



Safe with Me

Author: *Lynn Rhys*

Category: Erotic, Romance, New Adult

Description: I ran from a monster. A monster I thought was gentle and kind. A monster I thought loved me. I was wrong. So very wrong. I took a bus out west and landed in a small town in Wyoming. Ryker, the town's sheriff, has been helping me to settle in. But I can't get that comfortable, even if things seem quiet around here. I'll keep looking over my shoulder, no matter how safe Ryker thinks he can keep me. I know the monster is waiting in the shadows. Trigger warning: This book contains strong subject matter that may not be suitable for all readers. The topics in this book involve domestic violence, abuse, sexual abuse, profanity and sexual situations. Reader discretion is advised.

Total Pages (Source): 65

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

Prologue

Nicole

“Shit! How the hell were you not paying attention?” I scream at the person standing in front of me. She’s an older lady, probably in her forties and her eyes have gone wide and her mouth hangs open in shock.

“I’m sorry! I really am. I have insurance, so I’m sure we can get this fixed.” The lady begins frantically searching for her insurance card. Whatever insurance she has, I know it won’t be enough.

The car I’m driving, the car she so nicely rear ended into with her Ford F150, is a 2019 Aston Martin DBS Superleggera Coupe. It’s my car, but it’s in my fiancé’s name. That also leaves another problem. Telling my fiancé, Mitchell Wakefield.

My hand moves to my temple, and I can feel the pounding inside my skull. I squeeze my eyes shut and pray that when I open them, this will be nothing but a nightmare. There’s no doubt I’ll be in some serious trouble over this. This woman has no idea the problems she now caused because she didn’t pay attention while driving.

Opening my eyes, I see the accident in front of me. “Fuck! He’s going to be so mad at me.” I realize I said this out loud when the lady answers me.

“Oh, I’m sure he will just be happy to know you’re okay,” she says sweetly. She doesn’t know my fiancé. If it was the Mitchell from five years ago, sure. He would have hugged me, kissed me, and probably babied me until he was sure I was alright.

This lady has no clue how cruel the Mitchell of today can be.

Me and the lady who hit me, whose name I now know as Deanne, trade information before going on our way. Except I don't want to go on my way. I get back in my car, then slide into the black leather seats and start up the car. I let out a huge sigh. I knew I should have just stayed home today. I had a feeling today was going to be a bad day, and this accident only confirmed it.

Now I have to face the music.

Tears start to form, and my lower lip trembles. I know what's waiting for me at home: pain and regret. Nothing good will come of this.

* * *

Waiting for Mitch to come home and tell him is like waiting to hear sentencing from a judge for a crime you committed. You know what's coming; you just don't know how bad it's going to be.

The entire ride home I thought about calling him to let him know just to give him some time to cool off. The only problem was that if he was in a meeting when he took the call, there would be repercussions for disturbing him with such terrible news. So, either way, it was a lose-lose situation for me.

What the hell happened to me? My life doesn't feel like my life anymore. I'm a shell of who I used to be. I dig the heel of my hand into my eyes. My head's still pounding. Somewhere along the way, I gave up; I gave in to the pain and suffering. I let Mitch control every aspect of my life. It was never supposed to be like this.

From upstairs in our bedroom, I can hear the front door shut and Mitch talking loudly on the phone.

I look around our bedroom. I can't really call it ours, I usually sleep alone in it. The room is huge, with dark gray walls decorated in black and white art and plush carpet dotted with espresso furniture. This room, which should be an oasis, is sterile and unwelcoming. None of the design decisions were my choice. Mitch got to have all the say in the colors, or lack thereof.

Our home isn't a sprawling mansion, but it definitely says, "We have money." This place is decorated like a museum. You can't touch anything, only admire the money that went into it all.

Mitch already has plans to move once we marry. He wants to move into NYC, where we would live in a pretentious penthouse that takes up three entire floors. The heart of the city, the heart of where his company is. At the age of thirty-two, he's already CEO of Wakefield Investments. His father, Michael Wakefield, decided to retire early.

As quietly as I can, I make my way downstairs and head towards his office. When I don't hear him talking anymore, I gently knock on the door, waiting for permission to enter.

"Come in," Mitch calls from inside.

Slowly, I open the door and send up a silent prayer. A prayer that he won't be mad about the accident.

"Nicole. How are you doing?" He doesn't even look at me while he talks to me. His eyes stay on his computer as I step up to the room. I turn and close the door behind me. I take a few steps in and then stop, leaving plenty of distance between us.

Mitch is a tall man. He's six foot three, muscular, and feral. He has a mysterious and sexy whim about him. His dark brown hair is short on the sides and long on the top,

but he always has it perfectly gelled back. Even as an asshole, he's a good-looking asshole.

His office is massive. The ceiling is at least thirty feet high, and there are bookshelves built into the walls. The back wall behind his desk is basically one giant window, which overlooks our property. Well, his property and I guess mine by proxy. The office is stuffy and cold, just like the rest of the house. I hate having to be here in this office—and this house.

“Um, I need to talk to you about something. Something happened today.” My voice shrinks with each word.

Mitch's head snaps up, and a crease forms between his brows as his eyes narrow. “What happened?” His voice is cold and distant. Any hope I had of him not being mad at me went out the window with that one question.

“Well, I was out, running some errands ... I got rear ended. Some lady was texting while driving, and she didn't see me stopped at the red light. The car's in the garage, but it will need to be brought in. I have all her insurance information in my purse.” I spill everything I can as fast as I can. His eyes already gleam with rage. His fists curl on top of the desk.

“Did you get a police report?” Mitch growls.

“Well, no. She gave me her insurance information. It was a simple hit, and it doesn't look like that much damage. Nothing the insurance can't take care of, right? I mean, she ran into me.” My voice wavers. His brows pull to the center and a crease forms between them on his forehead. A redness creeps up his neck and I can hear a low growl emanating from him.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“That is a two-hundred-thousand-dollar car. Do you honestly think she has the insurance to cover it? Furthermore, how do you know she didn’t set you up to sue you for something? A police report would have proven you were not at fault.” Mitch stands and walks around to the front of his desk, halting for a minute.

“Okay, I just thought because it didn’t seem that bad that—”

“You thought wrong!” His voice booms in the room, the echo making it louder. I jump at the sound, and my eyes go wide. “That car’s going to cost a fucking lot to fix, Nicole. I can guarantee her insurance won’t cover shit. Not to mention she can concoct a story about how you backed into her. She obviously knows I have money with you driving around in that car.”

Mitch comes charging forward at me, I walk backwards until my back slams into the door. My body trembles as he advances. My hands fly up defensively as I try to stop him from coming towards me.

“Please—” That’s all I get out before I feel the sting of a slap across my face. I can taste the copper in my mouth from the blood.

Mitch grabs my hair and tilts my face up. The grip he has on my hair sends shockwaves of sharp pains through my head. My lip trembles and I open my mouth to silently scream. My skin feels like it’s being ripped from my skull. He slams my head back against the wall. Stars form in front of my eyes as the burning pain throbs from the spot where it met the wall. I close my eyes for a moment to try to refocus my eyes that are now seeing double.

“What the fuck did you just do, Nicole? You opened me up to lawsuits. More importantly, you took out my car and fucked it up.” Mitch’s other hand slinks around my neck, and he squeezes. My eyes shoot open in fear. “Why are you always fucking up? Why can’t you just be a good little girl for me?”

“Y-You ... got ... f-for ... me,” I gasp out between breaths. His grip tightens. It’s at that point I realize I shouldn’t have said anything. I’m fearful he’ll kill me right here, right now. I try clawing at his hand, but he holds it firmly around my neck. Without warning, he releases me. I have a mere second to catch my breath before I feel another sharp pain sear across my face.

“I didn’t tell you to take it out. That’s why we have a fucking driver.” He yanks my hair, making my head tip back. A scream builds in my throat, tears stinging my eyes.

“You don’t take the fucking cars out without my permission. I fucking own you. You do what I say, when I fucking say it. Or maybe I need to make myself clearer.” Mitch brings his hand under my jaw and wraps his hand around my face. The pain overwhelms me as he squeezes my face tightly. His nails digging into my flesh causing pain to radiate from his grip. I can feel the skin tearing from the force of his nail pushing into me. I try to shake my head out of his grip, but he is too strong.

He slams me against the wall. My head is pounding now, between the hair pulling and the impact against the wall. Again, he throws me against the wall, his lips curled into a cruel sneer. Tears stream down my cheeks, burning them from the earlier slaps. I must have a cut, and I’m scared to look.

“I’m so s-sorry. I didn’t m-mean to cause p-problems.” Everything in me shatters. This is not that man I once loved. His anger and rage ... I don’t know who this Mitch is.

“Well, now I have to go get the attorneys on this and fix your fuck-up. We will

continue this talk when I get back from the office.” He reaches into my purse and goes through my wallet to take my credit cards and my driver’s license. He also finds the woman’s information and shoves it into his pocket. “I don’t want you getting any ideas. So, these are mine now.” He walks the credit cards and my driver’s license over to the safe behind his desk and locks them in there.

My entire body hurts, and I’m shivering from the attack. He walks over to me, grabs me by my hair. I ‘m forced to look at Mitch as he jerks my head back. My breathing speeds up and a scream escapes my throat. He pulls me forward against him, and I can feel his nails digging into the back of my head. Bile rises in my throat.

“No more of your stupid ass shit. Stay like a good little bitch, and I will be back in a few hours when I get this handled. Then, you and I are going to continue this conversation.” He pushes me back again, causing me to trip and fall, hitting my head on the hard floor. Mitch looks down at me with an evil curl to his lip. He winks at me as he reaches for the door, opens it and walks out of the office.

I let out a groan and try to catch my breath. My head feels like my skull is going to explode from the inside. I try to take gulps of air, but I feel like there is a weight on my chest.

I can’t do this anymore.

I sit there shaking my head. No more. I can’t take anymore. This isn’t the Mitch I knew. I can’t take the abuse anymore. I can’t keep up the shell of who I am nor who I was.

The haunting look in his eyes, the soulless spheres that bore into me ... He wanted to kill me.

I hear the front door shut, and I run to the master bathroom. I bend over the toilet to

throw up. My body trembles as everything comes up. The fear I live with on a daily basis is too much. I need to end this.

Once there is nothing left in my stomach, I stand up and wash my face, then I stare at myself in the mirror. My red hair is in disarray, tangled and matted from Mitch grabbing and pulling on it. There are dark circles under my eyes. I bring my hand up to the cut on my face and wince in pain. My entire head's throbbing.

I reach down and grab a washcloth from under the counter, then I turn the water on warm and do what I can to clean up the blood. The bruises are already showing. The cuts from his fist stand out on my pale skin. There's more stinging as salty tears mix with blood.

I. Am. Fucking. Done.

My fists curl up as I stare at the beaten image in the mirror. Mitch is supposed to protect me, not hurt me. He's supposed to be my savior, not my tormentor. Mitch is the fucking devil, and I didn't sign up to live in Hell.

For over a year now, I've been plotting my escape. My parents won't believe me, I have no friends to turn to anymore, and I don't even have a career. But what I do have is the money he gave me to live off of.

I didn't need much each week, but I took everything he gave me to stash away. What Mitch thought was "shopping money" was really going to my "get the fuck out of dodge" pile.

Today's the day I get the fuck out of dodge.

I run into the bedroom and in the far corner of the closet, then I move some shoe boxes and uncover my hiding spot. Grabbing my duffle bag that's already packed, I

reach in and pull out my second wallet. In there, I find my new identity complete with a driver's license and social security card that an old friend delivered to me not that long ago.

Cyrus Faulkner's a friend from college; the only person who didn't give up on me when I got locked away in my tower. He deals with hacking and computers, I think. I don't really understand his world. But he knows people and was able to hook me up with a new identity. Enough to get me out of here.

Picking up an envelope stuffed with cash, I pull out enough to pay for a taxi. Everything I do for the next few hours is critical. I need to disappear as careful and as fast as I can.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

I leave my phone and watch on the nightstand. No electronics. Nothing he can try to find me with. I call a taxi from the house phone and wait by the front door.

When the taxi comes, I sprint out house and throw my bag into the backseat. Then, I turn around and flip the house off with both fingers.

“Fuck you!” I scream at the top of my lungs.

“Ma’am, are you okay?” The driver turns to me once I get in. He pales at the sight of my face. His mouth starts to open to say something, but I merely shake my head. I can see his eyes roam over all the bruising and cuts on my face. The man turns back around without saying another word and he starts to pull out of the driveway, getting me the fuck out of here. He doesn’t say I have the taxi take me to the coffee shop closest to the bus station. After I pay him, I hurry and buy myself a few different tickets.

All paid for in cash. All under the name Zoey Krause.

Nicole is no more. She disappeared the minute she said yes to marrying Mitch. She was gone the first time he laid a hand on her. She no longer existed when he forced himself on her. Mitch abused Nicole. He took away her soul, her life, her reason for living. Nicole isn’t here anymore.

Say hello to Zoey, fucker.

Chapter 1

Zoey

I've always wanted to take a road trip. Visit other states, sightsee. Enjoy the wonderful places this country has to offer. But not really like this.

Honestly, I've been on so many buses, and the seats don't get any more comfortable with time. I don't even know how many I've taken at this point. But all this is necessary. I have to do whatever I can to throw Mitch off of any lead he may follow to find me. That's if he even comes looking for me.

I've been traveling by bus out west for two days now. Taking a bus from New York out to Seattle is no joke. Thankfully, no one has mentioned my face and the bruises. After everything, I just want to be left alone.

Sitting back in my seat, I stare out the window since there's little else for me to do. Life of a girl without her phone, I guess. When I get to Seattle, I'll buy myself a cheap one. Honestly, I could use some music right about now.

We passed a sign a while back letting us know we're in Wyoming and my heart rate picked up. The farther I get away from Mitch the better I feel.

I'm getting closer to my destination. Getting closer to starting my new life.

There's no one that I'll miss except my sister, Lisa. She's my best friend. She's someone that I can run to when things get bad. I confided in her so many times, and she always wished she could do something to change what was happening to me. She promised that at some point she would be able to break me out of my hell. But I just couldn't wait for her help.

My parents are the opposite end of the spectrum. They have basically written me off as their daughter. They're awful people. I don't even know how I'm related to them.

When your daughter comes to you and tells you that her fiancé is an abusive asshole, you don't tell her to just 'deal with it'. Yup. That's what they told me to do. I tried to get them to help me leave him, but they wouldn't hear any of it.

They saw dollar signs when I got engaged and Mitch took over his family's business. Something about merging the two into a superpower business or some bullshit like that. I didn't want any part to that world.

I remember a time I went to my mom and told her that Mitch was getting rough with me. This woman had the audacity to tell me that it was probably just because Mitch had a long day at work. Yes, it was okay to use me as a punching bag because he had a bad day. Fuck. That.

I'm no one's punching bag. Not anymore.

I used to have dreams of my own. Aspirations of my own. Instead, I was told I couldn't work and that I needed to stay home for the good of the household image. Again, fuck that.

I couldn't give less of a shit about contacting my parents. They didn't care for my wellbeing, and I don't care if they even break a sweat worrying about me. I do care about my sister, and I wish I could've told her where I was going so she didn't have to worry. But I just can't. I can't risk Mitch trying to pull that information from her.

Then there's trying to find a job that I can survive on. I've got no clue what I'm going to do. But I'll figure it out along the way. As long as I'm away from Mitch, I can do anything.

While the bus is passing through a little town deeper into Wyoming, a loud cranking sound startles me out of my thoughts. We slowly come to a stop on the side of the road. My head snaps up, and my eyes wander around the bus meeting the looks of the

other passengers. My back straightens, and I listen in on the commotion from the other people wondering what is going on. The bus driver throws his hands up in the air as a sign of frustration. He shakes his head as he gets off with another worker to see what they can do to get the bus moving.

We're sitting on the bus for about thirty minutes when the driver comes back on and gets our attention. His face says it all. His brows are furrowed, and his lips are in a thin line. I'm going to take a stab at it and say this isn't his 'I figured it out and the bus will be moving shortly' look.

"Excuse me, if I can have everyone look up this way and quiet down, please," he says over the bus intercom, letting out a deep sigh. "There's no need to panic. The bus broke down, and unfortunately, it's not something we can fix right here, right now. But we can tell you that we have another bus on the way."

Of course, people lose their minds. Tell people not to panic, and people will panic.

"Right here is the town of Weston, but there's no bus depot from this location. So, there's no other way to get a bus other than to wait. I don't really have an idea of how long that'll take, either. So, we can get off the bus, but everyone needs to stay close. We hope to be back on the road soon." The driver turns back to the front, and that's when hands start flying up in the air. People start screaming obscenities at the driver as if it were his fault the bus broke down. Some people are grabbing their items and walking off the bus to avoid the drama.

I don't stick around for the showdown between pissed off passengers and that poor bus driver, either.

Sometimes things happen in life that you just don't expect, and I definitely didn't expect the bus to break down in some remote town in the middle of buttfuck nowhere. Let's face it; I didn't expect to be running away, without a phone, and with

a new name. But here we are.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

As I look out my window, I can see the quaint little town. This place is not at all like New York City, and I love it. Then, my mind starts to rethink my plans. Maybe a big place like Seattle isn't my endgame. Maybe I need a small town like this to hide in. Weston might just be my new home.

I jump off the bus and take a look around. Immediately I smell the air, fresh and clean. It's quieter here too. There's an absence of car horns that I instantly notice. I can hear birds chirping around me. Again, vastly different than home. The sky is a crisp blue, and there is a slight breeze that feels nice on my face after being on a cramped bus. Down the street from where I'm standing, I spot Joan's Diner. My stomach growls the moment my eyes land on the neon sign. It's at that moment I realize I haven't eaten much since yesterday; I was too distracted with getting away. It's definitely time to get some food. With my bag in tow, I start walking.

Towering brick buildings cast shadows on the street from the angle of the sun, and streetlamps line the sidewalk. It seems like a casual place, and no one is really dressed to the nines like NYC. Everyone seems so relaxed and comfortable. Walking up to the diner, I catch my reflection. Shit. The bruises and cuts. While they're better, the bruises are yellowing, and the cuts are still prominent on my face. I pray no one will bring them up.

Keeping my head down, I see there's a section of empty stools at the end of the counter. Perfect, I think. Sitting on the one closest to the wall, I place my bag on the one next to me, warding off anyone that wants to come near me. Straightening, I reach over to grab a menu that's slid in between the condiment bottles.

The diner looks like it was pulled right out of the 1950's. Black and white tile

checkers the floor, and blue and red leather seats fill the interior. White tables with metal edges hold patrons dining on hamburgers and waffles, the usual grub. Pendant lights gleam down while Betty Boop paraphernalia dots the walls. There's even a juke box and an Elvis cardboard cut-out, which makes my lips twitch into a small smile.

"Hi there! You're not from around here, are ya?" Looking up from the menu, I'm greeted by a friendly and very chipper voice. It's from a bouncy blonde with her hair pulled back into a ponytail that sits high up on her head. She's staring at me with a wide grin from behind the counter.

"Hi. Um, no I'm not." My gaze shyly falls back down to the menu.

Her eyes sparkle. "Well, what can I get started for you?"

I look back up at her and ask, "What do you recommend?"

"Hm." She taps her pen on the notepad in her hands. "Can't go wrong with our All-American Cheeseburger or our BLT. Those would be my picks. Oh! Our Club Sandwich is good too." Positive Polly's enthusiasm is killing me.

"A cheeseburger would be good, and extra pickles, please. And a Coke, if you've got it." I give her a soft smile and then look down at my hands.

"Comin' right up, dear!" With that, she saunters away to the open window across from me and gives my order to the kitchen staff.

Taking a look around, I notice this place is filled with town folk. People come in through the door and are instantly greeted by others already in the diner. Patrons are chatting about their day, waving at each other and hugging. It's almost like everyone knows everyone here.

Turning back to my spot, I sit and wonder about my family and Mitch. Not that I give a shit about Mitch, but I'm curious if he even gives half a shit that I left.

I run my hands over my face, hissing when I irritate the cut on my cheek. That's all the reminder I need that I did what was best for me.

I don't even miss him. My heart doesn't even break for him. I miss the life I had before he turned bat shit crazy. My friends, my goals, and everything about who I was. He cut my wings, taking away my ability to soar.

Well, that changes now. This bird's going to fly.

While lost in thought, I don't see the person that comes up and sits in the seat next to my bag.

"Saving the seat for someone?" The deep voice wakes me from my thoughts. I turn my head, and my breath catches.

Staring back at me are the most inviting set of blue eyes. They're mesmerizing. He has a face that can stop you dead in your tracks. My mouth drops open as I take in the stranger next to me.

His jaw is strong and square, his cheekbones high. He has tattoos up and down his left arm, and his shirt hugs every muscle on him—and boy, is he ripped. His hair's dark and cut short on the top and shaved on the sides. This man is sex on legs. He's tall, dark, and fucking handsome.

"Ma'am, are you okay?" The man reaches over and places a hand on my shoulder. I instantly recoil.

"Please don't." I look at his hands as he holds them up in front of him in a non-

threatening manner. “What did you ask me?”

“First, I apologize. Second ... well, originally, I asked you if this seat was taken,” he says with a drawl.

“Oh, no. It’s not. Feel free to sit there.” Turning my head away from his face, I fuss with my hair to try and hide some of the bruises. Because it’s at that moment that I realize he’s an officer.

Fuck.

“You aren’t from around here. My name is Ryker Holliday. Sheriff Ryker Holliday, actually. And you are?” He holds out his hand again, his expression kind.

Staring at him, I hesitate, not sure if I want to make nice with the locals. Then again, he’s the sheriff, so I probably should. I reach out to take his hand in my own. “Zoey. Zoey Krause.” The second we touch, I feel the zap of the electricity coursing through my veins. Quickly, I pull it away.

“So, uh, just need to ask. Are you okay, ma’am?” The sheriff leans in closer to me.

My head snaps away. I bite my lip and then take a deep breath. “Can you please not call me ma’am? That makes me feel old. And why are you asking if I’m okay?” His closeness allows me to take in his scent. It’s a woody aroma. Sandalwood, maybe?

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

He leans in a little closer, his eyebrows pulling down and his lips forming a thin line. “Well, you have some cuts and bruises. I just want to make sure you’re alright.”

“Oh. Oh! No, I’m fine.” I wave my hand around in the air, exaggerating my lie. “Fell off a ladder cleaning out my gutters back home. That’s all.”

“Fell off a ladder back home? Where’s back home?” He tilts his head to the side. It’s then I notice a toothpick sitting on his ear. I don’t know why it catches my attention, but it does. I shake myself out of my stupor.

“Uh, New York.”

“All the way out here from that big city? What brings you out this way?” Without even having to order, the waitress brings out a burger and fries for Ryker. He gives her a nod. “Thank you.”

The waitress turns back to the window behind her and grabs the steaming plate waiting. She smiles at me as she slides my food in front of me. I smile and thank her.

“So?” he presses, munching on a fry.

“Um, just needed a change.” I give him a lazy smile and turn back to my cheeseburger, absently playing with my bun. “I was on my way out to Seattle, but I kind of like it here. Might stay here for a minute.”

“Hm. Yeah. Weston’s a good place, small town, home to a lot of good people.” He takes a sip of his water, glancing at me from over the glass rim. Even though I’m not

looking at him, I can feel him staring at me. “Where are you staying at?”

“Well, no idea yet. The bus I was on broke down. Decided this was fate. So, I’m flying by the seat of my pants at this point.” I shrug.

“There’s a bed and breakfast around the corner. Dawson’s B&B. They can give you place to lay your head until you find a more permanent situation.” He wipes his mouth and turns his entire body to face me from his barstool.

I nod. “Thank you. I’ll check that out. Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.” Ryker nods.

My gaze lowers in shame. “Is there a place I can go and get a cell phone?”

“You don’t have a phone?” His eyes narrow at me.

“Uh, no. Lost it somewhere along the trip. Just figured I would get one when I got to Seattle, but since I’m stopping here for a while, I need to get one.”

“Sure. Well, there’s a general store down the main road. You can get a phone from there. They have pretty much everything.”

“Thanks. I’ll grab one from there.” I remove the top bun of my burger and pull off a pickle and eat it. I hear a shuffle next to me and see that the sheriff is pushing his plate away and getting up from his seat.

“Julie, this is for my lunch and hers. I’ll see you later.” He waves to the waitress, who I guess is named Julie, not Positive Polly.

“Wait ... no ...” I start to protest, but he simply turns and walks out.

“Thanks, Sheriff Holliday!” Julie calls from the other end of the counter. She nods to me and smiles. My lips quirk up in response; I can’t help it.

I reach for my fries and shove a couple in my mouth. I pick at the burger until I don’t feel like eating anymore. Rubbing my fingers in circles on my head, I sigh.

Maybe I should just keep moving to Seattle. The small town appeals to me in case Mitch comes looking, but they obviously notice outsiders. Being on the sheriff’s radar isn’t what I’m going for.

Ryker already saw my cuts and bruises. Of course, I jumped when he touched me. He already felt me out for what I was doing here. I know of all the people in this place, he doesn’t buy the shit I’m selling. I’m like a walking red flag.

Worse is the fact that he’s incredibly handsome and charming—and sexy. Can’t forget sexy.

Sheriff Ryker Holliday is going to be trouble for me.

Chapter 2

Zoey

Tonight’s been a rough night. It’s three in the morning, and I’m crying on the floor of the bedroom. Alone. I’m all alone. Even though that’s what I wanted, this isn’t how my life was supposed to go.

I’m not supposed to be in some small town in the middle of butt fuck Wyoming with a new name hiding from an abusive asshole of a fiancé. Well, ex-fiancé. I’m twenty-seven years old. I should be living my best life. Instead, I sit here, haunted.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

The nightmares keep me from sleeping. The nightmares where I did something to make him mad and he attacks me. The ones where Mitch finds me here. He does horrible things to me, and I can't fight him off. He ends up draining the life from me.

I wipe the tears from my face. Sniffling, I remember what we used to have. Mitch used to be so gentle, so caring. He held me at night, kissed me in the morning, and made love to me. The change was so sudden, I felt like I had whiplash. Without warning, he backhanded me one night because I didn't want to go out. I was sick and throwing up. The last thing I wanted to do was dress up and spend time with stuffy people from his job.

Mitch didn't care. He had a reputation to uphold, and I needed to fall in line, as he told me.

The change happened right after he took over his dad's company and he proposed to me. He went from talking about things with me to keeping me in the dark. He got along with my parents more than he ever did before. Mitch stopped sleeping in our bed every night, claiming he had work.

He became a monster. He went from the man I dreamed about spending the rest of my life with to the darkness I saw in my nightmares. He did things to me that were unfathomable. Took what he didn't have a right to take when he wanted to. Abused me countless times.

No one would help me, which was a lot worse.

So, that's when I took things into my own hands. Stole a little money here and there

from him. His family and him were so loaded, he never noticed it. I saved up to escape the prison I was in. Got myself a fake ID to get me where I needed to go.

And that seemed like the best move, still does, but now I'm here.

Alone.

When you're alone, it's easier for the memories to attack. The quiet allows my mind to remember every little thing that happened.

My tears fall as I recount the numerous times he hurt me. The times his eyes went black with hatred. No matter how many times I begged, it only made it worse.

"Mitch please, I'm sorry. I didn't know you needed me to pick up the dry cleaning. You didn't say anything this morning." My hands are in front of me, trying to help keep the distance between me and his hatred.

"Why should I have to tell you what you're supposed to do? Is this the first time you've met me? You know I need certain suits for certain days. What the fuck have you been doing all day?" he roars.

"I went to see my sister. I haven't seen her in a couple of weeks." Tears are free falling from my eyes. "We needed some bonding time."

"Fuck your sister! You're going to be my wife. I come fucking first!" Mitch raises his hand and backhanded me across the face. "Everything's fucked up because of you! You stupid fucking bitch!"

Mitch grabs me by the hair and pulls me to a standing position. His hands go around my throat. I can still breathe but his grip is tight.

“S-Sorry. P-Please,” I croak out.

“Oh, you will be sorry, Nicole. I don’t know why I waste my time with you.” Letting go of my throat and slapping my face, he throws me against the side of the bed, face down.

“No, Mitch, please!” I scream.

“You need to be taught a lesson. I get whatever the fuck I want. You only obey me! You’re still here because I let you be here. The Wakefields own you. You’re mine.” That sends chills down my spine. His words are vile.

My pants and underwear are torn off me.

“Please! No!” My heart rate picks up. “Please, don’t.”

Mitch says nothing, and my cries go unanswered. My vision’s blurry, and my body shakes. I hear him unzip his pants, and every part of me goes into fight or flight mode.

I black out, not wanting to know what’s happening to me.

The man that was supposed to love me and protect me was an evil human being. I never saw it coming. It’s like a switch was flipped.

Mitch and I met in college even though our family were friends. We just never crossed paths before then. I didn’t attend the “functions” my parents went to. My sister, Rachel, did all that. She’s four years older than me, and she had an interest in the galas and fundraisers. My parents never pushed me, and I didn’t offer to go. So, we never had the opportunity to cross paths.

Mitch was working towards his MBA, and I was studying to become a teacher. He was so supportive of my career choice in the beginning. He never balked at me pursuing my dream of teaching. He would tell me how great I would be with kids and help me study for exams.

There wasn't a time that I could even remember us fighting. Mitch was so attentive, so kind. He always opened doors for me and took me on dates. He treated me like a queen. We hung out with our friends and had great times. I was put first in his life, until I wasn't.

Part of me is still fearful he will find me and drag me back to New York. Mitch is a vindictive asshole who will go to the ends of the earth to prove a point. I'm hoping I won't be that point.

Running my hands through my hair, I look around at the room. There are doilies everywhere covering every piece of mismatched furniture the bed and breakfast had decided to put in here. The walls are covered in rooster wallpaper with hanging pictures of barns and tractors . I let out a small laugh. I went from a sterile bedroom to a farm invasion.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

Wiping the last of my tears, I crawl back up on the bed and get under then blankets. My body's tired, and I don't have any more tears to cry. There's a black hole where my heart used to be, destroyed by evil. I just need some good in my life.

My thoughts then drift back to Ryker. He's going to throw a wrench in my plans of laying low, I just know it. But there's something else about him, something in those eyes. The jolt I felt when I touched his callused hands. My nerve endings felt every spark from that contact alone. I close my eyes and picture those crystal blue saucers staring at me.

Eventually, I find my sleep.

* * *

The light pours in from the window. I roll over and look at the clock on the nightstand to see that it's only seven in the morning. As much as I want to sleep, I really need to get up and get started on putting my life back together. I get up and dress, making my way downstairs to see where the nearest coffee shop is.

"Oh! Good morning, Zoey. How did you sleep?" Rose Dawson's at the stairs when I come down. She owns the place, and she's a nice older lady who didn't ask too many questions last night about my appearance even though I know she wanted to. She had a look of concern on her face yesterday, but she just allowed me to be.

I stop at the end of the stairs. "Good. I slept good. Um, is there a coffee shop here?"

"The diner. That's about all we have. The next town over has one of those chain ones,

but it's a bit of a drive just for coffee, if you ask me." Rose smiles at me and she clasps her hands in front of her.

"Yeah, no car. So, diner it is. Thanks Rose." I swing past her and out the door. I throw on my new earbuds and walk down the street and around the corner to the diner.

Today's a beautiful day, and the atmosphere out here makes it even more beautiful. The sky is the bluest sky I've ever seen, and the air smells fresh. I can see the mountains from where I stand, and it's breathtaking. There's so much green around me. Trees, grass, bushes. All of this is so surreal. It's all so calm.

I close my eyes for a moment and take a deep breath. The air is so much different out here. Finally, I feel like I can breathe. Not sure if it's because of the location I'm in or because I'm out of Mitch's hands. Maybe a little of both.

Once I get to the diner, I go in and walk over to an open booth. Hopefully, this will be enough to hide me from everyone's stares.

"Hi there! You must be the new girl in town that everyone's talking about. My name is Joan, and I own this here diner. Welcome!" She places her hand on the table. "So, what can I get you to drink?" Joan smiles and leans towards me. Well, so much for not being noticed. The whole town already knows about me.

"Hi, Joan. I'm Zoey. I would love a cup of coffee, please." I place my hands in my lap.

"Absolutely. Here, take a look at the menu and let me know when you're ready to order, dear." Joan places her hand on my shoulder, and I recoil and gasp. She immediately pulls back her hand. "Sorry, dear. Didn't mean to scare you."

She hesitates and then turns to go get my coffee.

I give her a small smile as she walks away. “It’s okay, just took me by surprise.”

Holding up the menu, I scan it and see if anything pops out at me. I’m so busy looking at the menu that I don’t hear someone sneak up on me and sit at my table.

“So, whatcha thinkin’ of getting?”

“Oh my God!” The menu goes flying across the table, and my hand immediately goes to my heart. It takes all I can gather to just keep from almost jumping out of the booth.

“Nope, just me. But thanks for the compliment.” Ryker sits there and grins at me while I try to gain back my composure.

“What the fuck was that for? Could you not just get my attention by not scaring the shit out of me?” I seethe. My breathing is still fast, and my body is shaking.

“Now where would the fun be in that? Besides, you were studying that menu way too hard. The best breakfast here is the pancakes.” He waves Joan over and orders us both exactly that.

That’s when I realize my coffee is placed in front of me as well. Man, I’m apparently in my own little world. That, or I’m still exhausted. Which I am.

Ryker stares at me, making me really uncomfortable. We sit there silently until he breaks the tension with a question. “Did you know that a chicken farmer’s favorite car is a coupe?”

I blink. “Did you just make a joke?”

“Why, yes, I did. And you didn’t even laugh. I’m kind of hurt, Zoey.” He feigns being hurt and places his hand over his heart.

“Well, I’ll laugh when you get better jokes. Preferably ones that don’t sound like really bad dad jokes.”

His eyebrows shoot up, “Dad jokes? Oh, come on. It wasn’t that bad!”

I let out a little chuckle. “Sure. Keep telling yourself that.” I turn to look out the window and watch all the people starting their day here in Weston.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

We again fall silent. And yet again, Ryker speaks first. “So, Zoey, are you still thinking of staying here in Weston?” Ryker places his arms out in front of him and rests them on the table. He links his hands together and leans forward a bit.

From where I sit, I can see all the detail in the tattoos on his left arm. There are roses that surround an angel looking up. There are some roman numerals and broken clocks, but I can’t see the rest. It’s hidden under his uniform shirt.

“Zoey?” He waves his hand in front of me. “My eyes are up here.” His lip curls upwards.

I narrow my eyes at him and shake my head. “Yeah, I think I’m going to stay.” I pause. “I guess I need to find a more permanent place to live and a job. But yeah, I think I like it here.” I look down at my hands. My mouth curls up in a slight smile thinking about the fresh start. I’m scared to death, but I can do this. This a jumpstart to my new life.

“Well, we have some places available out here to rent, but as far as a job, the diner here is always looking for help.” He taps his fingers on the table and then tilts his head a bit. “Have you ever worked on a ranch before?” Before I can respond, Joan comes back with our breakfast.

“Thank you.” I say to Joan as she sets the plate in front of me and gives me a smile.

“You’ll love these, dear. They’re the best. Enjoy.” She saunters off and winks at Ryker.

I take a look at the soft, fluffy pancakes stacked in front of me and lick my lips at the sight. I look up, about to grab the syrup, only to find Ryker is already holding it out for me. “Thanks.”

He smiles. “Of course.”

As I douse my pancakes with syrup, I answer his question from earlier. “So, no. Never worked at a ranch. It’s not like they’re easy to come by in NYC.” Pausing, I take a bite of my pancakes. The minute I shove the buttery slice into my mouth, I let out a moan. The warm soft texture with the sweetness of the syrup set off an explosion in my mouth. “Okay, these pancakes are seriously the best I’ve ever had.” Moaning, I shove another bite of the fluffy cakes into my mouth.

Ryker, who is staring holes into me, clears his throat and breaks eye contact with me. “Well, uh, we’re always looking for a little help. You know, we also have a small little house on the land that you can stay in. It can at least give you somewhere to stay for now.”

