



Forever In Willow Creek

Author: *Jade West*

Category: Romance

Description: She needed a break from her life. She found the love of her life instead.

Burned out and fed up with city stress, Zoe Carter escapes to Willow Creek—a quiet town that feels like stepping into someone else’s story. She’s not looking for love. But when she meets Luke Harrison, the town’s handsome, soft-spoken mechanic, everything begins to change.

What starts as a temporary getaway turns into something deeper. Something real. Now Zoe has to choose: return to the high-powered career she’s always known—or build a slower, sweeter future with the man who makes her feel at home.

Forever in Willow Creek is a feel-good small-town romance about finding peace, finding purpose, and finding the kind of love that doesn’t ask you to change—only to stay.

Total Pages (Source): 16

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:21 am

Zoe Carter's car hummed steadily along the winding road, her eyes tracing the edge of the lush countryside.

Willow Creek was supposed to be a peaceful retreat, a brief escape from the frantic buzz of Chicago.

But as she passed rolling hills and open pastures, the calmness seemed almost.. .unnatural. Too quiet. Too slow.

She shifted in her seat, adjusting the air conditioning to blast a little cooler air on her face, trying to shake the anxiety that still gripped her chest. Her thoughts spun in a thousand directions as she passed the sign welcoming her to Willow Creek.

She'd seen the sign countless times on postcards her sister Sarah had sent her, but the reality felt different.

This wasn't the place Zoe had imagined. It wasn't the perfect little town in the middle of nowhere; it was a far cry from the glamour of city life.

Yet here she was—driven by the promise of peace, free from the corporate pressures and the never-ending demands of her job.

Her phone buzzed in her lap, and she instantly reached for it, her fingers grazing the screen before she thought better of it.

She'd sworn she'd leave the phone off for a few hours, but her fingers itched to check the messages.

Work had been suffocating her for months now.

But this is why you came here, Zoe, she reminded herself.

Taking a deep breath, she turned the phone over, tossing it onto the passenger seat. This time, she would stay off the grid—just for a little while.

As she drove deeper into town, Zoe's eyes caught the charming array of small-town storefronts: a bakery with a hand-painted sign, an old-fashioned Diner with a flickering neon sign, and a few rustic houses lining the main street. There was something quaint about it all, but it also felt like a movie set—picture-perfect but unreal. Zoe wasn't sure if she could ever belong here.

Her mind wandered as she drove past a dusty mechanic's shop with a faded sign that read "Harrison Auto Repair." The shop had a small fleet of old trucks parked outside, all showing signs of age and wear.

Zoe's car wasn't ancient, but she had no idea how long it had been since it had been serviced.

She would need to get that checked before her trip back, she figured.

She slowed her car down and glanced at the shop again. Maybe tomorrow, she thought. But for now, her focus was on finding her rental cottage.

Willow Creek wasn't as big as the city's she was used to, so it didn't take long to find the address of her cottage.

It sat on the edge of town, a small, weathered house with a flower garden that looked like it hadn't been tended to in ages.

A perfect getaway. Or maybe the perfect retreat from everything she had left behind.

As she pulled up to the cottage, Zoe parked her car, taking in the view. The cottage had the appeal of a place that had seen better days, but it felt oddly welcoming. The front porch creaked as she stepped onto it, and the scent of pine trees mingled with the fresh, earthy air of the countryside.

She grabbed her bag from the trunk and headed for the door, eager to see where she'd be spending the next few days. The key was in the lockbox, and after a few moments of fumbling, she managed to open the door and step inside.

The place was quaint, with mismatched furniture and floral curtains hanging on the windows.

Everything smelled faintly of lavender, a welcome difference to the city's smog.

Zoe dropped her bag on the couch and stood still for a moment, listening to the absolute silence around her.

No car alarms. No horns honking. No rushing footsteps. It was almost too quiet.

Zoe closed her eyes and leaned against the wall. For the first time in what felt like years, she allowed herself to breathe without worrying about the next task or deadline looming over her.

Maybe I can get used to this.

A knock at the door jolted her from her thoughts, and she opened it to find a tall, broad-shouldered man standing on the porch. He had tousled brown hair, worn jeans, and a simple gray T-shirt that hugged his frame. His face, rough-hewn but friendly, lit up when he saw her.

“Hey there. You must be Zoe. I’m Luke Harrison.” He extended his hand, his smile friendly but with a hint of curiosity in his eyes.

Zoe stared at his hand for a moment before shaking it. “Hi. Yes, I’m Zoe,” she said, briefly surprised by how easy his smile made her feel.

“I figured I’d stop by and introduce myself. This is my shop,” Luke gestured across the street to the mechanic’s garage. “If you need anything, or if your car gives you trouble, feel free to stop by anytime.”

Zoe chuckled, half surprised, half skeptical. She glanced at her car, which had been running perfectly fine, and back at him. “I think it’s fine for now, but thanks. That’s really kind of you.”

Luke smiled again, his eyes lingering on her for a moment longer than expected. “No problem. Willow Creek’s a small town, but we take care of each other here.”

His words were simple but comforting, and Zoe found herself nodding slowly. “I’m looking forward to experiencing that... a change of pace, I guess.”

“Well, if you need anything at all,” Luke said, giving her one last lingering look, “just let me know.”

Zoe smiled politely. “Thanks, Luke. I’ll keep that in mind.”

He gave her a short wave as he turned and walked back toward his shop, leaving Zoe standing on the porch, watching him go. She shook her head slightly, unsure of what to make of him.

She had no intention of sticking around here for long—but there was something about this town, and something about Luke Harrison, that made her think perhaps this

would be the place where she'd find the answers she was looking for.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:21 am

Zoe woke up to the soft light of the early morning sun spilling through the windows of her cottage. The crisp air from the open window carried the scent of pine and fresh earth into the room, and for a moment, she simply lay there, taking it all in.

It was peaceful. Too quiet.

Zoe sighed and stretched, swinging her feet off the side of the bed. The hardwood floor was cold beneath her feet, but she didn't mind. She needed this. She needed to feel something other than stress, burnout, and the overwhelming pressure of her job.

Her phone was on the nightstand, and she could feel the urge to check her emails, to catch up on what she'd missed in just a day. But instead, she ignored it. She had come here to disconnect, to get some clarity. No more work distractions.

After a quick shower, Zoe decided to take a walk around the town.

The weather was beautiful—bright and clear—and the streets of Willow Creek seemed to vibrate with quiet energy.

People were out and about, some heading into the local bakery, others walking their dogs or chatting with neighbors.

It was the kind of town where everyone knew everyone, and the slow pace of life felt like a balm for her weary soul.

Zoe strolled through the town square, admiring the flowers in the gardens lining the sidewalks and the rustic lure of the old storefronts. It was hard to imagine that a place

like this could exist so close to the modern commotion she was used to.

She found herself outside the Diner—Penny’s Place—a small, no-frills restaurant that had a handwritten sign in the window that read, Best Apple Pie in Willow Creek.

Zoe hesitated for a moment, wondering if she was brave enough to go inside. She hadn’t come here to socialize. But the soft buzz of conversation inside drew her in, and she found herself stepping over the threshold without thinking twice.

The bell above the door jingled as she entered, and the inviting, familiar scent of frying bacon and brewing coffee filled her senses.

The place was cozy, with mismatched tables and a long counter along the far wall.

A few locals were seated in booths, talking in low voices, while an older woman behind the counter smiled kindly at Zoe.

“Well, well, look who’s new to town,” the woman said, her eyes twinkling. “I’m Penny. You’re Zoe, right? I heard you just moved into that little cottage on the edge of town.”

Zoe nodded, her lips curving into a polite smile. “Yes, that’s me. Just arrived yesterday.”

Penny motioned to an empty seat at the counter. “Well, come on in, honey. You need coffee. Everyone does, especially on their first morning in Willow Creek.”

Zoe hesitated for only a second before she sat down. “Sure, why not?”

The woman busied herself behind the counter, pouring coffee from a pot into a mug before setting it in front of Zoe. “The first cup is on me. This town’s full of people

who like to take their time. But don't worry, you'll get used to it. Might take a little while."

Zoe chuckled softly, stirring her coffee. "I'm sure I will."

"Good. Now, I'm guessing you haven't had breakfast yet?" Penny grinned. "I make a mean breakfast burrito. You hungry?"

Zoe thought for a moment, then smiled. "Yeah, that sounds great."

