It was a rather strange sort of stop, but it made perfect sense to them.

Zoe left a piece of wedding cake on Roger's headstone. Blew a kiss to a beautiful part of her past.

Then she turned to her husband...and walked toward her future.

About the Author

Shiloh Walker has been writing since she was a kid. She fell in love with vampires with the book “Bunnicula” and has worked her way up to the more...ah...serious works of fiction. She loves reading and writing anything paranormal, anything fantasy, and nearly every kind of romance. Once upon a time she worked as a nurse, but now she writes full time and lives with her family in the Midwest. She writes paranormal and contemporary romance, as well as romantic suspense. You can find Shiloh at her blog at www.shilohwalker.com or via Twitter www.twitter.com/shilohwalker.

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One woman, one man, and a love that won't let either of them go.

No Longer Mine

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Born on the wrong side of the tracks and dealt a fair share of hardship, Nikki Kline never gives up a fight. Even when her reason to keep going is ripped from her, Nikki tries desperately to hang on. But when the man who broke Nikki's heart comes back into her life she doesn't know how much she can take. Especially since that man seems determined to win back her damaged heart.

Wade Lightfoot is a man who knows he's made more mistakes than most. As much as he would like to repair the damage he's done to those he loves, Wade also knows there is no going back. But when he sets out to put things right the last thing he's prepared to find out is that he had a son. A son he'll never get the chance to meet.

When the truth is out and all the old wounds are bared, it seems impossible that Nikki and Wade will find their way back to each other. But true love is an undeniable force that even past hurts can't destroy.

This book has been previously published and has been revised from its original release.

Warning: This title contains heartbreaking tragedy, lies and deception, and a scorching passion that nothing can deny.

Enjoy the following excerpt for No Longer Mine:

It was hot—the kind of heat that wrapped around a person, threatened to suffocate, threatened to choke. Hot, with leaden, overcast skies that seemed to promise rain, but it had been overcast for days and they hadn't seen a drop.

Nicole Kline was just outside of town when she flipped on the radio and heard the weather report. A storm was coming.

Great.

Not the ideal day for a run into town, but it was either suffer the heat or suffer the frustration when all she found for dinner was Cheetos and frozen ground beef. If she had paid attention to the weather before they had left home she would have suffered the Cheetos, the frozen ground beef—and her younger brother's griping.

Yum.

Instead of trying to make the thirty-minute drive back to her home in the hills, she decided to grab her groceries then go to her dad's and wait it out there.

She made it in and out of the store in under twenty minutes. As she walked outside with her infant son, Jason, perched on her hip, she glanced up at the sky. The sight of the thunderheads piling up overhead made her wince.

Her brother, Shawn, bumped her shoulder with his. "Come on," he said. "We're going to get soaked if we wait around too long."

She made a face. "We're going to get soaked anyway." She chuckled her son under his chin and smiled at him. Not that he was at all worried about those clouds.

The scent of rain hung heavy on the air.

Looks like the farmers are going to get the rain they want and then some, Nikki mused as she secured the straps on the baby's car seat. After she finished securing Jason in his seat, she went around to help her brother finish loading the groceries into the back of the SUV.

Flattened drops of rain splattered the hood of the car as she slid into the driver's seat. Then Nikki glared at the skies as the clouds burst, dousing the parking lot under a deluge of water.

"Don't sweat it, Nik," Shawn advised. "We can just wait it out at Dad's."

She sighed. That had been the plan anyway, not that she had told Shawn. Her brother and her father were on the outs for some reason, which was why Shawn had been spending the past few weeks at her place.

She could hear Jason jabbering to himself from the backseat.

"Dogs, dogs, dogs," he chanted over and over while he played with a tattered stuffed mouse and chewed busily on the remaining ear.

At least that was what she *thought* he was saying.

Flicking Shawn a glance, she ordered, "Put your seatbelt on, will ya?"

Rolling his eyes, he fastened the lap belt and drawled, "Yes'm." He gave Jason a look in the mirror, circling his finger at his temple. The baby laughed and clapped his hands before launching into a long and detailed jabbering monologue with his friend, Mouse.

Hazel eyes squinted, Nikki stared through the windshield, blocking out the noise of the rain and her son's jabbering. Even though she drove with the lights on, she couldn't see much more than fifteen or twenty feet in front of her.

Twenty minutes passed and she still wasn't at her dad's. The store wasn't even ten minutes from there, but that was under normal driving conditions.

