

# Protecting Her Heart - Bonus Epilogue



*This short story takes place six months after the epilogue of “Protecting Her Heart.”*

*As this takes place after the book finishes, it should be read after the book has been read.*

# Zoey



I've read the words on the headstone a million times before, but it doesn't stop me from feeling that familiar thud in my chest when I read them today.

*Caterina Miller. Beloved daughter, sister, friend. Gone too soon. Fly high with the angels.*

I don't think it'll ever not take my breath away. Whether I'm here in the height of summer or the frostiest winter day, here is a place where I tumble through a hundred different emotions and always feel cold. Sometimes, I'm only here briefly, staying only for enough time for the words to ruin me as I put down flowers, run my hand over the top of the headstone and leave. Sometimes I'm here longer, finding myself sitting on the floor next to the headstone, the grass underneath me as I sit crossed legged and pour my heart out, talking to somebody who isn't here anymore and can never answer me back.

Today feels like it will be a long day. I sink to the floor, awkwardly trying to get comfortable. I cross my legs, lean forwards a little to put down the flowers I've picked up for her. Blue hydrangeas today. They symbolise loyalty, sincerity, and, among other things, apology. Every time I have put flowers on her grave, they're always flowers to represent my sorrow, my pain, my dearest wish that I could have changed things.

It will never be right that she was taken from us. It will never be fair. But life isn't fair. Was it fair that I had such a terrible excuse for a father? Was it fair that Aiden lost both his parents to their addiction? Was it fair that he, Grace, and Richard lost Jonah in tragic circumstances? None of it was ever fair, and all of it broke my heart.

I finish putting the flowers into the little metal vase that sits in the centre of her headstone. There are no other flowers today and I wonder when her family will be here. Tomorrow would have been her birthday. I imagine they'll be here then. I wonder if they'll know these flowers are from me, whether they'll leave them here and put their own flowers in the other vases or will there be so many flowers mine will be removed.

I shift on the grass. I slip my hands under my stomach, shifting some of the weight of my bump into a slightly better position. Being seven months pregnant is uncomfortable sometimes, and I probably shouldn't be sitting on the floor in the cemetery, but it feels right when everything about the situation feels wrong.

"Zoey."

The voice behind me startles me but I don't need to turn to know who it is. I know instantly that it is Jessica. I haven't seen her in a long time. The last time I'd seen her was just after Lizzy had attacked me. She'd turned up at Aiden's place, bringing flowers and offering sympathy, but since then, I haven't seen her in person, even when I visit the cemetery. I think we started timing our visits to different days, just to stop seeing what we'd lost when we saw one another. I'm sure when Jessica looks at me, she's reminded of her lost daughter, and when I look at Jessica, all I see is Caterina.

I look up and there she is, Caterina's mother. Caterina was destined to turn into Jessica, they always looked so similar in features, except Caterina is forever frozen in her twenties.

"Jessica," I whisper. She looks different to when I last saw her, but that's to be expected. Time marches on whether we like it or not.

"May I?" she asks, gesturing at the floor beside me. Before I can respond, she sits next to me. She doesn't look bothered at the idea that her dress could get grass stains on it. She sits crossed legged next to me, the bright sunflowers still in her hands.

"How are you all doing?" I ask. We used to ask this question of each other whenever we crossed paths after the funeral. Invariably, it was met with tears and tight throats, words stuck as grief tightened our windpipes. Grief is the universal leveller. It doesn't matter who you are, it doesn't care about your background, when you lose somebody that you love, it destroys you in ways you never contemplated. You're never quite the same afterwards. Nobody gets through it intact.

"Surviving," Jessica replies.

"I heard Ronan retired," I comment. Ronan didn't need to work, he'd made millions early in his career, but he'd always kept himself in the game, though I'd heard he'd finally decided to give up work. Once, he'd told me he loved the buzz he got from working, whether it was making a deal or just seeing a project finalised. He'd always told Caterina he planned to retire at fifty-five and enjoy his life, but in the end, she never saw it as she died the year before.

"Yes, we have been doing a bit of travelling."

"How are..." I start and she smiles at me.

"The boys are fine."

It makes me smile because Caterina's brothers must be in their late thirties now. I wonder how they feel about being called boys by their mother, especially when they have children of their own.

"I haven't been for a few weeks," I say, gesturing at the grave.

"I expect you have had other things on your mind." Her tone is soothing as she looks at me. I wonder if she is now looking at my

wedding band, or the sizeable baby bump I have. She knows that I'm married, she knows Aiden is my husband. We sent a wedding invitation and received a polite decline, accompanied by a beautiful set of crystal wine glasses and a personalised note to wish us a wonderful future together.

"I have been meaning to call, but I wasn't sure it would be welcome," I admit. It feels strange that we drifted in the last couple of years because for the first few years after Caterina died, Jessica and I remained close. There'd never been an argument between us, no fired-up tempers, or a discussion that we wouldn't see one another, just a gradual drifting away. It felt like another loss to me. From the moment I'd met Caterina, her mother had treated me like an extension of the family. She always made me feel welcome. She always took pride in my achievements and remembered the tiny details. She was more like a mother to me than my own.