As Penny prepared her food, Zoe glanced around at the diner, noticing that there were no strangers here—everyone seemed to know each other. And there, at the back corner booth, she saw him: Luke Harrison.

He was sitting with a group of men, laughing as one of them told a story. The sound of his laugh carried across the diner, and Zoe couldn't help but smile at the way he looked so at ease, so effortlessly part of the town.

Luke noticed her staring and gave a small, amused smile before returning his attention to the group. Zoe quickly looked down at her coffee, feeling her face flush.

"You'll get used to him too," Penny said with a knowing grin, setting the breakfast burrito in front of Zoe. "Luke's a good guy. Hard-working, always willing to lend a hand. You should stop by his shop sometime. He's always tinkering with something."

Zoe took a bite of the burrito, savoring the mix of eggs, cheese, and bacon. It was delicious, hearty, and exactly what she needed. "He seems nice."

"Oh, he is. But he's been through some things. Hard to get him to open up about it, but the man has got a good heart. If you're thinking about sticking around, Willow Creek's the place where people really take care of each other."

Zoe paused mid-bite, the words sinking in. “I’m not sure I’m staying for long. Just here to figure some things out.”

Penny’s expression softened, her gaze understanding. “Take your time, honey. There’s no rush. The town isn’t going anywhere, and neither is Luke. You just have to decide what’s best for you.”

Zoe nodded slowly, unsure of what exactly she was looking for in this town. But Penny’s words settled somewhere deep inside her. She recognized that it wasn’t about having all the answers right away. Maybe it was about letting things unfold naturally.

As she finished her breakfast, Zoe’s phone buzzed in her bag. She resisted the urge to check it but couldn’t help feeling the burden of her obligations pulling at her. Tomorrow, she promised herself. Tomorrow, I’ll deal with all of that.

She paid Penny for her meal, giving the woman a generous tip. “Thank you. The food was amazing.”

Penny waved her off. “Anytime, hon. And don’t forget, you’re always welcome here.”

Zoe stepped back outside, the sun was higher in the sky now, casting long shadows over the streets of Willow Creek. She didn’t know what was ahead, but for the first time in a long while, she felt like she could breathe.

She wandered back toward the mechanic’s shop, Harrison Auto Repair—and found herself standing in front of it once more. The frequent sense of hesitation tugged at her insides, but this time, she decided to be brave.

With a deep breath, Zoe stepped into the building.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:21 am

Later that evening, as the sun dipped below the tree line and painted the sky in soft purples and golds, Zoe stood in the tiny kitchen of the cottage, staring at the ingredients she'd picked up at the local market: pasta, cheese, ground beef, tomatoes, fresh basil.

Her idea of “dinner” back in Chicago was usually smooth or whatever she could microwave between meetings.

But tonight, she felt oddly... motivated.

Cooking wasn't her usual therapy, but something about the homeness of the kitchen and the naturalness of Luke's smile earlier that day made her want to try.

Half an hour in, she had music playing softly from her Bluetooth speaker, the savory smell of tomato sauce filling the air, and the oven warming the cottage like a gentle hug. Her phone sat on the charger in the corner, lighting up with ignored notifications she refused to check. Not yet.

The timer dinged, and she pulled out the bubbling lasagna, proud of herself despite the slight crisp at the edges. She let it cool for a few minutes, then packed a generous portion into a container, wrapping it in foil.

Ten minutes later, she found herself walking back toward Harrison Auto Repair, container in hand, hoping she wasn't about to make a complete fool of herself.

The shop was still open, though dimmer now, with only one overhead light on inside. Luke was seated on a stool near the workbench, tinkering with something small and

metallic in his hands. When he looked up and saw her standing in the doorway, his expression shifted from surprise to amusement.

“You came back,” he said, setting down the tool.

“I said I would bring dinner.” She held up the container. “Lasagna, like requested. Well, a humble attempt.”

He took it with both hands, lifting the foil slightly to peek inside. “Smells like someone took this seriously.”

“I don’t do anything halfway,” she said, lifting her chin.

Luke chuckled and gestured toward the back. “Come on. I keep a table out back for breaks. Less noisy.”

They stepped through a rear door into a small outdoor area behind the garage, nothing fancy, just a picnic table under a wooden awning with string lights overhead. The evening air was cool and carried the scent of grass and motor oil, somehow not unpleasant together.

They sat across from each other as Luke dug into the lasagna, nodding after the first bite. “Okay, I’m impressed. You might just survive in Willow Creek after all.”

Zoe smirked. “That was the goal.”

A brief silence passed between them, easy and comfortable. Fireflies danced near the edges of the woods, and the soft hum of night creatures filled the space between their words.

Luke leaned back, watching her. “So, what are you really running from, Zoe Carter?”

The question was asked without malice or pressure, just quiet curiosity.

She exhaled slowly. “Everything. Work. Deadlines. Expectations. I’ve been climbing a ladder so long I didn’t stop to ask where it was going.”

Luke nodded like he understood. “Sometimes when you stop chasing, you finally see what’s been chasing you.”

She looked at him, her eyes narrowing in thought. “What’s been chasing you?”

His jaw flexed slightly, and he looked away. “Ghosts. The kind that don’t show up in the mirror but still follow you around.”

She wanted to ask more. About his life. About what he’d lost. But something in his eyes told her not yet. Maybe not tonight.

Instead, she gave him a small smile. “Well, consider this dinner a temporary truce. Me and Willow Creek—we’re on probation.”

Luke grinned. “You’ll come around.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it.”

“I would,” he said, his voice softer now, almost teasing. “You don’t seem like someone who gives up easy.”

Zoe met his gaze, and for a beat, everything felt still—the night, the town, the ache in her chest she’d carried for months. Something shifted then. Not loud or sudden. Just a quiet click, like a gear sliding into place.

She stood, brushing off her hands. “Thanks for the conversation.”

He stood too. “Thanks for dinner.”

They walked to the front of the shop together, and as Zoe turned to go, Luke called out gently, “Hey.”

She paused.

“You ever need to go without conversation or good company again, as long as I’m around.”

Zoe gave him a slow, knowing smile. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

And as she walked back to her cottage beneath a sky dusted with stars, she realized that something had cracked open inside her—just a little. And whether she liked it or not, Luke Harrison had something to do with that.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:21 am

Zoe didn't realize how quickly news traveled in a small town until three different people asked her about the lasagna by noon.

At the grocery store, the checkout clerk smiled knowingly. At the bakery, a woman she hadn't even met yet raised an eyebrow and said, "I heard Luke finally ate something other than diner food last night."

By the time she stepped into Sweet Bloom Flowers—Sarah's latest obsession, Zoe had stopped trying to act surprised.

Her younger sister was near the back of the shop, arranging a bouquet with the precision that Zoe had always found both beautiful and maddening. Sarah looked up when she heard the bell over the door, her expression brightening.

"There she is," Sarah said with a little too much cheer. "Town celebrity."

Zoe rolled her eyes. "Why does everyone know what I fed a man for dinner?"

Sarah smirked. "Because Luke Harrison has been a bachelor longer than I've lived here. You think you can drop off a hot meal and walk away unnoticed?"

"I was being neighborly," Zoe said, folding her arms.

"You were being pleasant. And brave." Sarah handed her a sunflower, placing it in her hand like a peace offering. "Also, he's hot. I'm just saying."

Zoe took the flower, amused and mildly flustered. "I'm not here for all that."

“You’re here to rest. And sometimes resting means realizing you need people too. Even grumpy mechanics with nice arms.”

Zoe snorted, but didn’t argue. Sarah always had a way of seeing through her walls.

Before she could respond, the door opened again, and a woman in her sixties walked in with a cane and a commanding presence. She wore a bright purple cardigan and carried herself like she ran the town—or maybe just knew it better than anyone else.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Zoe Carter,” the woman said, eyeing her warmly. “Heard you’re settling in real nice.”

“Um, hi,” Zoe said, thrown off but smiling.

“Name’s Granny Mae,” the woman said, reaching out to shake her hand. “And don’t let the name fool you—I’m sharp as a tack and nosier than a raccoon in your trash.”

Zoe laughed, surprised at how quickly she liked her.

“Mae runs half the events in town,” Sarah explained. “And she’s been trying to find someone for Luke for at least five years.”

“Don’t go scaring her off,” Mae said, poking Sarah gently with her cane. “I just like to see good people connect. And Luke’s overdue for some joy.”

Zoe’s eyebrows shot up. “You’re not subtle, are you?”