“I’m not a charity case. Besides, I’ve never worked on a ranch. I don’t even know how to work on one or what kind of work you do there or what animals are on ranches. I don’t think I’d be a good fit. I’ve only dealt with kids.” My eyes go wide as I realize my little slip.

“You’ve dealt with kids?” Ryker tilts his head to the side, studying me. Shit.

“Um, yeah. I was a teacher. Little kids. Elementary school.” I turn and look out the window.

“You know, our elementary school out here is probably looking for teachers. You could always do that.” Ryker continues to eat while gauging my reactions.

Like I said, this man's going to be an issue. He's looking at me like he's trying to read my mind or stare deep into my soul for answers. Of course I'd attract the attention of someone like him. Someone who likes to solve puzzles, mysteries. Isn't that what I am here? One giant mystery?

"Yeah, no. I need a change in my career. So, I don't want to teach," I lie. There's nothing more that I'd rather do than teach. I loved my job, I loved my students. But with the name change I took on to hide, my actual teaching license is null and void.

"Hm, all right. Well, it's not a charity thing. The ranch hand position is always open. It's only a couple of days during the week. We're always looking for more help because it's a lot to take care of. As far as the house goes, I'm just trying to help you. Besides, it's my house, so I can let whoever I want live there." He pauses as if he's letting that last little bit of information sink in. "Look, I can take you down there, if you want. You can check it out for yourself." Ryker pushes his plate to the side and sits back in his seat.

He's staring at me, looking over me like he's trying to figure me out. I merely nod and continue eating.

The next few days are going to be a bit rough. Somehow, I need to find a job and a place to stay. All while staying hidden from Mitch.

Maybe hiding on a ranch will give me the privacy and safety I need.

Chapter 3

Ryker

From the moment I spotted her in the diner, I knew she was hiding from something or someone. Her bruised skin and cuts gave that away. I don't buy the story she told me,

especially about losing the phone. I know better.

The idea that someone laid hands on her fills me with a rage I've never experienced before. When I saw those marks on her yesterday, I had to do everything I could to contain myself.

Zoey's absolutely beautiful. Her long red hair falls to the middle of her back, and her pale skin allows her freckles to pop. Her lips are full, and her eyes are a beautiful red color I've never seen before. They match her hair. She's a vision.

I could tell she struggled with whatever was going on with her. She seems broken. Her light's been dimmed. Zoey looks like a fallen angel. Her soul is broken. Something eats at her, and I know it has to do with whoever or whatever she's hiding from.

I tried to get her to talk, pull information out of her. Get her to give me something I can go on. When I got back to the station after meeting her, I ran her name through my databases, and there's no one by the name of Zoey Krause from the Big Apple. She doesn't exist. Fake name. She's obviously scared, but she's doing her best to try and hide it.

I could find out who she is easily. There are so many ways, but something in me tells me I need to get her to trust me enough to tell me. That there's more to the story than a simple identity change to run from her old self.

If anything, my instincts are usually right. Usually. The one time I didn't listen to them ...

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

I shake my head and focus my mind back on the red-headed beauty.

So, who is this broken soul?

That's why I told her about the diner and offered her the job at the ranch and a place to stay at the house. I know she'll be safe both on the ranch and here in the diner. She's surrounded by people my family trusts—and me, of course. That also allows me to keep a close eye on her. Figure her out, find out who she really is.

“So, you want to get out of here and go see my family's ranch?” Smiling at her, I pull the toothpick from my ear and pop it in my mouth.

“I don't know. I mean, I don't really know you.” Zoey's brows push together to form a forehead crease on her really cute face.

I bark out a laugh. “Darlin', I'm the sheriff. If you're safe with anyone, it's me.”

“Not true. I've seen movies. Besides, you're human. Just because you have a badge doesn't mean you're automatically safe,” she bites back.

Chuckling, I nod. “Well, stranger danger I guess, sure. But don't you think we're a little past that? I mean, we had lunch together yesterday, breakfast today. I think these dates are going well.” My lips curl up in a smile. Her head snaps to me, and I know I got a rise out of her. Her face turns red, and her eyes go wide and start looking around the diner.

She whispers loudly, “A date? Are you crazy? You sat next to me yesterday,

apparently not taking the hint that I wanted to be left alone. And today you sneak into my booth, that I was sitting at alone, and scare the ever-loving shit out of me. This isn't a fucking date." Zoey shakes her head.

She's a firecracker, this one. In two seconds, I have her riled up. I rub my hands together in excitement, then I clear my throat and turn serious. "Question for you." I look at her, and she nods. "Why did Adele cross the road?"

"Oh my God!" Her eyes go wide and throws her hands up.

"To say hello from the other side." I laugh, and Zoey puts her head in her hands.

"Those are so bad!" she cries, gesturing towards me. "You have to stop. Just stop with those." She cracks a smile, and it's one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen.

"So, how about we get out of here, and I can take us on our third date at the family ranch? I'll even take you horseback riding." I grin from ear to ear as I wait for her response.

"No. I don't want to give you the impression that I like you. So no, I'll pass." Zoey lets out a huff, her lips forming into thin line.

"No? You're passing up a horseback riding date?" I scoff and continue to tease her. "What do you need? Fancy restaurant? Dressed to the nines?"

Her body stiffens, and she looks down at her hands. It's then I know I've said something that stung her.

I study her for a minute to see if she gives anything else away. She's a tough nut to crack. She's let a couple of things slip, but I can tell she didn't mean to give that bit

of information away. She'll usually purse her lips together and widen her eyes when she lets a clue drop.

When she has her walls up, Zoey fidgets more, like she's trying to keep herself from giving up whatever else she's holding on to.

"Oh, come on. I'm only teasing you. I won't count this as a date because we'll be seeing my parents. That's just awkward." My hand slaps the table softly in front of her, and I smile.

"Ugh. You're frustrating. You know that?" she snaps through clenched teeth.

"Only getting started, darlin'."

"Don't you have anyone else to bother? Someone to arrest? A cow to go shoo off the road?" Her eyes narrow.

I look out the window and glance around, then turn back to her. "Nope."

"Ugh!" she growls. She looks around the restaurant and realizes everyone is looking at us. "Um, Ryker, why is everyone staring?"

"Fresh meat." I wink at her and clack my tongue against my mouth. Then I let out a laugh.

She seems taken aback by that. "Fresh meat? What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"It's a joke, darlin'. It's because you're new in town. That's all. This isn't like the big cities where you can get lost and hide. Out here, people will know when someone new is in town. They will talk and gossip about you. Since you're new, you're the

daily gossip for now until something else comes along.”

She grabs the sides of her head and pulls on her hair. “Again, shouldn’t you be working?” Zoey demands.

“I am.” Leaning on the table, I place my elbow on the top of it and rest my head on my hands.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“So, sitting here eating breakfast, telling me horrible jokes, and trying to get me to go on a date with you is working?”

“First off, my jokes are awesome. Secondly, no, taking care of our newest resident is my job. Making sure she gets settled in with a place to stay is.” I shrug and take a sip of my coffee. “I mean, if there was a cow in the road or a bad guy to arrest, then you would be on your own. But as of right now, you have my full attention.” She absolutely has my attention. Her feisty attitude is turning out to be quite the turn-on. So much so that I’ve had to shift in my pants a few times to get myself under control.

Zoey bites her lip and fidgets in her seat. “Look, if I agree to go with you to the ranch, would you leave me alone after that? I really didn’t want to make waves. I wanted low-key.”

“Hm, no. I won’t agree to anything. But why low-key?” I know why she wants to remain off the radar, but I need to hear her say it.

Zoey growls, “Because I just wanted a do-over. A fresh start. I can have one of those, right? Is that okay with you, sheriff?” Her hands form into fists on the table.

“You can do whatever your little heart desires. I was simply asking a question.” I hold up my hands in mock surrender.

Zoey sits there for a while, staring out the window. It gives me time to study her. The way her hair falls in front of her face and how she blows up at it to move it instead of using her hands. Her eyes are constantly moving, like she’s looking for something.

She bites her lip when she's lost in thought. Her face makes little movements, almost like she's having a conversation with herself. I've also noticed her hand movements. Zoey rubs them together, like she is wringing them out.

"So, do you want to head to the ranch now, Zo?" I cock my head to the side and wait for the response, not letting up on my staring.

Her head snaps back to me. "Ugh. Fine. Also, it's Zoey."

"Sure, Zo." I chuckle when I see her throw her hands up.

With that, I take out my wallet but Zoey has thrown down money for her. I pick it up and hand it back to her.

"What are you doing?" She scrunches her face in confusion as she takes the money from my hand.

"A gentleman never lets a woman pay for food on a date." Smiling, throw down some money and glance at her out of the corner of my eyes and get the reaction I was hoping for.

"This was not a date!" Her fists are clenched at her sides.

"Sure, whatever you want to call it then." Laughing, I head out to my SUV. She follows behind me not long after. I see her biting her lip and I hear her huffing as she shaking her head. I'm sure she has some internal war going on in her head.

Standing next to the passenger door, I hold the handle and turn to her. "Two windmills are standing in a wind farm. One asks, 'What's your favorite kind of music?' The other says, 'I'm a big metal fan.'"

Her hands go to her hips and her eyes narrow at me. “Do you have a book of bad jokes and puns that you carry around with you?”

I simply smile and open the door. “Let’s go, princess. Scoot up into there, and let’s get a move on.” Zoey shoots me another scowl, and I laugh as I shut the door and make it over to the driver’s side.

We pull out and start driving down Weston Road, which is the main road in this town. People see me driving down the road and wave. I hold my hand, giving them a small wave back. Weston is a small town, everyone knows everyone.

I turn my head and see she’s staring out the passenger window. “I need to stop at the station really quick, if you don’t mind,” I tell her.

“Well, you’re supposed to be working, aren’t you? Not escorting me around town?” Zoey doesn’t turn my way when she talks, but the corner of her lip turns up in a slight smile. This girl has a bit of fight in her. It really turns me on. Again, I find myself willing my dick to calm down.

“Like I said, if a cow wanders into the road or someone gets locked in their barn, you’ll be the first to know.” I chuckle and continue driving towards the station.

Once we pull up, I nod at her and tell her to follow me in. The station’s small and perfect for this size of town. We have a few holding cells and a couple deputies that help patrol over Weston and a couple other small rural towns around us.

Honestly, I really don’t need to stop in; I just want to rile her up a little more and drag out the time we spend together. We walk through the front double doors into a small lobby that has a wall and a glass partition that divides the lobby from the office part of the station. We have a dispatcher sitting behind the window partition to help anyone that comes in. I wave to Marley, our dispatch and turn left down a corridor to

a door that requires a code to be punched in. Once through the door I head into the open area where some of the desks sit.

“Hey, boss man.” Deputy Shawn Johnson waves from his desk. “What are we booking this one for?” He nods towards Zoey as he says the words.

Laughter rolls out of me. Zoey stares at him like he has three heads, all while turning red from embarrassment. “She’s not getting booked. This here is Zoey, the new girl in town.” I saunter over to my desk in my office as she follows.

“Oh, shit. I mean, sorry. Hi, ma’am. Deputy Shawn Johnson.” He reaches out and offers her his hand.

“Hi. Nice to meet you.” She doesn’t take his hand. If anything, she curls tighter into herself. Zoey merely nods and looks away. Johnson pulls back, his eyes find me and he tilts his head in confusion.

Looking back at Johnson, I shrug my shoulders. I’m not sure what’s going on with her, but I will make it my mission to find out.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“So, whatcha doing here, boss?” Johnson turns his attention back to me.

“Nothing. Just came in to check and make sure everything’s okay. Also, to let you know I will be up at the ranch if you need me.”

I hear a groan beside me. “Couldn’t you just call that in, sheriff?” Zoey bites, overhearing the conversation.

I smirk and look over at Johnson, who’s enjoying the conversation already. “I could’ve, but I didn’t want to.” Chuckling, I sit down at my desk and turn to face her. “Besides, with a proper date, I would take you places. So, I took you here.” I hold my arms out.

Zoey’s face turns red and her mouth drops open. After a beat she finds her words. “Seriously?” She lets out a long sigh. “Thanks anyway for the help, I need to get going.” She spins on her heels and heads towards the door.

“Stop, Zo,” I bark. She halts where she stands, not turning around. Johnson gives me the “you have your hands full” look. I nod, agreeing with him. I stand up and walk over to her. I hover my hand next to her back, not touching her. I stretch my other arm out towards the door.

“Let’s go, princess.” There’s a slight hesitation before she stomps off. She closes her eyes and shakes her head and comes back to reality.

“Finally!” Zoey throws her arms up.

We get back in the truck and head back out onto the main road. I sneak a glance at my feisty passenger. She pulls up her legs up under her and turns to look out the window. She taps on door handle as she tucks her other hand around her waist.

“You okay there, Zo?”

“Yeah. It’s Zoey, and I’m fine. Just taking it all in.” She sniffles.

“Want to talk about it?”

“No, I really don’t.” She shakes her head, not moving her eyes from window next to her.

“All right.” What more could I say?

Her cuts and bruises worry me. She’s running from whoever did that, and I need to figure it out before they find her.

In the meantime, I just have to keep her in my sights. She’s going to probably hate me, but there’s something telling me that I need to keep her safe. Whoever it is, they will come looking for her.

And they may find her, but they won’t get her. They will have to go through me.

Chapter 4

Zoey

I’m in hell, sitting next to a demi-god. A man who broke the mold of sexy. There should be a law to limit the amount of sex appeal that comes from him. Ryker is also genuinely kind. He’s a man who in one hand seems to want to help me. I mean,

Ryker is helping me find a place to stay, even offering his place to me. Then in the other, he seems to like to get me riled up and get a reaction from me.

Oh, and then there are the jokes. Those are a hell all on their own. Well, okay, maybe I like them just a little. But I will never tell Ryker that.

Ryker keeps trying to dig for answers, and I know he won't stop, either. But I just can't give him any. If for any reason I tell him who I really am and he tries to look into me and my past, that could send up the signals and let Mitch know where I'm at. I can't be certain that Mitch has moved on. For all I know, he could be scouring the internet and databases looking for me. Well, the old me.

There's something about him, though. I just can't put my finger on it. My gut's telling me to trust him and let him in on everything.

His eyes. When I look into his eyes, there's a sense of safety and security there. I mean, he looks scary, but when I look into his eyes, I see more. What's that saying? "Eyes are the window to the soul" or something? Something inside me tells me I can trust him.

But then I shake that idea right out of my head. I really can't trust my instincts anymore. Mitch was a great guy until he wasn't. So, I just need to keep to myself and become a loner.

"What do you call a bee that can't make up its mind?" Ryker pauses. I turn to him, glaring. "A maybe."

"Ugh. That was so bad. Do you actually get anyone to laugh?"

"My mom, some of the ladies at the diner, my dad ..."

“Yeah, your dad. Of course your dad. You probably stole them from him since they’re horribledad jokes!”

Ryker lets out a deep, sexy laugh. Oh, god, that laugh. We drive in silence for a minute before he waves his hand around at the open land around us.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“So, this town was established by Willam G. Weston in 1886. He moved out west from Ohio,” Ryker explains, starting to ramble. “He loved the people out here, so he decided to live here. Honestly, everyone in Weston is really nice. It’s a wonderful little town.”

“Will there be a quiz at the end of this? Just want to know if I need to take notes,” I sarcastically ask him.

“Are you going to draw on your notebook our initials with a heart around it? Replace your last name with mine? Zoey Holliday. Practice your signature for when we’re married?” Ryker smiles and laughs. God, he’s so frustrating. “Anyway, before I was so rudely interrupted, Weston was a rancher too. He loved this area so much that he bought land and established the Weston Ranch. Later on, this area became the Weston you know and love.”

He winks at me, making the same clacking noise with his tongue that he did in the restaurant.

“His ranch is not too far from ours, which is about ten minutes from the town. We’re technically neighbors, the Holliday and Weston ranches. The Westons are good people. Our families have been friends for decades. They’re mostly a horse ranch, and we’re a cattle ranch. We have other animals on the ranch, and a few dogs and cats. A couple of times a month, we have a weekend where kids can come and visit with the animals. Go on horse rides, feel some of the others. They enjoy it. I think you’ll like it there.”

“Yeah, it sounds nice.” We fall into a silence. I turn to stare out the window again. As

the small buildings turn into open landscapes, my thoughts go to my life I knew before I lost myself.

I remember when I was a little kid, I always had dreams of becoming a teacher. There was something about watching kids learn that made me feel proud, happy even. When I got older, I knew elementary school was where I wanted to be. They were these little personalities that were so interesting to teach and learn from.

Until I had to give it up.

My heart was broken the day Mitch told me I needed to leave my career. I wanted to fight it, but I knew it was useless. I loved him, and he thought it was best. Even after talking with my parents, they agreed with Mitch. There was nothing I could do. So, I left teaching.

I cried for days. I felt like a piece of me was ripped from my heart. Mitch insisted it would get better, but it never did.

As I thought about it, if I worked on the ranch, I could possibly help with teaching the kids about the ranch. Well, I'd have a lot to learn myself at first, but it's a possibility. Maybe I could feel a little like myself by doing that.

The car turns, and it snaps me from my thoughts. I see a sign on the side of the road as we turn. Holliday Ranch. Looking out the front window, my mouth drops. The ranch is freaking beautiful. Mountains lay far in the distance beneath the blue sky, and the sun illuminates wide, grassy areas full of animals.

"We even have a small little lake at the back of the property near my house." Ryker turns to me smiling, knowing that I'm already falling in love with what's around me.

"This is so beautiful." Sitting up straighter, I try to take in everything. I roll down the

window as Ryker slowly drives along the road. The wind whips my hair around, and I look up at the endless mountains. This isn't a view I'd see in New York.

We continue a little ways down the gravel road before I see a beautiful ranch house come into view.

“That right there's my parents' house. That house has been in our family for sixty years. It's had a lot of work done over the years and expansions and remodels, but it's still ours,” Ryker says with pride. “Also if you look over there across from the house, you can see our little store. My mom usually works there. Town folk come up and get some fresh food from the ranch every day. It's not much, but the community loves it.”

As we get closer, I can see the main house in greater detail. The exterior is painted white, and the front door is a stark contrast, being a bright royal blue color. A wrap-around porch holds a cute little swing, and a border collie wags its tail as soon as it spots Ryker's car.

“That's Dog under the swing there,” Ryker says as he parks the SUV.

“Aw, I see that. What's the pup's name?”

He deadpans. “Dog.”

“Dog? You named your dog, Dog?” My eyebrows shoot up.

“Well, long story short, we all couldn't agree on a name. And since it took so long to find a name, Dog was used to just being called ‘Dog.’ So, ‘Dog’ it was. The other dog's name is ‘You’. She's a golden retriever.” Ryker gives me an incredibly sexy smile that makes my stomach flutter a little.

“Let me guess, couldn’t decide on a name, so ‘Hey You’ stuck?”

“You catch on pretty fast,” he teases.

“So, is your cat named Kitty?”

He shakes his head, growing serious. “No, his name is Bear.”

There’s nothing I can say to that, so I simply shake my head and hop out of the SUV. As I wait for Ryker to make his way over to me, I see a woman coming out of the front door of the house.

“Ryker! My boy!” she yells as she comes running over.

“Hi, Ma.” He hugs his mom and gives her a kiss. He holds her tight for a moment and then lets her go to turn to me.

“Ma, this here is Zoey Krause. Zo, this is my mom, Jennifer Holliday.” Jennifer’s absolutely beautiful. She has chestnut hair and caramel eyes. She’s a little taller than my five-foot-three stature, but we both look miniature standing next to Ryker.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

My hands are in my pockets, trying to avoid being touched. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Holliday.” Before I can react, she pulls me into a hug. My body goes stiff, and I suck in my breath.

“First, we hug around here. Second, it’s Jen. None of this Mrs. Holliday stuff. So, you’re the new person everyone has been yammering about?” She turns to me as she talks to me with a bit of a country twang.

“Yeah, I guess.” I nod stiffly, shooting a sidelong glance to Ryker to help me. Before he can say anything, Jen pulls away.

“How do you like it out here? Beautiful, right? Where you from?” Jen starts rapid firing off questions, but I tune them out. My entire body feels like it’s on fire. I can’t remember the last time someone hugged me.

Ryker, sensing my apprehension, interrupts her, “Ma. Let’s not overwhelm her, please. I’m going to show her around. She needs work and a place to stay, so I thought I would give her this as an option.” Ryker comes and stands closer to me, his hand hovering on my lower back. He isn’t touching me, but I can feel the heat from his hand.

It’s a protective stance, one I appreciate. Already, Ryker understands I’m not ready to be touched. He doesn’t know why, but he’s aware of my boundary. But the hand hovering lets me know he’s there.

I need my boundaries more now than ever and especially with this man.

“Okay, okay. I’m gonna go put on some tea and get some food out. You show her around. Go.” She smiles and takes off back towards the house.

“Come on. Let me show you the horse stable.” We start walking past the main house when Ryker points in the direction of what I thought was another house.

“That’s a horse stable?” I stop walking and raise my eyebrows at him.

“Yup. Pretty nice one.” He cracks a smile at me and winks, making that clicking noise with his tongue. “They have that whole area behind there to run around in. They don’t go far, though. They’re pretty much used for riding around here on the ranch. So, they stay here in this.”

I give him a curious look. “That thing looks like a house. A really nice house.” This “horse stable” as he calls it is stunning. The light grey exterior, the beautiful rolling barn doors with glass windows. Oh, and it has a porch. A stunning, covered porch. These horses lived well.

Ryker laughs and walks me into the stable. My eyes immediately go to a beautiful black horse. I slowly walk up to the animal and stare at its beauty. It bows its head to me, and I pet it.

“She’s a beauty, isn’t she? Her name’s Amethyst, and she’s a Friesian.”

I gasp, turning to Ryker. “That’s my birthstone.” I turn back to her and smile. Her black coat shines, and she snorts as I pet her face. She’s regal looking.

“Hm. She isn’t usually this calm around people. Here, give her this.” Ryker hands me a carrot. I turn to Amethyst and feed it to her. She makes a happy whine as she eats, and I continue to pet her.

“She’s so calm,” I say as I run my hand over her snout.

“Amethyst isn’t normally like this.” Ryker tilts his head to the side as he looks back and forth between me and the horse. “She sometimes has a bit of an attitude.” Amethyst snorts at his remark, and it makes me laugh. “But she seems to have taken a liking to you.”

For a little while longer, we walk the stalls, and I get to meet the other horses. They are all so majestic, so strong.

“Come on. Let me show you the house. My house.” He swung his arm towards the opening and led us both out of the stables.

Ryker told me it was a little house. He lied. This house had to be at least fifteen hundred square feet. I had the idea that this was going to be one of those tiny houses or just a one-bedroom shack, but this was three tiny homes.

My steps falter the closer we get. The house is gray with a black front door and shutters. The porch extends end-to-end at the front of the house, and flower beds run along the bottom. A gravel driveway sits off to the left of the building, and a stone walkway leads to the front door. This house is amazing.

“Ryker, I can’t afford to stay here.” I shake my head and hold back the tears that are threatening to break through. We take the couple of steps onto the porch before Ryker unlocks the door.

“Did I ever mention rent, darlin’?” Ryker holds the door open, and we step inside.

“No, but I can’t live here for free. I can’t freeload off you. You don’t even know me. That just wouldn’t be right.” My body starts to shake as I take in my surroundings.

I can see pretty much every room in the house from just standing in the entryway, minus the bedrooms and the bathrooms. The kitchen catches my eye, and I immediately head over and run my hands over the white quartz countertops. The room is full of stainless-steel appliances, gray cabinets, and farmhouse fixtures like the deep porcelain sink. Dark wooden flooring meets my feet, and I smile.

It feels homely in here, not like a bachelor pad or college dorm. It feels comfortable, welcoming.

Ryker turns to me, and his eyes soften. “You’re not freeloading off anyone. You’d be working. Ranch or diner, you’d be working till you got on your feet.”

“Ryker, I just can’t. It’s not fair to you. This here is your domain, your home. I just can’t up and move in. You barely know me. I could be trouble.” I wrap my arms around me and shake my head.

“Oh, trust me, I know you’re trouble,” he teases. “But I want to help you out. Look, you need a place to stay for now, and it’s completely temporary.” He moved from his spot across the counter to stand in front of me. “Let me help.”

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

I close my eyes and try to ignore the huge presence of him in front of me. I fail miserably at that.

“I built it from the ground up with my family. Each of us have a plot of land that we can build a house on. So, I own this, Zo. You can stay here and have easy access to the ranch. I even have an old truck out there that you can use to get to and from the diner.”

“I don’t work at the diner, and I haven’t even asked if they had anything open.” Looking up at him, I take in his beautiful eyes.

“All you have to do is say yes. I already talked to Joan. They need some help. So, the job’s yours if you want it.”

My mouth drops open, and I’m speechless.

“Look, not only will I be here, but this house even has a top-of-the-line security system.”

A security system. That actually makes me feel better about this.

“If that goes off, a couple of things happen. I get a notification on my phone, my parents get one, and the station gets one. But honestly, you’re safe here.” Ryker looks at me, the corners of his mouth turned down and his eyes softening. Like he knows my secret, or at least a little part of it.

Ryker knows I’m scared. Hell, it’s probably why he brought me here. This would

provide me with more safety and security than an apartment back in town would have been able to. Except he hasn't pressured me to tell him what's going on. He's giving me the space and safety I need.

It's just that, if I come clean, if I put myself out there, it could throw me right back into the clutches of Mitch. All traces of who I used to be, can't come to the surface.

Security system or not, hiding who I am is the best protection I have right now.

It's also the only thing I have control over.

Chapter 5

Zoey

This has probably been the easiest move of my life. Well, with just a duffel bag full of my clothes. Two days after Ryker showed me the property, I'm moved in. It was a chance to get myself on my own two feet and do so under the protection of the town sheriff, of all people. As much as I wanted to be on my own, and I still technically am, the help doesn't hurt.

After all those times I had asked for help and no one came to help me, I wasn't going to look a gift horse in its mouth. Ryker was willing to lend me his place as a sanctuary, and I honestly couldn't say no.

The house is amazing. It's not small by any means, no matter what Ryker says. There are three bedrooms and three bathrooms. He uses one of them as a home office. I really have to admit he did an amazing job designing in building this house. Above all, my favorite part of this place is the shower in my own personal bathroom. There are shower heads everywhere. Everywhere. It's the kind of shower that I had wanted Mitch to put in our bathroom, but he decided against it. He only decided against it

because it was my idea, of course.

Nothing in Mitch's house was mine or could have been considered mine. I merely existed there.

Along with trying to get my life together and moving down a good path, Ryker's mom has been very nice to me. Even after only meeting me a few days ago.

Jennifer took me shopping yesterday. We met in town and grabbed me a few things to start me off with. She thinks she has some jeans and flannels that might fit me, but we needed to get me some boots and shoes to work in. She also had me stop at the diner and talk to Joan. I now have a job there waiting tables.

Being out with her was nice. I can't even remember the last time I went shopping with anyone. It's been that long. With no friends, shopping alone isn't any fun. Hell, I can't remember the last time I just had a nice conversation with someone.

Monday, I start working on the ranch as a ranch hand. Jennifer and Adam, Ryker's father, wanted to give me some time to adjust to the move. There wasn't much to adjust to, but I didn't say that.

Well, except living with Ryker.

Jen invited me to lunch today at the main house, saying that she wanted some company today. Again, it was nice to just be around other people, so I agreed. Her and I are sitting in the kitchen eating the sandwiches she made when she starts asking questions.

"So, Zoey, what brought you all the way out here to Wyoming? You're from New York, right?" She leans in, clearly interested.

I clear my throat and avert my gaze towards my plate. “Well, I just needed a change of scenery. New York can be a little overwhelming.” I give her a weak smile.

“Been there once in my life. I never want to go back. Too crowded for me. This town is my home and always will be.” She sighs. “So, tell me, what did you do back home?”

“I was a teacher. Elementary school.” My lips turn downwards as I remember my little friends, the best parts of my day.

“Oh! You know, the school out here is always looking for new teachers.” She grabs her glass and tips back her water, her eyes never leaving mine.

Shaking my head, I say, “It’s a nice thought, but I wanted to try new avenues.” More like I can’t since Zoey doesn’t have a teaching license.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“Hm. Yeah, I can understand that. Sometimes we just need to start over, start clean.” Jen pauses and loses herself in thought for a brief second. “I left college when I was twenty. It was too much for me, and I needed some space to think, to breathe. So, I moved to Wyoming. I was originally going to only stay here a year, give myself some time to unwind. But then I met Adam. Instead of going back after a year, well, we were married, and I had Levi.” She smiles to herself at the mention of her family.

“Wait, how soon did you get married after you met Adam?” The math in my head means they married each other right out of the gate.

“Two months. We fell in love and couldn’t deny what we felt for each other.” Well, that confirms my math.

My mind races at the thought of what would have happened if I had married Mitch right after meeting him. Would he still be the same monster he became later? How much worse would it have been?

“Wow. That’s ... incredible.” Shaking my head, I pick at my sandwich. “I don’t think I know anyone that has ever fallen in love that fast, or even gotten married.”

“Sweetheart, sometimes you just know. You feel it in your bones, deep in your bones. Love’s an unpredictable thing in our lives. There’s no guarantee when it will come around, no set date, no set time. Love just appears, and you can’t deny destiny. There’s no denying what the heart wants.” Jen smiles at me.

“Sure, I guess.” There’s nothing I can even say to all that. I thought I knew what my heart wanted, but those were lies. It’s nice to think that you can just know you are

meant to love someone, but I don't think that's how it happens for everyone. Not me, at least.

"Oh, Ry said he is going to come help you learn the ranch on Monday." She winks at me and laughs, but I tilt my head and narrow my eyes in confusion.

Clearly, I'm not in on whatever joke's there. "Doesn't he have sheriff duties to attend to?"

"Yup. But he took some time off. Benefits of being sheriff, I guess. Anyway, he'll be here with you, working with you side by side." Jen walks to the sink with her plate. I blush at the thought of being near Ryker all day.

Nope. Nope. Nope. Shake that shit right off.

Standing up from the table, I bring my plate to Jen, and she shows me what we're preparing for dinner for everyone. When there are long work days on the ranch, Jen makes sure to prepare a huge family dinner.

For a while, we're working side by side, laughing and having a good time. We talk about movies we've seen, music we like, and concerts we've been to. Jen tells me some stories about Ryker as a child, and one of them in particular has me laughing so hard I'm crying. Apparently from the age of four to six, Ryker was scared to death of chickens. Levi, his older brother, had told him that chickens eat little kids and then hatch alien babies that look like the kid they ate. She said he wouldn't even eat eggs for years after that. That might be why I see him with pancakes all the time.

I've never had this even with my own mom, this bonding time. Being in a kitchen or even anywhere and just talking and laughing. Her voice is actually comforting, relaxing me as we get into the nitty gritty of the cooking.

While I'm chopping peppers and onions, I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket. I pick it up and see that Ryker texted me.

Ryker: Hey. How's your day? Get all moved in?

Me: Hi. Yeah. I just had a bag, so ...

Ryker: Is my mom keeping you busy then?

Me: She is. We're making dinner. We went shopping and got some things for me.

Ryker: Good. I heard you got the job at the diner.

Me: Yep. I did. Thank you.

Ryker: You're welcome.

I place the phone back in my pocket. My stomach does little flips as I think about Ryker. I must be standing there for a while because Jen grabs my attention.

"You okay, dear?" Jen's voice pulls me back from my thoughts of all things Ryker.

"Oh, yeah. That was Ryker just checking to make sure I was okay." Shaking myself out of my stupor, I go back to chopping the onions.

She gives a small laugh. "My Ryker. He's a good man. Always looking out for other people, protecting those who can't protect themselves." She sighs. "He is fiercely protective of those he cares for."

I stop chopping the onions. Placing the knife down, I wipe my hands and then grip the towel between my fingers. He is a good man, and these people, his family, are

good people. I'm not sure if it's what she said or the onions, but I feel the tears well up in my eyes. My past can only bring trouble to them and Ryker. I can't expect him to put himself and his family at risk.

"If you excuse me, I'm, um, starting to feel a little tired." I need to get out of here. My chest is tightening, and my hands are shaking.

Before Jen has a chance to answer, I bolt out the back door and start walking. Tears stream down my face. I look up and see the horse stables. Without a second thought, I walk in that direction.

When I get there, I immediately go over to Amethyst. She huffs and whines as soon as she sees me.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“Hey, girl.” I wipe my eyes and grab a carrot. As I feed her the carrot, I run my hand over her. This majestic beast that seems to connect with me, and I don’t know why.

“You’re so beautiful.” I sigh. I continue silently standing next to her, thinking about my day with Jen. I shake my head and look at Amethyst. “I don’t know what I’m doing here. Honestly, I have no idea why I’m still here. Why don’t I have what they have?” More tears break through. “Why was I given such a shitty end of the stick? My mom never talked me to me about anything! They never spared me any attention. Maybe that’s why I latched onto Mitch so fast. He was the first one to show me any amount of attention. But you know what really hurts? They didn’t believe me, or they just didn’t care. They never protected me. Why?”

I sit on a stool in front of the horse and sob.

There was never a time I could remember where I had a strong relationship with my parents, but I’m still their daughter. I was always an outsider compared to everyone else. My hair color is different, my eye color is different. I had no desire to go into business. I was the black sheep of the family, the embarrassment.

I was nothing like them.

When I went to them, to have them help me get away from Mitch, they told me I was exaggerating. I showed them bruises, and they waved me off. They continued to tell me to stop making things up, that Mitch would never do something like that.

Once Mitch found out I went to my parents to try and leave him, it all got worse. The hitting, the pushing, the comments. And I remember the exact day that he found out. I

remember the day I fell out of love with him.

I was in the bathroom getting dressed to go out, and he came in raging mad. Mitch began yelling at me, asking me why I tried to stir up shit with my parents. He poked me in my chest hard, over and over. It hurt so bad that I kept backing up until I fell into the tub. I was trapped in the tub with him on top of me.

I screamed that I was sorry until my voice gave out. The bruises had me hiding in the house for a couple of weeks. I told people I had the flu.

I never went to get help again. And it's not like I had any friends or anyone else I could've gone to. So, I did what I could to keep my mouth shut and formulate my own escape. There really was no one I could turn to, not even the cops. His family had police and political ties, and my parents had their own ties. I had nothing.

My mind's a mess. Hell, my life's a fucking train wreck. I don't even realize I'm walking until I look out and realize I'm far out from the houses. So, I just keep going. Eventually, I make it to the lake.

I fall to a sitting position and I place my head in my hands and cry. I'm so broken, so lost.

My strength's slowly fading. Every hour of every day, I try and keep telling myself I can do this. I can be me again, my own person finally. But then everything around me just makes me realize how much I wasn't "me" to begin with. Who was I? Do I even want to be me again?

I'm not sure how long I've been sitting here, but I hear a truck come up behind me. Turning, I wipe my face and see that it's Ryker.

I quickly try and make myself not look like I've been crying, but I'm sure my puffy

red eyes will give it away. Moving my focus back to the lake, I wait for him to come up to me.

“Hey, there you are. Been trying to call you.” Ryker comes and stands in front of me. I look up and immediately, he drops to me. “Zo, what’s wrong?” He reaches out to touch my leg. A surge of electricity burns through my skin. He watches me closely, and it seems to dawn upon him that he touched me. I don’t make any move to change it, so he keeps his hand on me.

“I ... just ...” Shaking my head, I look down at our contact. He scoots to my side. Without saying anything, his eyes ask for permission. I nod, and his arms come around me before he pulls me into him.

My entire body feels like it’s going to combust. Every part of me that touches him tingles. Every nerve ending is firing off and sending shocks throughout my body.

As he holds me, I feel warmth, protection. I sink into his body, craving that touch, needing the safety he provides.

