

Protecting Her Heart - Flashback Two



In “Protecting Her Heart,” Zoey and Aiden have two years of no-contact before she receives a threatening letter and breaks their silence.

This short story takes place twenty months after their no-contact started, and four months before the events in “Protecting Her Heart.”

There are spoilers to “Protecting Her Heart,” so it is best read after the book to avoid accidental spoilers.

Zoey



I'm not sure what shocks me the most, the picture of the semi-naked woman, her very suggestive pose, or the text that accompanies the image, addressed to my boyfriend: *something to keep you going until you can see it again in person.*

For a second, I'm outraged. Weirdly, it isn't the photograph or the message that outrages me most, it's the fact that Caleb has been so careless to leave it so accessible for me. He's left his email account open on my laptop; it's such a rookie mistake.

I never made a mistake like that. I may not have been saintly, but I'd never have let him be blindsided like this.

I stare back at the photograph and then back at the email. Michelle Bell is the sender. I wrack through my memories, wondering if Caleb has ever mentioned a Michelle to me. It hits me like a brick; she's one of his superiors at work, based in the New York office.

I wonder how long it's been going on. The photograph by itself could have been explained away, and I imagine him trying to argue that it was unsolicited, some message from somebody he didn't want to receive and wasn't in control of. Except, the message seals it. There aren't many places he can hide after the sentence '*until you see it again.*'

I wonder how far he's gone with this woman, how long he's been seeing her. He's been flying back and forth to the states for years now; and I know she's been around for a long time. I remember him mentioning her a lot when he first started, though I can't recall the last time he mentioned her name to me. Maybe he stopped talking about her when their relationship moved from the professional '*she's my boss*' to the not so professional '*she is my mistress*.'

Mistress isn't the right word for it. I'm not Caleb's wife. That wasn't a role I wanted, that wasn't a life I wanted. I wonder if it's a bad sign that I can't remember the last time he spoke about her. Did he find it easy to stop talking about her because I had stopped listening to what he was really saying?

I know I don't have the moral high ground, not in any sense of the word. I've had nights when I've returned home to Caleb when I should have felt shame in every bone, but I never felt like that. I wonder if Caleb has felt shame for what he has been doing behind my back. Or is he more like me than he would like to admit, that he doesn't feel the guilt because he doesn't care he's betraying me. Maybe he's of the same mind as me, that he feels no guilt coming home to me because I'm not where his heart lies, that it lies with her. At least, that's what I've always felt, not the burning shame people would expect me to feel.

I sit back in the chair in my study, closing the laptop screen, look at my watch for the time. It won't be long until Caleb is home. He'll walk through the door, make a comment about me being home earlier than him for a change, and then he'll walk towards the kitchen, telling me that he'll make dinner.

Joke's on him tonight because I've already made dinner, and he won't be staying in the house long enough to eat it. He'll only stay for however long it takes him to realise that I know, for him to make his excuses and then pack his things. Even that will be too long for me.

I might not have been saintly in our relationship, I've slipped and betrayed him a few times, but this is all the evidence I need that we shouldn't be together. If both of us are so easily led to somebody else, there is no point in us being together. This is the death knell of what was us. It doesn't matter how good I've been for the last twenty months. Twenty months is an arbitrary count, it is not special in usual calendars, but it's been twenty months of conscious effort from me. Twenty months where I have tried to stay loyal, twenty months of hell. Maybe it's been difficult because Caleb is not the one my heart is loyal to, no matter how hard I've tried to deny it.

I open the laptop screen again and then print out the message that had been sent. Once it's printed, I pick it up and walk to the kitchen, putting the image and email onto the kitchen worktop, right next to the hob. The chilli I've been making is still simmering on a low heat on the back hob. I had planned to check my emails before cooking the rice, but I don't think I need to now. There's no point making rice when it will just be me eating.

The sound of the front door unlocking makes me jump, even if I'm expecting it.

"Zoey?" he calls.