Mae grinned. “Subtleties for cowards and folks who don’t get things done. Now,” she turned slightly, “speaking of getting things done, the Fall Festival is this weekend. And we need volunteers.”

Zoe opened her mouth to protest.

Mae cut her off. “Don’t give me that city face. You want to rest? Then rest by doing something that makes your heart full, not just your calendar empty. This town doesn’t heal you with silence—it heals you with people.”

It was the kind of thing Zoe would’ve brushed off a week ago. But today, with the sunflower still in her hand and the scent of soil and blossoms in the air, she found herself saying, “Alright. What do you need help with?”

Mae beamed. “Now we’re talking. You’re on decoration duty. Tomorrow morning. Nine sharp.”

As quickly as she had appeared, Mae shuffled back out of the shop, her cane tapping rhythmically against the wooden floor.

Sarah gave her a triumphant look. “You will thank me later.”

Zoe shook her head, but her heart was lighter somehow.

The next morning, Zoe arrived at the town square with coffee in one hand and a notebook in the other. Folding tables were already scattered across the grass, and hay bales lined the sidewalks. Fall in Willow Creek was serious business, and people showed up early to prove it.

She didn’t expect to see Luke there.

He was lifting wooden crates from the back of a truck, his flannel shirt rolled up at the sleeves, exposing forearms dusted with flour from the pumpkins he’d been hauling. Zoe tried not to stare—and failed, just a little.

He noticed her as he set down a crate. “You’re early.”

She held up her coffee. “Bribery works both ways.”

Luke smirked. “They roped you into this, too?”

“Granny Mae ambushed me at the flower shop. I think I got off easy.”

“She once convinced me to dress up as a scarecrow for the kids’ hayride.”

Zoe laughed. “Please tell me there are pictures.”

“Unfortunately, yes. And if you play your cards right, I might just delete them before Mae shows you.”

They fell into an easy rhythm, arranging decorations and stringing lights along the trees. For once, Zoe didn’t feel out of place. People passed by with warm smiles, inviting her into their conversations. It was strange, being noticed for something other than her job title. Here, she was just Zoe.

They took a break near the fountain, sitting side by side on the edge.

“You’re not what I expected,” Luke said after a long pause.

“How so?”

“I figured you’d be gone by now. Most people from the city don’t last more than a weekend.”

Zoe looked out over the square, the laughter of children echoing in the background. “I anticipated that I would have left by now as well, but if my sister can successfully

adapt to living in a small town, then I am confident that I can do the same.”

Luke’s expression softened. “Glad you’re still here.”

She met his gaze. Something gentle passed between them, something sizzling and deeply felt. She didn’t need to define it. Not yet.

The wind stirred the leaves at their feet, and for the first time in a long time, Zoe Carter felt like she was truly happy.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:21 am

The bell above the door chimed softly as Zoe stepped into Mae's Porch Teas, a cozy little shop that felt like stepping into someone's living room. Doilies. Floral teacups. Scones the size of fists. It was charming and eccentric—just like Granny Mae.

Zoe didn't expect to see Luke there.

He was seated at a small table near the window, nursing a cup of something steaming. No flannel today. Just a plain black T-shirt and jeans, his hair still damp from a recent shower. He looked up as she entered, his mouth twitching into a half-smile.

"Well, well," he said. "Didn't peg you as a tea-room kind of woman."

"I'm full of surprises," she replied, walking to the counter. Mae was nowhere in sight, so she helped herself to a menu. "You mind if I join you?"

Luke gestured to the empty chair across from him. "Please. Might be the best thing that's happened to me today."

Zoe slid into the seat and glanced around. "This place is adorable in a 'grandmother who collects porcelain cats' kind of way."

He chuckled. "Mae's been running it since I was a kid. Tea, stories, gossip—she serves it all hot."

A younger woman came from the back with a notepad and a cheerful smile. "Hi, I'm Elise. Granny Mae's granddaughter. What can I get you?"

“Something calming,” Zoe said. “And sweet.”

“Lavender honey blend and a cranberry scone,” Elise said, writing it down before Zoe could answer. “Trust me.”

Luke leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. “So, what brings you in today? Don’t tell me you’re already sick of pumpkin decorations.”

Zoe smiled. “I needed somewhere quiet. And I was curious. Sarah said this place had the best tea in town. Also, I may have needed a break from pretending I know how to decorate hay bales.”

Luke laughed, the sound easy and warm. “Fair. I come here when I need to stop thinking.”

“Thinking about what?”

His smile faded slightly, his gaze dropping to his cup. “Life. The shop. Things that didn’t go the way I planned.”

Zoe didn’t press. She just waited.

After a long pause, he added, “My dad passed away three years ago. Heart attack. Out of nowhere. One day he was yelling at me to stop over-tightening bolts, and the next, I was standing alone in the garage with no idea how to fill the silence.”

“I’m sorry,” Zoe said quietly. “I can’t imagine what that’s like.”

He nodded, fingers tracing the rim of his cup. “He built everything. This shop. My sense of purpose. Even my idea of what it meant to be a man. When he died, I felt... unfinished.”

Zoe swallowed the sudden lump in her throat. She knew that feeling—chasing after something that had once felt clear, only to realize you were no longer sure what you were even running toward.

“My mom died when I was a kid,” she said softly. “Breast cancer. I was eleven and Sarah was seven. My dad threw himself into work. Big career, big goals. And I guess I tried to do the same when I got older. Be so successful it made the grief worth it. Spoiler: it didn’t.”

Luke looked up then, eyes meeting hers. Something passed between them—raw, simple, and human.

“Maybe that’s why you’re here,” he said. “Not just to get away. Maybe you’re trying to remember what enough feels like.”

Zoe didn’t speak for a moment. She just looked out of the window, at the little street of Willow Creek, where nothing was urgent, and everything was present.

“I think I forgot how to be still,” she said finally. “How to just... feel something without spinning it into a checklist. Sarah was the opposite. She went to college here and stayed.”

Luke reached across the table then, not touching her, but close his hand resting palm-down near hers. “Stillness takes practice.”

Their fingers didn’t meet, but the space between them buzzed with something she had been craving for a long time.

Elise returned with the tea and scone, interrupting the spell. Zoe blinked, leaning back slightly. Luke sat upright again too, but his eyes lingered on hers a second longer.

As they sipped their drinks, the conversation shifted to easier things—Granny Mae’s insane pie recipe, the time Luke accidentally welded his keys to a workbench—but something had changed.

Zoe wasn’t just a visitor anymore. Not to him.

And maybe not to herself, either.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:21 am

The sky was overcast, clouds hanging low like they were waiting for the right moment to break.

Zoe sat on the front porch of the cottage, cradling a mug of lukewarm coffee in her hands.

She'd meant to enjoy the stillness, maybe even read that book Sarah had given her weeks ago.

But instead, her phone vibrated for the third time in ten minutes, each buzz clawing at the edge of her peace.

She sighed, finally giving in. The screen lit up with a familiar name: Kristen – VP Strategy.

Zoe hesitated—then tapped the green icon.

“Zoe! Thank God. I’ve been trying to reach you. Listen, we’re in the middle of a mess. The analytics pitch you prepped, the client wants a revision by Monday. And the regional team in Europe is expecting you to hop on a Zoom in an hour. Think you can make that happen?”

Zoe closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Kristen, I told everyone I was taking a short break—”

“I know, and we totally respect that,” Kristen cut in, her voice anything but respectful. “But no one else understands the material like you do. This is just a quick

pivot, Zoe. Then you can get back to your... cottage or cabin or whatever.”

Zoe bit back a sharp reply. “Fine. I’ll send the revised slides tonight.”

“Perfect. Knew I could count on you.” The call ended with a chirp, and Zoe sat there, blinking at the now-black screen.

Her pulse thudded beneath her skin. The ache in her chest, the one she had almost forgotten during long walks, late-night talks, and Luke’s quiet smiles—came roaring back. She was slipping again. Slipping into a version of herself she had come here to escape.

She threw on a jacket and stuffed her laptop into her bag, already regretting the decision.

By the time she reached Sweet Bloom Flowers to borrow Wi-Fi, her jaw was tight with frustration.

She barely noticed Sarah’s raised eyebrow as she muttered something about needing to work for a few hours.

Zoe locked herself in the storage room and didn’t emerge again until evening, her shoulders stiff and her mood even worse.

Later, as the sun dipped behind the hills, she headed toward Harrison Auto Repair. Her plan wasn’t fully formed, maybe she’d just say hi, see his face, let some of the tension bleed out.