Growling with frustration, she snapped, "I can't see a damn thing in this!"

The rumble of thunder edged closer. Lightning flashed.

"You're almost there, sis. It's just up there."

She spotted the turn off as Shawn spoke. "Almost there, fella," she said as Jason started shrieking, "Eat! Momma, eat!"

"Just a few minutes, Jas—"

Neither Shawn nor Nikki saw the other car. It came flying around a curve fast—so fast—and hit them from behind. She was thrown forward. Blinding pain sliced through her head and a loud, thunderous crash filled her ears.

A blaring noise rent the air, but above it she heard a baby's panicked, startled cry.

From the passenger seat next to her, Shawn swore viciously, grabbing for the door handle.

"Jason!" Her voice was garbled, choked. Blood filled her mouth and a red haze clouded her vision.

Instinctively she slammed on the brakes, wrenched the steering wheel to the right towards safety. Off to their left was a steep drop off—

Another jolt struck her SUV, throwing her back. She was pinned against the seat by her safety restraint as the world started to spin before her. Above the roaring in her ears she heard thunder and the screeching sound of metal against metal. Then all was silent.

Chipping away at her resistance, one touch at a time...

The Reluctant Nude

© 2011 Meg Maguire

Fallon Frost's late foster mother had done so much to heal the wounds of her damaged childhood. So when a lecherous developer plans to bulldoze her old home to make room for a strip mall, the practical, ordered life Fallon has built for herself is threatened.

Then he makes a twisted proposal. He'll leave the land alone if she poses nude for a sculpture that'll end up in his collection. Seeing no other choice, she heads for Nova Scotia—only to find something totally unexpected. A sexy, hot-blooded, *infuriating* sculptor.

Guarded, sexually detached Fallon is a challenge Max Emery can't wait to tackle. Yet with each tap of his chisel, he uncovers a woman who rekindles a dream he thought lost. Home, family...love. And the closer he gets to her core, the harder it becomes to accept that he's carving her naked body for another man's eyes.

As progress on the sculpture almost grinds to a halt, their fragile fantasy world collapses under the weight of reality. Threatening Fallon's one chance to save her foster mother's land...and any chance she and Max have to find love.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Reluctant Nude:

"When do you think we'll start the marble?" Fallon was curious to watch the process. She'd come to know the menagerie of marred statues in Max's garden intimately in the past two weeks. What he did was breathtaking, astounding. She could admit that now. She wanted to see him at work.

"Soon. We are close. Closer. But we're not quite there yet."

"You mean the touching bit?" she asked, body tensing. Since bringing it up Max hadn't pressured her about it, but she'd been living in fear of the inevitable day when it couldn't be put off any longer.

He nodded. "I know you're not thrilled, but I hope you trust it is necessary now."

"Yeah. I do." She shivered nonetheless. She wasn't a great fan of being touched, handshakes and the platonic hugging of friends aside. It was probably why her relationships never made it past the three- or four-month mark. She dreaded to think how uncomfortable Max's touch would be—his eyes alone often felt like a brand on her skin.

"Perhaps this afternoon we will try?" He cocked a cautious eyebrow across the table at her. "It must be soon if you wish to stay on schedule."

"Yeah, I do." Fallon frowned. It had become startlingly easy sometimes to forget why she was here, whose statue she would ultimately be posing for. "But don't expect me to be comfortable or anything. You may have to sculpt me wincing."

"I am sure I won't. It is all that energy nonsense I am sure you're sick of hearing about." He held his hands up and wiggled his fingers like a close-up magician. "Nothing personal. In your job, when you're working outside, what is it you do?"

"A lot of plant and animal collection...checking on populations of weeds and algae and mollusks and things, looking to see what's declining and what's thriving in a given area."

"And what if you had to do that with your eyes closed?"

She nodded. "I get it. It'd be really difficult."

"And I understand you do not want to be treated like a specimen. But you see what I'm saying?"

"Yeah."

He smiled deeply in his wicked way. "So you better keep drinking." He refreshed her glass and gathered their dirty dishes.

As Max pattered, Fallon sipped her wine and tried to imagine what it would be like, having Max's hands on her. She shuddered, though not entirely from trepidation.

For over a week now she'd been having dreams about him, the sorts of dreams she'd never been disposed to before. Dreams that had her waking up in cold sweats in the early hours of the morning. Stark visions of this man's predatory body and dark eyes, rough hands, rough voice. Dreams about commanding him and being commanded.