“You can tell me, Zo.” He pulls me back slightly so I can see his eyes. “Look, I’m going to be honest with you; that’s just who I am. Now, I know you’re running from someone. That much is clear. Let me help you; I can protect you. But you have to tell me what’s going on. I can’t help if I don’t know.” His voice is soft, so calming.

I close my eyes. “I can’t.”

“Darlin’, I’m not a fool. You’re scared. Those bruises, those cuts, those didn’t come from cleaning gutters. So, tell me. What’s going on, Zo?” Ryker pleads. There’s a pain in his eyes, and a need to fix this for me clearly burns in him.

But Ryker can’t get involved. When Mitch finds me, and I know it’s only a matter of

time, he'll drag me back to New York. Everyone else in his way be damned.

The Hollidays are good people. I don't need anything happening to them. Until I have enough saved up and a new place to go, I need to stay detached. Except Ryker is making that really difficult.

Ryker pulls me into him tighter, and I welcome it. There's something about the way he holds me; it's a fierceness. His grip's melding me to him.

"Zo, talk to me. Please. What's going on?" He lays his chin on my head. I don't hate that.

"Nothing. Nothing's going on. Everything's fine." I shudder. I know he doesn't buy it.

A few days ago, I was confident when I stepped out of that house. I had a plan. There was nothing that was going to stop me. No one would miss me. But the farther away I got from Mitch, the more guilt and fear crept in. He'll find me. He'll make me suffer.

No one should fall victim to him because of me. No one needs to hurt because of me.

I'm hopeless. I'm broken.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

I need to find my wings again.

Chapter 6

Ryker

“Hey, boss.” Johnson calls as I walk into the station. He’s sitting at his desk and typing a report into the computer. Deputy Shawn Johnson is twenty-five years old and moved here from California. He decided he wanted a small-town life, and Weston was where he landed. Honestly, I couldn’t be happier. He’s a good egg, and the locals love and trust him. With blond hair, blue eyes, and the ripped body of surfer, he’s a hit with the ladies in town. Johnson of course doesn’t mind being a thirst trap.

“Hey.” I walk into my office and place my coffee on my desk. Running my hands over my face, I sigh. I’m exhausted. After the time with Zoey at the lake last night, I couldn’t sleep. That girl’s going to run again. I can feel it in my bones.

And I can’t let her run.

I need to find a way to get her to tell me who she really is, get her to trust that I can take care of the situation. Shaking my head, I realize Johnson’s trying get my attention.

“Boss? Did you hear me?”

“No, sorry.” I take a sip of my coffee and then set it back down on my desk.

“What’s going on, Holliday? You don’t seem like your normal, charming self,” Deputy Courtney Dalton says as she walks into my office. Dalton and I graduated high school together. She was one of my closest friends through out school, and people always thought we would end up together. That obviously never really panned out; we never saw each other as more than friends, and that was just fine with us. With brown hair and green eyes, she’s absolutely beautiful, and any man would be lucky to have her.

I stare at them, “Zoey.” They both know what’s going on with her. They also both know to keep it under wraps until I can figure out a way for her to open up to me and tell me the truth. “She’s frightened, and I can see a struggle inside of her. One moment she’s strong and confident, the next she’s breaking down and unsure of every single thing. She’s in a war with herself.”

“Well, you said she was pretty bruised up the day she got here, right?” Dalton asks.

“Yeah. Cuts and bruising around her neck and face. It was fucking obvious those were from a person. I just don’t know who.” I shake my head. “It has to be from a family member or a boyfriend, even a husband.” My stomach rolls with the thought. How anyone who is supposed to love and protect a person can do that makes me sick.

Johnson leans on my desk. “Do the facial recognition. We can find her that way. Or DNA. I mean, we have ways.” He’s right. I have ways to find out. But I want her trust. She needs to feel comfortable with me.

“Maybe. Right now, I just need her to trust me. I think I’m gonna take that route for now. If I can’t persuade her to tell me, and it’s starting to get ugly, then yeah.” I let out a groan and reach over to my coffee. I take a sip of the now lukewarm sludge and will every ounce of caffeine to surge through me.

I didn’t sleep much last night. I heard her pacing around her room, talking to herself.

She gave herself a pep talk about how she can do it, about spreading her wings, and that she wasn't broken. At times throughout the night, I heard her crying, but I didn't want her to think I was spying on her. I want her to feel comfortable in my home.

But hearing her cry last night? That broke something inside me. I stayed up, not going to bed until I was sure she was sleeping, or at least done crying.

"I'm gonna go make some rounds." I nod to my deputies and head back out.

Coming out of the station, I stand outside my SUV and look around. I walk over to the B&B down the street and check in to see how Rose is doing. As I walk down the sidewalk, I take a deep breath of the fresh air. It's a nice morning. The sky is blue with not a cloud to be seen for miles. I walk past the diner and wave to some people headed inside. When I get to the B&B, I spot Rose immediately.

"Hey there, Sheriff. How're things going?" Rose nods to me from her porch. She stops sweeping and holds the broom next to her.

"It's going. How're things here?" I walk up the stairs and give her a hug.

"Things are good. Just getting this cleaned up. How's Zoey?" She places a hand on my arm. Rosie is a sweetheart of a woman in her mid-sixties, living her best life since the loss of her husband. Her husband passed away twenty years ago from lung cancer, leaving her this huge house that she later turned into Dawson's Bed and Breakfast. She once said that opening the B&B fills this house with people, laughter, and gives those who need it a place to lay their head. Something her husband always wanted to do with this place. So, she fulfilled his dreams a couple of years after he passed.

"Uh, don't know. That's actually why I came over. Wanted to see if anything happened while she was here." Tilting my head, I place my hands on my hips.

“Well, she was fine during the day, but at night ...” Rose stops and looks away for a moment, then turns back towards me, her lips twisting into a frown. Her hands fall in front of her, and she wrings them as she thinks.

“What happened at night?” I ask.

“Well, I don’t know for sure. I think she had nightmares. I would hear slight screams or whimpering. Then I could hear her walking around and crying.” Rose puts a hand over her heart. “Poor girl. Whatever has her upset really is messing with her emotionally.”

“Yeah. She’s staying with me now, so hopefully I can help her out. Thanks, Rose.” After I hug her, I head back to my SUV and pull out my phone to text Zoey.

Me: Hey.

Zo: Hi. What’s up?

Me: Working. Just wanted to see how you were doing.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

Zo: I'm okay. Just walking around. Spent some time with Amethyst. I really want to ride her.

Me: Well then I'll take you out this week. Have you ever ridden a horse before?

Zo: Once. Long time ago.

Me: We can get you up on the horse again. Wanted to see if you wanted to go out tonight. The NorthPark has a movie night every Saturday in September.

Zo: Yeah. That sounds like fun. I'd love to go.

Me: Okay. Meet me at the house around five.

Feeling a sense of relief that she agreed, I get in my vehicle and start my day.

* * *

I pull up to my house a little after five. Stepping through the door, I disarm the security alarm and look around to see if Zoey is there.

"Zo?" I call out.

"In my room!" she yells from behind the closed door.

Walking up to her room, I knock.

“Come in.”

I open the door and step through. My jaw drops.

Zoey looks beautiful. Her red hair falls around her shoulders, framing her face. Her jeans hug her in all the right ways, especially around her ass. She has on a fitted, black V-neck tee that has ‘NOPE’ written on the front of it. Her breasts push up a bit in the shirt, giving me a great view of her cleavage.

“You all right over there, Ryker?” She walks up to me, squinting her eyes and stopping in front of my face.

“Uh, yeah. Just ... you look beautiful.” My voice is hoarse as I try to regain some of my composure.

She laughs. “I’m just in jeans and a shirt.”

I blink. “There’s nothing sexier than a woman as beautiful as you in something simple like what you have on.”

Her cheeks suddenly get a rosy hue to them as she blushes from my confession. She looks down, and I place a hand on her cheek. Her eyes are sad when they meet mine again.

“Zo, just in case you’re overthinking my words, I’m not kidding. So, get out of your head and forget whatever’s upsetting you.” My thumb strokes her cheek, making my skin feel like it’s on fire. Every time I touch her, electricity shoots through my body, igniting every nerve ending I have.

“It’s not that. That’s actually the nicest thing anyone has said to me in quite a while. I’m just a little embarrassed,” Zoey confesses. Her lips are trembling, and it takes all

my willpower to not claim them as mine.

“Darlin’, there’s no reason to be embarrassed. But I’ll make a mental note that you need more of those compliments in your life.” I wink and tap my head.

My restraint starts to slip, so I do the only thing I can that will allow me to keep touching her but not push her. I wrap my arms around her and bring her into me, resting my cheek on the top of her head. I close my eyes and breathe her in, smelling vanilla.

“Nothing I ever say or do will ever be to hurt you. I promise you that, Zoey.”

Hearing me, she nods her head against my chest. I pull away, give her a smile, and walk into my room to get changed.

Once we get to the park, we find an empty area near the back and set up our blanket. The city uses one of the walls from the maintenance building in the park to cast the movie on. People are spread out along the grass on blankets, and some kids run around between the playground and the movie area. My mother knew we were going tonight, so she was kind enough to pack us a little picnic to sit and eat while we watch the movie.

I pull out the fruit and sandwiches and lay them out in front of us. Zoey immediately grabs herself some food.

“So, what movie is it tonight? And they do this every Saturday?” Zoey asks as she unwraps a sandwich and takes a huge bite. “Oh my God, this is good.” She moans, grinning wide.

Clearing my throat and trying not to get turned on by her moans, I reach for my sandwich. “Yeah, they do this every Saturday in September. Weather permitting, of

course, but it's a nice way to bring the town together. Tonight, I think it's Grease."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“No way! I love that movie! Oh, this is perfect.” For the first time since she got here, her smile stretches across her face and reaches her eyes. She’s actually excited and happy. My heart swells a little knowing I’m able to bring her a little bit of joy.

I want to make her laugh. “Hey, how did the picture end up in jail?”

She winces, already sensing what’s coming. “Oh no. Not these again.”

“It was framed!” I waggle my eyebrows and let out a deep laugh. I know these drive her crazy, but I think I’m wearing her down. She’s starting to love them.

“Seriously, how do you just have them ready to go?” Zoey waves her sandwich around.

I shrug, popping a piece of fruit into my mouth. “Trade secret.”

“Secret, huh? You can keep your secret. I really do not care to be brought in on that one.” She shakes her head and bites into a strawberry. Yeah, I need a change of conversation fast.

I shift myself a bit on the blanket and say the first thing that comes to mind, “So, you’ve met my parents, and I’m sure at some point you will meet my brothers.”

“Brothers? As in, plural?” She raises an eyebrow.

“Levi’s the oldest. I’m after him, and then there’s Asher and the youngest, Maverick.”

“Wow, you all have some interesting names.”

I shrug. “My parents have pretty common names, so I think they were trying to make us all stand out a little bit. At least when they named us, the names weren’t as popular. What about your name?”

“Um.” Zoey hesitates. I already know that’s because it’s not her real name. “My parents never really shared things like that with me.”

“Why not?” I look down, hoping I’m not pushing her too far with asking personal things. Thankfully, she has decided not to hold back.

“They were never really good parents to me. They were to my older sister, but never to me. I was the screw up or the dumb one. Always the black sheep of the family. If I ever needed them, they would laugh in my face and tell me to figure it out or deal with it on my own.” Her hands start to shake in her lap. I can see her bottom lip tremble. Shit.

“Zoey ...” Scooting closer, I put my arm around her.

“They’re just horrible people. I pray I never see them again,” she says, her words barely above a whisper.

Is she running from her family? Who the fuck’s her family?

I run my hand along her arm. “What about friends?”

She shakes her head and leans into me. “Don’t have any. I did at one point. But then again, I also used to have a career.” Zoey lets out a gasp and goes rigid in my arms. She let something slip. Her career, she had to give it up. Another piece to the Zoey puzzle.

“Explain, Zo.” I rub her back, coaxing her to give me a little more.

She hesitates for a moment, and I don’t push her, but then she finally relents. “I was a teacher. I loved my job, my students, everything. But then I was told I needed to stop. It was my duty, and my career would only pose problems.”

“Who would it cause problems for?” I whisper to her.

But she shakes her head, clamping down, not giving me anymore than she already has.

“Okay. It’s okay. When you’re ready, will you tell me? I don’t want you holding this all on your shoulders.” I take my hand and put it under her chin, making her look at me. “I’m not here to judge you or hurt you, but I am here to listen and maybe even help, if you let me.”

We sit there for a moment and just stare at each other. I’m sure the movie has started, but neither of us care.

Zoey is the first to break the tension. “Your tats.”

“What about them?” My brows furrow, and my eyes meet hers.

“What do they mean?”

I sigh. This was not how I pictured tonight going, but if this helps her feel more comfortable so she can open up to me, so be it.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

I look out at into the distance, staring at the people watching the movie. “No one knows this, so when I tell you, just know that you’ll be the first person to know the meaning. Please understand that.” I turn back to her, and we lock eyes.

Zoey nods and places a hand on my leg.

“I haven’t been the sheriff here for very long; only a couple of years. Before that, I was working in another state as a state trooper. Did that for a few years. My partner and I got a call about a stranded motorist.” Resting my arm that’s not around Zoey on my leg, I place my head in my hand. “He shot at us as we approached the vehicle. He was waiting off to the side of the highway. Shot my partner and then shot me.”

Her hand tightens around my thigh.

“I grabbed my partner and dragged him to cover, getting shot myself in the process.” I lift up the sleeve of my left arm. “I was grazed. As I was getting ready to call for back up, another set of troopers showed up. The shooter started shooting at them, too.” Taking a moment, I steady my breaths. “The tats of the broken clocks ... that’s the time they passed. The dates are their end of watch.” Pulling up the sleeve, I show her the rest of the tattoo. My entire arm memorializes them.

That day, I should have trusted my instincts. I felt it in my bones that something was off on that call. Because I didn’t listen to myself, three people were killed.

The shooter was hidden, and we never saw him from where we were at when we pulled up. The guilt I carried with me ate at me for the longest time. I wasn’t able to protect them, my brothers.

Zoey wraps her arms around me, and we fall the rest of the way down so that we're laying on the blanket.

For a moment, we merely stare at each other, not saying a word.

"Is that why you came back here?" she whispers. Her eyes water with unshed tears.

I shake my head. "No. Mom got sick. Cancer. She's fine now, though. Cancer free. But that was the reason I came back here. I couldn't help the family and mom through it if I wasn't here."

Zoey nods and then tucks herself into me, laying on my arm. It's quiet for a while after that.

"Do you think your family's looking for you?" I finally whisper to her.

Her answer is immediate, "No."

If she's sure her family isn't looking for her, then it's not her family that she ran from. That leads me to believe she's running from a boyfriend or husband. Her fear isn't fabricated; she's deathly afraid of whoever it is, but it's not her parents.

"What are you going to do now that you're starting over?" I ask her.

She takes a moment to answer. "Not sure. But whatever it is, I just want to stay in control of my future, my life, and my heart."

Chapter 7

Zoey

The sound I hate the most is an alarm clock before the sun is even up. It's only five thirty in the morning and I have to be up and getting ready for my first day on the ranch. Ugh. To make matters worse, it's a fucking Monday. No one likes Mondays.

Rolling over, I close my eyes and see if I can squeeze out a few more minutes.

"Zo. Time to get up." Mother fucker. Of course his sexy ass is up this early.

"Go away!" I yell back at him.

"I'm coming in, Zo. So be covered up or dressed." Before I can respond, he's opening my door.

He turns on the light in the room, and I shut my eyes tighter and throw the covers over my head.

"Come on, sleepyhead. You have a full day of me all to yourself." Ryker chuckles.

I groan as he pulls the covers off me, and he stops dead in his tracks.

"Um." Ryker's eyes go wide, and he clears his throat. "Sorry." He immediately turns and walks out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

My face feels like it's on fire, burning from embarrassment. I look down. All I have on is a pink camisole and black boy shorts. Let's also not forget that my nipples just made an appearance through the camisole.

Note to self: Buy a onesie.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

After the embarrassing morning wake-up call, I throw on some clothes and pull up my boots. I do my morning routine and eventually make it out to the kitchen where I smell food.

My mouth drops open as I see Ryker has prepared a feast, along with coffee. Pancakes, eggs, bacon, and sausage await me. I would kiss him if I could. But I won't, because that will just make things way more tense than they need to be.

"So, are you ready for today? Becoming a ranch hand?" He laughs. He makes a plate for me, full to the brim with breakfast goodness. I look over and see he has everything but the eggs. Internally, I let out a little laugh and eat mine.

"No, but I'm excited. Just not sure how good I'll be. I mean, I'm from the city, so I don't have a lot of ranch experience." Shaking my head, I take another bite of my eggs. I moan as I eat.

Ryker clears his throat as he looks back down at his food. I smile as I sip my coffee. I probably could have reacted faster to keep that from happening, but for fuck sakes, it was five in the damn morning.

Finally, I say, "Hey, you know, I used to think that chicken eggs had little aliens inside them." I press my lips together to keep from laughing.

"Oh, no. She told you that story? Ugh. I was four!" He drops his face into his hands and laughs. "I can't believe she told you that." Ryker shakes his head.

I giggle and we go back to eating. Seriously, this man can cook. Even if he doesn't

like eggs or still has an issues eating them, he can cook one hell of an egg. The eggs are fluffy and not over cooked, basically melting in my mouth. The bacon is just as perfect, not too crisp and not too soft in texture.

“I do want to apologize now if I screw anything up. Newbie and all.” I point to myself and shrug.

“Don’t worry. You’re in capable hands. Been working on this farm all my life. Well, until I went into law enforcement.” He throws back the rest of his coffee. “You ready?”

“Let’s do this.” I rub my hands over my face and let out a groan. We both grab our phones and keys and head out the door, locking up before we head towards all the barns and buildings.

First thing we do is walk over to the shop and pick up a Gator to drive around the ranch with for the day. I learn that the shop is a place where they keep a lot of equipment and tools. To me, it’s basically like a big garage, minus the cars.

We stop at the storage where the food is at and pick up some bags of food for the cattle. As we drive to the animals, I look out around the property. It’s beautiful out here. The sky is darker on the west side of the ranch and the sun rises and brighten the sky in the east. I’d like to say I can smell the fresh air, but I can’t. I’m surrounded by animals, cows specifically right this moment. The god awful smells that come from their waste, the sounds of their moos as we approach, and then the soft feeling of the soil below me as I walk. If I were Dorothy, I would think this was Kansas. This place is so different from New York. I’m so used to the concrete jungle that is home. It’s so open here. So back to nature. The sounds, the sights, the people, everything is the complete opposite, and I love it.

We make sure the cattle have enough water and food, and then we get back in the

Gator.

I look over at Ryker, pursing my lips. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“Why are you helping me? I mean, I’m sure the other people here could, but why you?”

Ryker sighs. “I don’t know, Zo. Honestly, I just feel like I should be the one helping to show you the ropes. Call it an instinct or whatever; I just feel like I need to.”

Satisfied with the answer, I nod. We head over to the chickens and get them fed. The chickens have some nice accommodations for being chickens. They have a covered area that is surrounded by a mesh that keeps them inside the coop. It is basically a huge shed like structure that allows for them to stay dry and keep their food from getting wet. Built into the side of the covered patio for chickens is what I call their apartment complex. Ryker informed me its a hen house, but I’ll stick with my name for it. They have a feeder and access to water outside the apartment complex and that encourages them to stay active.

While we’re messing with the chickens and their feed, I see three other men walking towards us. Immediately, I know it’s Ryker’s brothers. They look like carbon copies of each other with slight differences.

“Hey there.” One of them tips his hat. “You must be Zoey. I’m Levi.” He holds out his hand, and I slowly reach over to shake it. I’m becoming more comfortable around this family. More than I ever thought I would.

Levi looks like Ryker, but his eyes are green, and his hair is lighter. He has the same strong jaw as Ryker. He is about the same height as Ryker too.

“Ma’am.” Another one comes up from behind Levi. “I’m Maverick, the baby of the family. You can call me Mav.”

Shaking his hand, I take in his baby-like features. Out of all three of them, he looks more like his mom in the face, but he has the dark hair and smiles like the Ryker. His eyes are the same caramel color their mom has.

“Zoey, please.” I blush at the call of ma’am. “And that means you must be Asher.”

He tips his hat and extends his arm. “You would be correct. Nice to meet you, Zoey.” Asher has much darker hair, and a lighter blue in his eyes than Ryker. His jaw is shaped like both Ryker and Levi.

All of these Holliday men are fucking gorgeous. Broad shoulders, strong arms. They all are tall, dark, and handsome.

Except there’s something I notice when I shake their hands. None of them give me the jolt like I get when I touch Ryker. I’ve never felt anything like it before. He makes my body come alive.

After the brothers take off to handle some things around the ranch, Ryker and I stand there for a moment. I look around and take in the mountains in the background.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Ryker crosses his arms against his chest and smiles.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“Yeah, it truly is.” That’s when a sudden sadness comes over me. Who knows how long I will be able to be here? My mind races with thoughts of how I’m putting them in danger. I pray that Mitch just forgets I exist. But the chances of that are slim. He’s a vindictive asshole.

I catch Ryker staring at me.

His eyebrows pulled inward, “Hey, no frowning. Come on. Let’s go clean up the shop and shed.” Ryker leads the way back toward the buildings where we started our day, and I trail behind him, trying to rein in my emotions.

We start off in the shed, taking stock of the feed and what we need to go into town and get more of. We next organize the shed and sweep it out. This takes us a couple of hours but before we know it, we have everything organized and looking much better.

“Okay, so that’s pretty much how you deal with the shed. We do this a couple of times a week. We obviously never want to run out of feed, so this allows us to check the stock and keep this place organized.” He slaps his hand on a big plastic bag that contains horse feed in it.

“Okay, that seems easy enough.” I nod.

He points across the way towards the building we started at the ass crack of dawn in. “Let’s head over to the shop. I’ll show you how to deal with things in there. Putting away vehicles and stuff.” As we start to walk, he turns to me. “So, I think my brothers were excited to have you here working.”

“Sure, I guess.” I shrug. I pause for a moment while my thoughts take over. “Can I say something?”

“Always.” Ryker gives me his smile.

“You’re all like fucking Cabbage Patch dolls.”

Ryker busts out laughing, stopping dead in his tracks. “Cabbage Patch dolls?”

“Yeah. All of you look alike but the hair and eyes mix and match. Cabbage Patch dolls.” I grin back.

“I can honestly say that no one has ever said that about us, but I love it.” He holds the door open when we reach the shop after our short walk from the shed.

“Thank you.” I step over the threshold and take in my surroundings. There are work benches and shelving units that line the wall. Other Gators and vehicles they use to get around the ranch are missing, leaving a lot of empty space in front of the rollup doors. As I look around, I spot a coffee pot. “Does that work?” I ask Ryker as I point at it.

“Sure does. Want me to make some?”

Putting my hands together in a begging stance, I plead, “Please, pretty please.”

“Sure thing, darlin’.” Ryker walks over to the counter and reaches up to a cabinet above the coffee pot. He opens it, grabs a coffee canister and filter. Emptying the old filter into the trash he places the new one in. He heads over the sink next to it and washes out the pot and then fills it with water. Once he gets everything in their rightful place, he hits the brewing button and the dark liquid fills the glass pot.

Ryker hands me a steaming cup and I take a sip, moaning as the bitter heat goes through me.

Once we drink our coffee, we move around the shop, putting things away. Ryker shows me where the Gators and the four-wheelers go and how to pull them into the shop to make sure they get them all in every night.

We then move to cleaning up around the shop, where tools go and what tools are what, and he explains what each one does.

“Want a water?” Ryker asks as I hang up the broom I was using to sweep up.

“Actually, yes. That would be great.” I nod as Ryker walks over towards the fridge.

I’m hanging up a wrench when I hear a loud sigh come from Ryker and I turn my head towards him. “Shit. Let me go run and grab some more from storage. We’re out.” He closes the fridge and runs out of the shop.

I jump onto the counter and look around. Just when I start to feel comfortable, I begin to feel bad. Ryker used his day off to show me around and show me the ropes of some of the things they do on the ranch. He didn’t have to. There’s no reason for him to be this nice to me.

Everything’s so new to me. It makes me feel so lost. Watching how much they all support each other, how much they all love each other, it makes me wish I had the same. I mean, Ryker moved back home to support his mom and family while she beat the cancer. They are so close, so full of love for each other. I’m a little jealous.

I lower my head into my hands and start to cry. Tears stream down my face. I’m so lost in my sadness that I don’t even hear Ryker come in and over to me.

“Zo? What’s wrong?” I startle when he comes up and touches me. He holds his hands up innocently. “Just me, Zo. What’s going on?”

I shake my head and put my hand over my heart. “I hurt. My heart hurts. I’m lost and alone. I don’t even know who I am anymore.”

Ryker’s expression softens. “Sweetheart, you’re not alone.” His hand comes up and wipes away the tears on my face.

“I am, though. Watching all of your family together, this town, everyone supports everyone. I’ve never had that. Every day, I’ve had to be my own support, my own family. I had to learn how to live by myself.”

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“Zo, I’m going to tell you something, and I want you to listen to me. Don’t ever question what I’m about to tell you. Understood?” Ryker grabs my hands.

“Okay.” Sniffing, I close my eyes and try to control my shaking.

“I’m here for you, completely. There’s no reason you have to feel alone because you have me, you have my family, and you sure as fuck have this town. They’ve taken to your heart, just as I have. You’re special, Zo.” Ryker takes my hand and places it with his over his heart. “I promise that I’ll never do anything to hurt you or cause you pain.”

My hand wraps tighter around his. I believe him, I do. But when the truth comes out, will he still promise those things?

Ryker’s touch makes me shudder. Tilting my head up, I look into those beautiful blue eyes. His eyes soften when they meet mine.

“I promise. You’re not alone.” Ryker whispers to me as he places his forehead on mine, and we stay locked in each other’s gazes.

There’s a warmth in my heart, and I can feel the truth in his words. I know whatever is going on, my heart and head are not on the same page.

Chapter 8

Zoey

For the first time in a long time, I feel like I've settled into my roles. This week's been a struggle, but I'm finally getting the hang of things on the ranch and here at Joan's Diner.

Working at the diner has actually been nice. Locals spend a lot of their time there, so it's given me a chance to get to know them. And they are all great people full of stories and kindness. They have all been so friendly to me, accepting me into their fold like I belong.

"Betty and Tom! How are you folks doing today?" Walking over to their table, I bend down and give them hugs. Betty and Tom are older folks with grandkids. They live off their retirement and just enjoy life. They travel sometimes, going to see their kids and grandkids. I've learned, however, that they prefer Weston to any other place they've visited, which is why they still live here.

"Oh, dear, you know how it is. We're actually leaving to go see our youngest son next week in Colorado," Betty tells me. She's a short older woman with long grey hair that she often visits the local salon get done so nicely. She told me she was eighty-one, but has never felt younger because her great-grand babies keep her feeling like she's forty. Betty has twelve great-grand babies. Twelve.

I smile. "That's great to hear."

"How are you and the sheriff doing?" Betty's eyes sparkle.

"Um. I don't understand the question." My brows furrow.

Betty places a hand on my arm. "You know, since you guys are together now."

"Oh! No, we're not together." I chuckle.

“Dear, I know that look when I see it. The eyes that meet across the room, the sparkle. The sweet smile he gives you and only you. You two each have that look. Look at you, you’re turning ten different shades of red.”

Before I can respond, Tom speaks up. “Leave the poor girl alone, Betty.” He turns to me and grins. Tom’s a quiet guy. Often sitting there and letting his wife ramble on about the town happenings. Tom runs his hand over his bald head. He says it’s habit from when he had hair.

“Fine, fine.” Betty concedes, and they give me their order. I head back towards the counter to put in their order. While walking away from them, I turn over her words. We don’t have a look, do we? I shake my head, no, we don’t.

The bell above the door rings, and I see Ryker and Deputy Johnson coming in for lunch. Ryker has made sure to stop in throughout the day to check on me when I work at the diner since I started. Usually, it’s for coffee in the morning and for lunch in the afternoon.

Honestly, I don’t mind it. He does look incredibly sexy in his uniform. As those thoughts go through my mind, Ryker sits right in front of me. A smile stretches across his face, and he quirks a brow. It’s then that I know I’ve been caught staring. My face immediately heats up.

“Sheriff Holliday and Deputy Johnson, what can I get for you?” My back straightens and I try to regain control of my body. I press my lips together, focusing on the task at hand.

“Zo, come on. It’s Ryker. Only you can get away with it.” He smiles at me, letting out a quiet chuckle.

“Uh, right.” So much for formalities. “Then what can I get for you two? The usual?”

Like every day, they come in and get their cheeseburgers and fries. A water for Ryker and a Coke for the deputy.

“That sounds great, Zoey. Thank you.” Deputy Johnson nods and turns to wave at some of the other patrons in the diner. Deputy Johnson is a handsome man. Blonde hair and all. He must work out often, because he has a great body. But he’s not Ryker.

“So, I take it you all aren’t that busy today.” I tilt my head to the side and fiddle with the notepad in my hand.

Ryker puts his elbows up on the counter and then clasps his hands together. “Nope. We drove around to a couple of other towns, but all and all, it’s quiet.”

“And you just jinxed us, boss.” Johnson laughs.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

I hear the bell to the front door going crazy as I peel my eyes away from Ryker. I look up and see an influx of people walking in. I'm almost grateful for the sudden rush. As much as I love being in Ryker's presence, the words from Betty are still swirling around in my head. "Well, boys, I actually think you jinxed me. I would love to stay and chat, but it's the lunch rush. So, you can keep each other company." Without thinking, I smile at Ryker before I walk away and over to a new customer sitting at my table.

"Hello there. How are you doing today?" I give him my biggest smile. This man looks about my age in his late twenties or early thirties. He's an attractive man, with blond hair and grey eyes. Not as handsome and sexy as Ryker, but still good looking. He doesn't look like he's from around here. His expensive suit and watch give him away.

"Hi there, uh, Zoey." He says as he looks at my name tag.

"What can I get started for you today?" I tilt my head to the side and smile.

"You know what? I'll take the club sandwich and an iced water, please. Oh, and can you please put some ranch on the side for me?" He hands me the menu and nods.

"Absolutely. It'll be out shortly." I walk away and put the order in for the gentleman.

Heading back to the counter, I refill some drinks and hand out a few orders before stopping to see how Ryker and the deputy are doing.

"How's everything, boys?" I lean my hip into the counter and smile at Ryker.

“Better now.” Ryker responds. Johnson gags and then laughs. Ryker glares at him before turning his attention back to me. “We should probably get back to it. What time are you off?”

“Six.”

Ryker stands up and grabs his wallet out of his back pocket. “Ok, then I’ll see you at home.” He and the deputy pay the bill and head back to work.

Home. Ryker said home. Not, “see you at the house” or “I’ll see you when you get to my house.” Home.

Shaking my head, I wipe the counters and help a few people. About an hour later, I check on my “club sandwich” guy, making sure he doesn’t need anything. He’s sitting in his booth reading the paper.

Dropping the check off, I ask him if he needs anything else.

“Yeah, is there a place I could crash at? I’m just passing through, and this is a nice little town. Figured I might stay a couple days and check it out.” He looks up at me and offers me a genuine smile.

“Oh! This place is great. I’m new too. Just moved here. There’s a place called Dawson’s Bed and Breakfast. Rose, the owner, is one of the nicest people you’ll ever meet.”

“Well, I doubt that. You seem pretty nice.” He drops his paper and folds his hands.

I laugh nervously. “Thanks. Okay, well, is there anything else I can get you or help you find?”

“Nope. I’ve found everything I need. Everything.” His eyes narrow, and the corner of his mouth goes up. His smile turns evil, and his eyes seem hollow. His stare’s cutting right through me.

Without warning, a chill goes through me. My stomach drops, and I slowly back away.

“Well, thanks for coming. You can just leave the money at the table or head to Joan over there if you’re paying with a credit card.” Quickly, I turn and head for the back. Placing my hand over my heart, I try and calm my breathing.

That man was not right. Red flags. Red fucking flags.

* * *

After my very strange and weird shift, I head back to the ranch. Back home, as Ryker called it. I need to not overthink it. It’s his home, so that’s probably why he called it that.

Walking through the door, I’m greeted with the most amazing smells. Spices fill the air, and the aromas of basil and peppers take over my nose.

“Hey there, Zo. Dinner’s actually almost done.” Ryker stands at the island with his hands on the countertop.

“It smells incredible. I’m drooling.” Laughing, I slip off my shoes and walk towards the kitchen.

“Nope. Go get comfortable and do whatever for the next twenty minutes. But stay out of the kitchen.” Ryker points to my room and shoos me.

“Okay, okay. I’m gonna go hop in the shower then. I smell like the diner.” Turning on my heel, I walk into my room and run the shower.

After I undress, I step under the hot water and let it cascade around me. My feet hurt, my back hurts, but I love that they do. That means I’ve been working my ass off this past week.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

Never have I been able to sit still. I always like to keep busy. When I was told I needed to stay home and be a housewife, I was so fucking pissed. That wasn't who I was, who I am. Mitch knew I liked to teach, that I loved my kids. Yet, as I was told, I needed to support my soon-to-be husband. I needed to stay at home and take care of things there.

Though I don't know why, since he had a person for everything. Cooking, cleaning, driving, everything. I sat there most days, alone and bored out of my mind. Or scared out of my mind if something went wrong.

When I get out of the shower, I throw on some leggings and a t-shirt. I quickly dry my hair and saunter out to the kitchen.

Just as I walk in, Ryker's placing our plates on the island for us.

"Just in time. Sit." He points to the stool, and I slide into it. Ryker next holds up a bottle of wine, his hand run along the front as he presents it to me, and I nod. He pours us each a glass and then comes and sits down next to me.

"Ryker this looks amazing." Closing my eyes, I inhale the smells wafting up from our plates.

"Pesto baked salmon and some roasted zucchini." Ryker places a hand on my back as he holds up his glass. "Cheers."

I clink mine against his. "Cheers."

“How was the rest of work?” Ryker turns to face me, giving me the sweetest smile. I take a bite of the salmon, and I’m instantly distracted. It’s so flakey, so tasty. It’s practically melting in my mouth. The pesto against the salmon? Oh my God. Flavor overload on my tongue.

“Holy shit, Ryker. This is delicious. Seriously, I don’t think I’ve ever had salmon this good.

He smiles and takes a bite of his food. “I’ll cook for you anytime you want, Zo.”

We sit in silence for minute, eating, and then he asks me again, “So was your day good?

“Um. It was okay. There was this person who was passing through. Seemed nice at first.” I set my fork down and put my hands in my lap. My mind goes back to replay the events that happened after I brought him the check.

“At first? What happened?” Ryker puts down his napkin and turns his whole body towards me on his bar seat. His hand rests on my shoulder, drawing me back from my thoughts.

“Well, nothing really happened. He just was creepy. I don’t know, warning bells went off. But I could just be overly paranoid.” I wring my hands together.

“Always trust your gut. Always. If he seemed off, he probably was. You need to let me know if he comes in again.” Ryker rubs my back, and I nod. “I’m serious, Zo.”

“I know you are, and I will. I promise.” I look into his crystal blue eyes, and I can feel my heart flutter.

We have a nice, easy dinner, just the two of us. For the first time in a very long time,

I actually enjoyed myself.

Ryker grabs the plates, and I work on putting the food away. We work quickly together to get the kitchen cleaned up. After we're done, Ryker suggests a movie.

"Yeah, that actually sounds perfect." I make my way over to the plush grey sofa, fleece blankets covering the back of them. I sit on one end, and Ryker sits on the other. Candles are lit on the fireplace mantel and coffee table, giving the living room a soft glow once the lights are turned off. A dark wood coffee table sits in the middle of the room with the sofas around it. The fire place is set into a stone wall feature, the TV mounted to the wall above it.

"John Wick?" He quirks a brow, waiting for my answer.

"Never seen it, so sure." Shrugging, I grab a blanket and cover myself with it.

"You've never seen it? Sweetheart, you're in for a treat. It's a great movie." He does a little dance in his spot on the couch as he gets himself excited for the movie. I laugh myself to tears watching this hunk of a man get silly right in front of me.