Luke was outside, hands on his hips, watching the last glow of daylight fade behind the trees. He looked up as she approached, smile flickering.

“Hey,” he said. “You okay? You kind of vanished today.”

Zoe shrugged. “Had to handle something. Work stuff.”

Luke tilted his head. “I thought you were off the grid.”

“I was,” she said tightly. “But not everyone respects that.”

He studied her for a beat. “You could have told me. I would have understood.”

Zoe crossed her arms, defensive. “Why would I need to tell you everything?”

Luke’s eyebrows rose slightly. “You don’t. I just thought we were getting closer.”

A silence settled between them, thick and uncomfortable.

“I don’t belong here, Luke,” Zoe said, the words spilling out harsher than she intended. “I’m not built for pumpkin festivals and pie gossip and—whatever this is.”

Luke took a step back, stung. “Is that how you see it? A joke?”

“No,” she said, softer now, regret threading through her voice. “But I can’t just turn off who I’ve been for the last ten years. I’ve built a life. A career. And people depend on me.”

Luke’s voice was calm, but there was steel in it. “And what about you, Zoe? What do you depend on?”

She looked away, unable to answer.

“I get it,” he said after a long moment. “You’re scared. Maybe of getting stuck,

maybe of needing something real. But you're not the only one with ghosts."

Zoe swallowed hard, guilt forming a knot in her throat. "I didn't mean to push you away."

"But you did," he said gently. "And I don't know if you'll let me back in."

They stood there in the quiet, shadows lengthening across the gravel drive.

"I'm tired," she whispered. "Of running. Of pretending I'm fine."

Luke nodded once. "Then stop pretending. But don't take it out on this town. Or me."

Zoe felt like she might cry, but she didn't. She just turned away, murmuring a soft goodbye.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:21 am

Zoe barely slept.

The cottage was quiet, but her mind wasn't.

She lay awake long after midnight, replaying every word of her conversation with Luke.

The way he looked at her—not angry, just disappointed.

That was worse. She hated knowing she'd hurt him, that she'd let her fears build walls where bridges were trying to form.

By morning, her stomach twisted with guilt and something else she hadn't quite named yet—fear. Not of Luke, or Willow Creek. But of the risk that she might actually want to stay.

The town was already waking up when she stepped out onto the porch, sweater wrapped around her shoulders like armor. She didn't have a plan, but she knew she couldn't let things fester between them.

At 9:12 a.m., she walked through the open bay doors of Harrison Auto Repair . The usual sounds of tools and laughter was absent. Luke was alone, bent under the hood of a beat-up truck. He didn't look up when she entered.

“Hey,” she said softly.

He wiped his hands on a rag but didn't turn around. “Hey.”

Zoe stood still for a moment, unsure how to start. “About last night...”

Luke finally looked at her. His expression was unreadable, but his eyes, those steady, storm-blue eyes—held more emotion than she could unpack.

“You don’t have to explain,” he said.

“I want to,” she replied, stepping closer. “Because I said things I didn’t mean. Or—I meant them, but not the way they came out.”

Luke leaned back against the workbench, arms folded. “Okay.”

Zoe exhaled. “I’m not used to letting people in.

Everything in my life has always been about control.

About chasing something. Success, security...

validation. You have to understand as a black woman trying to make it you have to work harder and smarter.

I thought if I could be everything to everyone, I wouldn’t feel like something was missing. ”

“And?” he asked quietly.

“And I still felt empty.” Her voice cracked. “Coming here wasn’t about finding peace. It was about escaping the noise long enough to realize that I’ve been drowning in it.”

Luke said nothing, but his expression softened.

“I’m scared,” Zoe admitted. “Not of this place. Not even of you. I’m scared of needing something I can’t control. Of wanting someone who might actually see me.”

“You think I don’t get that?” Luke asked, his voice low. “You think I haven’t spent years pretending I was fine? Fixing cars because it’s easier than fixing what’s broken in me?”

Zoe looked at him, startled by the edge in his voice.

“I lost my dad, Zoe. And when he died, so did every plan I thought I had. I’ve spent the last three years trying to prove to myself that staying here wasn’t the same as giving up. That roots could be just as strong as wings.”

She blinked, the ache in her chest deepening.

“But you show up,” Luke continued, “and it’s like the universe decided to test me all over again. Because for the first time in a long time, I want something more. I want you . But I can’t keep standing still while you decide whether you’re going to stay or run.”

Zoe’s breath caught. “I don’t want to run.”

“Then don’t,” he said simply. “But stop waiting for a guarantee. There isn’t one. Not here. Not anywhere. You have to choose it. Even when it’s scary.”

Zoe stepped closer, the air between them charged.

“I don’t know how to do this,” she whispered.

“We’ll figure it out,” he said. “But only if you’re honest—with me and with yourself.”

There was a long pause, then Zoe reached out and took his hand.

“I want to try,” she said. “I don’t know what that looks like yet. But I know I don’t want to go back to the life I had. And I know I don’t want to lose you.”

Luke’s jaw flexed, emotion flickering behind his eyes. Then he pulled her into a hug—tight, grounding, real.

“You won’t,” he murmured into her hair.

They stayed like that for a while, surrounded by the smell of motor oil and steel and something beautiful developing between them.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:21 am

Zoe's alarm never went off.

She didn't need it anymore.

For the first time in years, she woke not to the shriek of a phone or the flashing of calendar reminders, but to the soft light of dawn stretching across the floorboards. The sound of birdsong drifted through the cracked window, and instead of dread, there was... calm.

She lay there a while, wrapped in the warmth of a blanket and something even softer a quiet confidence she hadn't felt since childhood.

This wasn't the life she planned.

But it was beginning to feel like the one she needed.

By midmorning, she was at Sweet Bloom Flowers , elbow-deep in dusty ribbons and jars of dried lavender, helping Sarah prep the shop's fall display. The task was mindless in a good way, busy, heart light.

"You're humming," Sarah teased, holding up a spool of burnt-orange ribbon.

"I am not."

"You so are."

Zoe rolled her eyes, but she didn't deny it.

There was a tranquility in her chest now, a kind of quiet that had once been foreign to her.

It didn't mean the old life was gone—her phone still vibrated with unchecked messages.

Her work laptop was still in the cottage, probably glaring at her from under the desk. But she wasn't rushing to it anymore.

She didn't feel like she had to.

That afternoon, she strolled through the square with an iced tea in hand and nowhere to be.

Children ran past her with sticky fingers and laughter in their wake.

An old man dozed on a bench beside the bakery.

Granny Mae sat under her favorite tree with a deck of playing cards and a knowing look in her eyes as Zoe passed.

And then there was Luke.

She spotted him down the street, crouched beside a boy's bicycle, helping the child adjust a chain. His sleeves were rolled up, grease on his forearms, that familiar curve of concentration etched into his brow. He looked up when he felt her watching.

His smile wasn't broad—but it was warm, familiar, and steady. Like it belonged there.

Later, they met at the cottage, sitting together on the porch steps, feet bare and drinks

in hand. The sky was streaked with amber and pink, the last warmth of the day fading into a soft chill.

“You seem lighter,” Luke said, nudging her knee with his own.

“I feel lighter,” Zoe admitted. “It’s weird.”

“Good weird or bad weird?”

She smiled. “The kind that makes you question why you made everything so complicated for so long.”

He nodded, gazing out at the trees. “I’ve always believed the right place doesn’t just slow you down—it reintroduces you to yourself.”

Zoe glanced at him. “Is that what this is? Me, meeting myself again?”

Luke chuckled. “Something like that.”

A comfortable silence stretched between them. The kind that didn’t demand conversation.

Eventually, Zoe spoke again. “I think I want to stay a little longer.”

Luke didn’t react right away. Just sipped his drink. “Good. Because I wasn’t ready to let you go.”

She nudged him with her shoulder, and he bumped her back, both of them smiling into the quiet. The stars blinked into view one by one, and Zoe tilted her head back to watch them. The wind shifted. The crickets began their nightly song.

For the first time, she wasn't planning her next moves, she was exactly where she was meant to be.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:21 am

The Fall Festival hit Willow Creek like a warm tide—slow, golden, and full of life.

The square was transformed. String lights zigzagged overhead, casting a soft amber glow over hay bales, vendor booths, and picnic tables laden with homemade pies and apple cider.

Children ran wild with caramel-sticky fingers.

Laughter and music filled the air, blending into a kind of magic Zoe had never quite believed in until now.