Across the room she could see the long ridges of muscle flanking each side of his spine, his shoulder blades, his shirt pulled taut against these shapes as he washed dishes. In her dreams those muscles twitched and tightened with other kinds of labor. Fallon hadn't felt the protracted touch of his skin since they'd shaken hands her first day at the studio, but neither had she forgotten it. Calloused fingers and palms on her bare body. She swallowed.

Max dried his hands on a dishtowel. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be," she said, heart pounding. "Can we do this in baby steps? Can I keep my clothes on?"

He nodded.

"Good." She shrugged her sweater off and stood in jeans and a tee in her usual space near the center of the studio. She trembled harder with each step he took toward her. By the time Max was directly in front of her, Fallon was shaking.

"You look terrified," he said, hands tucked safely in his pockets.

"I'm fine."

"You look like you might cry." As he said it, Fallon felt the pressure mounting in her tear ducts.

"I won't cry."

"You can if you want, you know."

"Well, I don't," she snapped, more surly toward him than she'd been all week. "Just get started, already."

Max slid his hands from his pockets and held them out, inviting her to do the same. Her fingers shook visibly. She held her breath as he sandwiched them gently between his palms, and the heat and roughness of his skin made her flinch.

“This is very hard for you,” he said softly, eyes on their hands as his thumbs rubbed her wrists.

“Yes, it is.” She could admit that. What she couldn’t admit was that it wouldn’t be *nearly* this hard with anyone else on the planet. “Only because it’s been built up so much.”

It felt as though Max had been warming his hands by a fire, his skin was so hot. “I hope it is not triggering any bad memories.”

“No.” It was triggering something much different. A breed of sensation Fallon had spent her entire adult life avoiding.

“You’re very cold.”

“I have low blood pressure,” Fallon offered. “Unless you meant that figuratively.”

“No, just your hands,” he said carefully, focused on their point of contact. His fingertips traced small circles over her knuckles. He slid them up to her forearms, raising all the tiny hairs, raising the fear bubbling in her core. She began to shake hard.

“Oh.” Max’s eyes widened and he yanked his hands away, holding them at a safe distance. “You’re not ready for this,” he said, alarmed. It wasn’t an expression she’d ever seen him wear before.

“No, I can do it. I have to. I’ll do whatever we have to do to get this statue made. Keep going.”

“That’s enough for today.”

“No. It’s *fine*.” Fallon’s anxiety spiraled. “If this ridiculous project fails, it’s not going to be because of me.”

“I understand. But understand too, that this is useless to me right now. I don’t need to feel your *body*. I need to feel *you*, all that energy. I cannot do this if you are a mess. You’re not ready yet.”

Anxiety spiked to anger. “I’m doing my best.”

“Well I’m not carving you when you’re like this. I may as well sculpt you out of sand, you feel so unstable.”

Fallon pressed her palms to her neck. “God, this is so stupid.”

“What is stupid?”

“This. All your energy nonsense. The way you make everything so freaking intense and complicated and *weird*.”

“I can’t help that.” His calmness looked as if it was taking a concerted effort.

Fallon groaned.

“Why are you angry?” he demanded. “I’m trying to make you as comfortable as I can, yes?”

“Well, you’re failing.” Fallon narrowed her eyes. “You make me very, very *uncomfortable*. You’re going to have to work around it, because it’s not going to change.”

Max stepped away, scraping a chair across the floor and sitting, burying his head in his hands, defeated. He rubbed his eyes and stared up again. "I thought we were making so much progress."

"We still would be if you'd just keep going. I'm going to be uncomfortable, doing this. Deal with it. *I* am."

"You have no clue what this is about, do you?"

"I'm proud to say that everything about you is incomprehensible to me," Fallon cut back. "Especially all this touching BS. But I'm going along with it. Try and extend me the same courtesy, okay?"

Max stood, face steely, patience abandoned. He leaned his back against the rail of the spiral staircase and held Fallon's eyes.

"What?" she said.

"Touch me, then."

"You?"

He nodded, neutral.

"That's supposed to help?" Her gaze zigzagged over him.

"Maybe. Maybe not. But try it, Little Miss Scientist. Suspend your empirical disbelief for me."

"If that's what it takes to keep this project moving forward, fine." She nodded and took a couple of steps closer, studying his face, his arms, the black hair at the collar of his shirt.

"Fine," Max agreed, that wicked gleam coming to his eyes. "Fair is fair."