Ryker clears his throat and then turns to me, "Where are all the dad jokes kept?"

"Not another one!" I groan and throw my hands up.

"The dadabase!" A wide grin forms on his face and I throw a pillow at him.

"Awful, Ryker. Just awful." I giggle and shake my head at him. Secretly, I'm really enjoying them, but he will never know that.

Ryker smiles and finally starts the movie. I sink into the couch and pull my legs up under me. Ryker kicks his feet up onto the coffee table and leans back comfortably

against the couch. We sit in comfortable silence as we start to watch it. It's not but several minutes into the movie that I'm crying and having to shut my eyes.

"No, I can't watch this." I violently shake my head. I throw my hands up over my ears. "They hurt the dog. No!" I'm in full-blown hysterics.

"Zo, sweetheart." Ryker picks me up and places me on his lap so that my back is facing the TV. My head immediately goes to his neck where I sob into him. "Sweetheart, it's just a movie. I promise you, everyone and every dog is okay." He rubs my back, trying to soothe me.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“I can’t. I can’t watch that. I can’t.” My head shakes against his neck.

“Okay, okay. It’s off. TV’s off. I promise we will never watch that movie. Ever. Well, I probably will still watch it with my brothers, but I will make sure you’re out with my mom or something.” Ryker chuckles.

That last declaration makes me pause.

“Ryker ...” I pull back and sniffle. “How long do you think I’m going to be here?” Searching his eyes, I see it. The longing, the softness. His eyes move back and forth, searching my face. His hands come up to rest on each side of my face, and he pulls me closer so our noses are almost touching.

“Zo, I kind of like having you here around me. I won’t hold you back if you want to leave, but please know I don’t want you to go.” His voice is hoarse. His eyes move to my lips.

We lock our gazes, and both our breathing picks up when we press our foreheads together.

“But you don’t know me, Ryker,” I whisper against his lips.

“Well, I’m trying to.” He reaches up and tucks my hair behind my ear.

The tension between us is thick. My heart feels like it’s ready to beat right out of my chest. Moving my hand up, I rest it on his heart. His is wildly beating as well.

My lips barely brush his, but we never touch.

“Zo, I want to kiss you. I need to kiss you. Please, can I?” Ryker begs.

In a breath, I grant him the permission. “Yes.”

Instantly his lips come up to mine, soft and gentle. It’s as if he’s making sure I’m still okay. So, I give him the permission he’s looking for. My hands slide up to the back of his head.

Parting my lips slightly, I lean closer and give myself to him. His hands travel up my back and sink into my hair. Ryker grips my tresses and suddenly, his kiss is more passionate, more fierce. A desire is lit within each of us as our tongues dance around each other.

Without thinking, my hips start to move slightly. I can feel him instantly harden beneath me. Involuntarily, I let out a moan and he follows with a growl. Realizing that I need air, I pull back. Both of us are breathing hard. Neither of us say a word; we merely stare at each other.

“Zo.” It’s all Ryker says as he softly nibbles on my lips. My entire body is ready to combust. My skin is burning from the inside out.

It’s in that moment that I realize I can’t deny what’s in front of me. I’m falling for Ryker.

Chapter 9

Zoey

“Thanks for the help today. I really do appreciate it.” Jen looks over at me and smiles.

Feeling the heat rise in my cheeks, I say, “You all have done so much for me. It’s truly the least I can do.”

“Oh, you are doing more than you realize.” She gives me a wink and then turns to wipe down the counter.

Today I’m helping Jen in the store on the ranch. Locals come here and pick up fresh vegetables, eggs, and all kind of things that come right from the property.

“What do you mean?” Turning to her, I narrow my eyes. What could I possibly be doing? They’re the ones that have taken me in and given me not only work but a place to lay my head at night. Well, Ryker has given me that last part, but still.

“Well, let’s see. Where do I start? First, you’ve done a complete one-eighty since you got here. You’re lighter, happier, freer.” I blush again at the compliment. “Then there’s my Ry. That boy’s been a different man since you stepped foot in this town. He’s usually quiet and keeps to himself. Hell, he’s been working on the ranch more in the weeks you’ve been here than these past few years.” Jen smiles and shakes her head.

“Um, I don’t think I had anything to do with that.” My face scrunches as I turn to her. Honestly, I don’t. I’m sure he is just making sure I don’t royally screw up his family’s legacy. Of course the last thing I want to do is hurt them.

“Zoey, sweetie, you have had more to do with that than you realize. I can see it in both of your eyes. The way you look at each other. The smiles you both wear all day long. How my son cares for you. Do you know he’s never mentioned a girl before? He dated, sure, but never once did he ever feel the need to talk to about her like he does you. Ry never brought them home. From the moment you stepped off that bus, you were his world.” She clicks her tongue.

Well, now I know where Ryker gets that little move from.

After I finish helping Jen in the shop, I decide to head over to see the horses. I'm not scheduled to do anything else today, so I have some free time.

Walking over to the southern pasture, I see that the horses are keeping themselves busy eating. I jump up onto the fence and sit down to watch them. Amethyst spots me and trots over. I hear her snort and nicker on her way over. Instantly I know she's excited to see me.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“Hey, girl. I know, I know. I haven’t had much time to see you. I’m so sorry. I promise I’ll make more time. That sound good?”

Running my hand over her face, she huffs in agreement.

“You having fun out here?” Amethyst does a little nod and leans her head towards mine. “Good. I’m glad.”

Sitting there, petting Amethyst, I hear a truck come up behind me. Ryker. Inwardly I smile, excited to see him.

Last night, I let myself feel what it was that I wanted. What I wanted was Ryker. When I’m around him, I get butterflies in my stomach. My heart beats faster, and his touch ignites me.

“Sweetheart.” Ryker comes up next to me and pulls my lips to his.

“Hi.” My cheeks feel hot, and I know I’m blushing.

“How’s your day? I see Amethyst is keeping you company.” He walks over and pets her. She huffs and snorts to show her excitement in seeing Ryker.

“It was all right. I helped your mom in the store today, so pretty uneventful. Had the rest of the day to myself, so just came out here to think.” I bite my lip, knowing he’s going to want to know what I’m thinking about.

“Do you want to talk about it?” He stops and turns to me. Ryker places his hands on

my arms, rubbing them. The touch is making my skin burn with desire.

“Actually, I do. There’s probably some things I need to tell you. Things you may know half-truths about, but things I need to be honest with you about. It’s time.” The tightening in my chest starts as soon as I look up at him.

“Okay, how about we head to the lake? We can talk there. We won’t have to worry about people or horses bothering us.” He gives Amethyst a side eye, and she huffs. I laugh, watching her trot away.

Ryker takes my hand in his, and we walk to his truck. We drive in silence to the lake. We make our way along the worn path past Ryker’s house. I stare past the fields to take in the beautiful mountains in the distance. Wyoming is a beautiful state. The vegetation, the open sprawling land around us, it makes me feel so free. Once we get to the lake, Ryker lays a blanket down in the bed of the truck and we hop in, looking out at the landscape. It’s so peaceful, so open. I can hear the trees rustle from the wind as birds chirp in the distance.

The tightening is starting to squeeze on my heart again, and tears are building up in the corners of my eyes. My hand reaches up and rubs my heart.

Ryker turns me towards him. “Zo, whatever it is, you can tell me.”

“Just promise you won’t ... Promise me that you’ll stay with me. That you won’t get mad or angry. You won’t leave. I don’t think I could handle that if I told you everything.” My bottom lip is trembling now. My hands tremble, and I try to hold them still.

“Look at me, darlin’. There’s nothing you could tell me that’ll make me leave your side. There’s nothing you could do that’ll make me walk away. I just found you, and I won’t let you go.” Ryker grabs both my hands, and his thumbs rub circles on the

inside of my wrists. That small gesture calms me a bit.

“I probably should start with who I am.” I take a deep breath. I look out at the lake for a second and then turn to Ryker. “My name is Nicole Moore. I’m a twenty-seven-year-old former teacher. I was engaged to a man named Mitch Wakefield while living in New York.”

I pause momentarily, trying to gather the best way to tell Ryker what Mitch did to me. Ryker sits silently and waits for me to continue.

“I ... I ran.” Tears start to spill over. “Mitch used to be a nice guy. But one day, it was like a light switch was flipped. He ... He w-would hit me and beat me. Sometimes f-forcing himself s-sexually on me.”

Ryker doesn’t say anything, but his hands are vibrating with rage. I can see it in his eyes, feel it in his touch. He is doing all he can to control his emotions right now.

“I had to quit my job, my career because of him. He told me my place was in the home. I needed to play the nice housewife with him. Host the parties, hang with other the other wives of the men that ran his company.” I stop and sniffle. “I should probably tell you that Mitch took over his dad’s company and from that point on, everything was about keeping up appearances. He said he had an image to uphold that his father created. It was his legacy or something like that.” Wiping the tears away, I give a gentle shake of my head.

“What about your parents? Could you have told them? Gone to them for help?” Ryker asks, clenching his jaw.

“Remember I said my parents were evil people? I did go to them. I begged them to help me, and they even saw the bruises and cuts on my face and body. My mom told me that Mitch was ‘probably having a bad day’ and that I ‘need to learn how to make

it better for him.' Be a better woman to him. My father would hear nothing of it. He told me I was being selfish and that he couldn't understand why a man of Mitch's caliber was marrying someone like me. Though, the marriage was vitally important to him. His focus was to get his company and Mitch's company merged. My dad stood to make a lot of money that way. Don't ask me how or why; I was never privy to that information."

Ryker huffs, and I can see his jaw tick. "Friends? Any friends you could have gone to?"

Shaking my head, I think back on all the people I used to call friends. "No, they all left me once I got locked up by Mitch. Of course, he told them they were worthless and that I couldn't be seen with them. So, they didn't stick around. The only person I had any communication with was a friend who helped me with the new identity thing. Aside from that, everyone else abandoned me. They were all afraid of Mitch, and I guess my friendship meant nothing to anyone. No one fought for me. I was all alone."

Turning to him, my eyes try to convey to him that what I'm about to tell him is bad. I clasp my hand on top of his and squeeze.

"The day I left ... I'd never seen such anger in his eyes. Some lady hit me from behind while I was out running errands, something I've done before. Sometimes I take the driver Mitch provides for me, sometimes I like to get out and drive myself. That day was a day I wanted to drive myself. So, when the lady hit me, I knew it was going to be bad. From the outside, it didn't look like much damage was done from the accident, but the car was an expensive car. Like a quarter million expensive."

"Fuck." Ryker's eyes go wide when I drop the price.

"He never asked me if I was okay. He never scooped me up and hugged me. I was insignificant. Mitch was more worried about the car and if the lady was going to try

to sue us by making up a story. He couldn't give two shits about whether I was okay."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

Mindlessly, I reach up and touch where the cut was on my cheek.

“Mitch became so angry about it. He threw me against the wall and hit me over and over. My head was on fire, and my face burned from the cuts.” I take a deep breath. “His hand went over my throat, and he had this look in his eyes, this hatred. I swear at that moment, I had no idea who was standing in front of me. Mitch squeezed so hard, I thought he was going to kill me right there in his office.” My body starts trembling from adrenaline now coursing through me at the memory. Salty tears sting my eyes and cheeks. “That’s when I knew I had to leave. I knew right then and there that if I didn’t run, he would kill me. Maybe not that day or the next, but there was no doubt he would eventually.”

Ryker reaches over and pulls me onto his lap. “Shh.” He holds me close to him, running his hands along my back. “I just ... I don’t understand how he could go from someone you wanted to marry to an abusive asshole.”

I squeeze tighter into Ryker. “It was right after he took over as CEO to his father’s business. I don’t know much about the company. Something with financials ... I honestly have no clue. He travels a lot, does things with numbers; it’s completely out of my wheelhouse. And he wasn’t always an asshole. Mitch was actually a nice guy before all that. I mean, he got upset and angry, but people have emotions. Except he never laid a hand on me. Ever. Until the first time he did, of course.”

My hands rest on Ryker’s chest and I can feel how wildly his heart’s beating beneath it.

Biting my lip, I take a deep breath. “I’m scared he’s going to find me and drag me

back to New York. If he does that ...” I trail off, knowing that if I go back to New York with him, I won’t make it out alive.

“Zo, look at me. Listen to every fucking word I’m about to tell you. I won’t let anything happen to you. Nothing will ever happen to you; I swear on my life. I’ll do everything in my power to protect you and keep you safe. Understood?” His hands are gripping the sides of my face. There’s a viciousness in his eyes, not directed at me, though.

I snifle, more tears overflowing.

Ryker brings my face to his and kisses my nose. “You’re safe with me. I’ll protect you. I promise, Zo.”

He takes a shuddering breath, and then his lips come crashing down on mine.

Chapter 10

Zoey

Ryker grips the back of my neck. His mouth falls from my lips and trails kisses along my skin. Slowly, he turns me, lowering me onto the blanket. Ryker boxes my head in with his strong arms on each side.

Our eyes meet, and his darken with desire. Reaching up, I caress his face, pulling him back down to me. He presses a searing kiss to my mouth, and I lose myself to the intensity of our mouths moving together. Ryker’s tongue slides against mine, and he lets out a low growl as his hand moves under the hem of my shirt.

My skin burns from his touch. Every nerve ending is igniting an inferno. My breath catches, and I pull away. Our chests move rapidly in unison.

“Ryker, not out here,” I say between breaths, my hands gripping his shirt.

Nodding, Ryker jumps out of the truck bed and holds out his hand. “Let’s go.” He helps me onto my feet and into the cab.

He runs over to the driver’s side and slides in, starting the truck, but leans over and places a soft kiss on my lips before we drive off. My hand moves to the tingles that are left on my lips from him.

When we get back to the house, we both jump out. Ryker sprints over to my door and picks me up without hesitating. My breathing is heavy as his lips softly brush against mine. As my fist wraps around his shirt to pull him into me, my eyes meet the desire in his. My back hits the hard surface of the car. Ryker’s warm breath floats along the skin of my neck. A soft moan escapes my lips, and I feel his grip on my sides tighten as my hands travel up his chest and around his neck. My skin ignites from his touch as a burning need for him to be inside me grows.

My hands thread through his hair, and I pull his head back. My lips trace kisses up along his neck, eliciting a growl from him.

“I need to get us inside, darlin’.” Ryker’s voice is hoarse.

“Please.” My hands move to cradle around the back of his neck, and he walks us inside.

The moment the door closes, Ryker backs me against the wall, and our flame reignites. In an instant, his lips are on mine. We both move to touch as much as we can of each other as our desire grows. Our hands are pulling and grabbing anything on our bodies as our tongues clash against each other. A whimper escapes me as I feel his hand reach under my shirt. Ryker grinds against me, and we both let out groans.

We stop for a moment and stare at each other, breathing hard. He's waiting for a confirmation that I want this, so I give him one. "Room." That's the only word I'm able to get out. He nods and carries me to his bedroom.

Ryker deposits me softly on his king-sized bed. The grey comforter underneath me cools my burning skin. He stands at the end of the bed and removes his shirt, reaching behind himself and tugging it with one hand over his head.

His entire body is hard. I can see the lines and definitions of every muscle. My tongue wants to lick every crevice, every tattoo covering him. My nipples harden at the sight of him standing in front of me. He's utter perfection.

I start to pull my t-shirt up over my head, but his hands come to mine and stop me.

Ryker shakes his head. "No, let me."

My hands immediately fall to my side, and his reach down to the skin that's exposed. His fingers trace along my stomach, leaving goosebumps trailing behind them. His fingers find the hem of my shirt, and he slowly lifts it up over my head and off me. He pulls me up so I'm sitting at the edge of the bed, and then his legs straddle mine.

"You're beautiful, Zo." Ryker bends down, and his lips softly caress mine. My hands find his chest, and I gasp at the hardness of his body. I move down to the button of his jeans. He softly stops me. "Hold on, let me enjoy you, Zo." He slowly moves to unhook my bra, sliding it down my arms and throwing it behind him.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

Ryker's mouth immediately finds my hardened right nipple, and he pulls it into his mouth. My head falls back as I moan, and his arm wraps around me to hold me up. His tongue swirls around, his teeth gently biting my sensitive nub. Every inch of my body feels electrified. My pussy clenches from the pulsing. Ryker moves to my other nipple, claiming it with his mouth as he slowly lays me back on the bed.

Reaching for the button of my jeans, he slowly opens them and then stands over me. Ryker's fingers grab the waistband of my jeans and pulls them down. I immediately close my legs, embarrassed that I'm not wearing anything sexy.

"Zo, open. Let me see these cute little pink panties you got on." His hands go to my knees and he pulls them apart. A groan escapes his lips. Ryker drops down to his knees, pulling me towards the edge of the bed, and his index finger runs along my covered folds. "You're soaked, sweetheart." Slowly, he removes my panties and kisses his way back up my thigh to my entrance.

My entire body shakes from nerves.

"Relax, Zo. Just relax for me." His voice is low, and his arms wrap around my thighs. I look down and see his blue eyes staring back at me. Ryker pulls my folds apart, and his tongue travels up my slit, circling around my sensitive bud.

"Ryker ..." I gasp.

Pulling back slightly, he smiles. "You taste like honey, darlin'." Before I can respond, I feel his mouth on me again. Sucking gently on my clit, his tongue swirls around it. My hands come down to his head, and I grab his hair.

“Oh God, Ryker.” The words are forced from my throat as I feel myself come closer to the edge.

His fingers push inside me, and I begin to come undone. When two isn't enough, he pushes in a third. My walls start to pulse around him, and I can feel the heat build inside me.

“That's it, sweetheart. Come for me,” Ryker says huskily, stifling a groan.

His fingers curl up, hitting that spot inside, and flashes of light go off. The waves of my orgasm crash through me as I call out his name. He continues to work me through my euphoric release. When I finally come down from my pleasurable high, Ryker kisses my opening.

Standing over me, he removes his jeans, walks over to his nightstand, and pulls open a drawer. I hear the crinkle of foil and I watch him roll on a condom.

Holy fuck.

He's hard and huge.

Ryker chuckles as he lifts me up and pushes me back further on the bed. He crawls over, moving on top of me. His lips find mine, his tongue sweeping inside my mouth. Ryker pulls back and looks at me with a question in his eyes.

I nod. “Please, I need to feel you.”

Ryker reaches down and lines himself up with my entrance. Slowly, I can feel him push inside me, and I stretch all around him.

He hisses as he fully sheathes himself. “Fuck, Zo.” His eyes are closed as he allows

me time to adjust.

Wrapping my legs around him, I move against him, and he starts to move inside me. We start to find a rhythm, and he leans down, his arm beside my head, his lips finding mine.

I slide my arms around his neck, and he pulls back, locking eyes with me. His movements become faster and his thrusts harder. I can feel my body igniting again as the friction starts to build me up to detonating.

“That’s it, Zo. Come for me. Fucking come for me.”

As if my body understood his command, I explode with pleasure. My toes curl, and my nails rake against his back. My body shoots off fireworks as it squeezes and pulsates around him, milking his orgasm from him.

Ryker’s eyes close, and I hear his breathing get heavy. Suddenly, he moans with a final push, and I can feel him coming inside me.

Dropping down, he kisses me passionately. Our tongues thrust against each other. He reluctantly pulls away and presses his forehead against mine.

“Zoey,” he rasps.

“Ryker,” I say breathlessly.

He pulls out inch by inch, and I already miss the feel of him. He gets up and throws away the condom in the bathroom. When he returns to the bed, he pulls down the covers, and I climb under them along with him.

I kiss him and turn my back to his front. Ryker’s arm swings around and pulls me

into him. Our legs lock into each other, and he lets out a long breath.

“Mine,” he whispers into my ear as he wraps his naked body around me.

His breathing evens out, and eventually we both find sleep.

* * *

“Good morning, beautiful.” I open my eyes and see Ryker near his dresser tucking in his shirt. Taking in a deep breath, I smell the rainforest. I smell Ryker and all his deliciousness.

“Mm.” I scoot over to his side of the bed, wrapping myself up in the warmth of his scent.

“Gotta get moving, darlin’. You’ve got a shift at the diner, and I need to visit a certain waitress to get the best damn cup of coffee in town.” Ryker walks over and presses his lips to mine. He pulls back and adds, “I don’t think I wore you out that much last night, did I?”

I groan. “I’m Jell-O and have no bones.”

Ryker lets out a deep laugh, and I smile. “That means I did my job.”

“Let’s not forget about three times this morning.” I roll over onto my back and pull the covers up over my head.

Ryker pulls back the blankets and hovers over me. “It would be four times if it wasn’t for the fact that I need to get to the station.” He reaches for my face, and his lips meet mine. I moan upon contact, relishing in his touch. “Get up, woman.” Ryker slaps my ass and gives me a soft smile. He turns and heads back into the bathroom to finish up getting ready.

Eventually, I pull myself out of bed and say goodbye to the hunk of a man that completely flips my world upside down. He came out of nowhere and completely took me by surprise. I run my hands through my hair and try to remember what it is that I'm supposed to be doing.

Work. I need to get to work.

By the time I get to the diner, I've regained the ability to walk. When I go inside, Joan, the diner's owner, greets me. She leans against the counter, giving me a grin from ear to ear. My face flushes.

"Well, hello there, Zoey! How are things goin' for ya?"

She really is a sweet woman, always looking out for the people of this town. I found out not too long ago that this diner was once owned by her father, Jack Harris. He named the place after his one and only daughter, Joan. The diner's a staple in this town. For the locals, it's practically a second home. She runs this restaurant with all the love she has for it and those who walk through its doors.

"Hi, Joan. It's going." Nodding, I slowly saunter past her. I look away so she can't notice the redness in my cheeks.

"Oh? And how's our sheriff doing?" And there it is. Joan winks at me and chuckles. "I mean, since you do live with him and all."

Completely embarrassed, I turn to her. "He's fine. You know, you can ask him yourself when he stops in for his morning coffee." I do love this town, but damn, they know everything about everyone here. It's like living in a town full of paparazzi. I shake my head and head into the back room to put my stuff away and get ready for my shift.

About an hour into work, while I'm wiping down a table, I hear the bell of the door and turn to see Deputy Johnson and Ryker come in. My heart immediately warms at the sight of him.

"Hello, Darlin'." Ryker leans in and kisses me on my cheek. My skin sizzles at his touch.

Blushing, I drop my head. "Hi."

Ryker places a finger under my chin and lifts it so that my eyes meet his. He tilts his head towards the counter. "We're just gonna go sit up there." He leans in and brushes his lips against mine.

My mouth wants more, but I rein in my need for him. "Okay. I'll be up there in a second," I say, my voice hoarse.

Once I finish with the table I'm working on, I head over to the counter and to the coffee pot. I fill two cups and bring Ryker and Johnson their usual coffees to-go.

I lean against the counter. "So, how are you boys doing?"

Johnson holds up his cup of coffee with a grin. "Better now, thanks to you." He throws in a couple of creamers and a packet of sugar, stirring it before taking a sip.

I curtsy. "Glad I could help." My gaze falls to Ryker. "You been busy today?"

Ryker takes a sip of his black coffee. "No. Been pretty slow today. I was able to get some paperwork done this morning, which is probably a good thing, I'm a little tired this morning." He winks at me, and I hear Deputy Johnson chuckle beside him.

Right about now, I'm probably as red as a tomato. I can feel the heat go from my

cheeks all the way to my ears. It probably doesn't help that what he says brings me back to last night and this morning. His body on top of mine, his hands caressing me. His tongue thrusting against mine. My entire body is humming with the thought of him inside me.

Ryker and I sit there and stare at each other, our minds both obviously thinking the same dirty thoughts, until Johnson clears his throat. "We should get back, boss."

Ryker blinks. "Yeah, let's do that." Turning to me, he leans over the counter. "I'll see you tonight at home, sweetheart." His lips meet mine for a passionate kiss. I can feel the eyes of everyone in the diner on us.

"Bye," I croak out.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

Once he leaves, I finally take a deep breath. That man is intense. His personality, his size, his ... Nope. Don't go there. Work, Zoey. Work.

As I shake off the heat from my encounter with Ryker, I get back to taking orders and talking with the townspeople. I notice a familiar face back at the same table he was at before. The creepy blonde man who scared the living daylights out of me yesterday.

Trying to sound and act as casually as I can, I approach him with a smile. "Hi there. How are you doing today?" I pull out my notepad and grab my pencil from my pocket.

"Zoey, right?" he asks, and I nod cautiously. "I'm good. My name is Brett, by the way." He holds his hand out and I stare at it, not wanting to touch him.

I purposely drop my pen on the ground so I can avoid shaking his hand. I stand up and place my pen tip on the pad of paper, my eyes looking down at it. "So, what can I get you this morning?"

"Uh, two eggs over easy, a bagel, and a side of bacon, please." Brett grins as he hands me the menu.

"I'll get the order put in for you." I quickly head back to the counter to hand over the order to the kitchen staff and get away from him. I turn and take a look at Brett, seeing him simply sit there reading a newspaper. Something just isn't right with him.

I keep pretty busy the rest of the morning and then eventually bring the check to Brett.

I give him a nod. “Here you go. I hope everything was good.” I lean over the table and pick up his plate.

“It was amazing. This whole town is absolutely amazing. I wish I had more time here, and I’m sad I have to head back home.” He frowns as he picks up his coffee and takes a sip.

Not thinking, I ask, “Oh, where are you from?”

Why are you making conversation with him?

His eyes lock in on mine. “New York. What about you,Zoey? You said you just recently moved here? Where are you from?”

I shudder when my name rolls off his tongue. “Um, back east as well. Anything else I can get for you?” I try to slow my heartbeat and control my breathing, but something feels off.

Before I can turn and leave, he speaks again, “You know, it’s been nice here. And you were right about Rose. She’s a very nice lady. In fact, everyone in this town has been great. Honestly, I wish I could stay here. Then I could learn more about you,Zoey.” He narrows his eyes at me, and chills run down my spine. “Can I be honest with you,Zoey?”

My stomach drops, and my feet feel like there’s cement in my shoes. I want to run, but I can’t. So instead, I nod, my eyes as wide as saucers.

He hums for a moment, thinking.

“Zoey is a very pretty name, but you just don’t look like a Zoey to me.” His entire body turns in the booth towards me, and his fingers thrum against the table. I take a

step back, my breath hitching. The plate drops to the floor, pieces scattering everywhere.

“Zoey? You okay, sweetie?” Joan calls over as she runs to me. Tears threaten to break through as I finally find my ability to run.

I push past Joan, running into the back room. My chest is tight, and my heart feels like it’s going to explode right out of me. My breaths come in short and fast. I feel like I can’t get enough air into my lungs. The room spins and the floor feels like it’s being pulled out from under me.

Stumbling over to a wall, I lean back against it, sliding down and curling myself into a ball. Tears stream down my face, and I can hear my blood pumping in my ears. I don’t even notice that someone else is in the room until he’s right in front of my face.

His hands find my shoulders. “Zoey. Sweetheart. Zo!” Ryker’s eyes are laced with concern. “Zo, what happened? You gotta talk to me, darlin’.” His right hand comes up to my face and wipes away some of the tears while his left holds my shoulder.

My head shakes back and forth. “H-He knows. He f-found me.” My stomach turns as those words leave my mouth. Every muscle tightens in me as I shiver violently.

“Who found you, Zo? Your ex?” Ryker places his hands on each side of my head. He tilts my face up so that I can make eye contact with him. “Talk to me, sweetheart. I need something to go on here.”

“The guy. Brett. My table.” My hands shake as I point back towards the restaurant. “H-He said I don’t l-look like a Zoey.” My voice is tight, and my words come out in ragged gasps.

Ryker’s hands suddenly leave me, and I can hear him talking to someone outside the

back room after he disappears. I can't make out what it is; my heartbeat is too loud.

He appears soon after, saying. "Zoey, come on. I'm gonna take you home."

"No. No! He's out t-there." My head shakes violently back and forth, and I try and push Ryker away from me.

"Zo. Zo! Listen to me, whoever this 'Brett' guy is, he left. He's not out there. Joan said he paid with cash and took off. I went outside, but I didn't see anyone. I have Johnson and McCormick driving around town looking for him. Let me take you home, sweetheart. Please," Ryker pleads, his eyes boring into mine.

Nodding, I let him wrap me up in his arms. He pulls me up and moves his hands so one slides under my legs and the other is around my back, holding me bridal style as he carries me out.

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

Ryker gets me into his truck and shuts the door. My head lays against the headrest, my mind lost to fear. I don't even hear Ryker get in his truck, but I feel his warm hands on me as he reaches over and buckles me in. His thumb and finger find my chin, and he pulls my face towards his. His thumb runs along my bottom lip, sending shivers through me.

"Zo, looks at me," he commands. "I want you to listen to me. I won't let anything happen to you. Do you understand? I promise, I'll do everything I can to keep you safe." Ryker leans his forehead against mine, and he seals his promise with a kiss.

It's too late. As much as he wants to, he won't be able to keep me safe all the time. He can't be with me every second of the day. The minute I'm alone, that's when he will strike. That's when Mitch will grab me.

I'm a sitting duck.

Chapter 11

Ryker

It's been three days since the incident at the diner. Zoey's been an absolute wreck about it, and I don't fault her one bit. With every bang or loud noise, she jumps, scared out of her fucking mind. The confident woman I knew is lost somewhere in that scared shell she walks around in now.

What's worse is that Zoey's having nightmares. I wake up to her screaming and her face wet with tears, her sweaty body shaking with fear. After what she shared with

me the other night, I completely understand the nightmares. This guy's a fucking piece of shit. Her parents are just as bad for not protecting her. Zoey's entire life was taken away from her because the people she loved and trusted gave zero fucks about her.

But now she has me. I won't let anything happen to her. Zoey will know that she's safe with me. She may be pissed when she finds out my little secret, but I reached out to a friend of mine over at the FBI to look into this Mitch guy. Agent Dean Fuller. He's a good guy, and I trust him with my life.

If what she's telling me is true, that he seemed to change overnight and turned into an asshole, abusing her, then he's extremely dangerous. My instincts are telling me that something triggered him to become the monster that Zoey says he became. What would cause such a drastic personality change?

The next thing I asked Fuller to do makes me hate myself. I also wanted him to dig into her background. I trust her to tell me things, but I need to know who and what I'm dealing with. It took her so long to tell me what was going on, and I don't know how long I have until this Mitch asshole shows up.

I may have fucked everything we have up by simply sending him a few strands of her hair to run. Honestly, I hate myself for it.

But I can't protect Zoey if I don't know everything about her.

As I sit here in my office, I stare out the window thinking about the things that led me to this point in my life. Everything I've done brought me here to protect Zoey from her demons. In a way, she has breathed new life into me.

My phone rings and jostles me from my thoughts. Reaching into my back pocket, I take my cell and see 'Dad' flashing on the screen. He doesn't normally call unless

there's something urgent he needs to talk about.

My brows pull together with concern. "Hey, Dad. What's up?"

"Ry, we have a situation at the ranch," he says, breathlessly. "Any chance you can swing by real quick?" My father sounds upset, which isn't like him. The man's an upbeat guy, always happy and full of love and life.

"Is everyone okay? What's going on?" I stand and grab my keys before walking towards the door of my office.

"Some of the cattle have escaped the northern grounds. We need to round them all up and get them back to the east pasture." My dad groans. "Fuck."

Shit. "Okay, I'm on my way. Did any get out into the road?"

"No, I don't think so. Just get here when you can, Ry. We could use your help with this mess."

"On my way, Dad." I hang up the phone and walk out of my office and over to Deputy Dalton, who is sitting at her desk doing reports.

She looks up from her computer when she hears me coming over. "Hey, Sheriff. What's going on?" Dalton unscrews her water and takes a sip, then focuses her attention on me.

"I need to head to the ranch for a couple of hours. Cattle got loose. Need to round them up. Call me if there's an emergency."

She smiles. "Go help your family. I got it from here. If anything happens, you'll be the first to know. Go get them cattle, cowboy." I narrow my eyes at her and shake my

head. Dalton simply laughs and turns away.

She always jokes that I lead a double life, Sheriff by day and cowboy at night. Dalton says I'm most women's fantasy. I don't buy it.

When I finally pull up to the ranch, I park by the main house and jump out. I see my parents and Zoey huddled around each other in a heated discussion. Zoey looks like she's been crying. Her arms are flailing all around as she talks to my parents. Finally, I see her shake her head and throw up her hands.

I come up next to Zoey and can see her eyes are puffy and red. "What the hell is going on?" I turn and face my parents, one hand on my duty belt and the other wrapped around Zoey.

"It's my fault the cattle escaped," she cries. I turn and look at her in surprise as she continues to talk. "I fixed the fence, or at least I thought I did. Maybe I didn't do it right. But I mean, I know I did it. I'm not crazy. I remember fixing it a couple days ago. Nails, hammer, all that jazz," Zoey rambles on, and eventually she starts full-blown crying.

I pull her closer to me as she sobs into my shirt. "Dad, what's happened?"

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“Well, the part of the fence she was supposed to fix wasn’t fixed like she claims. We didn’t know that when we herded them into the northern pasture yesterday. When we went to go take stock and feed them, we noticed a whole bunch were missing. Your brothers are trying to round them up now.” My dad runs his hands through his hair. “I’m gonna go help them.” He nods and takes off.

My mom merely looks at me and Zoey and gives a sympathetic smile. She says nothing, instead turning away and walking towards the store.

I pull Zoey back and take her face in my hands. “Tell me what’s going on, Zo.”

“Ryker, I know I fixed that fence. I swear I did. I ... I know I’m not sleeping well, but I didn’t imagine it.” She sniffles and shakes her head out of my hands. Zoey wipes the tears away and puts her hand over her mouth.

“All right. Let me go take a look at the fencing. Why don’t you go head to the store and help my mom out with that for now?” I kiss her forehead, and she leaves the way Mom did. Her eyes are completely distant. I know her mind is going a million miles a minute trying to piece together what happened.

I hop on a horse and head out to the fence in question. When I get there, my dad and Levi are looking at it too. I hop off my horse and walk over.

“This is what Zoey was supposed to fix.” My dad points to the open section of fence in question.

“She says she fixed it.” I take a closer look. The wood is old, and we’ve repaired a lot

of these pieces before. Nothing tells me that she did or didn't fix it. All I see is the pieces of wood not where they should be.

I look around the grass, trying to see if I can find any missing nails or splinters of wood. My foot brushes across the ground, but nothing sticks out.

"If Zoey fixed it, Ry, then the cattle wouldn't have gotten out. She signed off on the list saying she did, but look." Levi points to the whole fence. "She could be lying about it."

I glare, turning towards Levi. "Why would she lie? Wasn't there someone to help her with this?"

"She never asked. Also, Ash and I were out on a delivery. I'm pretty sure Zoey can handle some wood and nails." He pauses. "Well, I take that back. Apparently not." Levi holds his hand out again at the gap in the fence.

"Watch it, Levi," I growl. His hands shoot up defensively and he takes a step back from me. "Look, I honestly don't think she would just lie about this." As I say this, my stomach turns. Would she? She's lied about who she really is and why she's here. I shake my head and the thought away, remembering that's because she left a bad situation.

"Look, for now, we'll just keep her in the store. She can help your mom out there. Maybe this was just too much for her. We've put a lot of responsibility on her in the last few weeks, and maybe it was too much, too fast." My dad's usually the voice of reason between all of us. He has a point.

"Maybe." I shrug. "But yeah, let's keep her at the store. She might enjoy that more than wandering around here doing the other tasks." Sighing, I take my hat off and run a hand through my hair. "I'm gonna be honest with the both of you, I think she's

telling the truth.”

I don’t wait for an answer. I turn on my heel and get back on the horse before heading back to the stables. Once I reach them, I walk the horse over to her stall and get her locked up. When I finish, I head into the store.

I walk in and see Zoey standing by the counter, but it doesn’t seem like she notices me. She’s lost in her own mind, and I can see her lips moving as if she’s talking herself through her thoughts. Seeing her this sad pains me. I reach up and rub the back of my neck, sighing.