She stood near the edge of the crowd, her boots dusted with hay, her scarf loosely wrapped around her neck. Sarah had convinced her to wear one of her own handmade dresses—a navy blue wrap that cinched at the waist and made Zoe feel more like herself than any of the power suits ever had.

Across the square, she spotted Luke by the cider stand, deep in conversation with one of the local farmers. He wore a dark button-down shirt rolled up to his elbows, jeans that fit just right, and a crooked smile that made her stomach flip even after days of pretending she was immune.

He saw her. The way he looked at her then—slow, deliberate, like he'd been waiting all night for the chance—sent a hum through her chest.

Luke made his way over, stopping just short of touching her. “You clean up well.”

Zoe arched a brow. “This from the man who wore a flannel shirt to a community

potluck.”

He grinned. “Flannel’s formal here.”

She laughed, and he offered her his hand, palm open.

“Come on. I owe you a dance.”

Zoe hesitated, glancing toward the gathering of couples spinning lazily to the music drifting from the gazebo stage. “I don’t know if I remember how.”

“It’s like riding a bike,” he said. “Only with better music.”

She slid her hand into his.

The moment they stepped onto the grass dance floor, time seemed to slow. The music shifted to a gentle country ballad, low and steady, full of longing and promise. Luke pulled her in with practiced ease, one hand resting at her waist, the other holding hers just enough to anchor her.

Zoe rested her free hand on his shoulder, her body tensing instinctively—until he leaned in, voice low near her ear.

“Relax,” he murmured. “Just follow my lead.”

And somehow, she did.

The world faded as they moved together, a slow sway that felt like something more than a dance. It felt like surrender. Like trust.

Zoe closed her eyes and let her body find the rhythm. Luke’s hand tightened gently at

her waist, guiding her with quiet confidence. She felt his breath near her temple, the steady beat of his heart beneath her palm.

When she finally looked up at him, he was already watching her.

“I’ve been falling for you since you showed up with grease on your cheek,” he said, his tone raw and honest.

Zoe blinked. “You mean when I yelled at you about my car battery?”

“Exactly,” he said with a chuckle. “I thought, there she is. Trouble in boots. ”

She laughed, but there were tears threatening behind it.

“I didn’t come here looking for any of this,” she whispered.

“I know.”

“I was so sure I didn’t need anyone.”

“I know that too.”

Luke’s hand slid up to the back of her neck, thumb brushing her jaw.

“But I do,” she said quietly. “I need this . You.”

His eyes searched hers, like he was making sure it was real—like he wanted to memorize the moment before it disappeared.

Then he kissed her.

It wasn't rushed or hesitant. It was a kiss that spoke of every quiet conversation, every look that had lingered too long, every unspoken truth. His mouth was warm and patient, coaxing rather than claiming. And when Zoe kissed him back, it was with everything she hadn't known she was holding.

The music continued around them, but they didn't move. Didn't speak. Just held each other in the soft, golden light, the town fading away behind the pounding of their hearts.

When they finally pulled apart, Luke rested his forehead against hers.

"You're not going anywhere, are you?" he asked.

Zoe shook her head, breath catching. "Not tonight."

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:21 am

Zoe woke to the sound of her phone vibrating against the nightstand.

She almost didn't reach for it.

Luke's arm was draped over her waist, warm and grounding. The covers were tangled around them, and the sun hadn't even begun to rise. Everything about the moment whispered, stay still . Stay here.

But habit—old, relentless habit—won out.

She slipped free from Luke's embrace and grabbed the phone, padding quietly into the kitchen. She thumbed the screen and squinted at the name.

Kristen – VP Strategy.

Of course.

Zoe hesitated, thumb hovering over the “ignore” button. But her curiosity got the better of her.

“Zoe,” Kristen said without preamble. “You're not going to believe this—we just got the offer. The one from Hamilton Consulting. They want to bring you on as Senior Partner. Full benefits, leadership track, everything we've been building toward. You'd be overseeing global accounts.”

Zoe's stomach twisted.

“What’s the timeline?” she asked, already hating herself for the question.

“They want an answer by Friday,” Kristen said. “It’s aggressive, I know, but it’s the real deal. This is your next move. I don’t want to pressure you, but... well, I am pressuring you. You’ve earned this.”

Zoe barely registered her own reply. She ended the call with vague promises to think about it, then set the phone down on the kitchen counter and just... stood there.

Willow Creek still slept around her. But her heart was racing. The air felt too still, the room too small.

A few minutes later, Luke appeared in the doorway, shirtless, hair mussed, sleep still soft in his eyes. “Everything okay?”

Zoe turned toward him, but the words lodged in her throat.

“Work stuff,” she said, too casually.

He watched her. “The kind that pulls you away?”

Zoe couldn’t meet his gaze.

“I haven’t decided anything yet,” she said.

Luke stepped closer. “You don’t have to pretend, Zoe. I can see it all over you. The tug. The gears already turning.”

“I just need time to think.”

He nodded slowly. “You’ve got it.”

But something had shifted between them. Not anger, not quite disappointment—but distance. That invisible line she thought they'd crossed had reappeared, drawn sharp across the floor of the cottage.

Later that day, she tried to shake it off. She helped Sarah at the shop, smiled at Mae when she passed by the tea room, even went to the festival planning meeting with Penny. But nothing fit quite right. Not like it had the day before.

She walked through town like someone drifting between two worlds, unable to choose either.

By sunset, she found herself standing outside Harrison Auto Repair, unsure why she'd come. Luke was closing up, rolling the bay door shut, wiping grease from his hands with a rag.

"Hey," she said softly.

He looked up. "Hey."

"I didn't mean to disappear today."

"I figured you had a lot to think about."

She stepped closer. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Only if you want to be honest," he said, his voice gentle but firm.

Zoe hesitated. "They offered me a promotion. A big one."

Luke nodded, expression unreadable. "And you want it."

“I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do.”

She looked at him, eyes pleading. “I didn’t come here to fall for anyone. Or to find a new life. I just wanted to breathe.”

“And now?” he asked.

Zoe shook her head, unable to answer.

Luke dropped the rag into a nearby bin and stepped past her, pausing at the door.

“I’m not going to fight for someone who doesn’t know if she wants to stay.”

The words weren’t cruel. They were quiet. Final.

Zoe stood frozen in place as he disappeared inside.

The breeze picked up, rustling the leaves overhead.

She had come here to escape.

Now she had to decide if she was willing to stay.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:21 am

The storm rolled in overnight.

Wind howled against the shutters, and rain tapped furiously at the cottage windows like it was trying to claw its way in. Zoe sat curled on the couch in an oversized sweatshirt, the untouched mug of tea in her hands long gone cold.

She hadn't gone to see Luke since their conversation at the garage.

He hadn't come by either.

There was no anger between them. No slammed doors or accusations. Just space. A silence that grew heavier with each passing hour.

Her inbox blinked on the laptop screen from the table beside her. Kristen had sent the contract. Friday at noon. A promotion, a future, a return to the life she'd built with such meticulous care.

And yet, all she could think about was how empty that life had begun to feel.

This is what you worked for, she reminded herself.

The title. The respect. The money. The grind.

But Luke's voice lingered in her mind.

"I'm not going to fight for someone who doesn't know if she wants to stay."

A knock at the door startled her.

Zoe crossed the room slowly, heart beating fast.

It wasn't Luke.

It was Sarah, rain-damp and frowning.

"I figured you weren't going to show, so I came to check on you."

"Show where?"

"Granny Mae's," Sarah said, slipping inside. "They're loading baskets for the community drive. You signed up last week."

Zoe blinked. She had. But that was before the offer. Before everything turned gray again.

"I forgot," she said softly.

Sarah studied her for a beat. "No, you didn't. You're just somewhere else right now."

Zoe sank onto the couch. "I feel... pulled."

Sarah sat across from her. "Then pull yourself toward the place that feels like home. Not the one that just looks good on paper."

"I don't know if I belong here, Sarah. I don't know if I'm enough here."

"You don't have to be anything here," Sarah said. "That's the point."

Zoe let her sister's words settle before whispering, "I think I'm scared that choosing this life means I failed at the other one."

Sarah reached across and took her hand. "Choosing peace is never failure. Choosing love... that's the hardest, bravest thing you can do."

Zoe looked down at their hands, then out the window at the rain.

Later that evening, the storm eased, and Zoe found herself walking through town. The roads were slick, the lights glistening on the pavement. She didn't have an umbrella. She didn't care.