"Kitchen," I call back.

I move away from the hob, grabbing a glass from the cupboard and walking to the fridge so I can pour myself an orange juice. I'm still pouring the juice when he comes into the kitchen.

"You must have left work early if you have had time to make chilli," he comments from the doorway. The smell of chilli hangs in the air because I make mine hot and spicy, even if he doesn't like it that way. "What time did you leave work?" he asks.

"Not too early," I reply. I didn't leave work early, instead, I took the day off. Today, the longing to be on the beach was too much to ignore.

I'd worked a couple of extra hours each day last week to clear the diary so I could spend some time alone. It's been the first day off I've had in months, and I hadn't told him because I knew he'd suggest taking the day off with me, and I didn't want that.

It's just more evidence that we shouldn't be together. I've known for a long time that our relationship is not a good one. Not wanting to spend time with the man I'm supposed to love is not just an indicator that the relationship is limping, it's a flashing, huge neon sign, high in the sky screaming *'get out, Zoey, now, what are you playing at?'*

"I'm glad, you've worked extra hard recently to stay on top of things," Caleb comments.

He says it in such a condescending tone that I feel every inch of my skin protest. I always work hard but it isn't about staying on top of things. I am passionate about what my company does, I'm passionate about everything that goes on. That's what takes my time. He used to like that passion about me, told me he loved me being a boss in the world, but the last few months, his comments are less complimentary, more often than not, they're a dig. Comments that I've fallen behind at work, or that I've potentially dropped the ball again. I haven't, in either case, so the comments make me bristle. It was the same when I heard my father had died, when I'd needed some time to process, he'd been disappointed in me. With Caleb, it's almost like that when I did make a mistake or when I needed somebody to lean on, I lost the sparkle lens he'd always seen me through. I became just another woman to him, not somebody who was strong and independent, but somebody who was broken. It's another joke that is on him. I was broken long before I met him, I just hid it well.

Despite being bristled by Caleb's comment, I don't respond. I just hover near the fridge and wait. Wait for him to come further into the

kitchen, for him to see what I've left next to the hob. I'm waiting for him to realise that everything has changed, and there is no going back.

Caleb



Zoey stands by the fridge, drinking her orange juice, staring at me with her icy blue eyes. I used to think she had the most beautiful eyes I'd ever seen but now, whenever she looks at me, it just feels cold.

I don't know when things changed in her. The first time I saw her, in a meeting where I was part of the team pitching to win her account, I'd been blown away. She had a commanding air about her, even when she wasn't talking. She used to have a way of drawing people in, I don't know if she was ever aware she was doing it. It's another thing about her that has changed, another thing that feels cold.

She's become a different woman. I thought it was from when she'd told me she'd heard her father had died, the father I didn't even know who existed, but when I looked back, I realised it was about a year before that when she started getting colder, indifferent.

I've been patient, waiting for her to snap out of whatever mood she's fallen into, but it doesn't seem like anything is ever going to change, and I'm starting to wonder whether I imagined the first few years with Zoey. Did I imagine that fire in her, or did it get snuffed out? If it got snuffed out, what was the cause? It's never been anything I've been able to put my finger on, I just know she's not the woman I fell in love with.

I cross the kitchen, walking past Zoey and heading to the hob. The smell of chilli is everywhere. I hate chilli, or rather, I hate the way Zoey makes it. I hope she's got some sour cream. I reach for the spoon so I can test the chilli, but my gaze falls onto a piece of paper that is placed on the worktop.

What the hell.

I freeze. The image of Michelle, the email she'd sent me, it looks like it's illuminated on the worktop. I knew it was stupid to open my emails on Zoey's laptop, but I'd left my phone in the office. I tend to chat with Michelle for an hour or so when Zoey's busy catching on work. Usually, I disappear into the bathroom, under the pretence of a long bath. Last night, my desire to talk to Michelle, it overran my ability to be logical, and Zoey was flittering between the living room and kitchen, so I'd used her laptop in the study to chat with Michelle. Now it looks like it's something that's going to bite me.