The past couple of days have been rough for her, and I know her sleep has been greatly affected. I can see the dark circles under her eyes, her haunted expression, and the paleness to her skin. She’s exhausted.

“Zo, darlin’. You doing okay?” I slide next to her.

She shakes her head. “Ryker, I know I fixed it. I know I did. You have to believe me. I went there, I had the wood and the hammer. I remember actually doing the work!” Her voice starts to get higher the more she goes on.

“Hey, slow down. I believe you. I have no reason to doubt you.” I run my hand through her hair. “You’re shivering. Are you cold?”

She nods. “Yes. It’s always so cold in here.”

I bend down behind a box on the floor. “Here, my mom leaves this little heater in here. Just make sure to unplug it when you leave.” I plug it in and have her stand near it.

Zoey places her head in her hands and starts to cry. “How can the fence be fixed one

minute and not in the next? I don't understand."

I frown. "Zo, I need you to calm down. We'll figure out what happened. I promise you that. If you say you fixed it, I know you fixed it. I believe you, sweetheart."

"But your parents don't think I did. They're so mad at me. I can't even face them right now." She plants a hand on her chest. "I let them down, Ryker," she whispers. I pull her in close and let her cry, resting my chin on the top of her head.

My hand rubs her back in small slow circles. "They just don't understand what happened. It's an accident, and accidents happen sometimes. But I believe you. So, now we just need to figure out what happened."

Zoey wraps her arms around me, and I continue to hold her until she's calmed.

"Come on, let's head back to the house. You need to take a nap. You're beyond tired at this point and if we're going to figure out what went wrong, I need you rested. I'm going to head back to the station, but I'll be home before dinner. My mom can come back and finish up. Okay?" I lean in and kiss her forehead.

Zoey nods and unplugs the heater. She puts away the paperwork she was going through and locks the register.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“Let me just text your mom and let her know I’ve locked up.” I nod as Zoey picks up her phone to send out the text.

She places the phone in her back pocket and sighs loudly as she gathers up her purse. She stands there for a moment lost in thought but then her eyes find mine and she gives me a sad smile. I move to stand next to her and wrap my arm around her shoulder to bring her closer to me. We make our way out of the store and Zoey locks it up.

For a moment she doesn’t turn back. She takes a shuddering breath and stares at the locked door. Zoey wipes the tears that have fallen to her cheeks and turns back to me. Her eyes don’t meet mine but I pull her close as we walk the short distance to my truck.

It’s a short drive to my house, but the couple minutes that we are in the truck, Zoey doesn’t say a word. She just sits there and stares out the window. I get out and run over to her side of the truck. Opening the door, I lean in and unbuckle her. Wrapping my arm under her leg and the other around her waist, I pick her up and carry her in. Her body goes limp against mine and her head finds the crook of my neck. I take her straight to the couch and lay her down.

The minute her head hits the pillow, she’s asleep. I stand there for a minute and stare at her beauty, seeing her red hair pulled into a braid that lays on her shoulder, her soft, pale skin that I love to run my hands over, her quiet breathing that calms me.

Zoey is unlike any woman I have ever known.

I walk back into my room and rummage through the closet for another blanket. Quietly, I head back to the couch and lay it on her, making sure she's warm and comfortable. I walk into the kitchen and grab a bottle of water and place it next to her. I then kiss her and then head out of the house, locking up the door behind me.

Something's gnawing at the back of my head. I'm positive she believes she fixed it, but none of this makes any sense. Why would the wood go missing? Did one of the hands do this to purposely to mess with her?

Then there's the problem with her already lying to me about her identity. Maybe that's what's bothering me. She's asking me to trust what she's saying, but she's hidden so much from me already. I know she still harbors secrets, and that's probably what allows my doubt to creep in.

She lied about who she was, and granted, it was for a very good reason. But still. That's why my doubt still makes me waver. That's also why I need more information on her. I need the truth.

Tell a lie once and all your truths become questionable.

Chapter 12

Zoey

Yesterday was fucking awful. I only got a few hours of sleep after Ryker dropped me off at home. But as usual, I woke up sweating from a nightmare. My heart was beating so hard it hurt. Ryker was nowhere around to help calm me.

So, I found a corner and wrapped a blanket around me, pulling my knees up and trying to calm my shivering body.

Mitch. He knows where I am. There's no doubt in my mind that Mitch sent Brett. Now I feel like I have to constantly watch my back, more so than ever before.

Then everything that went on with the fence. There's no way that any of that happened. I know I fixed that damned fence. I don't understand how pieces of wood can up and walk off. They were nailed into the fucking posts. I'm not super handy, but I can handle a damn nail and hammer. Ugh. Nothing's making sense. Was Brett involved with this? Maybe this was his way of fucking with me. Did he do something to that fence?

Today I feel like I have a hangover. My head's spinning. The headache grows with each passing second. I take the palm of my hand and push it against my forehead, trying to relieve the pressure. My stomach turns, making me feel queasy.

The walls feel like they're closing in on me. My chest feels tight. The pressure of staying hidden is becoming more difficult, especially now that Ryker knows about my past. Even more so now that I've fallen for him. I need fresh air. I need to get out of here. I've got to get away from the ranch for a while.

With everything that happened yesterday, the Hollidays thought it would be beneficial if I took a few days off from ranch work. It kills me to think that they doubt me. Ryker tried to tell me that they didn't doubt my side of the story, but I saw the disappointment in their faces. I know that look all too well. My parents had that look every single day, every single time they looked at me.

It's getting a little cooler here in Wyoming, so I need to buy some warmer clothes and a jacket. So, I quickly dress and pop some pain relievers to dull my headache. I look in the mirror and see the black circles under my bloodshot eyes. I run my hands through my hair and exhale. The stress is getting to me.

When I enter the living room, I grab my purse and keys. As I walk through the front

door, I stop and stand on the porch, looking out at the ranch. It's beautiful here. The vast open landscape, the sounds of the animals in the distance. The wonderful family that works together to keep this place going, the Hollidays. They're wonderful people who made me feel like I was special to them the moment I arrived. I feel a sharp pain in my heart. I need to leave. The Hollidays don't need to deal with my problems. I sigh, locking the door behind me. I rub the space over my heart as I walk over to Ryker's old pickup truck and hop in. A good retail therapy session can help take my mind off things and maybe numb the pain.

I drive into town and pull up to a store front along the main street. Body Canvas Clothing is a cute little store in town that caters to women. They have everything from stuff to wear on the ranch to little black dresses for date nights. I walk through the door and my eyes sweep over the store taking it all in. Light blue walls surround an expansive space full of rustic wooden décor topped with countless clothes. Country music plays over the speakers above me, which makes a small smile play on my lips.

"Hi there! Welcome to Body Canvas Clothing! Anything I can help you look for?" A short blonde woman approaches me, looking cheerful as ever.

"Uh, hi." I back up a step from her. "I'm just looking for now."

"Okay! My name's Miranda. If you need any help, just holler!" With that, Miranda bounces off to another section, singing along to the music and leaving me in peace to browse.

After about an hour of trying on things, I pay for my stuff and head out. Miranda ended up helping me find some outfits that'll be handy to wear around the ranch. She was nice, which again is just another testament to how wonderful the people are in this town.

I sigh as I walk down the street. I have no idea what I'm going to do. There's a part of me that wants to move on from this place, but I know I can't. Mitch already knows 'Zoey' is here. I don't have any of my old contact information for Cyrus, so I can't get a new identity. If he found me once, he can find me again.

So, what the fuck do I do?

Every day I stay here, I put Ryker and his family in danger.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

That's what my nightmares are about every night.

Every time I close my eyes, Mitch not only finds me, but he finds me with Ryker. Over and over, I watch Mitch kill Ryker right in front of me. It's why I try not to sleep at night. But ultimately, sleep does get to me, and so do the nightmares.

Ryker has tried to get me to tell him what the nightmares are about, but I can't bring myself to talk about it. He already has to worry enough about me. I just tell him I can't remember what I saw. He'll then bring me into him, holding me until I ultimately fall down the rabbit hole again. It's a never-ending cycle until morning comes.

As I walk down the street, I start to get hungry. A little trip over to the diner would be nice and honestly, relaxing. But as I make my way down the sidewalk, I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand. Without warning, the air feels thicker, and it becomes harder to breathe.

I look around and see nothing, but I feel it. There are eyes on me.

Ryker. I need to get to Ryker. Immediately, I turn and walk fast towards the station. As soon as I get in there, I bolt inside. As I stand in the entrance, I see Deputy McCormick standing near the door to the back of the station.

"Hey Zoey. How's—" Deputy McCormick starts before I cut him off.

"Ryker," I say between gasps. "I need Ryker." I grab at my chest, trying to suck in air, realizing that I'm having a panic attack. Deputy McCormick comes towards me

and places a hand on my shoulder. I jump at the touch and push him away. “Stop!” My hands go up over my face.

When I look up again, McCormick has his hands up. His eyebrows are furrowed and his mouth is turned down. “Holliday, get out here! Now!”

I fall to my knees, gasping. My chest is tightening more and more, and my lungs are struggling to pull air in. I close my eyes to try and control the dizziness, tears beginning to trickle down my cheeks.

“Shit! Zoey! Look at me, darlin’.” I hear Ryker’s voice, and he turns my head towards him as he kneels in front of me. His eyes are pools of blue. It’s all I see. Everything else fades away. Just blue. “Count with me, Zo.”

Ryker counts with me to twenty and helps to bring me back from the panic attack. Suddenly, the air rushes back into my lungs. I take a deep breath, breathing in sync with Ryker. Once I’m able to, he helps me up off the floor and wraps his arms around me.

“You’re shaking, Zo. What happened?” Ryker whispers in my ear.

“He’s here. I can feel his eyes on me. Someone was watching me.” I sob into his uniform.

“McCormick, go check outside. See if you see anything.” Without another word, the deputy heads outside and Ryker turns back to me. “Did you see anyone?”

I shake my head. “No, but I felt it. I swear I felt it.”

“Okay, just relax. Let’s go to my office.” Ryker walks me through the door and over to a room and sits me on a tan, plush couch. He heads back outside and talks with

someone for a minute before coming back in. My eyes scan the room. A dark wooden desk sits in the center of the office with bookshelves flanking the sides of a window behind the desk. While studying the room, someone walking back into the room catches my attention. My head snaps to the door to see Ryker approaching.

“McCormick didn’t see anything or anyone that stuck out. He’s going to go circle around and check again.” Ryker sits down next to me on the couch, his hand rubbing circles on my neck. “So why don’t you just relax here for a bit and then I’ll drive you home?” He moves his hand to my forehead before running it through my hair.

I cry into my hands as he pulls me into his side. “I swear, I’m not crazy. Someone was watching me.”

He places his hand under my chin and turns me towards him. “Zo, you’ve had shit for sleep for a while now. I believe you, I do. But also, the lack of sleep might be getting to you.” Ryker kisses the top of my head.

A knock comes at the door, and Deputy Johnson walks in.

“Hey boss, I have ... Zoey are you okay?” Deputy Johnson flashes me a concerned look. “What happened?”

Ryker shakes his head. “She had a scare. Thought someone was following her. I’m going to take off early and get her home. So whatever reports you have just leave them on my desk, and I’ll grab them tomorrow.”

Johnson nods, his mouth turned down. “Got it, boss man. Zoey, let me know if there’s anything I can do to help. Okay?” He places the files he had in his hand on Ryker’s desk and turns to leave.

The ride back to the ranch is quiet. But not letting me forget that he’s there for me,

Ryker laces his fingers in mine. His touch sends warmth through my skin. His thumb circling my palm ignites a flame deep within me, sending shivers down my spine. Slowly, I breathe out and try to calm my thoughts.

Ryker's here. He's all I need right now. I'm safe with Ryker.

Lost in my repeating thoughts, I don't even realize he let go of my hand or that we've pulled up to the house. The opening of my door startles me, and I gasp as I jump in my seat before I realize that it's Ryker.

"Just me, Zo." He holds his hand out towards me as concern flashes in his eyes. Instead of reaching for his hand, my arms wrap around his neck, and his arm folds around my back.

"Come on, sweetheart. Let's get you inside." Ryker doesn't even put me down. His other arm goes under my knees, and he effortlessly carries me against his chest into the house.

He brings me into his room and sits me on the bed. Ryker slowly takes off my shoes and socks. He's softly relaying to me everything he's doing so it doesn't come as a surprise. He stands up, disappears for a minute, and comes back with a clean pair of his flannel pants and a t-shirt. Once he's removed the rest of my clothes, he puts his t-shirt on me.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“I want you to sleep. Take a nap. I’m not going anywhere, okay? I’ll be right out in the living room. But you need to sleep.” Ryker runs a hand along my cheek, and my eyes flutter in response.

Ryker stands up, but I grab his shirt. “Please, just lay with me until I fall asleep.”

He bends down and kisses me. “Of course.” Ryker pulls down his comforter and has me slide in before he follows suit. I roll onto my side and he comes up behind me, wrapping his arm over my stomach.

Pulling me close, he whispers, “Sleep, Zo. I’ve got you.”

It doesn’t take long, but sleep takes me.

Chapter 13

Zoey

“Please, I’m sorry,” I beg on my knees.

Mitch clenches his teeth as he hovers over me. His eyes narrow as his face reddens with anger. “You shouldn’t have even left, Nicole. All of this is on you.” His hand comes up, and I feel the impact on my face. Before I can recover, his fist comes crashing into the side of my head.

“This is all your fault. You deserve all this. You fucking bitch! Now look at what you’ve done.” Mitch shows me his hand; it’s bruised and bloodied.

My face and head are screaming in pain. My eyes can't focus beyond him. I feel like this all looks familiar, but I can't make out my surroundings. Then, I hear a grunt.

"Zo, don't give up. I've got you." Ryker. It's Ryker. Where am I? My head, the pain, I can't focus.

"Ryker! Where are you?" I scream.

"Aw, isn't this cute. Two little fucking love birds. Well, problem is, you're supposed to be marrying me. But I'll tell you what, let's take care of this little problem. Shall we?" Mitch drags Ryker's beaten body over to me. My eyes start to focus, and I realize I'm back at the house in New York.

How did I get back here? When?

"Mitch, please. I'll marry you. Just ... Just let Ryker go!" I plead.

"Yeah, no. Not going to happen, sweet cheeks. So, let's get on with it." Mitch pulls off Ryker's blindfold.

His eyes. The blue in his eyes is gone. They are grey, muted, lifeless. My head shakes back and forth, and my eyes open wide while my lips tremble.

"Zo, don't look," Ryker begs, but I can't obey. No matter how hard I try to turn my head, it stays looking right at him. "Turn away, Zoey."

Mitch stalks behind Ryker. "I want to watch your face, Nicole. Make sure to watch, love."

"No! Please! Don't do this, Mitch! Don't hurt him! I'll marry you. I'll come back home. I'll never run again! Please, don't hurt him!" My body is frozen in place, and

my screams go unanswered.

“I’m not going to hurt him, Nicole. I’m going to end him.” Mitch holds up a gun to the back of Ryker’s head.

It fires, and I scream, the world around me turning black.

“Ryker! No! Ryker!”

My body jolts up from the bed. I’m drenched in sweat, crying and clenching my chest. Ryker comes running into the bedroom as I try to catch my breath.

“Zo! What happened?” He jumps into the bed and wraps his arms around me, pulling me into his chest. “Sweetheart, you’re shaking. Talk to me.”

My breathing is heavy, my chest heaving as I try to take in air. “Nightmare.”

“Fuck, Zo.” He squeezes me and rubs my back. “Whatever it was, it’s just a dream. I’m right here. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Ryker stands, walking into the closet. Slowly I sit up and shift myself to the edge of the bed on his side. My body shivers from the memory of the nightmare. It felt so real. The loud bang of the gun that went off, the ringing in my ears from it. I still feel the sting of Mitch’s hand on my face. Squeezing my eyes tight, I try to control my breathing. When I hear footsteps coming towards me, I look up to those ocean blue eyes.

Ryker hold out his hand and nods. “Come on. Let’s get you rinsed off and comfortable.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

My legs shake as I rise from the bed, and I feel an arm wrap around my waist. “I’ve got you, Zo.” I blink back my tears and place my arm around him. I lean against him, feeling his warmth against my body.

I say nothing. I’m so afraid to speak. The last thing I want to do is have him ask me to recall the nightmare. So, I don’t say a word. My lips form a thin line as we reach the bathroom, willing myself to keep it together. As we enter, I grab onto the countertop and grip it tightly. Ryker walks away from me momentarily to turn the shower on, and the loss of him is felt immediately. It’s cold and empty.

I turn and look into the mirror, and immediately I see the redness of my eyes. I run a hand down my cheek, wiping the couple tears that broke free. The stress is starting to wear on me.

“Hey, it’s going to be okay.” Ryker comes up behind me, and his strong hands run up and down my arm, giving me back the warmth. Worry fills his eyes, and his lips form a thin line. He slowly removes my shirt and helps me out of the rest of my clothes. He wraps himself around me to keep me warm as he checks the water temperature.

“Go. Get in, rinse off. I’ll be right here if you want me to stay.”

I nod. “Please. Stay.” My voice shakes as the words leave me. Ryker’s eyes soften, and his hand finds mine as he helps me in.

I let the hot water cascade over me. I try not to close my eyes unless I absolutely have to. I bring my hand to my heart and will it to calm down. Tears prickle from the corners of my eyes and mix with the water as it falls down to the bottom of the

shower.

As the water warms me, a calmness rushes through me. The fog of the nightmare starts to lift, and I start to feel a little better from the ordeal. Turning off the water, I turn and wring out the excess water from my hair. Before I can get cold, Ryker is right there with a towel to help dry me off before wrapping up my hair. Our noses touch, and sparks between us ignite. He plants a soft kiss on my nose that makes my stomach flutter.

I look to the countertop as he moves away and see the set of clothes lying there. He reaches over and grabs the shirt. Slowly he pulls it down onto me, allowing me to take in the woodsy scent left on the fabric. Ryker. I grab the pants and slowly pull them on. Before I can move, he steps closer into me and cups my face. His eyes are filled with determination. He presses his lips together and stares at me.

He doesn't say anything, and he doesn't need to. I can see it all in his eyes: the words that aren't being said. Ryker's lips brush mine in a promise. A promise that he will always protect me. I'm his.

We head out to the kitchen, and he starts making dinner for us. I watch him and admire how handsome of a man he really is. He moves gracefully through the kitchen as he preps and cooks. Every now and then he looks up at me, giving me a small smile. The one thing I've learned about Ryker is that he's loyal and protective to those he cares about. He left a job in Texas without a second thought to come home to help take care of his mom.

Such a great and wonderful man. A man who has me falling for him.

He places the chicken fettuccini in front of me. As good as the food looks, I really don't have an appetite. Ryker sits down next to me at the kitchen island and starts to eat. I push the pasta around my plate. My body is exhausted, my mind is burnt out,

and my heart is heavy with worry.

There are two sides of me at war. One side wants to run and hide somewhere else and give into the idea that I'll never be free. The other side wants to fight like hell. That side wants to live, laugh, and love, never living in the shadows.

Ryker breaks me out of my internal war. "You know you can talk to me about them. The nightmares. It might help."

I just shake my head and put my fork down. It's bad enough that I have to live through it in my head; I don't want to hear it out loud.

Ryker grabs my hand. "Hey, look at me." I turn my head and can see the pleading in his eyes. I can see his worry even as he tries to hide it. "Everything's going to be okay, Zo. Trust me." He pulls me into him, and I rest my head on his shoulder.

My entire body is tight with tension and stress. Waiting for Mitch to show his face is slowly wearing me down. It's breaking every ounce of strength I had when I left. There has to be something I can do to end this. I just have no idea what that is.

"Come on. Let's leave this here. I'm tired, you're tired. Let's just go get some sleep." Ryker holds out his hand and pulls me up from the chair.

We walk into his bedroom. It smells like him, like a forest. It's a comforting scent that I've honestly come to love.

We get into bed and turn to face each other. His hand softly runs over my face. I place mine on top of his as he moves it over my skin. His warmth radiates into me, giving me serenity.

"I'm sorry, Ryker," I whisper.

“For what? You have nothing to be sorry for.” Ryker reaches out and pulls me closer. “Nothing that has happened has been your fault. Don’t apologize for it.”

“I brought it here. It’s my fault Mitch is turning this town upside down.”

“First, the town is not upside down. Second, you ran with good reason. A fucking really good reason. And thankfully, into my arms.” Ryker leans in and kisses me with fervor.

My hands move to his chest, and I can feel his heart beating against me. Ryker rolls me onto my back and hovers over me. My eyes find his blue ones. His hand runs under my t-shirt as he leans down, and our tongue thrust against each other. He squeezes above my hip, causing me to moan as he slowly moves above me.

Ryker breaks apart from my lips and hastily removes his shirt. He leans in and takes my shirt off, then quickly pulls off my pants and panties.

“Ryker, I need to feel you.”

He doesn’t say anything. He merely moves to his side of his bed, sliding off. I hear a drawer open and a foil packet rip. I turn my head to see Ryker has shed his pants and is sliding the condom over himself.

Ryker climbs back in bed and crawls over me. His head dips down, and his lips find my swollen nipple. I let out a gasp as I feel a soft bite against it, and then a tongue swirling around the nipple to soothe the pain. He turns his head to the other nipple and gives it the same attention. The sensations are too much for me, and I reach my hand down to wrap around his shaft.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“Zo,” Ryker hisses. I line his hard member up to my entrance, and he pushes in, completely sheathed. “God, you feel so good.”

He slowly rocks against me. My hands travel up his chest and into his hair. I pull him down, meeting his mouth with my own. My moans are swallowed by our kiss.

Ryker places his forehead against mine, and his thrusts become faster. He sits up as he grabs my hips, bringing me into him.

I start to feel the building of what I know will send me over the edge. “Ryker, I’m so close.” He lets out a growl as his finger finds my clit. He begins to circle it, giving me the friction I need.

“Come for me, darlin’. Let me feel you.” With the power of his words, my body goes careening over the edge, swept up in a wave of orgasmic bliss. My orgasm milks him as he soon follows me into his own release.

Ryker bends down and peppers my jaw with kisses. “You’re perfect, Zo. Everything. Perfection.”

In that moment, I live on the high that he’s giving me. In this world, in this moment, nothing else matters.

Nothing but Ryker and me.

Zoey

Bang!Bang! Bang!

Ryker jolts out of bed. “What the fuck? Who in their right fucking mind ...?” He continues to rant as he leaves the room and answers the door. I stay in bed, trying to will myself back to sleep.

The past three days have been rough, but sleep is starting to get a little easier for me. The nightmares still come, but Ryker’s there to help me past them.

Footsteps echo through the hallway and back into the bedroom. Ryker clears his throat. “Zo, I need you to come into the kitchen.” His lips form a thin line, and his eyes instantly tell me something is wrong.

“Okay.” I jump up and put on my pants that lay on the floor and grab a hoodie from the closet. My stomach starts to form knots, and I get a sickly feeling. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Whatever this is, it has to do with me.

I walk out to the kitchen and find Asher and Levi sitting on the barstools at the island. They both have grim looks on their faces, but I ignore it and go to the coffee maker to start a pot. I can feel their eyes boring into the back of my head as I turn to grab some mugs from the cabinet.

“You guys want any?” I offer to them without turning around. They don’t answer, so I face them and see the paleness in their faces. Levi’s leg shakes under him, and Asher’s fingers thrum on the countertop.

Something’s wrong.

Sighing, Ryker speaks first. “Uh, Zo. Levi has a couple of questions he needs to ask

you.” Ryker comes around the island and stands next to me, placing a hand on my back.

“Um, okay. What’s up?” Folding my arms across my chest, I turn to Levi, and my brows furrow.

“Did you feed the chickens yesterday?” His eyes flick back and forth between Ryker and me.

“Uh, yeah. Twice. Once in the morning, and then at night before I was finished. I signed off on it on the checklist in the shop.” My eyes narrow as I look at Levi and Asher. “What’s going on?”

“Well, we found some of the chickens around the feeder this morning.” Levi pauses and looks down. “Dead.”

Asher clears his throat and continues for Levi, “The gate was also left open, and some of the chickens escaped.”

My stomach drops, and my hands begin to shake. Tears well in the corner of my eyes. Not again. They think I did something to the chickens. I look to Ryker, and he’s just staring at me. I shake my head.

“No. N-No. They were fine when I left ... There’s no way. The gate ... I closed it. I swear. They were alive. When I left, they were alive. I fed them their feed and they were alive. They were all fine.” I back up against the counter across from the island and wrap my hands around my body.

“That’s the thing, Zoey. You were the last one to feed the chickens. There were no other hands on the farm at that point. You closed up the shop,” Asher says quietly.

“Are you sure you fed them the right feed? And that you closed the gate?” Levi raises an eyebrow.

“Yes! Yes! A thousand times yes! I know what to feed them, I’ve done it before, quite a few times. And I specifically remember locking the gate because Rover tried to get out when I did. I told him that he was slick, but it wasn’t happening. I latched the gate and left.” Tears are pouring out of my eyes at this point. “I swear.”

My breath catches and I sink to the kitchen floor.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“I ... I ...” I squeeze my eyes shut. Ryker is immediately at my side. The panic starts to flood my veins. My breaths becoming harder to take in.

“Zo, breathe.” Ryker rubs my leg and tries to get me to come out of the panic attack. “You both need to leave,” he tells his brothers.

“Look, Ryker, we’re not trying to be assholes, but we needed to ask her. You know we do,” Asher argues as his brows pull together. He runs his hands over his face as he lets out a sigh.

Ryker shoots up. “Really? Because right now I see her on the floor in a state of panic over this bullshit accusation. Does this honestly look like she did something? Are you two looking at her?”

“Ry, man, we had—”

“Just go,” Ryker growls.

My vision is completely distorted by my tears. My heart hurts, and my head is pounding. My entire body feels like it’s been run over.

“Zo, sweetheart, it’s gonna be okay. I swear.” Ryker puts his thumb and finger on my chin and pulls my face to look at him. He leans in and kisses me. “I’ll figure out what’s going on. None of this makes sense, but I’ll get to the bottom of it.” He drags his knuckles over my cheeks to wipe away the tears.

I work to steady my breathing, and I close my eyes. “But you believe me, right?”

Please, tell me you believe me.”

“Yeah, Zo. I believe you.” The way Ryker says it doesn’t sound very convincing. “Come on. It’s early, but it’s morning. You need to get ready for your shift. Go shower and get dressed. I’ll make something for us to eat.”

Ryker holds out his hand, and I latch onto it. He pulls me up, bringing me crashing into him. My arms encase him, and I hold onto him like he could be pulled away at any second. The part of me that wants to run? That’s the one that is speaking the loudest right now. The side that’s telling me that he will eventually stop seeing the truth. He will give in to the lies.

Removing myself from his grip, I walk out of the kitchen and down the hall to my bedroom. I head back to the bathroom and turn on the shower. I look into the mirror not knowing who is staring back at me anymore. Tired, shadowed eyes stare back at me. I run my hands over my face; I don’t even what’s going on anymore, nor what’s real.

My body aches, and my head feels like it weighs a ton. Between the incessant pounding that’s going on inside of my head and the stiffness in my neck, I’m completely surprised I can even keep my head up at all. I step in the shower and stand under the hot water. With everything in me, I close my eyes to hold back the tears. My body shakes, and soon, my legs give out. I drop down to the bottom of the shower and curl myself up in a ball, letting the water drench me.

It’s Mitch. All of this is his doing. I know it. Who else could it be?

Eventually, the water runs cold, and I pull myself up off the floor. I get out of the shower and wrap a towel around my body before putting one around my hair. I next drag myself out of the bathroom and walk over into the bedroom I was using before Ryker and I started sleeping together. I don’t even have to worry about moving my

clothes into his room; I'm sure I will be out on my own soon if this bullshit keeps up.

I throw on my uniform for the diner, which is a red-striped carhop dress, and I head into the kitchen and sit down at the island. I'm greeted by eggs and bacon.

I move the food around on my plate, not interested.

"Not hungry?"

I look up and see Ryker staring at me. I shake my head. "Not really."

"Hm. Yeah, it's been a hell of a past few days." Ryker sounds like he's mulling over something. I don't really want to know what that 'something' is, so I look back down at my food without replying.

This is probably where things end for us. Where he pulls away from me. Where I end up being more trouble than I'm worth. I shake my head and try to regain myself.

"You okay?" Ryker extends a hand out to touch me, but I slide off the stool, putting some distance between us, and place my dish in the sink.

"Fine." I walk past him, giving him a small smile and heading to the front door.

"Zo." He comes over and grabs me by the waist. Ryker pulls me in close to him and whispers, "You're safe with me. I promise you. We'll figure out what the fuck is going on around here."

"But your family—"

He cuts me off, "Fuck what my family thinks right now. They'll see the truth too."

Before I can respond, he presses his lips to mine. His tongue sweeps over my bottom lip, and I part my lips in response. Our tongues collide, and I let out a moan.

Ryker backs me up against the door, our breathing growing heavier. One of his hands runs up my body, sparking little fires with every touch. He stops when it reaches the side of my face, and his thumb caresses my cheek.

“Mm. I so want to spend all day tasting you, ravishing you. Showing you how much you mean to me.” He pauses and bites his lip. “I’ve got an idea. How about tonight, after you’re off work, we go have a picnic at the lake?” He kisses along my jawline, making his way over to my earlobe. He nibbles on my ear, sending a shockwave through my body.

“That ... sounds ... good,” I say between breaths.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

Ryker drops his head against mine. “Go to work, darlin’. Before we’re both late.”

* * *

When I pull up to the house after work, Ryker’s sitting there on the tailgate of his pickup truck. He’s such a sight to see. As strong as his exterior is, his heart is as soft as can be. His blue eyes pierce through mine every time our gazes meet. His lips are soft, and his hands burn against my skin with every touch. Every inch of him is solid like a rock.

My heart skips a beat whenever I’m near him, and my pulse quickens at his touch. I’ve never had these feelings before. This longing to be with someone. A fear that I can lose it all in an instant. If I’m being honest with myself, it’s a good possibility that I will.

Ryker has done so much for me. In return, all I seem to do is hurt him and his family. Not intentionally, of course. Just by being here on the ranch.

I jump out of the truck and meander over to him.

“Hey there. What are you doing out here?” I move to stand in-between his legs. Ryker wraps them around me, locking me into him.

“I’m waiting on someone, a beautiful woman. We’re supposed to go have this nice picnic at the lake tonight.” He reaches behind him, patting the top of the basket. “I had this whole thing packed and ready to go. Not sure if she’s gonna show up, though.”

Looking around him, I see the wicker basket sitting on top of a few blankets. A drink cooler sits along the back of the truck bed under the back window. “Oh wow. That would be a shame and such a waste of food. You know, if she doesn’t show, I’m sure someone in town would love to have a picnic with you.”

Ryker yanks me closer as I laugh.

“Someone in town, huh?” He presses sweet kisses on my lips and then nods towards the truck. “Let’s go, woman.”

We jump in his truck and head out towards the lake. When we get there, he lays out a blanket in the bed of the truck, and I jump in the back. Ryker hands me a sandwich and grabs his own, taking a bite.

“So,” he begins, turning to me, “The past, the present, and the future walk into a bar.” His lip curls up. “It was tense!”

I laugh and throw my napkin at him. “Those are so bad. Seriously, you have no future as a stand-up comedian.”

“You know you love them. And I got you to laugh. Mission accomplished.” He digs into the basket he brought and hands me a bottle of water. “You seem to be in better spirits.”

I shake my head. “I’m not, but I’m great at putting on a fake face. Right now, I feel like I need to seem like I’m okay.”

“Don’t.” Ryker stares at me.

“Don’t?”

“Don’t be fake with me, Zo. Be you.”

I chuckle at his comment. “Um, I can’t be me, number one. Number two, this is how I need to deal with everything. I’m a huge risk to your family’s ranch. Everything I touch goes to shit. All I can be is fake.”

“Bullshit, Zo. I don’t care if you’re Nicole or Zoey. You’re still you. No one can take that away from you. And we’ll figure out what’s going on here. You know I will.” Ryker rests a hand on my leg.

I shake my head. “You don’t understand. He’s already taken who I was. Every hit, every punch, every time he forced me to have sex with him, a little piece of who I was died. I never got the chance to become anything. I never found out who I was.” I sniffle and wipe the tear that escaped from my eye. “All of this ... It just makes me feel like I’m absolutely crazy. I know it’s Mitch; I just can’t prove it.”

“Don’t worry about proving it. I’m already trying to work on that. And before you ask, no, you can’t know the details. Just know that I’m using my contacts I trust to figure things out. As far as the ranch, my parents aren’t mad, Zo. They’re more concerned about you. They know you’re tired—hell, the whole town can see that, sweetheart.” He wraps an arm around me.

“Your brothers were far from concerned this morning, Ryker. They were mad at me for something I know I didn’t do.”

Ryker takes my sandwich from me and places it back inside the basket. He picks me up at the hips and pulls me onto his lap. Without a thought, I curl up against his chest. His body is warm, and it pulls me deeper into his hold. I fit him. I feel safe with him. This is where I’m supposed to be.

“Let me worry about my brothers.” He sighs. “Hey, this was supposed to be a nice

dinner. Let's not talk about the bad stuff, okay?" Ryker lays down, pulling me with him. He shifts me to his side but keeps me tucked into his body.

"The stars are beautiful out here." I lean back on his arm, looking up into the night.

Ryker turns his head towards me. "I take it you don't see much in New York."

"No, I don't. But I never really stopped to look up either."

He exhales. "See that one right there?" He points to a set of stars. "That's the constellation called Andromeda, also known as 'the Chained Woman.' She was the daughter of Cassiopeia and Cepheus. Story goes that Poseidon caught wind that Cassiopeia was saying that her daughter was more beautiful than the Nereids, which were sea nymphs. Well, Poseidon couldn't let that stand, so to punish Cassiopeia, he sent the sea monster Cetus to attack Ethiopia. Cepheus started panicking and went to an oracle. The Oracle told him that he had to sacrifice his daughter to Cetus in order to save his kingdom. So, they chained her to a rock by the sea for him. Hence 'the Chained Woman.'"

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“Wow, her parents were assholes too. And technically, they had me chained, waiting to marry my sea monster of an ex. Huh, I kind of feel like her and I are kindred spirits.” I laugh.

“You know, it’s funny you should say that.” Ryker looks back at the sky. “See that constellation below it? That’s Perseus, the son of Zeus. He’s a Greek hero. He found out about what Cepheus did to Andromeda, so he went in search of her, killed Cetus, and saved Andromeda, setting her free. Then he married her, and they had a shit ton of kids.”

I raise a brow, scoffing. “A shit ton?”

“A shit ton.” He smiles at me and turns on his side. His hand comes up and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “I’ll free you from your past, Zo. Protect you from whatever monsters are lurking around.”

I move to face him, placing my hand on his chest. “Why? Why are you doing all this for me?” I whisper.

“I have a confession to make.” He looks away for a moment before returning his gaze back to me. His eyes are blazing with passion and desire. “I really care about you, Zo. Since the moment I walked into that diner, I couldn’t get you out of my head. You’re someone I can’t wait to see or talk to the minute I get up and the person I want to fall asleep next to every night. You’ve settled here.”

He takes my hand and places it over his heart. My eyes start to water, and I try to hold back the tears. “I’m falling hard for you, Zo, so I won’t let anything happen to

you. Never. Because I don't know what I would do without you next to me."

Before I can respond, Ryker leans over me and melts his body into my own. His lips tease mine until he can no longer hold back. His kiss leaves me breathless as his tongue dances with mine inside my mouth.

This is the moment I know everything will become more complicated because I have absolutely fallen in love with this man.

Chapter 15

Ryker

Since the night at the lake, things have been really great between me and Zoey. This past week, I've seen something different in her. She's standing a little taller, finding a little more confidence in how she holds herself. She's starting to return to the old Zoey. She's got a little more fight in her.