She ended up at the garage.

The lights were off inside, but the office was still open. She found Luke sitting behind the desk, staring at nothing in particular. A box of tools sat at his feet, untouched.

"I didn't think you'd come," he said without looking at her.

"I wasn't sure I would," she replied honestly.

He finally met her eyes. "Well?"

"I got the offer. Senior Partner. All of it."

Luke nodded. "Are you going to take it?"

She stepped closer. "No."

That one word landed like thunder in the room.

“No?”

Zoe shook her head, voice stronger now. “I spent so long climbing that ladder I didn’t stop to ask if I even leaned it against the right wall. I thought success would fill the empty places. But it just made them quieter.”

Luke stood, his breath catching.

“And now?” he asked.

“Now I want something different. Slower. Truer.” She smiled softly. “I want to choose my life, not just react to it. And I want you in it.”

He crossed the space between them in two strides, pulling her into a hug so fierce, so relieved, that she felt something inside her finally unlocked.

“You sure about this?” he murmured into her hair.

“I’m still figuring it out,” she whispered. “But I’ve never been surer of anything.”

Luke leaned back just enough to look at her, his fingers trembling slightly as he brushed the rain-soaked strands from Zoe’s cheek.

The storm outside had raged for hours, but now, in the dim light of her cottage, the world felt still—like it was holding its breath.

His voice was soft, almost lost in the drone of the fading rain. “I missed you.”

Zoe’s lips curved into a smile, her eyes glistening with something deeper than the tears she’d wiped away earlier.

She leaned into his touch, her hand resting on his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

“Then don’t let me go,” she whispered, her voice barely audible but carrying the weight of everything unsaid between them.

He kissed her then—not the kind of kiss that demanded or devoured, but one that whispered of longing and promise.

His lips were gentle against hers, his hands cradling her face as though she were something fragile, something he couldn’t bear to lose again.

The world outside didn’t matter. The rain, the wind, the chaos—it all faded into the background.

Zoe’s fingers curled into the fabric of his shirt, pulling him closer.

She kissed him back with a quiet intensity, her breath mingling with his as their bodies pressed together.

The warmth of him seeped into her, chasing away the chill that had clung to her skin for weeks.

His hands slid down her arms, leaving trails of fire in their wake, before settling on her waist. He held her like she was his anchor, like she was the only thing keeping him grounded.

When they finally pulled apart, neither of them spoke. The silence between them was thick, charged with emotion and the unspoken words that lingered in the air. Luke rested his forehead against hers, his breath shaky as he inhaled the scent of her—vanilla and rain and something uniquely Zoe.

“I can’t believe you’re really here,” she murmured, her voice trembling. Her hands moved to his neck, fingers brushing against the soft hair at the nape of his neck.

Luke’s eyes closed briefly, savoring the feel of her touch.

“I couldn’t stay away,” he admitted, his voice rough with emotion.

His hands tightened on her waist, pulling her even closer until there was no space left between them.

“I tried, Zoe. I tried to stay away, but... I can’t. Not when it comes to you.”

Her heart ached at his words, the raw honesty in them making her chest tighten.

She knew what it cost him to say that, to admit how much he needed her.

It wasn’t easy for him—Luke had always been the one who kept his emotions locked away, who built walls around himself so high she’d thought she’d never reach him.

But now, in the quiet of her apartment, those walls had crumbled, and she could see the vulnerability in his eyes.

Zoe pressed a soft kiss to the corner of his mouth, her lips lingering there for a moment before she whispered, “Stay with me.”

His breath hitched, his hands sliding up her back to tangle in her damp hair.

“Always,” he promised, his voice low and rough.

He kissed her again, this time with a little more urgency, a little more heat.

His tongue brushed against her lower lip, and she opened for him with a soft sigh, her fingers tightening in his hair.

The kiss deepened, slow and sensual, each movement of their lips and tongues speaking of a connection that went beyond the physical.

Luke's hands roamed her body, tracing the curve of her spine, the dip of her waist, the swell of her hips.

Every touch was deliberate, every caress meant to remind her that she was his, that he was hers.

Zoe's hands moved to the buttons of his shirt, her fingers trembling slightly as she worked them open.

His chest was warm beneath her palms, the hard planes of muscle shifting as he breathed.

She leaned in, pressing her lips to the center of his chest, right over his heart.

She could feel it beating—steady and strong, just like him.

Luke's breath caught, his hands tightening in her hair as he let out a low groan. "Zoe," he murmured, his voice strained. He tilted her face up to his, his eyes dark with desire and something else—something deeper. "You're beautiful," he said, the words soft but sincere.

Her cheeks flushed, her heart swelling at his words.

She didn't say anything, just kissed him again, pouring everything she felt into the kiss.

Her hands moved to his belt, fumbling with the buckle for a moment before it came undone.

She pushed his jeans down his hips, her fingers brushing against the hard length of him through the fabric of his boxers.

Luke groaned again, his hips bucking involuntarily as her hand closed around him.

“Zoe,” he breathed, his voice rough with need.

His hands moved to her waist, tugging at the hem of her shirt until it was over her head and tossed aside.

Her bra followed a moment later, leaving her bare to his hungry gaze.

He stared at her for a moment, his eyes roving over her body as though he were memorizing every curve, every inch of skin.

Then he leaned in, his lips brushing against the hollow of her throat before moving lower, tracing a path down her collarbone to the swell of her breast. He took her nipple into his mouth, sucking gently until she was trembling in his arms, her hands clutching at his shoulders.

“Luke,” she gasped, her head falling back as his teeth grazed her sensitive flesh.

His hands slid down her body, cupping her ass and lifting her until she was pressed against him, her legs wrapping around his waist. He carried her to the couch, laying her down gently before settling between her thighs.

He kissed her again, slowly and deeply, his hands roaming her body as though he couldn't get enough of her. His fingers dipped between her thighs, stroking her

through the thin fabric of her panties until she was writhing beneath him, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

“Please,” she whispered, her voice breaking on the word. She didn’t have to say more, Luke knew what she needed. He hooked his fingers in the waistband of her panties, dragging them down her legs and tossing them aside.

He kissed his way down her body, his lips trailing over her stomach, her hips, her thighs. She trembled beneath him, her hands tangling in his hair as he moved lower, his breath warm against her skin. When his tongue flicked against her clit, she let out a cry, her hips arching off the couch.

Luke’s hands tightened on her thighs, holding her in place as he licked and sucked at her, his tongue working her into a frenzy. She cried out again, her back arching as pleasure coursed through her. Her hands tightened in his hair, pulling him closer as her thighs trembled around his head.

“Luke, I’m—” she gasped, the words breaking off into a moan as she came, her body shuddering with the force of it. He didn’t stop, his tongue coaxing every last wave of pleasure from her until she was boneless beneath him, her breath coming in shallow gasps.

He kissed his way back up her body, his lips brushing against hers as he settled between her thighs. She could feel him, hard and hot against her, and she wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him closer.

“I need you,” she whispered, her voice trembling with emotion.

Luke’s breath caught, his eyes dark as he looked down at her. “Always,” he promised again, his voice rough with need. He kissed her slow and deep, as he slid into her, the heat of him filling her completely.

She gasped, her body arching against his as they moved together, each thrust a testament to the connection between them. His hands tangled in her hair, his lips brushing against hers as he whispered her name, over and over, like a prayer.

Her hands roamed his back, her nails digging into his skin as she clung to him, her body trembling with the force of her pleasure.

When she came again, it was with his name on her lips, her body shuddering with the intensity of it.

He followed her moments later, his hips stuttering as he spilled himself inside her.

They lay there for a long time after, their bodies tangled together, their breaths mingling in the quiet of the apartment. Outside, the rain had stopped, the sky clearing to reveal the first hints of stars. Inside, something new had just begun.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:21 am

The next morning, Zoe stood on the back porch of the cottage, holding her phone like it weighed a hundred pounds.

The contract was still in her inbox.

Unsigned. Unanswered.

She stared at the screen for a long time, rereading Kristen's last message:

We need to know by noon today. This kind of opportunity doesn't wait, Zoe.

For most of her adult life, she would've answered that call without hesitation.

She would've had her suitcase packed, her calendar color-coded, and her ambition sharpened like a weapon.

She had been trained—by grief, by pressure, by the unspoken expectations of everyone around her—to never let a chance slip through her fingers.

But this time... she let it go.

She opened the email. Hit reply.