He peeled his shirt up from the waist, revealing that body so maddeningly adept at making Fallon's heart skip a beat. Tossing it aside, he reached down and unbuckled his thick belt. Fallon felt her eyes widen, embarrassed but transfixed as he lowered the zipper and eased his jeans down over slim, toned hips. The garment dropped to the floor and Max stepped out, toying with the waistband of his gray boxer briefs, eyes glued to Fallon's, demanding her answer to an unspoken question.

One taste of her lips, and friendship is off the menu.

Flash Point

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Holding Out for a Hero, Book 3

Kate has always been everybody's friend and the de-facto little sister to the Wyatt brothers. But her feelings for Todd Wyatt, the town's hottest firefighter, run far beyond the sibling variety. Not that he's ever noticed.

After years of nursing her crush, Kate decides it's time to take action. Except she has one awkward little secret: she's still a virgin. She hopes she can seduce Todd without him realizing just how inexperienced she is.

In Todd's mind, Kate's the sweet girl he teases and hits up for free cupcakes. One surprise kiss over the summer, though, and suddenly she's jumped from the platonic side of his brain to the want-her-in-my-bed side. Even though the last thing he wants is to lose her friendship, his resistance to her determined seduction is slipping. Fast.

When malicious attacks on her bakery escalate, it soon becomes clear that for all Kate's friends, she's made at least one big enemy. And if they don't figure it out soon, things could take a deadly turn.

Warning: A sexy firefighter. A virgin bakery owner. A dollop of role playing, kinky costumes, friends becoming lovers, and a little danger along the way.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Flash Point:

He might as well have sucker punched her in the gut. Kate blinked, trying hard not to let the surprise and hurt show on her face.

"Oh, right. Sure."

And there it was. The real reason he'd asked her out tonight. It definitely hadn't been romantic, wasn't really even a friend thing, he just wanted baking lesson to get into some chick's pants.

Her stomach knotted and she swallowed hard. God she was a fool, had been acting like a fool all night. Chatting a mile a minute to try and hide how damn nervous she was, to avoid thinking about his arm against her breast earlier, and how she wanted so much more than an accidental brushing.

"It doesn't even have to be anything exciting," Todd went on quickly. "I mean, maybe just some no-brainer cookie recipe?"

She nodded and took another bite of food, even if her food had lost all flavor and enjoyment.

Silence fell between them, heavy and awkward, and the longer she kept quiet, the more she just wanted to *scream*. She could barely deal with Todd talking to her about the women in his life, seeing them was bad enough, but having to help him with it?

Todd seemed to sense her mood change, because any further attempts at conversation stayed firmly away from the topic of women and dating.

When the check arrived, he handled it despite her insisting that she pay half. The entire ride home, the hot ball of anger in her belly just kept expanding, until her vision was tinted with red and her hands were clenched into fists.

When they pulled up outside her house, she didn't trust herself to say anything more than a terse, "Goodnight."

She climbed out of the truck, slamming the door behind her as she strode toward her front door. She'd just blown any pretense of playing it cool, but so what? She heard the truck door slam again, and she flinched, increasing her pace.

Todd's fingers curled around her elbow, spinning her around and off balance. She reached out to catch herself, just like she'd done earlier today with Walt. Only this time, there was no urge to pull away when her palms flattened against Todd's hard, broad chest. But the fact that she was pissed, not just angry, downright pissed at Todd, had her jerking away regardless.

Todd didn't let her go though, instead slid his hands up her arm to pull her closer to him.

Her heart lurched in her chest and her mouth went dry.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

She lifted her gaze to his and from the light of her porch saw the regret in his eyes.

"There isn't a woman I'm trying to impress with baking. I made that up."

Kate frowned, stilling in her efforts to free herself. "Why did you say that then?"

"Damn it, to keep *this* from happening." His head blocked out the light as it dipped, and then his mouth crashed down on hers.

Shock ripped through her as his lips masterfully parted hers, his tongue plunging inside to taste her. She couldn't move, couldn't even respond for a moment. Until the tingling began and a liquid heat seeped through her veins, pooling heavily between her thighs.

She was in Todd's arms and he was kissing the hell out of her? How long had she fantasized about this?

Kate kissed him back, pressing her body firmly against his, crushing her breasts against his chest as she gave herself over to the moment. To the power of a chemistry never before acted on. A chemistry that for so long she'd thought would always only be one sided.

He lifted his head, his breathing ragged. His gaze tormented. "Tell me to stop, Kate."

"I can't," she whispered. "I won't."



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