Things have also been calmer at the ranch. No other problems have popped up, and I'm hoping it stays that way. But the days she works on the ranch, I make sure I'm there helping her. The last thing I need is for her getting blamed for more things that go wrong.

"Hey, boss, you listening?" Deputy Johnson and I are sitting at the diner having breakfast, and I have apparently missed the entire conversation he was having with me while being wrapped up in my thoughts.

"Sorry, my mind was wandering. But I'm listening now." I grab my coffee and take a sip.

He tilts his head curiously. "I was asking how Zoey was doing."

Placing the cup down, I smile. “Things are good. She’s good. No, strike that. She’s amazing.” I sigh. “I just hate that she has had to deal with so much shit. She gets into her own head, gets lost in there. And when shit goes sideways? Fuck. She retreats completely.”

“Are things still happening? Does she think she’s still being followed?” Johnson grabs his toast and starts to butter it.

“As far as the ranch is concerned, it’s been quiet, thankfully. But I’ve put a lot of time into making sure no one is messing with her there. If something does happen, I can assure my parents it wasn’t her. My parents have her working only at the store, so that should cut down on the bullshit. But everything has been fine.” I pause and take a bite of my pancakes. “She still thinks someone’s following her. She pretty much sticks to the ranch unless she has to come here to work or when she’s with me.”

Johnson stops eating, and concern flashes over his face. “Have you seen anything when you’re with her? I mean, she was scared out of her mind the other day. That has to account for something.”

I shake my head. “No. I don’t know if it’s just her fears manifesting into something she thinks is happening or what. But nothing happens when I’m with her, and nothing feels off.”

“So, what are you gonna do then?” Before I can answer Johnson, Deputy McCormick slides into the booth next to him.

“So, ladies, what are we gossiping about today?” McCormick leans over and steals a slice of toast from Johnson. Johnson just shoots him a death glare that McCormick shrugs off.

“We were talking about Zoey and if there’s anyone following her,” Johnson answers

with his eyes still narrowed at McCormick.

McCormick takes a bite of the toast and shrugs. “No offense, Holliday, but she’s a little strange. Maybe she’s a few cards short of a full deck?”

“What the fuck did you just say?” I growl and clench my teeth together. My right hand curls into a fist, as I can feel my body start to heat up.

“Look, I said no offense, but she’s been lying since she got here. She’s lied about who she is, things have gone wrong at the ranch, and she thinks someone is following her.” McCormick holds up his hands, and the sides of his mouth turn up. “I’m just saying, a little off her rocker is all. Again, no offense.”

“If you say something like that again, I will get up and kick the shit out of you. Besides, Zoey told me who she is. She told me why she’s here.” I close my eyes momentarily and try to control my breathing. After a deep breath I open them, taking another sip of my coffee. McCormick is already getting on my nerves, and it’s still early.

Johnson’s eyes go wide. “We’re waiting, boss.”

“Can’t say right now. But I have some things going on that will hopefully help protect her.” My lips form a thin line as I look at them both. The table falls quiet until McCormick speaks up.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“Okay, I’ll bite. How and who are you working with to protect her?” he asks as he frowns.

I stare at him, narrowing my eyes over the rim of my mug as I take a swig. “Not important.”

He slams his hand into the table. “Dude, Holliday. Come on, man. Don’t you think you’re going a little overboard for this one? I mean, no offense, but I’ve never seen you like this over a chick.”

I glare at him. It’s a warning, but he apparently doesn’t care.

“I mean, when she came into the station a couple of weeks ago, I just went up to her and put my hand on her shoulder, and she freaked the fuck out. That’s not normal, man. She’s got shit going on in that head of hers. You don’t need that drama or that crazy.” McCormick leans back in the booth and folds his arms over his chest.

“I kind of agree, boss. Maybe it’s a lot of crazy going on around her, but she’s bringing it here. I don’t think she’s that bad.” He shoots McCormick a glare. “But she’s bringing a lot of baggage with her that you and your family don’t need.” Johnson shakes his head as his eyes soften.

“You need to stop thinking with your dick, Holliday. I’m sure she’s great in bed. The crazies usually are.” Instantly, my head snaps to McCormick. My heart rate increases as my muscles tense. My body starts to vibrate, and I can feel the heat rise up my neck. McCormick is seconds away from me beating him into a pile of broken bones.

“Enough!” I exclaim, and the entire restaurant goes quiet. I stand up and lean over the table, glaring at the two of them. “If I ever hear you talking about her, thinking about her, or doing anything other than helping her, I will make it my personal mission to see that you two don’t and can’t ever wear a badge again. Got it? Good. Now fuck right the fuck off.”

I throw a twenty down on the table and make my way out to the truck. My body is shaking with fucking rage. Those two are assholes. Johnson not so much, but McCormick is a fucking dick. Getting in my truck, I drive around town with a great need to calm myself down. Yes, she kept a lot from me, but she had good reason to. Which reminds me that I need to check in with Dean Fuller, the FBI agent friend of mine.

I hate myself for sending off info about Zoey, but I can’t fight this war blind. I need to have all the facts. There’s no way I can figure out a solution to all of this if I don’t know everything there is to know. Zoey may hate me and never talk to me again if she ever finds out, but I don’t plan on her finding out.

* * *

When I get home, I go through my usual routine of changing out of my clothes and getting into something a little more comfortable for lounging around with Zoey. I head into the kitchen and start to prepare dinner for us. After the shit day I had, I want something comforting, so meatloaf and mashed potatoes sound like the perfect meal for us.

Zoey has been much more open about the nightmares. She explains what goes on in them from what she remembers when she wakes up with one. But I can tell she’s still holding back on some of what she remembers. Even still, when Zoey gets them, I pull her close and hold her until she calms down and falls back asleep.

There have also been more discussions about her past with her ex. It's why I walked out of the diner so angry at McCormick and Johnson. They have no clue as to what she's been through. All at the hands of the people she was supposed to be able to trust the most. But I do. And I vow to protect her from all of it.

I'm in the middle of mashing the potatoes when Zoey walks in.

"Hey there, sweetheart. You hungry?"

Zoey strolls up to me and kisses me on my cheek. "I'm starving. What are you making?"

"Meatloaf and mashed potatoes. Simple, comforting, but yummy." I smile.

"Mm." She licks her lips, and I have to hold back a groan. "Okay, I'm going to change, and I'll be right back out." She leaves the room, and I can't help but watch her beautiful ass sway. I reach down and adjust myself. Down boy. I smile knowing I'll have my hands full of that tonight.

When Zoey comes back into the kitchen, we sit down to eat. She's quiet, and her eyes look a little glazed over as if she's lost in thought.

"Penny for your thoughts?" I turn over to look at her as I move the food around my dish.

She hums. "Just thinking about my day."

"How was your day?" I take a bite of my meatloaf and wait for her to tell me.

Zoey sighs. "Boring. I mean, don't get me wrong, I love working with your mom. But I was enjoying working on the ranch, too. Now I'm sort of being forced to stay at the

store.”

“You and my parents both thought it was a good idea. No one forced you, Zo.” I tilt my head towards her and raise my eyebrow. “Besides, this is just until we figure out what’s going on. It’s not a punishment. We’re just trying to keep you safe. That’s all.”

“Yeah, you’re right. But still, I miss working on the ranch as a hand.” Her head sags a bit as she looks down at the food in front of her. “And I know you say I’m not being punished, but I feel like I’m being punished. That I’m being punished for things I didn’t do.” Zoey shakes her head.

“I know, but you’re really not. I’m sorry.” I place my elbows on the counter and rest my chin in my hands.

“Nothing for you to be sorry about. I’m the problem, Ryker. This,”—she points between the two of us—“wasn’t supposed to happen. I was supposed to lay low. Wait it out. Just get by until I could figure out a better plan. Maybe that’s what I need to do. Hide somewhere else. I have money saved up. I can lay low, and eventually Mitch will get tired of trying to find me. He will just let me be.” She curls tight into herself, wrapping her arms around her chest.

I can’t let her run. I can’t protect her if she’s not here with me. I can’t be next to her every night if she decides to take off.

“No, Zo. That’s not the answer, and you know it. You know as well as I do that he won’t rest. You’re not running.” My lips form a thin line. I close my eyes for a moment and try to control my erratic heartbeat. I need to keep her here just a little while longer. “Look, let’s go watch a movie, relax, and wind down. What do you say, darlin’?”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

Ignoring my plea to change the subject, her face falls. Her voice comes out weak when she says, “I want to be stronger, Ryker. I need to be stronger.”

She brings her hand up to her face, and I keep quiet, letting her continue.

“I used to be me. I want to be me. There was a time where I laughed, where I had fun, when I knew who I was. When ... When I left, I thought I was going to get me back. But now I spend my days looking over my shoulder, worried about who is coming out of the shadows.” Tears roll down her face. “I’m just a shell, Ryker. I’m so lost and broken.”

“Sweetheart, you’re not lost, and you’re not broken. Since you’ve been on this ranch, I’ve seen such a different side of you. From the moment you got here, you’re not the same person, Zo. You left a fucking asshole of an ex—who I’d like to fucking kill with my bare hands, by the way. Zo, you came to a new town, a new fucking state, and started over.” I reach over and lift her chin so she’s looking at me. “You took back your life, albeit with a new name for now, but you took it back. If that isn’t strong, then I don’t know what is.”

I lean in and kiss her lips.

“You’re the strongest woman I know,” I whisper. She moans, and I scoop her up, wrapping her legs around me. Nibbling on her lips and kissing down her neck, I bring us into the bedroom. Slowly, I lower her onto the bed and hover over her, savoring every inch of her skin.

I wasn’t lying. She is the strongest woman I know. She fought to get out of the

situation. She planned and got the fuck out of dodge when she found the right time.

Zoey fought for herself, and I'll do everything I can to fight for her.

* * *

"Ryker, wake up." Zoey taps my face.

"Hmm. What is it, baby?" Then I hear it. Bang, bang. "Who the fuck is at our door in the middle of the fucking night? If it's one of my brothers, I'm putting them in a holding cell." Slowly, I extract myself from Zoey, which is the last thing I want to do.

When I sit up, I hear sirens and suddenly smell something burning. "Zo. Zo, get up. Something is on fire. Now."

Zoey shoots up, and her eyes go wide. I have a sinking feeling in my stomach. From the look on her face, so does she.

The banging on my front door continues, and we both run over to open it.

Deputy Dalton is there. Her face is etched with concern, and the corners of her mouth are turned down slightly.

"Dalton, what the fuck is going on?" I rub my eyes, trying to rid myself of the sleep that still lingers in them.

"It's the store. It's not good, Holliday." She turns to Zoey and then back to me.

Zoey and I both slip on our shoes and bolt out of the house, sprinting over to the store. Dalton was right. It's not good. Thick black smoke billows out of store. Flames shoot out of the roof, windows, and doors. My mouth drops open at the sight. The

entire building is gone.

“Oh my God. Ryker, what the hell happened?” Zoey reaches out to me, and I pull her into my side.

“I don’t know, Zo. Let’s go find out.” We walk about fifteen feet over to where my parents are standing and holding each other.

“Ry, honey.” My mom’s in tears and reaches out to lay her hand on my arm. My dad’s mouth hangs open in shock, and his face looks pale. I turn back to the shop, finding that orange, yellow, and bits of red flood the scene in front of me.

It’s gone. All those years of hard work, gone, just like that.

I turn to Zoey, and there’s terror in her eyes. She doesn’t blink, her eyes open wide as she looks on. Her body’s shaking, and she covers all but her eyes with her hands.

I reach over to tug her into me, pulling her close against my body.

“Shh. It’ll be okay.” I caress her face, placing my chin on her head as I watch the flames destroy it all.

Once the fire is put out, the fire fighters walk into the building to make sure there are no embers still lit. They’ll probably go in and see if they figure out a quick cause to the fire before the inspector does his own investigation. My heart is beating out of my chest while I watch all of this go down.

After a little while, Dalton comes over with a grim look on her face. “Can I talk to you for a moment, Sheriff?”

“No, whatever you have to say, you can say in front of everyone here. It’s my

family's store, so they should hear."

"Okay." She hesitates, looking back at the store. "Who was the last one to work last night? Who closed up?"

Zoey looks right at Dalton. "That would be me. I closed the store."

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

My grip immediately tightens around her, and my stomach drops.

“Did you use some kind of personal heater while you were working yesterday?” Dalton asks.

“What? Uh, yeah. I did.” Zoey shakes her head, obviously confused as to why Dalton is asking her that. But I know exactly why.

“While there will be a formal investigation into the cause of the fire, from what they can tell, it does look like it was started by a personal heating device.” Dalton drops her chin, obviously hating what she’s insinuating.

My parents and brothers turn to Zoey. The look in their eyes say it all.

Anger. They blame her, and there will be no forgiveness this time.

Chapter 16

Zoey

No.No!This can’t be happening again. My throat goes dry, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. For a second, I stop breathing. The world is spinning and falling down around me.

I shake my head adamantly. “That can’t be right, deputy. I turned it off and unplugged it well before I left. Like a couple of hours before I left. I let it cool off before I placed it back under the desk.”

“Look, Zoey, I’m just relaying what I was told. That’s what they believe was the cause based on what they saw. We’ll know for sure once the official investigation is over, but I’m just trying to give you a heads up. Was anyone with you in the store tonight?” Dalton squares off looking at me. Her eyes give nothing away about what she’s thinking.

“No, it was just me. No one even came in the last hour we were open.”

I suddenly feel an absence and realize Ryker’s no longer touching me. My stomach drops, and I feel nauseous. He was keeping me here, grounded, able to handle all of these accusations.

“Did you lock up the store once you left for the night?” Dalton puts her hands on her duty belt, her words coming out stoic and cool.

“Yes, like I always do! I closed out the register, turned off the lights, and then left the store, locking the door behind me. Look, I didn’t do this! I swear. Jen, Adam, please.” My head turns to the Hollidays. I can see the hurt in their eyes, the hurt I didn’t cause but am being blamed for. “I swear I didn’t do this. Everything was fine when I left.” My voice breaks.

“Maybe you need to take some time off from the ranch. It might be way too much for you to handle right now.” Adam’s response comes out curt. He wraps his arm around Jen, and they walk away from me. No!

“I didn’t do this! Please!” I scream at the top of my lungs. My legs give out, and I fall to the ground. Wracked with sobs, I nearly end up face-first in the dirt before my arms catch me.

Ryker instantly picks me up, pulling me into his chest. He’s silent as he carries me back over to the house. I put my head into the crook of his neck, my tears wetting his

skin.

“He did this. He did this, Ryker,” I cry. Ryker doesn’t understand that if I don’t leave, it’s only going to get worse. “It’s him. He won’t stop. Mitch is coming for me. I didn’t do this. He did this. I’m sorry.”

Ryker gets me to the porch and turns, facing Dalton. “Tomorrow, you can get a statement from her. She’s not in a good headspace to make one tonight.”

I don’t hear what her response is; my thoughts are too loud. Mitch is sending me a message. He will ruin anything in his way to get to me. And when he gets me, I’ll be ruined too. Anyone and anything standing in the way of getting to me will be fucking burned to the ground. The store was just the beginning of the raging hell that awaits anyone who doesn’t give him what he wants.

Me.

Ryker brings me in and sets me on the couch, laying me down and covering me with a blanket. He’s saying things to me, but it’s not registering. Everything echoes inside me head. My vision blurs, and my breathing hitches. My hand flies to my chest as I try to steady my out-of-control heartbeat. I can hear the blood pumping through my body, and it’s making me dizzy.

Without warning, I’m brought back to reality when I feel his hands on my face.

“Zo, darlin’, I need you to snap out of it. This was an accident. That’s it.” My eyes focus for a moment on his blue orbs. Sadness. Loss. Confusion. Everything I know he isn’t telling me, I can see in his eyes.

I shake the fog from my brain. “No. No, it fucking wasn’t.” I take a shuddering breath, “I know I turned it off ... Maybe ... No! I turned it off. I know I fucking

turned it off!” My voice gets louder with every word, and I sit straight up. My breaths are coming fast and hard.

“Okay, Zo, I need you to calm down. Slow your breathing, sweetheart. You’re sending yourself into a panic attack.” Ryker’s voice isn’t helping. Nothing is.

My vision’s becoming tunneled, and I’m having a hard time getting air into my lungs. I try to take a deep breath, but my lungs don’t want to work. My head feels light. In an instant, Ryker’s lips are on me. The kiss takes me by surprise, making me jump.

His lips, I need to focus on his lips. The softness of them against mine. He tastes like cinnamon. Like Ryker.

My eyes fly open, and the weight on my chest is gone. Ryker pulls his mouth from mine and moves to rest his forehead against my own. Our noses brush against each other, and my breathing finally starts to regulate. “You doing okay, sweetheart?”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

My lip quivers, and I break down again. I'm embarrassed at how much my life and past are destroying everything around me and hurting people I care about. Leaning into his shoulder, I let the tears fall. Ryker goes from hovering over me to sitting down on the couch, pulling me onto his lap as he does. His hand rubs my back, and his cheek rests against the top of my head.

"Let it out. Get it all out, Zo," he whispers. I'm not sure how long we sit there. My tears soak his shirt, and my throat is sore. When I finally calm down, he murmurs, "Let me go get you some water. Sit here." Ryker lifts me off his lap and places me back down on the couch. As he runs into the kitchen, I bury my face into my hands out of frustration. He comes back and sits down in front of me on the coffee table. Handing me the water, his hands move to my legs as he slowly rubs circles with his thumbs.

Slowly, I take a drink of water. The coldness soothes my achy throat. I hand Ryker back the bottle, and he places it behind him on the table.

He lightly taps my forehead. "Tell me what's going on in that pretty little head of yours, Zo." His hands find mine, and he squeezes them softly. His thumbs run over my skin, leaving goosebumps in their wake. I pull my hands away, the contact becoming too much for me. Everything is in overdrive, my thoughts, my feelings, my heart. Everything. It's all too much.

Looking down, I wring my hands nervously. "I don't know. So many things." I drop my head into my hands and sigh. "Maybe I did forget. No. No, I know I didn't. I keep a little check list, and I know I checked it off. I'd say let's go look, but that's not possible." My voice has trailed off into a whisper.

Ryker doesn't say anything; he just listens.

I bite the inside of my cheek and bring my eyebrows together, "All these things happening ... it's not me. I don't know why they keep happening, but I can guess it's because of Mitch."

"Why would Mitch do all these things? Why burn down the store?" He squints like he's trying to find the answer himself.

"I left him, disobeyed him. I made him look like the fool that he is. He would go to the ends of the earth just to find me and bring me back. He needs to prove a point; teach me a lesson about who's boss. His pride, too. Imagine telling people your fiancée left you, that you have no idea where she disappeared to. Wouldn't look good to his people. So, Mitch would scour the earth looking for me. In the end, I would be punished."

"He has that much control? That much ability to do all this? Why isn't he worried about getting caught?" He raises his voice slightly. A crease forms in his forehead.

"They are untouchable, Ryker. They have woven themselves into the fabric of the law and government. They know people in very high places. So yes, he has that much control and the ability to do everything he did and more. He's unstoppable. And all of this will keep happening until I give myself back to him." I bite my lip and wrap my arms around my chest. I'll have to sacrifice myself to stop all this.

Ryker sighs loudly and scrubs his jaw with his hand. He's deep in thought, and I'm sure it's whether I'm worth this trouble. That or he foolishly thinks he can take Mitch down. "Okay. Let's go back to sleep. We can sort this all out in the morning."

"I'm sorry, Ryker." My chin drops down as I look at the floor.

Ryker kneels in front of me and lifts my chin up so I'm looking at him. "Nothing to be sorry about, sweetheart." He wraps my arms around his neck and picks me up before carrying me into the bedroom. He lays me on my side of the bed and covers me up. "Sleep, Zo. You're safe with me."

Those are the last words I hear before sleep overtakes me.

* * *

"Mitch? You home, baby?" I walk into the house and throw my keys in the tray by the door. "Mitch? Where are you?" I saw his car in the driveway, so I know he's home. "Mitch?"

My phone suddenly rings, and I see it's him calling me.

"Hello?" I answer.

"Hey, baby. How's your day?" Mitch sounds so happy. There's static in the call, distracting me. His car was just here.

"Mitch? Hey. I'm fine. Where are you?" I'm so confused right now. I look back outside, and his car is still there.

"How were the parent-teacher conferences?" Mitch asks.

"Um, fine. Mitch, baby, where are you? I see your car, but I don't know where you are." I close the curtain and step back from the window.

"I love you, Nicole. You mean the world to me. You're the best thing that has ever happened to me. Forever, baby." The call starts to cut out.

“Mitch? You’re breaking up. Mitch?” My head snaps up to a sound of a door closing. My hand begins to tremble as I end the call and head down the hall to Mitch’s office.

I knock on the office door, and a cold monotone voice behind the door tells me to come in.

Mitch is sitting at his desk with his arms folded in front of him.

“Nicole,” he growls. Wait, what’s happening? This isn’t the nice Mitch from the phone call. My breath catches at the realization that this is monster Mitch.

“Mitch, I’ve been looking for you. Why did you call me if you were at home?” I start to walk up to the desk and then stop. Something in his eyes tells me to run, but I can’t move. My feet are heavy, and I try to force any bit of movement, but they won’t budge.

“I’m right where you left me, Nicole.” Mitch stands up so fast from his chair, the chair falls to the ground. The loud bang startles me, and I flinch.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

In a flash, Mitch is already in front of me.

“Why can’t you just be a good little girl and listen to me? Save me from all the trouble of keeping you in line? If you would just listen, things wouldn’t be so painful.” Before I can question what he means, a blow to my face knocks me to the floor.

My hand flies to my cheek, and there’s a copper taste in my mouth. The pain radiates through my skull. “Mitch, stop! What’s wrong?” I scream. “Stop!” My hands shoot up in front of my face to try and protect it from any more blows. I close my eyes, praying for the abuse to end.

Pain sears through my skull, and I cry out as he yanks me up by my hair. His nails scrape against my skin, no doubt leaving a trail of blood. My hair is practically being ripped at the root by his grip.

“You lied,” Mitch hisses. “You lied to me!”

“About what?” I gasp, flailing to get him off me.

He drags me over to the wall next to the couch, bringing my head forward to slam me against it. For a moment, I’m seeing spots. I start to slip down the wall, sputtering blood from my lips.

I finally find my voice and yell, “Stop! Please! I don’t know what I did!”

Mitch drags me back up the wall, taking my hands and raising them above my head. I

hear metal clanging above me and something cold clamping around my wrists. I whip my head up and the sight before me frightens me. Metal cuffs wrap around my wrists, holding me against the wall. My head turns back towards Mitch and I stare into the deadly black of his eyes. His lips curl up, but he's not smiling because he's happy. No, he's smiling because he has me right where he wants me. Trapped.

Mitch exits the room, leaving me chained to the wall. My heart picks up pace, beating wildly in my chest. I try to tug against the chains, but it's useless. They won't budge. My body aches and feels heavy, but I'm stuck.

"Zoey? Zoey, where are you?" a voice calls from somewhere.

I know that voice. Ugh, there's a drummer pounding away inside my head. The pain makes it hard to concentrate on the sound of that voice. Think! Who is that?

"Zo, darlin'?"

Oh my God! "Ryker! I'm here! I'm in the office!" I close my eyes, praying that he finds me. When I open them, Ryker is in front of me. Tears stream down his face. He's crying. Why is he crying?

"Ryker, what's wrong?" I ask, my voice wavering slightly.

"I can't save you. I'm so sorry. I can't slay the beast." The beast? What is he talking about? I hear a click of a gun cocking. Looking past Ryker, I see Mitch with a gun to Ryker's head. My mouth drops open, and a cry makes its way past my lips.

"Please! Don't do this, Mitch," I plead. I pull against my bindings, but nothing gives. Ryker merely stands there, his cheeks glistening from salty tears. His mouth is moving, but I can't make out what he's saying. Why isn't he doing anything?

“Say goodbye.” Mitch turns to me with an evil glint in his eyes.

“No! No! Please! No!” The sound of the gunshot is deafening, making my ears ring.

“Zo! Sweetheart!” Ryker. Why do I still hear him?

“Ryker!” My eyes fly open, and I roll out of bed and land on the floor.

“Zo! Are you okay?” Ryker comes running around the bed, crouching down to me. His hands fly to my face, cupping me and trying to get me to focus on him. Warm. He’s warm.

When I look up at him, the dream comes back to me. The tears he cried, the pain I felt. “Oh my God! No!” I start shaking my head back and forth, trying to erase the dream. But I can’t. Mitch killing Ryker is all I can see, all that haunts my mind. I feel like I’m floating. The images of Ryker dying are too much. I let out a scream of frustration, and my fists clench. No! He can’t take Ryker from me.

Without warning, I feel ice-cold water being poured over me. Everything comes back into view. My surroundings become more focused, and the confusion settles in my mind. Cold. I’m freezing. My mouth opens, but I can’t get any words out.

“Zo, look at me. Sweetheart, I need you to look at me.” Ryker smooths my wet hair back. I look up at his crystal blue eyes, and reality comes crashing back.

“R-Ryker.” My teeth are chattering. “C-Cold.”

“There you are. You had me worried, darlin’. Sorry, I know it’s cold, but I needed to shock you back to the here and now. I’m not sure where you went to, but you freaked me out. Here, let me warm you up.” Ryker reaches behind me and warms the water. He steps closer to me, pulling me into the shower. We’re both still in our clothes,

which are now sopping wet.

“Y-You’re okay.” Placing my head on his chest, I curl deeper into him. I listen for his heartbeat and feel it pounding against my head.

“Shh. Yeah, I’m okay. Whatever you think you saw, Zo, it was just a nightmare.” His hand runs over my hair. The water is warmer now, but I’m still shivering. “Tell me what you saw. Let me help you through it, please.”

I place my hands on his chest, grasping at his wet shirt. “I can’t.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“You need to. Zo, this was the worse one yet. It took me quite a few minutes to get you to wake up. You were locked deep in that nightmare. You need to tell me what you keep seeing. I’m serious, Zo.” His voice is stern as he knits his eyebrows together.

“Mitch ... He killed you.” I cry into his wet shirt. “He had me locked up in his house. You came there, found me, and he killed you. I lost you. You were gone, right in front of me. I can’t lose you. I can’t.” My fist clenches his shirt. “He’s taken everything from me. He can’t take you.”

“Shh. I’m right here, sweetheart. No one’s going to take me from you.” His cheek rests on the top of my head.

“But he got to m-me. He hurt me. H-He killed you.” I tremble as I remember being restricted by the chains. As I remember the gleam in Mitch’s eye as he held the gun to Ryker’s head. I whimper, seeing the pain in Ryker’s eyes before the gun went off.

“Darlin’, no one is going to hurt you. I promise I’ll do everything I can to keep you safe. Everything.” His lips find mine, and I feel a sudden heat blossom inside me. He’s real. I need to feel real. I need him.

My hands claw at his soaked shirt, trying to pull it over his head. I don’t want to feel the loss; I want to feel him pressed against me.

“Zo, Zo, slow down.” Ryker’s voice is hoarse.

“No. I need to feel right now. I need you. All of you. Please, let me feel you,” I beg.

He nods slowly, and I go back to getting his shirt off.

Ryker steps back from my arms and pulls it off, then his hands find the hem of my tank top and lift it up over my head. The warm water cascades down my back.

He leans down and nibbles at my collarbone. My hands move down his chest, finding the top of his shorts. I slip my thumbs under the band and push them down. He flings them to the side of the shower and now stands completely naked. Ryker's hands work to help me get my pants off, throwing them in the same spot as his own. His hands slowly move up my sides to my cheeks. Ryker cups my face and makes me look at him. Our eyes meet, and the fire in his grows.

“Ryker, I—”

Before I can finish, his lips cover mine. His tongue traces over my bottom lip, begging me to open. When I give him access, his tongue explores every inch of my mouth. I moan into him, and he nibbles my lip with approval.

Ryker's hands caress me, working their way down to my ass. He cups my bottom and then lifts me up before turning me so my back's up against the shower. My legs wrap around him, pulling him closer to my core. His hardness is pressing up against my stomach, so I reach down and wrap my hand around it. His mouth pulls back from mine, as he hisses from the contact.

“Zo,” Ryker whispers. I continue to work my hand up and down his shaft. His skin is like velvet against mine. Ryker's breathing picks up, and he stops my hand with his own. His eyes fly up to mine.

“You have to stop or else I'm going to come right here.” His voice is desperate, and his eyes are full of heat. “I want to be inside you, Zo. Tell me you're on the pill.”

I nod, and my voice is raspy when I say, “TUD. Please. I need you.”

Ryker grabs his cock, rubbing it along my folds. He brushes against my clit, sending a surge of pleasure through my body. He slowly eases the tip of his cock inside me, and I gasp at the welcomed intrusion.

His mouth finds mine as he pushes further inside me. I moan into his mouth, his cock stretching me. He plants kisses on my neck as he begins thrusting. I run my hands over the bulging muscles on his arms, which are the only things holding me up.

“Oh, Ryker.” My head falls back against the shower wall.

He hisses and then grunts. “Fuck, you’re so tight, Zo. God, you feel so good.”

His pace slows as he kisses me, completely lost in pleasure. I can hear more soft grunts as he moves. Ryker looks down and watches himself thrust in and out of my core. There’s a building inside of me, the friction igniting every nerve ending in my body.

“R-Ryker, I’m going to come,” I pant.

Every thrust is more powerful than the last, his forehead against mine. I can feel my toes start to curl in anticipation.

“Look at me, Zo,” he commands breathlessly.

Bolts of electricity shoot up from my core. My body shakes in his arms as he holds me tightly, watching me unravel. No sound comes from my mouth as I see fireworks with every push inside me. I squeeze his cock as I come all around him.

Ryker lets out a guttural groan. “Fuck. That’s it, sweetheart.” With a final thrust, I

feel his warmth fill me. His cock pulsates as he finds his release.

We both stay as we are, breathless. My hands find his face, and Ryker rubs his nose on mine before kissing it.

Gently, he sets me on my legs again and hugs me, the shower still sending water cascading over our bodies. With my head against his chest, I can hear how wild his heart beats. He's just as scared as I am.

Ryker holds me tighter. "I won't let him hurt you, Zo. I promise you that you're safe."

Chapter 17

Zoey

It's been a couple days since the fire, and I'm even more anxious than I was before. Everywhere I turn, I feel like I have eyes on me. On the ranch, at the diner, and even inside the house. I feel crazy and paranoid, like I need to add a straight-jacket to my wardrobe. I don't sleep well, and when I do actually get some semblance of sleep, the nightmares wake me. I'm in a constant state of stress.

It's not just my stress. Ryker hasn't been the same, and it's making me more uncomfortable by the minute being with him. He says he's okay, but I see in his eye's that something's bothering him. I know that something is me. My past has destroyed his family's way of life.

Ryker has spent the last couple of days going over the reports of the fire, trying to find something to either prove it wasn't me or that it was. He claims it's to prove that it wasn't, but we've drifted apart since the fire, so I can't be sure what's going with us anymore. We just sort of exist in each other's orbit, never really touching or running into each other, merely floating by.

And it's eating me up inside.

My only job now is the diner. I've been able to pick up extra shifts for the rest of the week to make up for the money I no longer make at the ranch. Not only can I no longer work there, but I can't even walk around the ranch. Basically, I'm a prisoner in Ryker's house. I can come and go to work, but that's it. I can't go see Amethyst. I can't go visit the lake. Just to and from work. A prisoner, like I was with Mitch.

Maybe it's better if I move out and off the ranch. There's an obvious strain between Ryker and his parents, and I know I'm the cause of it. I've brought it up to Ryker, but he waves me off and tells me that I'm not moving out. The reality is that we won't survive this much longer.

Whoever's doing this to me, they're just around the corner waiting to strike again. And that terrifies me to my core.

Closing my eyes, I try and push past the pain and hurt. When I open them, I sigh and put my stuff in my locker at the diner. Straightening my uniform, I head out the back room and to the counter up front. I place the usual fake smile on my face and pretend that for at least a few hours, my life isn't as dreadful as it seems. That for a few hours I don't have my ex-fiancé coming for me.

"Hey, Zoey. How're things going today?" Joan waves me over to where she stands by the coffee maker, putting on another pot. She smiles at me and offers me my own cup, but I shake my head.

I reply, "I'm good, Joan. Have we been busy?" I look around and see the usual suspects in the diner, but there isn't really anyone else.

"Not really, but it's early. Give it an hour and we should be packed. Well, I'm going to go refill some cups so I can make a fresh batch. The sheriff will be in here soon get his cup." Joan winks at me and turns back to what she was doing.

My stomach flips at the thought of seeing him. As much as I want to stare into those beautiful eyes and see his lips curl up into a gorgeous smile, it's not the same right now.

While I wait for Ryker to come and grab his coffee, I start taking orders from some of my tables. It's 8:30 and Ryker still hasn't stopped in for his morning cup. Something

isn't right. There's a funny feeling that's brewing inside me, and I can't quite place it.

I try to shake it off and continue working before I come up to a table and see a face that doesn't seem to want to go away.

Brett.

I need to call Ryker.

Before I can run away without him noticing me, he looks up and sees me staring at him. Shit.

"Zoey." My name on his lips is vile. The way he says it makes me feel sick. His lips form a thin line, and his eyes immediately glue to me.

"Um, sorry. I can't remember your name. But what can I get started for you?" I lie. I remember everything about him. How much he scares me, how much he knows about me. Brett knows who I am, who Mitch is. He likely works for Mitch. Is this the other shoe that drops? Does Mitch walk right in here? Grab me and take me back to New York?

"Brett, but you remembered that, right Zoey? You wouldn't forget a name, would you?" Brett frowns as he looks at me, narrowing his eyes.

I ignore his comments. "So, what can I get for you?" I hold my pen and notepad in my hand. It's taking every ounce of control to keep myself from shaking in front of him. I take a deep breath and try to slow my heart down. My throat feels like it's closing up on me.

His eyes flash with something I can't quite place. "He wants you home. Enough with the games." Brett's voice gets low, and he leans closer to me.

“I ... I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I start to step back away from him, but he slowly shakes his head, warning me not to.

“You and I both know that Mitch isn’t a patient man. He expects this little rebellion to end and for you to come back home.”

“Who the fuck are you?” I ask, my voice wavering as I try to keep it level. I don’t want others hearing this ... hearing the truth about me.

“You can say I’m an associate of Mitch’s. My task was to bring you back home. You don’t want him coming out here to get you.” He shakes his head slowly. His mouth breaks into a sinister smile, and he chuckles darkly.

“It was you,” I whisper.

“What was me?” Brett tips his head to the side, smirking.

“All the problems on the ranch. T-The cattle and fire. The chicken deaths. You did it. You did all that. Destroyed their livelihood.” My fists clench at my sides.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

Brett shakes his head and lets out a laugh that makes my stomach drop. “Girly, I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I’m honored that you thought I would kill some chickens. I like to eat my chickens; I’m a breast man. I love me some breasts.” He turns in the booth, fully facing me and staring at my chest. I let out a gasp, and a shiver runs down my spine. “Now, while I didn’t do it, I can tell you that yes, it was Mitch, not personally though. He has people to do his dirty work. He’s behind whatever trouble you seem to be having.”

If it’s not him ... “T-Then who? If Mitch isn’t here, then who is behind all the ranch trouble?”

Brett shrugs. “No idea. Not part of my gig, and I couldn’t give less of a fucking shit fuck about it. But if you don’t want it to get worse, say, deaths of the ‘human’ kind, you’d be wise to go back to New York. Mitch isn’t playing around anymore. You know better than anyone the types of connections he has.”

I shake my head, falling back. “Get out. Get the fuck out! Now!” My voice booms through the diner, and all goes silent. You could hear the drop of a pen if you tried hard enough.

He reaches in his pocket, and I jump back a little. He smiles and pulls out a twenty-dollar bill before dropping it on the table.

“For all your trouble, ma’am.” Brett nods and walks right out of the diner.

“Zoey? Zoey? What’s wrong?” Joan comes running over to me, but I just watch him leave the diner and head down the sidewalk out front. “Somebody call the sheriff!”