I still feel like my brain has stalled.

"She's pretty," Zoey comments from behind me. "It took me a second to see her face, I was distracted by everything else she has on display."

My blood runs as cold as ice. The last time I felt like this was when I'd been called in to see my boss after I'd failed one of my accountancy exams for the second time, knowing I could get fired. That day, the ice had existed until my boss told me they'd give me another chance. Somehow, I'm not sure a second chance is likely this time.

"Zoey," I murmur.

"I wasn't sure how she could have her hands in both places and still take a photograph, but I guess she has mastered the art of a handsfree photograph. Or does she have somebody who takes the artistic photographs she sends to you, because if so, I admire her dedication," she continues. How her voice is still so even and steady is beyond me.

I turn to look at her. She's still by the fridge but now the door is closed and she's leaning against it. The glass is still in her hand. I wonder if I'm going to end up wearing the contents.

I don't know what to say to her. I could give her a million excuses and a thousand apologies, but I know they'd be futile. She clearly doesn't want to hear them, and I'm not sure I want to say them anyway. I could turn this onto her, raise the suspicions that I've had about her over the past few years, question her own fidelity, but I'm sure she'd just be defensive and tell me that two wrongs don't make a right. I know that. I never had proof she'd done anything with somebody else, but she sure has the proof I have done something, splayed out on the countertop in spectacular fashion.

Zoey puts her glass down slowly. I'm oddly relieved.

"Zoey," I start, but she waves a hand, dismissing whatever words I was going to muster next.

"I don't care, Caleb. I'm just letting you know, so you can get yourself started on clearing your things out of the house," she says.

"You don't even want to talk about it?" I ask.

"Why would I? You're clearly done with the relationship." She shrugs.

"I guess I expected you would have questions."

"The whole when did it start, who is she, how many times?" she fires some questions at me. I open my mouth to answer but again she waves me off. "I already know who she is. She's one of your superiors at work. You really have a type, don't you?" Zoey scoffs.

"We're in love, Zoey. I love her, I have for a long time," I admit. "I don't want to hurt you, but I love everything about her, and I want my life to be with her."

For a second, I wonder if this will be something that makes her cry. I don't think I've ever seen her cry. That was something I once admired

about her. Zoey wasn't clingy, she wasn't needy or emotional. The phrase '*she's not like other girls*' was something I'd said about her so many times. I'd laughed when friends had complained about their over clingy girlfriends, the ones who dropped big hints about when they expected an engagement ring. I'd seen so many friends walk down the aisle, settle down and have the children they swore they didn't want. I'd admired Zoey's firm stand that she didn't want kids. I imagined years of us putting good money behind us and then travel, adventures.

Now, I imagine that with Michelle, except with her, I imagine more. I imagine marriage and kids, being with a strong woman who *wants* me by her side.

I hadn't meant to fall for Michelle, even if I'd had some doubts about how committed Zoey was to me. I've known Michelle for a couple of years and to start, our relationship was strictly professional. We'd meet when I was in the States, all discussions about work related items. At some point, the conversations started to wander. When I'd travel to the States, we'd go for a lunch meeting, and it only took a few of these meetings before all topic of work vanished and we only spoke about ourselves. She'd tell me about what was going on in her life, I'd tell her about things in mine. A few of these lunch meetings later, my conversations about Zoey became less complimentary and then they stopped completely. Michelle and I exchanged emails at work and again, they moved from the professional to the chatting, the emails coming through to see how I was, to tell me a funny anecdote about her day. Then we exchanged personal mobile numbers and moved to texting. Despite the time-zone differences, she'd message me to wish me a happy morning, I'd message to wish her a good night. I'd convinced myself it was all innocent, that we were just friends.