Typed a single sentence: Thank you for the offer. I've decided to move in a different direction.

Her finger hovered over "send" for only a moment.

Then she clicked it.

It was done.

The moment the message disappeared, her breath left her in a rush she didn't realize she'd been holding. A strange calm washed over her, like the kind that follows a hard cry. It was over.

And something else had just begun.

Later that afternoon, she met Luke at the shop.

He was under the hood of an old Chevy, his shirt sleeves rolled up, grease smudging the edge of his jaw. Zoe walked in quietly and leaned against the frame of the bay door, watching him for a moment before speaking.

"I turned it down."

Luke looked up slowly.

His eyes searched hers. "The promotion?"

She nodded. "Gone. Just like that."

He set down the wrench and walked toward her, wiping his hands on a rag. "How do you feel?"

"Lighter. Terrified. But mostly... like I can finally breathe."

Luke studied her face, as if trying to read the spaces between her words.

She smiled faintly. “This isn’t just about you. Or this town. It’s about me realizing that the version of success I’ve been chasing wasn’t mine to begin with. I inherited it. I shaped myself around it. But it never really fit.”

Luke nodded, quietly taking it all in.

She reached for his hand. “And I’m done trying to be someone I’m not.”

They stood there for a moment, nothing between them but the hum of the world outside and the slow, shared rhythm of two hearts beginning to beat together.

“I’ve got fears,” Luke admitted. “I’m good at hiding them. But they’re there.”

She squeezed his hand. “Then let’s be scared together.”

He laughed, just a little, the tension leaving his shoulders. “That might be the most honest offer I’ve ever had.”

They moved to the back of the shop, where the bench overlooked the open stretch of fields behind the property. It was quiet. No traffic. No pressure. Just sky and space.

Zoe leaned into his side, her head resting against his shoulder.

“You know,” she said, “if you had asked me a few weeks ago what I thought I’d be doing right now...”

“You would’ve said fighting for a seat at a conference table with a three-hour commute and a cold sandwich for dinner.”

Zoe smirked. “Exactly.”

He turned his head to press a kiss to her temple. “And now?”

She exhaled. “Now I’m thinking about planting something. I don’t know what—flowers, maybe herbs. Something that grows.”

Luke’s smile deepened, soft and proud. “You’re already growing.”

They stayed like that until the sun dipped low behind the trees, the sky stained in pink and gold. Neither spoke. They didn’t need to.

Sometimes letting go wasn’t about giving up, it was about making space for something better to begin.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:21 am

The rain had come and gone again, leaving Willow Creek drenched and glistening. Zoe walked barefoot through the grass outside the cottage, the ground cool and soft beneath her feet. The storm had washed everything, clean—the air, the streets, maybe even her own heart.

She looked up at the sky, streaked with fading light, and for the first time, didn't feel the urge to run, fix, or prove anything. She just wanted to be .

Luke arrived just before dark, headlights flashing once down the driveway. He stepped out of the truck holding a brown paper bag and two cans of soda tucked under his arm.

“I come bearing dinner,” he said with a crooked smile.

Zoe returned the smile. “Did you cook?”

“Does Penny's Place count?”

They ate on the porch, picnic-style, legs stretched out and their backs leaning against the railing. The leftover storm clouds hovered above them, but the world was quiet. Steady. Safe.

“I've been thinking about something,” Zoe said after a while, picking at the label on her soda can.

Luke glanced at her. “Dangerous territory.”

She smiled, but it faded quickly. “You know how I told you I lost my mom when I was young?”

He nodded, waiting.

“She was sick for years. I don’t remember much from before the illness. But I remember the day my dad stopped making breakfast. I remember when he stopped smiling at dinner. It was like we all became machines. Productive. Efficient. But hollow.”

Luke stayed quiet, giving her space.

“I think I’ve been trying to outrun that silence ever since,” Zoe whispered. “Filling every space with meetings and goals and... noise.”

He reached over and took her hand.

“I didn’t just burn out in Chicago,” she added. “I broke. I started to forget why I was even fighting so hard.”

Luke’s thumb brushed lightly over her knuckles. “And now?”

“Now, I want more than success. I want something that feels real. I want mornings that start slow. Dinners that actually taste. Love that doesn’t have to be perfect to be worth keeping.”

Luke leaned his head back, staring at the canopy of stars. “You’re not the only one who’s been hiding behind habit.”

Zoe turned to him, surprised by the openness in his voice.

“I wasn’t always quiet,” he said. “When my dad was alive, we fought like hell. Over the shop, over my future, over everything. I left town once, for about six months. Thought I’d never come back.

“What changed?”

“He got sick.” Luke’s voice dipped lower. “Not the kind of sick you can plan around. One day he was in the garage, hands covered in grease. The next, I was helping him walk to the bathroom.”

Zoe placed her hand gently over his heart.

“He didn’t want to go in a hospital,” Luke went on.

“So, I brought him home. Took care of him. And when the heart attack took him out, I didn’t leave again.

Part of me thought I owed it to him to stay.

To carry on what he built. But the truth?

” Luke looked at her. “I was scared. Scared if I left again, I’d lose everything—him, this place, myself. ”

Zoe’s eyes shimmered. “You didn’t lose him.”

“No,” he said. “But I did lose the part of me that believed I could still want more .”

She leaned in, touching his face. “Then let’s find it. Together.”

Luke turned his lips into her palm. “You sure you’re ready for that?”

“I don’t want perfect,” Zoe said. “I just want honest . Messy, flawed, real.”

He pulled her into his arms, and they sat in the dark, wrapped around each other like the world outside had finally stopped spinning.

No more hiding.

No more pretending.

Just two people finally telling the truth—with their words, their hearts, and the warmth they shared in silence.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:21 am

The next week brought a quiet shift, like the changing of seasons happening from the inside out.

Zoe began her mornings slowly—coffee on the porch, sometimes shared with Luke, sometimes alone with a blanket and the sound of birdsong. She stopped checking her inbox compulsively. Her phone spent more time in drawers than in her hand.

She wasn't just pausing anymore.

She was staying.

At Sweet Bloom Flowers , Sarah taught her how to arrange seasonal bouquets—wild, uneven, alive.

Granny Mae handed her a clipboard and put her in charge of organizing the vendor lineup for the Winter Market.

And at Harrison Auto Repair, Luke handed her a rag and showed her how to change the oil in her own car.

“I swear, if I mess this up, you're legally required to fix it,” she said, sleeves rolled up, hands already smudged with grease.

Luke grinned from where he leaned against the workbench. “You've got this. Just loosen the filter. Not launch it across the shop.”

Zoe snorted. “No promises.”

She didn't always understand the parts or the tools.

But she liked the rhythm of it—the focus, the satisfaction of watching something broken work again.

And she liked the way Luke looked at her when she tried.

Like he was proud of her, not for getting it right, but for showing up in the first place.

They spent their evenings tangled in each other—on the porch swing, in the kitchen, in bed. Their relationship wasn't fast or perfect, but it was real. Each day they peeled back another layer. Each night they found new ways to say I see you without words.

One afternoon, Zoe brought lunch to the shop—sandwiches and lemonade in a basket she borrowed from Penny.

Luke was underneath a pickup truck, his legs poking out when she walked in.

"I brought food," she called.

His voice echoed back, amused. "Is it edible?"

"I've lived here almost a month now. I've earned the right to insult you for that."

Luke slid out and sat up, grinning. "You really have."

They ate on the tailgate, feet swinging, the sound of cicadas buzzing around them.

After a few bites, Luke glanced over. "You know, I don't think I've ever had someone bring me lunch and know how to check their own oil filter."

Zoe raised an eyebrow. “Is that your version of romance?”

“Pretty much.”

She laughed and leaned her head against his shoulder. “You ever think about what’s next?”

“For us?”

Zoe nodded.

Luke was quiet for a moment. Then, “Yeah. I think about it more than I say. I am thinking about fixing up that little house on the corner. Starting something with someone who isn’t afraid to build slowly. I think about finding peace... not just passing time.”

Zoe looked up at him. “I think about those things too.”

He turned toward her, brushing a thumb across her cheek. “Then maybe we stop thinking about it and start doing it.”

She smiled. “Are you asking me to build a life with you, Luke Harrison?”

He kissed her softly. “I’m asking if we can keep growing... side by side.”

Zoe rested her forehead against his. “Then yes.”

Later that evening, as they walked back to the cottage under a sky streaked with orange and indigo, Zoe caught herself watching the way Luke reached for her hand.