My entire body is trembling. My heart is racing, and I can feel beads of sweat rolling down my neck. I clasp my chest, trying to right my breathing. Joan wraps an arm around me and brings me into the back room.

“Sit, Zoey. The sheriff’s on his way, okay?” She leads me to a chair and rubs my back. A moment later, her phone rings.

Joan pulls it out and glances at the screen. “Oh, let me take this call. I’ll be right back, honey.” She steps away, and I sit in the back room alone.

My stomach turns with dread. Mitch has known where I was all along. How? How did he find out? I need to get out of here. I have to run. I have to get out of this goddamned town. People will fucking die because of me. The room starts to spin, and I place my head in my hands. My head hurts, and the pounding’s relentless against my skull.

Fuck, I should’ve taken Cyrus’s number with me. How the fuck am I going to be able to slip away?

As I sit and think of a way out of the mess, Ryker and Deputy Johnson come into the back room. But when they walk in, something’s off. The air feels thick and stuffy. And Ryker has a hollow look in his eyes, the blue color appearing dulled.

“What happened?” Ryker’s tone is not one I’ve heard before. It’s short, devoid of emotion. He’s looking at me, but it feels like he’s looking right through me.

“B-Brett came in. H-he told me that Mitch knows where I am.” I take a breath and close my eyes. The room starts to spin again, and I try to breath slowly and calm myself down. I grip the arms of the chair and look back up at Ryker.

“Johnson, go check and see if you can see anything outside. See if anyone is still

hanging around waiting for her to leave or something.” His tone changes as he talks to Johnson.

“Got it.” Johnson gives me a sympathetic smile, then turns and leaves the back room.

Ryker turns back to me, but his eyes aren’t giving away anything. “What did he say?”

I relay everything that Brett told me to Ryker. He nods his head, but he doesn’t say anything. It’s at that moment that Joan walks back into the room with a look of hurt and concern on her face. She bites her lip and is wringing her hands together.

“Joan, are you okay?” My voice cracks, my hands shake. I’m praying Brett hasn’t done something to her.

“No, um, didn’t you take the deposit to the bank last night?” Joan hugs her phone close to her chest.

“Yeah, I took it around six and dropped it in the overnight slot.” My face twists with confusion. Why is she asking me this? What the fuck is going on?

Joan bites her lip. “Well, the bank just called. They were concerned because we drop it off every night and they didn’t get one last night.”

My mouth drops open, and my hands start shaking. “No. That’s impossible. I dropped it off. I swear, I dropped it off like always.” My head goes back and forth between Joan and Ryker. He’s standing there, not moving a muscle. His eyes merely pierce through me as he clenches his jaw, the muscles rippling with rage he’s obviously tried so hard to hide.

“Honey, I’m telling you that the bank didn’t get it. Rebecca wouldn’t lie to me. Can you think of anything that might have happened to it?” Joan moves to sit in the chair

next to me.

“Joan, I took the deposit, walked it over to the bank, and put it in the slot. Just as I’ve always done before.” My eyes grow misty, and I look towards Ryker. “This is Mitch. He’s doing this.”

“Who’s Mitch?” Joan turns and looks up at Ryker. She squints at him, confused.

He waves her off. “No one. Don’t worry.”

“Well, Zoey, for now, I’m gonna need to remove you from the schedule until we can figure out what happened to the money.” Joan sighs. She stands up and starts to walk out but turns to me at the last second. “I’m sorry, honey. Really, I am. As soon as we can figure out what happened, you can come back, okay?” With that, she leaves me with Ryker.

“Let’s go,” Ryker barks, and I jump.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

“Where?” My mind is trying to process everything that has just happened, including Ryker’s weird behavior.

“Get up and follow me. Now.” His voice is low, and I can see him practically vibrating with fury. Ryker looks like he’s about to combust.

To avoid getting him more upset than he already is, I nod, and we start walking down the sidewalk to the station. My stomach starts to turn, and I can feel the bile rising in my throat.

Once we arrive, Deputy Dalton says hi to me, but Deputy McCormick merely glares.

Ryker drops me off in his office. “Stay here.” He slams the door shut, making me yelp.

My mind’s racing at a million miles a minute. I try to think about what happened with the deposit from last night, the run-in with Brett, and now Ryker’s attitude change. I dropped the deposit off. I know I did. I run my fingers through my hair and pull. Crazy. That’s the only word for it. This is all completely insane. And for what? Because Mitch wants to win at some game he’s the only one playing? He just can’t let me go.

While deep in thought, Ryker comes back and walks around to his chair. He slams a folder down on his desk and sits. He glowers at me, practically fuming as his cheeks redden.

“Who is Allison Davis?” he booms. Ryker folds his hands in front of him. The edge

of his tattoo barely peeks out of his shirt sleeve.

Closing my eyes, I try to take in what he just asked me. Allison Davis? “I have no clue who that is. Who is she? Does she work for Mitch?”

Ryker doesn’t say anything.

I can feel the bile rise again.

“Ryker, I don’t know who that is. She must be part of Mitch’s crew or maybe a business associate. I’ve never met everyone he worked with, but that could be who. Look, please listen to me. They did all that stuff on the ranch! Brett told me it was Mitch.” My voice starts to rise.

“Enough!” Ryker slams his hand on the desk, making me jump. “Who the fuck is Allison Davis?”

My head spins, and I try to rack my brain for that name. Was it someone from school? An ex of Mitch’s? A family friend? Who is she?

“I ... I have no idea, Ryker. I don’t know Allison.” My lips start to tremble.

“Why are you lying?” Ryker’s voice is almost a whisper.

“I don’t know what I lied about. If it’s about who I was, I told you, I had to leave Mitch. And I didn’t lie, I just didn’t tell you my real name was Nicole.” My leg starts shaking up and down.

“See? More lies. Why have you lied about everything? The ranch issues, the diner issues? Nothing you’ve said has been the truth!” He gets up and walk around his desk over to me. He places his hands on the arms of the chair I’m sitting in, his face mere

inches from my own. “You’ve been faking this whole time. Lying this whole time about who you are and what you’re doing here. You destroyed my family’s livelihood. And for what? Because you were scared to get married? Afraid to be committed again?”

Scared to get married? Committed? What the actual fuck is he talking about? I was scared, but of being killed by Mitch. What does this have to do with Allison?

“I don’t understand what the fuck you’re saying, Ryker! I didn’t do anything on the ranch! Someone set me up! Mitch! He’s behind all this!” My whole body vibrates. My heart is pumping so fast I think I’m about to faint.

“Again! The lies! Who. Is. Allison. Davis?” He punctuates each word, saying it through gritted teeth.

“I don’t know! Who the fuck is she?” I scream at him, completely at a loss for whatever the hell is happening in this shit storm. Tears stream down my face, and my throat tightens with a sob threatening to escape.

He looks right at me, his eyes blazing with hate. “It’s you. You’re Allison Davis.”

Chapter 18

Zoey

What the ever-loving fuck? No. I’m Nicole Moore—well, Zoey Krause these days. But I was Nicole Moore. I’m not Allison Davis.

Shaking my head, I look at Ryker, “You’re wrong. I’ve never even heard of that person.”

Ryker glares at me, his eyes piercing through me. “DNA doesn’t lie, Allison.” The way he says the name, it’s almost vile.

“DNA? How? Wait, why? What?” My mind runs a million miles a minute trying to process everything, and now I have to add on that he used my DNA without me knowing. “You never asked me for a sample.”

“Nope, I didn’t. But seeing as how you have been lying to me, I’m glad I didn’t. You would’ve had an excuse not to give it to me.”

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

“You had no fucking right, asshole!” I scream in his face. My hands squeeze into fists and my nails dig into my palms, nearly drawing blood.

“I had every right! My family got involved when you started pulling shit around the ranch. You’re only pissed that I caught you red fucking handed with your bullshit.”

“I. Didn’t. Do. Anything! Nothing! It wasn’t me!” My voice is now reaching a new octave. How dare he look me in the face and tell me I am lying when he stole my DNA to spy on me! Who the fuck have I been living with? This isn’t the man who said he would keep me safe, and he just proved that.

His voice lowers, “Then who was it? Who did all those things? I have combed through everything, but it all leads back to you.”

“Really? So, you’re just going to assume it’s me?” My eyes narrow, and I can’t help the disdain that spills into my words.

“If the shoe fits ...” He shrugs, glaring at me.

Immediately, I stand up from the chair and get in his face. “Are you fucking out of your mind? You promised I was safe with you! You promised to protect me!” My whole body is burning with rage.

He’s silent for a moment before saying, “I think it’s best if you head back, pack your shit, and leave.” His voice breaks, but so does my heart.

My stomach drops, and I immediately feel sick. “No, please. Let me fix this. I just

need to prove it's Mitch. Please. If I can find this Brett guy ..." I beg, my hands in front of me folded together.

"Zo—Allison, you've done nothing but ruin my family." His eyes become a little misty as he continues. "You've allowed me to believe and trust you. You ... You made me f—" Ryker turns away from me with his hands on his duty belt. "Just get the fuck out."

"Please, I'm not lying. I'm Nicole, I swear. That's who I was before all this. Please, you have to believe me ..." I trail off into a whisper. I realize he doesn't have to believe a damn thing.

"Stop lying to me and to yourself. Just leave. Get out of here and out of my life," Ryker says sadly.

"I thought I was safe with you, Ryker," I whisper. Tears are steadily falling from my eyes.

"Zoey was, not Allison." With that, he leaves his office, and I fall to the floor on my knees. My heart shatters into a million pieces, and every jagged edge stabs me inside with each breath I take. I sob into my hands, knowing I've lost Ryker for good.

After a few minutes of trying to collect myself, I get up and run from the station. I don't stop and say goodbye to anyone; I'm sure they know what's going on. Hell, they probably heard us. I have no idea where Ryker went, but I hop in his old pickup and drive like a bat out of hell to get to the house. I need to find a new place to hide.

Why is this happening? How did I become Allison fucking Davis? Who the fuck is Allison Davis? I feel so broken right now, and my body aches from the stress of it all. My heart aches from the shattering; from the full-on blow that it took from the hatred Ryker threw at me in his office.

Trying to get my breathing under control as I drive, my head pounds from the complete turn of events. Fucking Mitch is determined to destroy me. And now I'm apparently known as someone who I've never heard of before.

When I pull up to the house, I jump out of the truck and run inside. When I reach my room, I grab my bag and check to make sure my "savings account" is in there. I call for a cab to come get me and take me to the next town over.

Looking inside the bag I check the stash. The envelope still has all the money. Not the missing money from the restaurant, which I'm sure Ryker thinks I have stashed in this room. I'm surprised he didn't come home and look.

Home.

This isn't my home anymore.

I look over my room after I've thrown what I can in my bag and make sure there's nothing else I need. Walking out into the hall, I turn my head and look at the open door to Ryker's room. My heart sinks knowing I will never sleep next to him again. I blink back the tears that are threatening to spill from my eyes.

Without realizing it, I walk towards his room. Immediately, I'm hit with the scent of him. My heart squeezes at the thought of losing him. I walk over towards the bed, and my heart picks up pace. I fell asleep with him here just last night.

I sit on the bed, on his side, and bow my head.

Who the fuck is Allison Davis and why does he think that's me?

He promised he would protect me, that I was safe with him. He lied. I was never safe. All it took was enough doubt and I was thrown to the curb. But I guess he has a

reason to be doubtful; the evidence does all suggest that it's me. Eventually, he had to see what was right in front of him. The DNA was obviously the last straw. At that point, I was no longer safe.

Especially my heart. My heart was never safe.

I stand up and walk towards the bedroom door. With one last look, I wipe the tears away from my face. "I fell in love with you, Ryker. I'm sorry you think it was me. I'm sorry I ever came here. But I'm really sorry I fell in love with you," I whisper to his empty room.

I leave the key on the counter and take one last look around. It was home for just a minute, but it was the first time I felt comfortable and wanted. At least I had that feeling for a moment in my life. Walking towards the door, I open it up and step out, locking it behind me. The sound of the door closing makes me let out a small whimper. This is the end.

Walking over to the cab, I take in one last look around me. I'm going to miss this place. I was finally feeling like I belonged somewhere. The Hollidays, for the most part, treated me like part of their family. I finally felt like I was part of something, that I wasn't an outcast like I was in my family. Not anymore.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

Yeah, time to get the fuck out of dodge.

Opening the door to the cab waiting outside, I throw my bag in and plop down on the backseat.

“We headed to Brixton, ma’am?” the cab driver, who is an older gentleman, asks.

“Yes, please. And if you know a good hotel or a place to stay, please just take me straight there. Thank you.” Leaning back, I stare out the window as we leave the ranch. Placing my hand over my heart, I push to try and dull the pain.

I close my eyes and rest my head against the window as we drive out of town. My headache is still beating my skull in. My mind is still trying to replay everything that happened. Nothing makes any sense.

Was this Mitch’s doing? The man has connections with government officials, so maybe he did something to my records. He’s put doubt in everyone I’ve run into in Weston, essentially tearing me from them and forcing me to run. But how? How would he have known Ryker would run DNA? Who the fuck am I?

The farther we get from Weston and Ryker, the more I hurt. Physically hurt. I sigh as I take in the view of the mountains around us as we drive. While we roll along, I spot cows in a field, and my heart twists in pain. Ryker, why can’t you just believe me? Well, because I lied to him from the get-go. From the moment I met him, I didn’t tell him who I was. Why would he believe me?

We pull up to a run-down motel, and I wipe the tears that slide down my face. This

place looks a little rough around the edges, but these towns are older, so their buildings are too. The doors to all the rooms face the outside of the building. It's not the best place to be right now, but it'll do until I can think of a plan to escape out this state tomorrow.

I make my way into the lobby after paying the driver and wait for my turn.

"How are you doing ma'am?" a motel employee says as I walk in. He stands behind the counter in front of the computer, his hands folded in front of him. He looks a little disheveled, his shirt is dirty, and his hair is messy. I have to remind myself that this isn't some five-star resort.

"I just need a room for the next couple of days, please." I pull out cash from my bag as he stares at me without any emotion in his eyes.

"Uh, sure. So, what brings you here to Brixton?" the man asks in a monotone voice. According to his name tag, his name is Fred.

"Just traveling, Fred." I nod and look around the lobby area. It's small and dingy. There are brown spots on the ceiling tiles from water damage. The floor has bubbled up in the corners of the room. It doesn't seem that this place has been cleaned in quite a while.

Fred hands me a room key and smiles. "Room 913."

"Thanks." I turn and walk away with my bag thrown over my shoulder.

When I open the door to my room, I crinkle my nose in disgust. This is place will have to do. The walls are a dingy beige, the television looks like it was from a decade ago, and God only knows who has slept in this bed. The carpet has dark stains on it, which I really hope is not blood, and the air smells stale. Yeah, I definitely need to

get the hell out of dodge.

It's only for a night or two. At least that's what I'm telling myself.

With the covers still made, I sit on the bed. I lean back on the very flat pillows and run my hands over my face. Where the hell am I going to go? Maybe I should continue out to Seattle. That's where I originally was headed. Maybe I can backtrack and head out to the mid-west. Or fuck it, maybe I will just head to Florida. Everyone seems to be headed there these days. Warm weather, beaches, and of course Disney World. Seems like a good place to live.

I exhale, closing my eyes and then opening them. Everything's so fucked up. I still can't believe Ryker's accusing me of being someone I'm not. The man who was so kind to me, so protective of me, turned on me in the blink of an eye.

Ryker was so angry and hurt when he confronted me. But I'm even more angry and hurt. He promised he believed me. He promised he would protect me. The betrayal of his flip-flop is disgusting. What the hell was in that folder? I should have demanded to see what it was, to make him prove to me that somehow, I was this Allison Davis person.

I let out a growl in exasperation. I can't think of this anymore. It's tearing me apart. I plug in my cell phone and put my earbuds in. The first song that plays is Ashes of Eden by Breaking Benjamin. Of course this is the song that plays. It's fitting. It's about losing someone, and I've lost the man who stole my heart. I hit the repeat on it and lay back down on the bed.

I let the tears burn me. I let them fall from my eyes, mourning the loss of Ryker and what we had. It's all over.

Ryker's gone.

I close my eyes and imagine Ryker holding me. His calloused hands lightly trailing along my skin. His soft lips kissing every inch of my body. His warm body lying next to mine. Eventually, the exhaustion from today's events pull me deep into sleep.

* * *

I wake to a sudden bang. My body shoots up from the bed, and I look around at the dark room. I reach over to the nightstand and find the light before turning it on. Looking around, I realize the room is empty and that the noise didn't come from in here. Quietly, I wait to see if I hear anymore. I only have to wait a few seconds when I hear the people next to me arguing loudly.

After a few more bangs against the wall and screaming matches, I relax knowing that's what woke me. I rub my hands over my face and let out a sigh. Picking up my phone, I see I have no missed calls or texts.

Throwing the phone down on the bed, I get out and head over to the bathroom to start the shower. I turn around and look at myself through the dirty, cracked bathroom mirror. This is all quite fitting, actually. This is what I wanted from the get-go. To be alone.

And now I am.

I step into the shower and let the hot water cascade over me. When I woke up this morning, this wasn't how I pictured today going. I tilt my face up and try to wash away the tears I've cried today. I have no shampoo or soap, so I just stand under the spray. I have nothing left. My heart is with Ryker; it's all his.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

Dropping down to the floor, I bring my knees up and rest my head on them. The water pelts me from behind.

“I thought you were going to be there for me,” I say to no-one. “Why did you let me go?” There’s a weight on my chest, and I place my hand on it. “Why aren’t you listening to me, Ryker?” I sob into my legs, wrapping my arms around my shins.

I stay like that until the water goes cold. Pulling myself up, I turn off the tap and wrap a small, shitty towel around me. I head back into my room and take out a pair of leggings and a t-shirt. I dress and then wrap the same small shitty towel around my hair to help soak up some of the water. I next move to the bed and sit back against the headboard.

Picking up my phone, my finger hovers over Ryker’s name. I bite my lip, unsure if I should feel the disappointment when he doesn’t pick up. Instead, I close the phonebook out and click on my messages. It may be better to send him a message. He can choose to read it or not, but at least I can try again to get through to him.

Me: Ryker, I’m sorry for everything. For the hurt I caused both you and your family. God, why won’t you just listen to me, Ryker? Well ... What I’m saying next, I’m only saying because I don’t think I will ever get the chance to say it to your face. Please remember our good times. Please don’t forget our stolen moments or our times of passion. I love you, Ryker. I always will.

Before I can erase it, I hit send. Picking back up my earbuds, I place them in my ears and turn back on the song, Ashes of Eden. I lean my head back against the headboard and close my eyes.

Tomorrow's a new day. I have nothing left, and there's no other choice than to start over again. But this time, without my heart.

I left that back in Weston.

Chapter 19

Ryker

Sleep didn't come for me last night. I missed her in my bed. Her soft breathing that helps lull me to sleep. I didn't have that, but I could still smell her on my bed. Like she was right there next to me. I missed her.

Her.

I don't even know what to call her. Zoey, Nicole, Allison. The only name I knew her by was Zoey, but that tastes bitter on my mouth now. She texted me, but I've yet to read it. I just can't. I'm sure it's an apology or something. I just can't deal with it right now.

I rub my palms into my eyes. I've been at the station since six this morning. Figured if I couldn't sleep, I might as well get some paperwork done.

Picking up the folder I got from Dean, I open it up and take another look at the information he sent over. My stomach sinks as I pull out the papers. My heart still can't believe what my eyes are seeing.

Allison Rose Davis. Age twenty-seven. Five foot three. One hundred and thirty-seven pounds. Red hair with hazel eyes. I pull out a picture, and it's her. There's a pain in my chest as I look at the photo. We were so good together. She made me feel like I was walking on air. I saw her bloom with her independence on the ranch. I shake my

head, let out a long sigh, and continue reading the information in front of me.

Allison was adopted by the Moores twenty-seven years ago after they lost their daughter, who was stillborn. They chose not to change her name. The daughter they lost was named Nicole Moore. I pause and let that soak in.

As I continue raking through her past, shock comes over me with each thing I read. She had mental issues that have amounted to her staying in mental facilities for periods of time. I groan in anger. That could explain the name usage. If she were mentally unstable, using the baby's name wouldn't have been that big of a deal for her.

Reading further, I grow angrier. I can feel my face heating up, and my leg is shaking underneath my desk. Everything about her is a lie. She has no teaching degree. No friends. Nothing. Everything she told me was a complete lie.

Her mental instability could explain all the issues on the ranch. Did she do them for attention? Fuck. Damnit. She was a good liar. I exhale loudly as I continue to sort through it all.

Dean let me know that her fiancé, Mitch, even put out a missing persons as soon as he realized she was gone. Yes, according to him, they were still engaged. The fiancé said that she has run before because the "voices tell her not to get married." Allison's completely unstable. And I had her near my family, in my house, in my bed. But she never seemed unstable. She was focused and driven, determined to make her way in the world. Hell, just getting her stay on the ranch was a battle.

For another hour, I stare at everything in front of me. Something is nagging at me in the back of my mind. The information's there, but it doesn't feel right. With the exceptions of the issues on the ranch, she never felt off. She didn't seem unhinged or unbalanced. The file says it's her, but it isn't her. Even the things that happened on

the ranch don't fit in with what I know about her. I feel like I'm missing the piece of the puzzle.

Reaching into my back pocket, I dial Deans number.

"Fuller," Dean answers.

"Hey, it's Holliday. All that information you sent over, is this all there is?" I stare back down at the folder.

"That was just a quick run-down. Why?" he asks.

"Something isn't right. I mean it's her, but it's not. Nothing's lining up with the woman I knew. She didn't exhibit any mental issues. She never talked about being adopted. Gut feeling. Something doesn't sit right." I lean back in my chair.

Dean falls silent for a minute, and I can hear the clacking of a keyboard in the background. "Hm. Okay. I still have some agents working on it, so let me look deeper into what they've found. I'll get right on this and see if I can find anything and get it over to you today."

"Please. If something else is going on ..." I let my words fall off. He knows why I don't want to finish in that sentence.

"You got it, Holliday."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it.” After I end the call, I get everything back into the folder and set it in a tray on my desk. Looking at my watch, I realize I need to meet Johnson and McCormick at the diner. And I really need some coffee to keep my ass awake today. I grab my keys and wallet and walk over to the diner.

When I walk into the diner, the smell of pancakes and sausage hits me. My stomach rumbles the moment it realizes where we are. I take a look around and nod to some of the townspeople as they wave. I spot McCormick and Johnson sitting in a booth and head over to the table.

I plop down into the leather seats, sighing as I do. My two deputies stare at me, and I’m sure they’re trying to gauge my mood. But I couldn’t give a shit. Today I’m not in a “give a fuck” kind of mood. I stare out the window, and my mind going to her. Zoey. There’s a pain in my chest as I think of her name. Before the two in front of me can ask anything, Joan reaches our table.

“Hey there, Sheriff. These two already ordered, so what can I get for you?” She stands next to me with her pad in her hand.

“The usual, Joan.” I nod to her.

“Pancakes coming right up. I’ll be back with your coffee too.” She gives me a sad smile. From what she’s told me, she still can’t believe that Zoey stole that money, and she’s been trying to do everything she can to find the reason it’s missing. In fact, she was at the bank all day yesterday trying to get the bank to tell her they just misplaced it. They didn’t. The bank’s cameras caught her at the deposit box, but you can’t see her drop the deposit bag in. Her back was to the camera blocking the view of the bag

going in. So, when Joan went over to the bank, there was no way to show that it got dropped off. The camera didn't pick that up. The evidence points to Zoey never putting it in the overnight drop box.

McCormick and Johnson are both leaning back against the booth and staring at me. McCormick finally breaks the silence.

"You doing all right? Because you look like shit." His lip curls up in a slight smile. A smile I want to wipe off his face. Smug asshole.

"No." I shake my head. "I'm not. Didn't sleep last night. I can't get what happened out of my head. Not to mention that something just feels off about it. About her."

McCormick leans forward and folds his arms on the tabletop, "Well, yeah, you had a thing for Zoey, and she didn't turn out to be who you thought she was. I'm pretty sure that would affect anyone. I'm also pretty sure it would confuse you enough to doubt what's right in front of you."

"It's not that." I shake my head. "Yes, I did have a thing for her, but I'm missing something. Nothing my FBI contact gave me makes any sense. It doesn't match who I knew or who she was around me. Hell, who she was around town." I fold my hands, placing my elbows on the table.

Joan places a stack of pancakes in front of me with a cup of coffee. I nod to her. "Thank you." She then places the other two plates down in front of Johnson and McCormick.

"You got it, Sheriff." Joan smiles and heads over to clear off some tables across the diner.

McCormick takes a bite of his eggs and then points the fork towards me. "You're

crazy if you think something else is going on. Girl is cuckoo. She played you, Holliday. You're a complete fool if you think otherwise."

"Why, because I have a hunch that it is? Because something feels off with the information I received?" My voice raises, and I narrow my eyes.

"Because DNA doesn't lie. It told you who she was, who she is. Why are you fighting the evidence?" McCormick shoves a piece of sausage in his mouth, then continues to talk with his food in his mouth. "She's a crazy person. End of story, Holliday."

Johnson looks up from his oatmeal. "Look, I hate to agree with this asshole,"—he tilts his head towards McCormick, chewing—"but he's right. The DNA told you who she was, it just wasn't what you wanted to hear. Maybe that's what's bothering you?" He shrugs and then looks back down at his boring ass bowl of oatmeal.

I swallow the pancake I have in my mouth. It doesn't even taste like a pancake. It's dry and flavorless. And I know it's not Joan or the diner's fault. It's mine. Nothing tastes good. Everything is bitter, like my heart. I shake my head. "Well, I'll find out soon enough. I'm having my contact look further into it."

McCormick sets his water down, "Seriously? Why? Why waste that person's time? Well, really, the FBI's time. She isn't worth it! She's a liar, a psycho! She destroyed your family's store, Holliday."

"Maybe just let it go, boss. Why put yourself through all this? What if it comes back that all this information is true? You just wasted more time on it." Johnson looks down at his dish and pushes his food around the plate with his spoon. "She was a nice girl, but she had her secrets. She obviously has her own demons she's fighting. Don't drive yourself crazy over it."

We sit there quietly for several more minutes, finishing our breakfasts, and I mull over what my deputies were trying to get across to me. McCormick gets up and throws down some money. He looks at me, but his face shows no emotion. He simply nods and takes off.

Johnson scoots over and takes out his wallet, putting some cash down as well. “I have some paperwork to do back at the station. I’ll see you there later?”

“Yeah.” With that, he leaves. Sipping my coffee, I reach into my pocket to take out my phone, but it isn’t there. “Shit.” I realize that I left it back in the office. I leave money on the table and down the last bit of coffee. I wave to Joan and exit the diner.

It’s a beautiful October day. The air is cool and crisp, and the sky is clear and blue. I stand outside on the sidewalk. Placing my hands on my belt, I exhale loudly. Even with the sun shining, my mind feels like it in a fog. I shake my head and turn towards the station. As I get to an alley in between the bar and diner, I hear a familiar voice yelling.

“... he had the FBI look further into it ... No!” The person must have been talking on the phone. I slowly step closer to the building to see if I can try to hear more. “You said you would pay it off!”

Another pause.

“Okay, but she left town. Nicole’s all yours now! Why do you still need me? You said I’d be done, that my debt would be cleared. We had a fucking deal!” I hear the person sigh. I can’t hear anymore, so I start to turn around the corner just as the person drops his phone back into his pocket. And I stare at someone I trusted and respected.

Deputy Johnson.

My fists curl at my sides, and my eyes narrow into slits. “What the fuck did you do?”
I roar.

Johnson’s eyes widen, and his hands come up in defense. He shakes his head. “I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

“Sorry? What are you sorry for, deputy?” I take a step closer to him, my eyes seeing red. My chest is puffed up, and my fists are aching to punch this motherfucker the fuck out.

“I had to. I had to! I’m sorry. He left me no choice.” Johnson’s visibly shaking, his lips trembling.

“I’m going to ask you again to explain yourself. If you don’t, I’ll have no choice but to beat it out of you. And I couldn’t give two shits about the badge right now. So, explain. What the fuck did you do?” I grit through my teeth.

Johnson hesitates for a moment before speaking. “I was in trouble. I ... I had a huge gambling debt from a year ago. Remember I went to Vegas? It was from that trip.” He pauses, and his hand runs down his face as he sighs. “Brett, that guy that kept bothering Zoey? He approached me a little while back. He knew about the debt and said that Mitch knew the person I owed. H-He told me if I helped him get Zoey to come home, Mitch would pay off my debt. All I had to do was get her to run.”

“You met Mitch?”

Johnson shakes his head, gulping. “No. Never met him. Everything I’ve done has been through Brett.”

“Then how did Mitch know about your debt?” I demand. My heart feels like it’s ready to explode from my chest. My entire body is shaking with such rage and hatred for the man standing in front of me. A man who swore to protect the people of this town.

“I-I don’t know. Brett mentioned something about Mitch doing his homework on the people here. Mitch had, like, information on us. The guy has connections. Hell, Brett’s been here pretty much since Zoey has. I mean, I don’t know how he found Zoey, but he did. Mitch found out where some of my money was going to, who I was paying off. Look, maybe he does know the people I owe, but I couldn’t ignore it. I had to do what I had to do, and I regret every single second of it.” He chokes up, sniffling.

I sneer. “So, the stuff on the ranch—”

He quickly says, “That was me.” He shakes his head, frowning. “I’m sorry! That debt was hanging over my head. I’ve been scared out of my mind because of it. Mitch said he could help me if I helped him. That I just had to figure out a way to get her away from you. You were in the way, man.”

“The bank?” I question.

“I had Rachel help. Told her I would find a way for her to get paid if she helped me. She took the bag and did something with it. I don’t know what. But that way it wouldn’t get deposited. We got lucky that the cameras didn’t catch the bag going in so we used that to our advantage.” Johnson was cracking under the pressure. “Fuck, I’m sorry, boss.”

“Goddamn it! Don’t fucking call me that. You’re an absolute disgrace to everything you’re supposed to stand for! Are you fucking serious right now? You turned my family, this town, against her. She’s fucking innocent! Do you have any idea what you did? Fuck!” I can feel the heat of my anger rise up my neck. I take off my badge and throw it on the ground, roll up my sleeves and take another step closer to him. “That man’s going to find her, Johnson. He’s going to kill her! Fuck! All that shit had me doubting her. But she was telling the truth; she didn’t do any of the stuff she was accused of.” I run my hand down my face. “You handed her over to the fucking

Devil.”

“I’m sorry,” he cries.

I roar and stalk towards him. I raise my fist and bring it down so hard against Johnson’s face that I can feel bones break against my knuckles. I bring my fist back before landing another. Then another. Fuck this motherfucker. His head goes limp, and his legs give out.

He falls to the ground, knocked the fuck out.

After knocking Johnson out, I handcuffed him to a pipe and I ran into the diner to have someone contact dispatch to have them get McCormick over to the alley. I didn’t give McCormick the full rundown but just enough to clue him in. Johnson was the cause of the trouble on the ranch. The look on McCormick’s pale face said it all. He was disgusted.

We got Johnson in custody but taken to the local hospital so they can do X-rays on this face that I for sure broke. Asshole. When I finally make it back to the station I immediately grab my phone on my desk and click on Zoey’s text and read it.

Zoey: Ryker, I’m sorry for everything. For the hurt I caused both you and your family. God, why won’t you just listen to me, Ryker. Well ... What I’m saying next, I’m only doing because I don’t think I will ever get the chance to say it to your face. Please remember our good times. Please don’t forget our stolen moments or our times of passion. I love you, Ryker. I always will.

“Fuck!” I slam my hand against my desk. I pick up a coffee mug on my desk and hurl it against the wall. She loves me and I sent her away. I lied about being able to protect her. There’s a pain in my chest that makes it hard to breathe. The palm of my hand rubs the spot over my heart. She loves me. I love her. What the fuck did I do?

I look up at the clock hanging on the wall in my office. It's been a couple hours since I talked to Dean last and I need to update him on everything Johnson spilled. This really makes me doubt the information he found, not that it was his fault, but that someone else gave him false information. I sit down in my chair and pick up the phone and hit his contact name.

"Fuller."

"Hey, it's Holliday." I look at the folder in front of me and open it up. My stomach churns as I see her picture. "We got an issue. I think the info you gave me was falsified."

"Yeah, it was. I was going to call after I had a few more loose ends tied up, but it didn't take much digging. We found something." I can hear the keyboard on the other side of the phone as he clacks away. "Sending you something now."

Opening up my email I see a name, Todd Evanston. "Who's this Evanston character?"

"Works for the state. Dirty. Looked back at some of his arrests, he was arrested for falsifying government documents. But never got convicted." Fuller continues to type away on his keyboard in the background.

"Why not? Who does he know?"

"Mitchell Wakefield. Well, the whole Wakefield family. Seems he's been represented by their attorneys. I mean it's not hard to guess that they threw a little money at the problem and it went away. From what I can tell, this whole Wakefield family is dirty. In bed with politicians and other high officials. Probably has the police force corrupted to with the amount of money they throw around. I don't have the evidence to prove anything, that will take some time to get. That's just a hunch on what I'm

seeing.”

“But if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck—”

“Then it probably is a duck. Exactly.” He finishes for me.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

“Ok so, help me out here. How does this tie to Allison Davis?” My eyes go back to the folder and I pull out her picture and study it. Her beautiful eyes, creamy skin. I can hear her laugh and her soft snores when she laid next to me at night. I feel that sharp pain again where my heart should be.

“That’s where this gets ugly. I need to do more digging but I think I got a twofer here.”

“Twofer?” I tilt my head to the side. He can’t see my puzzled look.

“We have been trying to close in on an underground adoption ring that has been going on for quite a few decades. But we can’t get close. Every single time we think we get close to ending it, the ring goes dark. Honestly, I think your girl is the key.” He sighs into the phone.

“How is she the key?” I lean back in my chair.

“Well, Mitch fucked up when he changed her information from Nicole back to Allison. This Evanston didn’t cover his tracks very well. It led me straight to him. When I looked at Evanston’s background, we unlocked so much that it gave it all away.” Fuller pauses. “She is Allison Davis. Stolen at birth. Birth mother, apparent suicide. No listed father on the birth certificate.”

“Okay, so where’s this leading?” I know he’s going somewhere with it. I sit up straighter, on pins and needles.

“Nicole Moore, stillborn. Parents: Richard and Lisa Moore. They didn’t want to do an

adoption legally. Seems they had to come home with a baby. Elites and all. I think something else happened, to cause the baby to be still born.”

“Like what? He beat her, pushed her down the stairs or something?” I furrow my brows in question.

“Something like that. They did some shady ass shit to cover up at the hospital. Looks like some doctors got some of their debt cleared out that night. Pushed her, kicked her, whatever it was, the baby didn’t make it.”

“So they needed a coverup. They needed a baby.”

“Exactly. And they were far enough along in the pregnancy that they could buy a baby and no one would think anything of it. Death certificates were hidden, birth certificates falsified—“

I cut him off. “They stole Allison and renamed her Nicole. After the baby that didn’t make it.”

“Yeah. So she holds the key to unlocking this thing and breaking the adoption ring wide open. We can finally get to the people we have been trying to identify for years.” I can hear him typing on the keyboard.

I ask a question I’m not sure I want to know the answer to. “Who?” I stand from my desk, my body tense as I wait for the other shoe to drop. “Who’s behind all this, Fuller?” Please don’t be who I think it is.

“The Wakefields. More specifically, now that he has taken over daddy’s company, Mitchell Wakefield.”

Motherfucker.

Chapter 20

Zoey

After a restless night, I pull myself out of bed and head to the dingy bathroom. I flip on the light and stare at my red eyes and pale face. I turn on the faucet and let the water get hot. My hands rest on the counter, and I mentally will myself to try to get through today.

“Okay, you can do this. New day. New life. Find a new place to live.” I close my eyes tightly and shake my head. Just one day at a time. Yesterday was awful. The hurt in Ryker’s eyes ... But today, I start new. Fresh. Or fake it till I make it at this point.