The first time she sent me a picture, I expected she would follow up with an embarrassed message, telling me it was a mistake, meant

for somebody else, apologise profusely and tell me she was mortified, perhaps even beg me to delete it and not talk about it again. When all she'd sent was a photograph, her in her lingerie and heels, and no follow up retraction had arrived so after fifteen minutes, I'd sent back an emoji of fire.

That's all it took. One simple photograph and response, and the line was gone. It wasn't even that the line had blurred, it was like it had never existed in the first place. The next photograph was followed up with some text. She'd written that our exchange was probably something that could get her in trouble at work, but she couldn't stop thinking about me, that she didn't care because she wanted me. It had felt so good to be wanted. Michelle's a beautiful, strong, smart woman. Her wanting me, out of everybody she could possibly have, yeah, that stroked my ego, among other things.

The next time I went to the States, Michelle picked me up from the airport. She'd stayed with me at the hotel I'd been booked into for my stay. Four nights together and I was hooked. Michelle's so strong but when we're in the bedroom together, or her office, she lets me lead and do things Zoey would never. I don't think Zoey can yield to anybody, and until Michelle, I didn't know how much I wanted that.

It's been six months since that first night. I can't get enough of her. When I get home and all I have is Zoey's indifference and coldness as a comparison to Michelle's heat and passion, it just makes me want her more, especially when that aspect of my life with Zoey had slowed down to a dim trickle over the last two years or so.

I look at Zoey. There are no tears from her. Instead, she wears a smirk on her face.

"Oh, Caleb, don't be so naïve. You think you know Michelle?"

"I do know her."

"You only know what she *wants* you to see because that's the only thing she'll show you," she scoffs.

"She isn't like that," I snap. Zoey might be hurt or bitter about finding out what I've been doing, but I know Michelle, everything about her. I love her, and she loves me.

"We're all like that."

"She's not cold, like you," I fire at her. It's underhand, but she's the one who started it.

"I'm sure she isn't, because it's supposed to be hot and frantic in those first few months. Everybody is on their best behaviour to keep their true self hidden. She knows what makes you tick, so she knows what to show to you to keep you entertained. We're masterminds at it, and you're so naïve to think otherwise."

"You're wrong. I know exactly who you are, and I don't like it."

"You don't know me. Not really. I've always kept my true self hidden from you, Caleb. You just bought into a woman who didn't exist." She shakes her head, wryly.

"So, what, the woman I fell in love with was just an illusion and the woman I see now is the real you? Is that why I don't like what I see in you now?"

"You don't like what you see in me because you want somebody who is going to run the world, somebody you can show off as an accomplished partner, help you stroke your ego, not somebody real who occasionally has a moment of doubt, regrets, heartache. You want the gloss of a power relationship, but you don't want anything real. The second Michelle needs to rely on you for something, or you see that she isn't this perfect boss in control of everything, you'll find some other strong woman takes your eye." She sounds so full of distaste and scorn.

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised at you lashing out. You've always been cold and calculated," I mutter.

"Funny how strong and independent quickly becomes labelled as cold and calculated when it suits a man's argument," she snaps. She takes a deep breath. "I think you should get some things and leave now, before we both start saying things we mean, but probably should leave unsaid."

"Fine," I snap back at her. I storm out of the kitchen and up the stairs to the bedroom, grabbing my usual travel bags so I can throw some essentials into them.

She doesn't follow me. I'd half expected her to storm up behind me, supervise my packing in case I took anything that she thought was hers only, but she leaves me alone to pack. I shove as many of the things I'll need in the next few days into the bags, my mind elsewhere as I imagine explaining all this to Michelle when I call her later.

When I've finished packing the essentials, I head back down the stairs. Zoey stands next to the front door.

"Here are your keys," she says, hand out, my keys dangling from one finger. She's removed my door keys to the house.

"Whatever," I mutter.

"I'll box up the rest of your things and send them to you," Zoey offers. "Get yourself settled and I'll send everything where you tell me."