Like it was second nature.

Like it was home.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:21 am

Winter came gently to Willow Creek.

The leaves had long since fallen, blanketing the sidewalks in crisp gold and brown. Twinkling lights lined every storefront, and wreaths hung from porch railings and lamp posts. The town had a way of making even the quietest days feel special.

Zoe stood behind the counter at Sweet Bloom Flowers , arranging a holiday bouquet for one of Mae's last-minute party requests.

Her hands moved quickly, clipping stems, fluffing pine, tucking in deep red roses—while soft jazz played on the radio.

She'd become something of a regular fixture at the shop, helping Sarah a few days a week while freelancing part-time for a small consulting agency out of Asheville.

No more long commutes.

No more corporate marathons.

Just time.

Time to think. To breathe. To love.

The bell over the door jingled, and Zoe looked up, already smiling.

Luke stepped inside, cheeks pink from the cold. He wore that old navy work jacket she loved and held two steaming cups of cider.

“You’re late,” she teased.

“I’m exactly on time,” he said, setting one of the cups beside her. “I waited until Mae left. I like having you to myself.”

Zoe chuckled. “Mae’s convinced we’re getting engaged next spring.”

“Well, she’s not wrong.”

Zoe froze mid-bouquet. “What?”

Luke shrugged like it was the most casual thing in the world. “I mean, I haven’t asked yet. But I’ve got a few ideas.”

She blinked at him, heart suddenly racing. “You do?”

He leaned against the counter, eyes twinkling. “Don’t worry. I won’t do it here, surrounded by floral foam and pine sap. I’m not completely hopeless.”

She tossed a sprig of holly at him, laughing. “You’re dangerously close.”

They sipped cider in companionable silence for a few minutes before Luke reached across the counter and took her hand.

“You happy?” he asked softly.

Zoe looked at him—really looked—and felt the truth settle deep in her chest.

“I didn’t know I could be,” she whispered. “Not like this.”

“Good,” he said, brushing her knuckles with his thumb. “Because I’m thinking about

tearing down that shed behind the garage and building something real. With a porch. Maybe a garden.”

Zoe tilted her head. “What kind of something?”

“A home.”

He let the word hang in the air between them.

“And I want you in it.”

Her throat tightened. Not from fear. Not from doubt. But from the overwhelming sense of rightness.

“I’m in,” she said, voice steady.

The following weekend, they stood beneath a snow-dusted arbor at the Winter Market, handing out cider and laughing as Granny Mae heckled every couple within earshot.

Sarah had made Zoe a wreath crown. Luke wore a pine-scented flannel.

Zoe swore she’d accidentally set on fire if he didn’t retire it soon.

They weren’t perfect.

They had bills and work and the occasional misunderstanding about laundry or forgotten dinner plans.

But they had each other.

They had morning walks. Shared coffee. Grease-streaked kisses in the garage and evenings tangled together on the cottage porch swing. They had a love that wasn't flashy—but it was honest. Earned.

As the snow began to fall and the last of the vendors packed up their booths, Luke pulled Zoe close.

“This still feel like the wrong life?” he whispered.

She smiled up at him, eyes bright with all the things she never had to chase anymore.

“No,” she said. “This feels like forever.”

And in Willow Creek, forever didn't have to be big.

It just had to be true .

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:21 am

One Year Later The house sat on a quiet hill at the edge of Willow Creek, where the woods began to thicken, and the sunsets came in slow and golden. It wasn't big. Just two bedrooms, wide windows, and the porch Zoe had once only dreamed of, now real, now home.

Zoe stood barefoot in the kitchen, her hair tied up in a messy bun, flour dusting the edge of her sleeve. A pie cooled on the counter beside her, and the smell of cinnamon and apples filled the warm, bright space. Outside, wind chimes played a lazy song in the breeze.

Life wasn't slower, it was just quieter now. And Zoe had learned to love the quiet.

From the back porch, she could hear the soft rumble of Luke's voice as he worked on a client's truck in the garage out back. The radio played something old and country, and every now and then, she'd catch him singing under his breath—off-key and endearing.

She checked the time. Penny and Granny Mae were due in twenty minutes for their weekly Sunday lunch. Sarah would bring dessert even though Zoe had insisted they didn't need more than one pie. That argument had never gone her way.

She set the table just as Luke stepped in, wiping his hands on a towel. His hair was windswept, and his cheeks were kissed pink from the cold. He wrapped his arms around her from behind and nuzzled the side of her neck.

“Smells like you're trying to make me fall in love with you again.”

Zoe leaned into him. “Just trying to keep you from escaping to the shop when company shows up.”

He chuckled, warm and close. “Too late. I’m in for life.”

They stayed like that for a beat longer—no rush, no noise, no tension. Just skin against skin and the soft sound of wind outside.

“Remember when you said you were only staying for a few days?” Luke asked, teasing.

“I also said I didn’t like small towns,” she replied, smiling.

“And mechanics.”

“And hay bales. And porch swings. And cider.”

Luke kissed the top of her head. “Now you’re practically a local.”

She turned to face him. “Don’t tell Mae. She’ll have me running the next bake sale.”

They both laughed, and he kissed her—quick and sure, like he had a thousand times before.

Then the doorbell rang, and just like that, the house filled with voices and laughter and the clatter of dishes.

Mae claimed her usual seat by the window.

Sarah teased Zoe about finally learning to cook.

Penny brought a pie anyway. And somewhere in the middle of it all, Zoe caught

Luke's gaze from across the room.

He didn't smile.

He just looked at her like she was the most solid thing he'd ever known.

Later that night, long after the guests had gone and the dishes were drying by the sink, Zoe stood on the porch, wrapped in one of Luke's flannels, looking up at the stars.

Luke joined her with two mugs of tea, passing one into her hand.

The steam curled upward, catching the golden light of the setting sun filtering through the trees of Willow Creek.

She wrapped her fingers around the warm ceramic, feeling the heat seep into her skin the way his presence always seemed to.

"You still glad you stayed?" he asked, his voice low and smooth, like the creek that ran behind his cabin. He wasn't looking at her, but she could feel his attention on her, steady and unwavering.

She looked out over the trees, her heart so full it ached.

The silence between them wasn't empty; it was alive with the unspoken words they'd been circling for weeks.

The way he'd catch her eye across the room and hold it a beat too long.

The way his hand would graze hers when he passed her a tool or a cup of tea, sending a shiver down her spine.

The way he'd say her name like it was something sacred.

"I didn't stay," she whispered, her voice trembling with the weight of it. "I belonged ."

Luke turned to her then, his eyes searching hers. There was something raw in his gaze, something that made her breath catch. He stepped closer, the space between them narrowing until she could feel the warmth of his body, smell the faint scent of cedar and something uniquely him .

Her heart pounded in her chest as he reached up, his fingers brushing against her brown cheek, tracing the curve of her jaw.

She leaned into his touch, her eyes fluttering closed as his thumb grazed her bottom lip.

The world seemed to tilt, the trees and the creek and the cabin all fading into the background until there was only Luke and the way he looked at her, like she was the only thing that mattered.

"You do," he murmured, his voice rough with something she couldn't name. "You belong here."

And then he was kissing her, his lips pressing against hers with a gentleness that made her knees weak.

She melted into him, her hands finding his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart beneath her palms. His kiss was slow and deliberate, like he had all the time in the world, like he wanted to memorize every curve of her mouth.

She parted her lips, and he deepened the kiss, his tongue sweeping against hers in a way that sent heat spiraling through her.

Her fingers tangled in the fabric of his shirt, pulling him closer, needing to feel every inch of him against her.

His hands moved to her waist, his grip firm but not possessive, anchoring her to him as the kiss turned urgent, desperate.

She could taste the tea on his lips, the faint sweetness of honey mingling with something darker, something that made her head spin. His breath hitched as she nipped at his bottom lip, a low groan escaping him that made her ache in ways she hadn't known were possible.

When they finally pulled apart, they were both breathless, their foreheads resting against each other as they tried to steady themselves.

“Luke,” she whispered, her voice trembling.

He didn't say anything, just cupped her face in his hands and kissed her again, softer this time, but no less intense. “I've wanted to do that for so long,” he admitted, his voice barely above a breath.

She smiled, her heart swelling with something she couldn't name. “Me too.”

He kissed her again, and she let herself drown in it, in him. The world outside ceased to exist. There was only this moment, only the two of them, and the feeling that she had finally found the place where she truly belonged.