Once the water is hot enough, I throw some on my face. I pat my face dry, I pick up my toothbrush and brush my teeth. I look at the person staring back at me and wonder why this is all happening to me. No. No pity party. I can do this.

“Focus. Strong. I will get through all this bullshit.” I repeat that to myself in the mirror, over and over, willing it to be true. I close my eyes and exhale. I open them a second later and hope the pep talk is enough.

After I’m done in the bathroom, I head back over to the bed and sit on the lumpy mattress. I pick up my phone and check for any messages. Nothing. No calls, no messages. Just silence.

Sighing, I pull up the internet search engine and see if I can find a diner nearby. Castle Diner is just a block away, so I slip on my shoes and grab my purse. Once I’m outside, I turn and lock the door behind me.

When I turn around, I take a look at the town I came to yesterday. The leaves are

falling off the trees that are in the parking lot of the motel. A slight breeze whips through my hair. I love fall, and it's honestly my favorite time of the year. I take a deep breath and take in the fresh air, then head down the stairs and over to the sidewalk towards the diner.

As I get closer to the diner, I notice the same small-town busy street like in Weston. People stopping to greet each other and small storefronts that are mom-and-pop shops. They're a little busier here on the main street, so this town must be a little bigger than Weston.

While I walk around, people grin at me and say hello. I give them all a small smile back out of politeness. When I make it up to the door, a gentleman coming out holds it open for me.

I nod. "Thank you."

"Have a good day, ma'am," he says.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

Walking into this place makes me really miss Joan's Diner. Castle Diner is nice, but it's not the same. It's a lot bigger, more modern, and doesn't have the same homey feeling as Joan's.

I look around and find an empty booth. I slide into the black leather seat and place my hands on the stainless -teel table in front of me. This entire place is pretty much black and white with gray, not like Joan's at all.

A server saunters up, smiling wide. "Hi there. You must be new in town. Never seen you around!" She has long brown hair, brown eyes, and she looks to be about eighteen-years-old.

"Yeah. Just, um, passing through." I offer her a small smile back.

She tilts her head, "Oh? Where are you coming from?" Her pencil taps her pad of paper in her hand.

"Weston." I look down at the table and try to control my emotions. Just saying the name makes me want to cry.

"Oh! Sheriff Holliday stops in here all the time to say hi. He's usually patrolling around Brixton too. Small towns and all. I know his momma and daddy got a farm up there in Weston. Did you get to meet him? Nice man. Super cute." She winks at me.

I feel my face turn hot, and I stammer, "Um, no. Never got the chance. I'm sure he's a great sheriff. The town was a nice town, so it speaks volumes to their ability to keep it safe."

“Yeah, it is! So, what can I get started for you?”

“Pancakes, side of bacon and a cup of coffee, please.” I smile at her and nod in thanks.

She leaves, and I stare out the window. I’m not really staring at anything, just trying to look like I don’t want to talk because I don’t.

I take out my phone and check out whether there are any nearby bus or train stations I can go to so I can get out of there. I finally find a bus station a couple towns over. But where should I go?

While I look at different states to get lost in, my server comes back with my pancakes.

“Here you go. So, how long are you staying in town?” she asks as she sets my plate down in front of me.

“Probably till tomorrow.”

“Where you headed to after this?” Her hand goes to her hip.

Shaking my head, I reply, “Um, no idea.”

“Hm. Okay. Well, enjoy your breakfast. Let me know if you need anything else.” She gives me a soft smile and turns on her heel to saunter over to another table that just sat down.

While I eat, I think back to how this was how it was supposed to be when I got to Weston. No one bothering me, no one to talk to, just me, myself, and I.

But that's not what happened. The minute I got there, I was sucked into Ryker's orbit. Like magnets, we were drawn together. He brought me out of my shell, allowed me to be myself. For a while, even protected me and trusted me.

I push my plate away and leave a twenty on the table. Scooting out of the booth, I head for the door and make my way down the street to the local general store I passed on the way here. I need get some provisions for the next couple of days at least. I hope to be out of here by tomorrow, but just in case I can't, I need to have some things to get me by.

When I get back to the room, I place the water in the fridge and put the snacks on the counter. I check to time and see that it's noon. Sighing, I pull down the covers on my bed and slide underneath.

Before long, my thoughts finally calm, and I fall asleep to dreams of what should have been. Ryker and me.

* * *

I awake to a knocking at my door. Opening my eyes, I stare at the door and then look at the time. It's a little after five in the evening. Apparently, I needed the sleep. Which I did after the shitty sleep I got the night before.

Knock, knock, knock.

I slowly sit up and move the comforter off me.

Knock, knock, knock.

My eyes are glued on the door now. I quietly take a step towards it while trying to slow my breathing.

“Nicole, I know you’re in there. Open up, love.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

No!

No. It can't be.

Mitch.

I shake myself out of the stupor and grab my phone. I run into the bathroom and see if there's anything I can protect myself with. There's nothing.

Knock, knock, knock.

"We can fix this, Nicole. Just open up. Let me in so we can talk," Mitch calls from the door. His voice is all apologetic, but I know that's a lie.

I come out of the bathroom and place my back against the wall farthest from the door. I have nowhere to run to. No way to escape. The only window in the room is right next to the door.

If this were the story of Andromeda, my Perseus would rescue me from this monster. The monster that stands outside my door.

But my hero isn't coming. My story doesn't end like Andromeda's story.

With my back to the wall, I stare at the door. The handle is jiggling and then suddenly, the door opens.

Standing in the doorway is the man I hoped to never see again. The man I hate more

than anything. A shudder envelopes me in its fearful grasp.

Mitch waltzes in, not bothering to shut the door behind him. He stares at me, his lips curl up, and his eyes narrow. “Hello, love. How are you doing?”

“What the fuck do you want?” I croak out.

He smirks. “That’s no way to greet your fiancé, is it? Come here and give me a kiss.”

“Stay away from me. Just go and leave me alone,” I plead.

Mitch shakes his head and steps closer. “No, can’t do that. See, you are supposed to marry me. I put a ring on that finger. Do you have any idea how lucky you are to have a man like me as a husband?” His hands go to his chest, feigning hurt.

“You are no man.” My body is pushing against the wall as if it will give way into another door to get me out of there.

“Oh, so we are going to be insulting me then. Okay. So, this is how it’s going to go. You are going to come with me, or I will make you come with me.” Mitch shrugs and puts his hands in his pockets. He pulls out a syringe and waves it, and my blood runs cold. He now stands only a mere few feet from me.

My heart is racing, and my breathing is fast and hard. With my eyes wide I shake my head, “No. I won’t. I left, and I refuse to come back.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Mitch looks at me, his eyebrows drawing in.

“Get what?”

“The only person who wants you is me. You’re lucky that I do. Do you know your

parents didn't even care that you left? Even your sister wrote you off," he spits out.

I shake my head. "No. She loves me. She would never—"

"She doesn't. She played the game like everyone else, Nicole. Or should I say, Allison." He pauses and smiles. He steps closer to me, and we're now standing toe to toe. "You were only there to fill the shoes of the baby they were supposed to bring home. That's it. You are nothing special to them. You are a reminder of the child they lost. I mean, if you dad didn't beat the shit out of his wife, maybe the real Nicole would still be here." He shrugs.

"I'm not adopted! And I have never seen my dad raise a hand to my mom!" I scream at him, my fists curling at my sides.

"Oh, but you are. My family helped find you for the Moores. And yeah, after that incident, I hear your dad went soft. Changed his ways of getting his wife under control. Shame." Mitch tilts his head to the side. "Didn't you ever wonder why you were so different from them? Red hair, short, and curvy. You look nothing like them. You really mean to tell me you haven't ever thought, 'Why am I so different?'" His hands come up on each side of my head, boxing me in. I can feel the heat of his breath on my face.

"So, if I am, then why do you care? Why do you even want me?" I whisper. My body starts shaking, and my eyes remain locked with his.

"Because I love you." His hand brushes my cheek. I try to pull back, but the wall stops me. "I've always loved you. Since the moment we met, I knew you were the one. You were so sweet, so beautiful. I had to have you."

Shaking my head, I snap, "I don't love you anymore, Mitch."

His one hand comes up and grabs a fist full of hair while the other hand goes behind his back. He yanks my head down, and I cry out in agony from the pain tearing through my skull.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

“You know, that truly is a shame. I think you’re becoming more trouble than you’re worth. Maybe we should just call this whole thing off. End it here and now.” He sighs. “I’m sorry, Nicole. I really wish we could have worked this out.” His hand that’s behind his back starts to move. I know this won’t end well for me.

Tears fall from my eyes. I close them and start to think of the one person I wish I could see again. Ryker. I love you, Ryker. My cheeks are wet, and I feel the salty tears starting to fall on my lips. This is how it ends.

Click.

“Don’t fucking move a muscle or I’ll put a bullet in your fucking head.”

My eyes shoot open, and I look past Mitch. I can’t believe what I’m seeing. Ryker. Ryker is standing behind Mitch with a gun to his head.

Chapter 21

Ryker

Two hours earlier

“Fuck.” I can’t believe what Fuller just told me. That’s why she reacted the way she did when I brought up the adoption. She had no idea. “Fuller, I need you to trace her cell find the last tower it pinged at. He’s going to find her. I need to get to her before he does.”

“Okay. Give me a minute, and I’ll send that info your way.”

I end the call and jump out of my chair. Grabbing my keys, I run out of the station and into my truck. Before I can leave, McCormick comes running over.

“What’s up, Holliday? You going to see Johnson and get a statement?” He puts his hands on the window of the truck door.

“It’s Zo. She’s in trouble. Turns out things aren’t as they seem. I’ll explain later. Just stay close in case I need you. I need to find out where she went.” Without waiting, I throw my truck into reverse and start driving. I start heading to Greenrey, a small town east of Weston. About ten minutes into the drive there, my phone rings and I see Fuller’s name flash on the screen.

I accept the call immediately. “Tell me you got something.” My heart races with anticipation.

“Brixton. She last pinged off Brixton. But I can’t find any credit cards or anything to tell me where she was last,” Fuller says.

“She’s been using cash. I doubt she even has a one of those on her. Fuck.” I hang up and quickly turn myself around. I haul ass as I head towards Brixton, trying to make up for lost time.

About forty-five minutes later, I pull into Castle’s Diner. I throw the truck in park and jump out of it. With sweat dripping down my back, I race inside and see if I can see her.

“Hey, Sheriff. How’s it going?” Sherry, one of the servers, asks.

I take out my phone and pull up a picture of Zoey. It’s a picture of the both of us

snuggled up in the bed of my truck.

There's no time for pleasantries. Throwing the phone at her face, I bark, "Have you seen this woman?"

Sherry squints her eyes, frowning. "No, I haven't seen her, but I just got here." She turns towards the counter and shouts, "Hey, Diana. Have you seen this girl?"

Diana, one of the young servers here, comes out from behind the counter. "Hey there, Sheriff." She smiles and winks at me.

"Look, I need to know if you've seen her." I show her the picture on my phone.

"Yeah! She was in here this morning. She stopped in for breakfast. Said she was just passing through." She gives me a puzzled look.

"What is it?"

Diana shakes her head, looking confused, "She said she didn't know you. I had mentioned that you were the sheriff, and she said she never met you."

I growl, "Do you know where she's staying at?"

"No." She shakes her head. "I never asked, and she never told me."

"Do you know which way she went when she left?" I press.

"Um, yeah. I think she headed towards the general store." Diana frowns.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

I nod and run out of the diner. I then hop in my truck and drive over to the general store. Fuck. It's almost five. My palms are sweaty, and my heart is beating practically right through my chest. Every muscle in my body is tense.

Walking through the door, I'm greeted by Marie, the store owner.

"Sheriff! What brings you in today?" She leans on the counter, putting her head in her hands.

"I'm looking for someone." I pull out my phone and bring up the picture again. "Have you seen her?"

"Oh, yes! She came in here earlier. Got a few things." Marie stands up straighter. "Is everything okay?"

"No. Did she tell you where she was staying?"

Marie nods. "No, but I saw her head towards the motel down the block." Before she can say anything more, I turn and run out the door.

Jumping in my truck, I throw it in reverse and peel out of the parking lot. Shifting back into drive, I punch the gas pedal and take off towards the motel. It's a short minute drive, thank God. I pull right in front of the office and jump out, then bolt to the front desk.

There's no one around. I ring the bell obnoxiously. Still no one.

“Hey! Sheriff’s Office. Anyone here?” I yell out. Come on, come on.

Finally, after about five minutes, William comes out of the back room. “Hey there. What can I do for you, Sheriff?”

“Zoey Krause. What room is she in?” My hands grip the edge of the counter so hard my knuckles turn white.

William types in the name. “She’s in room 913. Through the door and up those stairs. She’s the last door at the end.”

I run out of the office, not even stopping to thank him. I take out my gun, remove the safety, and take a look around. The motel’s quiet, and no one is around. I listen and can’t hear anything. Quietly, I walk up the stairs, keeping my eyes peeled for anything. As I get closer to the end of the walkway, closer to room 913, I hear voices.

One of them is Zoey’s.

I stalk over next to the door and listen.

“So, if I am, then why do you care? Why do you even want me?” I hear her say softly.

“Because I love you.” The guy pauses. “I’ve always loved you. Since the moment we met, I knew you were the one. You were so sweet, so beautiful. I had to have you.”

“I don’t love you anymore, Mitch.”

I hear her yelp, and every bone in my body wants to go in there and just start shooting, but I can’t risk hurting Zoey. I cautiously peek around the corner and see he has her against the wall with one hand pulling on her hair. The other he has behind

his back as he reaches for something in the waistband of his pants.

“You know, that truly is a shame. I think you’re becoming more trouble than you’re worth. Maybe we should just call this whole thing off. End it here and now.” He sighs. “I’m sorry, Nicole. I really wish we could have worked this out.”

I need to move. Fast. I steadily walk in with my gun drawn. I hold my breath and slide up behind him. I see tears falling from Zoey’s eyes, which only makes me that much more determined to save her and end this. I hold up the gun to his head and cock it.

Click.

“Don’t fucking move a muscle or I’ll put a bullet in your fucking head.”

Zoey’s eyes shoot open, and she looks at me like she is trying to make sure I’m really standing here.

“Put your hands up in the air slowly. No sudden movements.”

My right hand drops to my belt to reach for my cuffs, and in that split second, Mitch swings to his left. His left arm swings around mine pushing the hand that holds the gun towards the floor. Mitch’s right hand comes down hard on my wrist as his left hand holds it, causing my hand to open and drop the gun. Once the gun drops, I kick the gun to get it away from him. My right hand curls into a fist, and I throw all I can into the side of his face. Mitch stumbles back, and that pulls us apart for a moment.

He rushes me, landing a blow to the side of my head. I bite back a curse, and he grabs my shirt and holds me to swing at me again. But instead of him landing another hit, I whip my head back before slamming my forehead into his. The blow has him faltering backwards, and he falls to the ground, dazed.

Turning to look for my gun, my eyes meet Zoey's, and I can read the fear in them. Her lips tremble, and her eyes shed her tears. But I can't focus on that right now; I need to get to my gun.

Before I can look for it, a force comes up behind me and knocks me into the nightstand. My head hurts, and I reach up to feel a wetness. Everything is getting smaller, darker.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

The last thing I see is Mitch on top of me, laughing as his fists come down on me. Then everything goes dark.

Chapter 22

Zoey

Mitch is on top of Ryker punching him over and over again. Ryker isn't moving. What the hell do I do? I'm not going to survive. My hands are shaking, and my cheeks are wet with my tears.

Shaking my head, I take a deep breath. No. I need to survive. I need to get out of this. Mitch doesn't win, I do. Fuck him.

Ryker's gun isn't far from me, so I slowly reach for it. Grabbing it, I stand and point it at Mitch.

I walk back around from the bathroom, my back to the front door. Mitch hasn't seen me; he's too focused on Ryker.

I could run. I could take off and try to get help. But I can't leave Ryker. He didn't leave me. He came for me. He fought for me, and now he needs me.

I cock the gun. "Get the fuck off him or I will shoot you," I say through gritted teeth.

Mitch's head snaps up, and a sinister smile stretches across his face. "You're going to shoot me? Really?" He stands, giving Ryker one last look before taking a few

painstakingly slow steps towards me. He wipes his bloody knuckles on his shirt, laughing.

The gun shakes in my hand, and I try to hold it steady. “Trust me, I have no problem shooting you, Mitch. Just like you have no problem hitting me or abusing me. Raping—” Choking on the last word, I step back as he slowly moves forward.

“Tsk. You know you deserved it. Don’t blame me for your failures. You were there for me. Mine. I took what I needed.” Mitch’s eyes grow wide, almost crazy looking. He tilts his head to the side, grinning. “I’m waiting, Nicole. Pull the trigger.” He stops several feet away from me, holding his arms out wide. “Pull it. I know you don’t have it in you, so prove me wrong.”

My hands shake so hard that I almost drop the gun altogether. Right here, right now, I can end this. I can make him go away forever.

“See? You can’t. You can’t do what you need to.” His eyes lock on mine. “You’re no one without me, Nicole. Can’t you see that? Everything I have done for you was to help you. Your parents gave up on you. They used you for what they needed. But I gave you a home, I gave you my love. So, I had to smack you around a little bit. Big deal. I was never really going to hurt you.” He shrugs as if my pain was nothing. “Well, up until now. Now you’re just a problem I need to get rid of.”

He laughs, and I cringe, my finger trembling against the trigger.

“My family saved you from a life of poverty. Your real mother was a prostitute. A drug addict who surprisingly stayed clean while pregnant with you, but she would have gone back to drugs. Then where would you have been, Nicole? Who would’ve loved you then? Do you know she killed herself? My family saved you when they took you and gave you to the Moores. You would have ended up in the system, in poverty. Instead, you were given a life of luxury.

“You were given me, a man who would love you even though you were a whore’s daughter. I gave you years of love. Love no one else wanted to give you!” he yells, his face turning red.

“It was years of abuse!” I argued, my entire body full of adrenaline, in fight or flight mode. “That’s not love! Being forced to do things, being scared out of my mind that you would kill me! That’s not love! You’re a fucking psychopath! A fucking monster!”

He moves towards me again, and I step back, but this time I hit the wall between the window and front door. I’ll never make it out of the front door in time. And in this place, no one’s coming to help me no matter how loud I scream. He laughs, knowing I’m stuck. My only choices are to shoot him or give in and let him win.

I won’t let him win.

I steady the gun, biting my lip in determination. My eyes line up my shot, aiming for center mass. I grit my teeth together. My finger wraps around the trigger as I get ready to pull.

Bang!

A shot rings out. Mitch stands there with his mouth open. Suddenly, his eyes roll back into his head and his body goes limp as he falls face first into the floor.

My body freezes. I didn’t pull the trigger.

I snap my head to where the shot rang out from and see Ryker sitting up with another gun in his hand, his face bloody and bruised.

My body’s frozen, and my mouth hangs open as my eyes go from Ryker to Mitch’s

body and then back to Ryker. My legs start to weaken, and I drop to the ground.

“Zo!” Ryker stands in front of me. I watch him place the gun he just killed Mitch with back in the ankle holster. Once it’s secured, his face turns back to me. “Zo, give me the gun, darlin’.” He slowly removes it from my hands, and he places it back in the holster on his hip. My eyes leave Ryker’s face and I zero in on Mitch. He’s dead. Gone.

My breathing starts to come in rapidly, my heart rate rising. I become dizzy and lightheaded.

“Zoey, I need you to focus on me. You’re panicking and going into shock. Listen to me, listen to my voice.” Ryker places his hands on my face. He positions himself in front of me. “Feel me, Zo. I’m right here. Listen to my words.”

His warmth. I feel his warmth. His calloused fingers. I look up and see his eyes. His blue eyes. Lost in blue. Without warning, my mind catches up, and I let out a cry. Ryker pulls me into him.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

“Shh. It’s okay. You’re all right. It’s all over, sweetheart.” Ryker runs his hands through my hair. I close my eyes and listen to his words. “It’s done. You’re free from him.”

The reality of everything starts to hit me. “Ryker ...”

“Not now, Zo. Let’s deal with this first. We need to get you looked at, and then we can talk about it okay?” Ryker reaches into his pocket and grabs his phone. I don’t hear what he says as I focus on his heartbeat to calm me down.

I don’t know how long we sit there for. But I hear commotion around me. I see bags dropped on the floor, feet walking in front of me. I hear Ryker’s voice, he’s talking to someone, but I can’t make out the words. I can see and hear the snap of the medical gloves, medics. The medics are here.

My mind isn’t processing anything right now. I know they’re asking me questions, and I see lights flashing in my eyes, but my mouth can’t move. I feel myself being lifted and put on a something flat. Noises come from all around me as I get strapped in. While I’m loaded into the back of an ambulance, my voice finally comes through.

“Ryker. I need Ryker,” I croak out.

I feel the ambulance shift, and then Ryker appears next to me. “Right here, darlin’. I’m not leaving your side. Never again.” He leans in and kisses my lips. “Never again.”

* * *

Ryker pulls up to his house, gets out of the truck, and runs over to my side. This man hasn't left me in over six hours.

Once the ambulance came, they took me in because I was going into shock. Once they got me calmed down, they monitored me for a little while before releasing me.

Ryker didn't say much, he sat there next to me in the hospital and held my hand, kissing me and just letting me know he was there. When I went to say something, he had held up his hand and told me we would talk when we got home.

Home.

The door opens, and Ryker extends his hand out toward me. "Come on, sweetheart. Let's get you inside and get some sleep."

Shaking my head, I look up and meet his eyes. "But we need to talk, Ryker."

"And we will. But today was a lot to deal with. So, let's get some sleep and tomorrow you and I can sit down and talk. All right?"

I nod. "Okay."

When I step out of the truck, Ryker bends down and puts an arm around my back and the other under my knees. He scoops me up and carries me into the house.

"You know I can walk right?" My hands go around his neck, and our eyes meet.

"I know." Ryker smiles and opens the front door, moving us into the house. He pushes the door closed with his foot and turns to reach for the lock.

We next move into his bedroom, and he sits me on his bed. Ryker bends down, unties

my shoes, and removes them. He stands up walks into his closet, returning with a black t-shirt and a gray pair of basketball shorts.

He sets them on the bed and moves to take off the rest of my clothes. Everything he's doing is slow and tender; caring. He finishes dressing me, his eyes meeting mine for a split second. I blush at the intensity in his gaze.

Ryker leans in and picks me up again, carrying me over to the side of the bed I used to sleep on when I lived here. He pulls the covers back and softly places me in bed before kissing me softly. After he gets dressed in a pair of flannel pants, leaving his chest bare, he slides in next to me.

He pulls me into him so that we're face to face. My leg moves in between his, and my hands are on his chest. Our eyes lock, and we lay there silently.

No words need to be said right now; he's right, it can all wait until morning. Right now, we just need each other. We need each other's touch, comfort, and closeness.

Ryker leans in and kisses my forehead, then my lips. "Sleep, darlin'. You're safe with me."

I close my eyes, and in the comfort of the man I love, I let sleep take hold.

* * *

The heat coming from the body under me wakes me up. I slowly open my eyes and find sunlight lighting up the bedroom. I feel a hand caressing my hair, and I look up, meeting the most beautiful eyes with my own.

"Good morning." Ryker smiles down at me. He shifts himself and rolls onto his side, pulling me into him. "How did you sleep?"

“Honestly? Like a log.” I laugh and flash a genuine smile. My hand comes up and caresses his cheek.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

Ryker stares at me for a moment before saying, “What kind of cats love bowling?” He pauses. “Alley cats.”

I groan, stifling a giggle. “You know, I miss those. They’re kind of growing on me.”

“See? I knew I would eventually get to you. Because I have a shit ton more.” He taps the side of his head with his finger.

“Oh, I don’t doubt that you do.” I laugh.

After a few minutes of staring at each other, his face grows serious. “I owe you an apology. A huge apology.” I start to shake my head, but Ryker interrupts me and holds his hand up. “Let me get this out, please.”

Nodding, I say, “Okay.”

“Like I said, I owe you a huge apology.” He pauses. “I’ll never be able to forgive myself for not believing you. I should’ve looked deeper. Trusted my instincts that something wasn’t right. Instead, I let the lies get the best of me. I made you a promise that I would protect you from Mitch, and I failed.” His voice hitches. “In the end, he got to you, and I almost lost you. I’m sorry, so sorry.” His voice drops to a whisper, and I can see his eyes getting misty.

My hands move to cup his face, “Shh. Ryker, I don’t blame you. What he did ... It wasn’t your fault. Between the problems on the ranch and then all that information you were sent, I can see why you reacted the way you did.”

“About the ranch, I know that wasn’t you.” His hand rubs up and down my back, his mouth a thin line. His jaw clenches, and I can see the rage bubbling just beneath the surface.

“Who—”

“Deputy Johnson.”

My eyes go wide in shock. My mouth drops open, but no words form.

Ryker continues, “It seems that your ex found out he had an outstanding debt to someone in Las Vegas. Used that to manipulate him into helping by saying he would pay off his debt as soon as you were away from me. When you didn’t run, well, that’s when he upped his game and made things worse. Then I got the information and ... you know what happened.” Ryker sighs. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. If I had been honest with you in the beginning, maybe all this would have been different.” Pausing I bite my lip. “Hell, I don’t even know who I am anymore.” I shake my head, frowning. “In an instant, who I thought I was ... I don’t even know that person anymore. Allison, Nicole, Zoey ... Who am I?” My eyes start to well up with tears.

“You’re the bravest person I know. You’re fierce and strong. You left an abusive asshole and found a way to start over, all on your own.” His nose rubs against mine.

“I’m not brave, Ryker. I couldn’t save myself in that room at the motel.”

“Here’s the thing; I saw you. Your finger was on that trigger ready to pull. You would’ve pulled it. I saw it in your face. You were determined to end it. But I didn’t want it to be on you. I didn’t want that on your conscience. You were in that situation because of me, and it needed to be me to end it.”

“Oh, Ryker.” My hands move into his hair, and I bring his lips to mine. I hear him groan as my tongue dances with his.

Ryker shifts his body and rolls me over onto my back. Not breaking our kiss, he moves on top of me, his arms beside my head as he holds himself over me.

When he finally pulls back and breaks the kiss, he looks at me with his beautiful blue eyes.

“I will never forget the moment I first saw you in that diner. I will never forget the first time I kissed you. I will never forget the first time we made love and every time thereafter. And I want you to never forget something for me.” His lips softly brush over mine.

“What’s that?” I whisper.

“I love you.” His face breaks out into a huge grin. “I love you more than anything.”

A sob escapes my throat. “I love you, Ryker.”

“Say it again.” He starts to nibble on my neck.

I laugh. “I love you.”

His lips move up to my ear, sending a pulse to my core. “Again.”

“I love you!” I giggle as he nibbles on my earlobe.

“Again.”

My hands move to his face, and I bring it to mine. “I love you, Ryker. Always and

forever.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

With an intense look in his eyes, he pauses and stares into mine. If at all possible, his smile turns wider. "Forever. I like the sound of that."

Epilogue

Zoey

It's May, and it's absolutely beautiful here in Wyoming. The sun is out, the sky is blue, and there isn't a cloud in the sky today. There's a slight breeze that blows my hair into my face, cooling me. But today is absolutely perfect.

Since October, the last several months have been a whirlwind. I've run the gamut of emotions just in last fall alone.

The death of Mitch made a lot of things come out into the open. My adoption, or stolen at birth, as I call it. The FBI were involved, and I learned a lot of things about Allison Davis and the family that stole me.

My birth mother, Mindy Davis, was a druggie and a prostitute. But when she ended up pregnant with me, she turned her life around. She got help and ended up finding a job as a receptionist. She gave birth to me and thought she would be going home with me.

A little while after giving birth, she was tested for drugs. The hospital told her that I had drugs in my system. Mindy told them that wasn't possible that she hadn't touched a single drug during the pregnancy. The hospital disagreed. They told her I was being put in child protective services.

The reality was that the Moores needed a baby to replace the one they lost. They turned to the Wakefields, who used the people they had in their pocket to put me in their family. If my mom hadn't gone into labor that day, I might not have ended up with the Moores. My mom was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Even after she lost custody of me, my birth mother stayed clear of drugs. She did all she could to fight to get me back, but the system kept her from getting me. Eventually she became so depressed that she returned to drugs and overdosed a few months after losing me. The depression and guilt led her back to the same thing that got me taken away.

When all that came to the surface, I struggled with that information. My mother lost her life because she lost me. If I hadn't entered the world that day, I would've been loved by a woman who turned her life around for me. A woman who loved me unconditionally, a woman who fought with everything she could to get me back.

I spent days in bed crying, not eating or leaving the house when I did emerge from the bedroom. The sharp pains in my heart consumed me. I was cheated out of knowing my mother, knowing where I came from. My birthday is a reminder of all that I lost. I felt so guilty and yet there was nothing I could've done. All this time, I felt like I didn't belong in the family I was a part of, and I was right to think that. I didn't belong there. I was never supposed to be there.

It still hurts, knowing I will never get to meet my mother. She died never knowing me except for the brief few minutes after birth. The heartbreak she went through is unimaginable. She tried to stay strong for so long until her demons took back control of her. I still have days where I struggle to understand the domino effect that happened after the Moores' lost their baby. All the lives they truly affected.

I did seek out therapy after some persuasion from Ryker, who has been so supportive through everything. He felt a doctor might be able to do more for me. Dr. Thorn, my

therapist, has been helping me work through the bad days, helping me understand that the series of events that transpired, I had nothing to do with. I was an unwilling participant who knew nothing other than what was being told to me.

Everything was out of my control. Except for the small fact that I was the missing link in the FBI's case and by them putting together what happened to me, they were able to take out all the key players and then some.

The Wakefields and all the people on their payroll have been caught and are being prosecuted. Some of those on their payroll chose lighter sentences in exchange for testimony. They realized that helping the FBI was favorable to not helping.

Ryker was never charged with killing Mitch; it was deemed self-defense. There was an investigation, but he was cleared pretty fast once all the evidence came in.

The Hollidays felt horrible once they learned that former Deputy Johnson was behind all the issues on the ranch. For weeks afterwards, Ryker's mom would break into tears and try to apologize even when I told her it wasn't necessary. The entire situation was fucked up and put a lot of good people in precarious positions.

Ryker's family does all they can to try and make up for how they acted towards me, even with my protests. They're good, wholesome people who just got caught up in a horrible situation.

Rachel at the bank was arrested, and the money was found locked up in a safe deposit box. Having my back turned the way I did when I deposited the money gave Rachel and Johnson the doubt they needed to frame me.

Joan hired me back as soon as they found out that I was set up. They even threw me a welcome back party at the diner once I was up to start working again. So, now I work full time there, only helping on the ranch when they need it. The plus side of working

at the diner? Ryker. He comes in at least three times a day when I work, and I'm not complaining.

After the incident with Mitch, Ryker pretty much became attached to my hip. Again, not complaining. We do everything together. The more time I'm with him, the more I love him. I moved in after that night at the hospital. Well, more like I never left, ever again.

After that night, I had to figure out what to do about my name. I never knew Allison Davis, nor did I know my mother. But Nicole Moore was a lie. She didn't really exist except for the benefit of the Moores.

In the end, I decided to keep the name Zoey but with the last name of Davis as tribute to my mother. Zoey was the one true thing I knew. It wasn't stolen from me, and it wasn't a lie; it was something I gave myself to get rid of the past. It was my choice, my name.

Zoey Davis.

My phone chirps, and I see that I have a text from Ryker.

Ryker: Hey, sweetheart. What're you up to?

Me: Sitting at the lake. It's beautiful outside. The sky's so blue.

Ryker: Tonight'll be a great night to look at the stars. You want to star gaze?

Me: You know I'll never say no to that.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

Ryker: Good. I'll see you when I get home.

I get up off the grass and head back to the house. On my way back, I bump into Jennifer.

"Hey there! Where've you been hiding?" Jennifer gives me a giant smile and wraps her arms around my shoulder, pulling me in for a big hug.

I grin, pulling away. "Just taking in how beautiful it is today. Went down to the lake."

"It really is gorgeous. I don't know what it is about today!" She shrugs. "If you're hungry, I made some turkey sandwiches. They're in the fridge. Stop by the main house and grab some."

"Thanks. I'll do that." I turn and hug her once more, then I run over to the main house and pick up lunch before heading back to sit on the porch and chow down.

Several months ago, I had no clue where I was going to end up. I had no one I could count on, no one I could trust. As I look out at the ranch, I realize how much I have I actually do have. I came here to Weston with nothing, but I gained an entire life.

The first twenty-seven years of my life were a lie, but I'm determined to live the rest of my life the way I want to and to its fullest.

* * *

"Did you grab the blankets?" Ryker calls from the porch.

“Yeah. In the truck. All we need is you to get your hot ass out here. And by we, I mean me. So, let’s go, Sheriff.” I laugh and hop in the truck.

After about a minute, Ryker finally hops in the car, and we head over to the lake. The sky is completely clear, allowing us to see every star in the sky. It’s a good night to lay out in the bed of the truck; the view is simply unbeatable.

We pull up to our spot and both jump out. Ryker gets the blankets laid out for us to lounge on. He grabs me by the hips and lifts me up onto the tailgate. I crawl to my spot, and he soon follows.

Ryker gets in his usual position. He lays on his back and extends his arm out for me to lay on. I pull myself into him, resting my head on his chest.

“Look, there’s Perseus.” He points close to the horizon. I look out at the horizon and stare at the hero. I pull in a little tighter towards Ryker and give my hero a squeeze. I plant a kiss on his cheek and lay my head back on his chest.

I narrow my eyes and look around Perseus. “Where’s Andromeda?” I look back at him with a frown.

“Below the horizon this time of year. Usually, you can see her in the early morning hours before the sun starts to rise, but she’s still there.” His hand goes to my hair, and he threads his fingers through it.

“You know, when I was in that hotel room, I closed my eyes and prayed you would come save me. My Perseus, coming to slay the monster.” I let out a breath. “When I opened my eyes and saw you there, I didn’t know if it was real or if I was dreaming. But then you rescued me. You saved me.”

“I had a promise to keep.” Ryker slowly pulls his arm out from under me and rolls himself so he’s hovering above me on the truck bed. “I’ll never break that promise

again, Zo.”

“Ryker, you didn’t break it. I know you didn’t. Because you found me, and you did everything you could to protect me and save me from Mitch.” I reach my hands up to his face and run them down the sides of his cheeks. We lay there silently for a moment, taking each other in, letting our eyes speak into each other’s souls.

“Zoey,” Ryker leans in and kisses me softly. “You’re my world. You’re what makes my sun shine brighter and my heart beat faster. You have a hold on my soul, and I just can’t live without you.”

He pushes up and puts his weight on his knees as he reaches behind my head for something. When his face meets mine again, he is holding open a small black box. Inside sits a beautiful princess-cut diamond on a white-gold band.

My mouth goes dry, and my eyes tear up.

“Zoey Davis. I would like there to be one last name change in your life. The one that ties you to me, for the rest of our lives. The one that makes you my wife. Would you do me the honor of becoming Zoey Holliday by marrying me?”

“Ryker ... Yes. Oh my God, yes!”

He takes the ring out of the box and places it on my ring finger. He then holds my hand and brings it to his lips, a huge smile stretching across his face. He leans back down and hovers over me, tenderly kissing my lips.

I pull back and lock eyes with him. “So, I have a question then.”

“Ask anything,” he says as he peppers my jaws with kisses.

“Does this mean we’re going to have a ‘shit ton of kids’ now?” I press my lips

together to keep from laughing.

Ryker's eyes sparkle. "Fuck yeah it does." His lips crash into mine, and our tongues tangle together.

Under the stars that share our story, where we have shared so much, we create a new memory for our journey together.

With my mouth still against his, I murmur, "I love you, Ryker."

"I love you, Zo. Always and forever." He rubs his nose softly against mine.

I place my left hand on his chest. "Forever. I like the sound of that."

The End.