"I can't believe you're so calm and rational," I blurt out. I hadn't expected tears and begging, but her indifference is jarring.

"Were you expecting me to turn into a little crying mess? Honestly, Caleb, you couldn't hurt me. I've been through far worse stuff than this. I've had my heart broken so thoroughly by people I've loved beyond measure. Breaking up with a cheating, snivelling man-child couldn't hurt me," she mocks.

I reach for the door handle, desperate to get out of the house, out of the scorn that seems to radiate from her. I open the door, step into the porch, and then turn to look at her.

“I don’t believe you’ve been heartbroken because you’re not capable of loving anybody, Zoey,” I snarl, and then I slam the door, tightening my grip on my bags, and I walk to my car, my head held high.

Zoey



Half an hour after Caleb leaves, I hear the front door open.
“Zoey? I’m here!”

“In the kitchen,” I call back.

“I can’t believe he’s been cheating.” Lizzy’s voice gets louder as she walks towards the kitchen.

“Glass of wine?” I ask once she’s in the kitchen.

“Yeah, go on then.”

I reach for the bottle, top up my glass, and pour her some wine into the second wine glass I’d already gotten out of the cupboard for her.

“I’ll be fine,” I say, pushing the glass across to her.

Lizzy frowns. “I know you’ll be fine, you’re a wonder woman, Zoey, but still, it must be a shock.”

“I think it’s been a long time coming, if I’m honest,” I admit.

I know the writing has been on the wall for our relationship for a long time. Even discounting that my heart wanted to be with somebody else, there have been many times where I’ve known the relationship with Caleb should be over. I should have ended things after my father died. It wasn’t that I needed to lean on Caleb when I found out about his death but knowing that his support wasn’t something

he would offer, that he'd view my floundering as something almost disdainful, that was when I should have ended the relationship.

Actually, I should never even let it get off the ground as a relationship. I've always known that I loved another man more than Caleb, I should never have let things progress and amble along with him, not when my heart would always belong to another. Even now, Aiden's the one who has my heart. I'd told him years ago that I couldn't possibly belong to anybody else, that my heart would always be his. Nothing has changed, except I'm still not strong enough to go back to him and ask for things to change between us.

"Even so..." Lizzy's voice trails off.

"It isn't like I was always faithful," I remind her.

Lizzy's the only person in the world who I've ever told about my affairs with Aiden, how he's been the only man I've ever loved. One night, not long after I'd met Lizzy, I'd had a few too many drinks with her and the whole story had leached out of me. I told her about Caterina, Jonah, Aiden, and the twists in our lives.

I didn't tell her how I planned to make myself a better person, somebody whole, somebody fixed, just so I can finally make my way back to him.

"So, what are you going to do?" Lizzy asks.

Automatically, I think of Aiden. I think about calling him, feel that longing to hear his voice. That pull towards him is always there, but since he gave me the ultimatum, I'm always hesitant to give in. I know I need to be better before I go back to him, calling him as soon as Caleb has left would be wrong. I need to be strong and whole before I call Aiden, and every day I pray I'll get there, and he'll still want me when I reach that milestone.

I force myself to stop letting my mind run wild with thoughts of Aiden. I look at Lizzy and smile.

"I think I'm going to get a cat," I tell her.

"Like a kitten?" she asks, looking bemused.

"No, a cat from the shelter. I'm going to go adopt a cat that needs a home and somebody to look after it," I explain.

"Well, you are nothing if not unpredictable," Lizzy says with a grin. She leans to clink her wine glass against mine. "To Zoey and her new adventures with her cat. I'll come with you to pick one out."

"You're a good friend, Lizzy."

"Why, yes I am." She laughs. "Come on, drink that glass of wine and we'll have another, before I help you demolish that chilli, and we'll pack up Caleb's things together," she suggests.

I do my best to stop my mind wandering back to Aiden, ignore the beat in my heart that almost demands me to call him. Instead, I smile at her and then sip my wine, forcing my attention back onto my friend.