



With Every Heartbeat (Forbidden Men #4)

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Category: Young Adult

Description: I used to think everything was black and white, truth or lie, easy or hard, that if I could just escape my strict, overbearing, abusive father, my life would be perfect. But since I've found a reason to risk his wrath and leave, to help a friend in need, I've come to realize everything I thought I knew is wrong.

Friends have their own agenda, honesty comes with a dosage of lie, easy doesn't even exist, keeping secrets sucks, and love...love is the most painful thing of all.

Maybe if Quinn Hamilton hadn't asked me to skip classes for the day and help him pick out an engagement ring for my best friend, I wouldn't have fallen for him so completely on that sunny Tuesday afternoon and I wouldn't feel so conflicted. But I did, and I can't take it back, no matter how hard I try. So I have to deal with the fact that even I'm not as good, or honest, or caring as I'd always thought I was, and no matter what I do next, someone's going to get hurt. Probably me.

-Zoey Blakeland

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Page 1

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The party was completely out of control. Thumping loud music, alcohol in every hand, topless girls in the hot tub outside, and more of them booty-grinding on the coffee table indoors. If I'd been wearing pearls, I would've clutched those bad boys for dear life as I stood in the doorway, gaping at the sight before me.

This was my first college kegger...and on Shark Week, no less. I couldn't believe Cora wanted me to meet her here.

"Out of the way!" a voice bellowed behind me. "Coming through."

I turned just in time to see a silver keg barreling directly for me. With a squeak, I dove to the side and fully into the frat house, barely saving my piggies hanging out the front of my sandals from being smashed. The pair of drunk guys pushing the beer inside on a dolly leered at me, offering me a drink if I agreed to flash them. I respectfully declined, and they shrugged, moving on and disappearing into the rowdy horde.

Clutching my imaginary pearls, I gulped heavily. What the heck was I doing? After living eighteen years under the strict dictatorship of my father, I'd never seen anyone drinking spirits before, much less getting wasted from them, as pretty much everyone around me was. Heck, we even took grape juice during Communion at the church we attended because wine was forbidden in my little world.

I was so out of my element; I wanted to run and hide. But I didn't have anywhere to run to. Arriving three days early, I was literally locked out of my new apartment until I found my roommate.

After I'd called her from the track phone she'd sent me and told her I was in town, Cora had instructed me to meet her at this address. And I was sure it was this address; I'd double, triple and quadruple checked.

I'd texted her from outside moments ago, telling her I was here, hoping she'd come out to me, but all she'd replied was: Come on in. I'm in the back.

The back. She might as well have told me to meet her at the end of a dark, creepy alley of a ghetto where homeless bums were scurrying through trash and thugs were dealing drugs, and oh, Holy Hosanna, was that guy smoking a joint? I didn't know the difference between a real cigarette and...well, whatever that thin, short thing was hanging out of his mouth, but it certainly didn't smell like regular nicotine tobacco wafting my way.

Telling Cora no way, that she needed to hike her skinny little tush outside to meet me, would only express how much of a loser I was. So I bolstered myself, squared my shoulders and drew in a deep breath.

Welcome to college, Zoey.

Had I mentioned I was so out of my freaking element?

Grabbing a piece of my blonde hair and trying not to appear as awkward and scared as I felt, I wound the comforting lock around my finger and stepped forward, determined to do this. But a startling cheer from the crowd as a guy jumped onto the coffee table to dance with the topless girls had me hunching my shoulders and bolting toward the first doorway I saw, hoping it led to "the back."

My heart pounded, and I felt so inept because everyone around me was having fun. No one was scared out of their mind, no one looked as if they could burst into tears any second just because they were here, and no one seemed to be on the verge of hyperventilating. The jealousy bug nipped hard. I kind of wished I could be as

uninhibited and free-spirited as all these people.

Why was it so hard for me to walk through a crowd of drunk strangers? To mix and mingle? To socialize? Growing up as isolated as I had was no excuse. Cora had grown up in the same environment, and she was here, wasn't she?

She'd better be here.

Focusing on the anger I felt at myself for being such a coward, I used the heat behind that to propel myself forward. I could do this.

I would do this.

The next room I entered was thankfully mellower than the first. No dancing, no music, no nakedness. But it was still just as crowded, if not more so. Lots of people clumped into groups, talking. Most of them were male, which brought up another irrational trepidation I had. After being homeschooled through the first eight grades, I hadn't been around much of the opposite gender, at least not many who were my age. My father had made sure to keep me away from boys. So seeing this many of them, everywhere I turned, was a little unnerving. My limbs heated and face flushed. I was certainly going to be attending college with a lot of hotties.

Already knowing I wasn't going to find Cora in this room, I started to turn but stopped cold when I did recognize one face, like the supreme hottie of all hotties.

Cora was an avid Facebooker. She posted pictures and updates constantly. So I was well aware of what her boyfriend looked like. I'd been bowled over the first time I'd seen his snapshot pop up on her page three months ago. Quinn Hamilton was perfect in the looks department—like ridiculously, flawlessly perfect. I couldn't believe my best friend had been able to snag a complete dreamboat like him.