"May I?" she asks again.

Jessica puts the sunflowers down between us and gingerly raises her hand. I know what she wants to do so I nod and shift a little. She takes a moment but then her hand rests gently on the swell of my stomach. She closes her eyes as her fingers splay across my baby bump. Almost like the baby recognises the placement of Jessica's hand, there is a flurry of little kicks against me. I will never get used to this sensation. Sometimes, late at night, when Aiden is sleeping soundly beside me and I've been woken up by indigestion or racing thoughts, the little bumps and flutters in my stomach make me feel serene, comfortable. My favourite times is when Aiden props himself on the floor when I'm lounging on the sofa, positioning himself near to my stomach, talking away to the baby. He recounts his day as I stroke his hair, feeling those little kicks as the baby responds to the sound of his voice.

Jessica takes a deep breath next to me. She opens her eyes to look at me, a single tear rolling down her cheek.

"I wish she were here. I always imagined that we would be pregnant together, that we'd be going to antenatal classes and shopping for baby items. She'd have been the best godmother and honorary auntie, and I'd have done the same for her. I imagined we'd shared tips about how to avoid morning sickness, and joke about how we were raising the future generation for the company. She'd have held my hair back when I'm throwing up in the office and telling me to focus that in a few weeks, there will be an expansion to our family." I cry as I talk, and I hate myself for it. Pregnancy hormones erode any control I have on my emotions, but it's more than that. I know it's cathartic to talk about it all, instead of holding all those feelings inside of me.

"Zoey," she soothes.

"I don't know how she'd have felt about me having a baby with Aiden, but..." I blurt out, but she raises her hand to cut me off.

"I've told you before, sweetheart, she would have accepted you two. I know she loved Aiden, but that was her past. They were in the past, over a long time before she died. Her love for you, that was what was eternal. She loved you, so much Zoey. You always used to say that she changed your life, but my gosh, do you know how much you changed hers? She went to university to find out who she was, but you helped make her, shaped her. You both made each other better people. All of that, it would have been stronger than a man, no matter who that man was."

I can't stop the fast tears now. They spill over faster than I can wipe them away. I feel weak crying in front of the woman who lost her daughter in tragic circumstances. Jessica, ever the classiest woman I've ever met, fishes a cotton handkerchief out of her pocket and hands it to me.

"I'm sorry," I sniffle, wiping my eyes.

"There's no need to cry, Zoey. It's okay to feel sad, but you have a lovely future ahead of you. You, Aiden, and the baby. I'm happy for you. This is a blessing, sweetheart," she soothes.

I'm hit by a wave of sadness. Not only am I going through this pregnancy without my best friend, but I don't have a mother who is hovering around me, excited about their future grandchild. My mother and I are trying to rebuild our relationship but it's difficult. All we have is faulty foundations and what feels like a lifetime of hurt feelings. Grace is a wonderful mother-in-law, far more than I could ever have hoped for, but I still wish for more, somebody else to be excited for me.

"We're having a girl," I tell her.

"Oh, that's wonderful."

"We have been talking about the name. We can't decide."

Aiden and I have been back and forth for names, right from the day I told him we were going to have a baby. We'd walk through the island we were holidaying on, he'd point something out to me, comment about the beautifully clear waters and suggest names, one after another. When we found out we were expecting a daughter, he got serious and came home with a book of names, searching for something perfect. We settled on Katherine for a middle name, something similar to Caterina without being too close. Some things are inevitable. If we'd been expecting a son, I know we'd have used a middle name to honour Jonah.

"What are you debating between?" Jessica asks.

"Eden and Hope," I reply. I know Caterina had once planned for her daughter to be named Cecelia, a name Aiden and I both love but could never use it.

"Well," she says, smiling, "wouldn't Hope be a wonderful thing."

“Hope Katherine Slater,” I muse.

“Perfect,” Jessica agrees. “Hope Katherine. Beautiful.” There’s a tiny hitch in her tone when she says Katherine.

“I know it would be unusual, but it would mean a lot if you would be open to be in her life. Mine too, and Aiden’s,” I murmur. “Only if you want to, only if it wouldn’t make you uncomfortable,” I blabber on.

“Well, it would be nice to get updates directly rather than from Grace.” She smiles.

“From Grace?”

“Yes, we stay in touch. She sent me the photographs from the wedding. You looked beautiful, and Aiden looked so happy,” she comments.

“I don’t know what to say,” I admit.

I didn’t know Grace and Jessica were still close. At one point in life, they anticipated being in-laws together, there were plans for Aiden and Caterina to marry. I’m sure they’d have had discussions about who would pay for what, maybe got competitive about what colour the mother of the bride would wear and what the mother of the groom would wear, but that was stripped away when Caterina cheated on Aiden, years before our relationship started. It would have been natural for Jessica and Grace never to talk again, but it warms my heart a little to know they still do. It crosses my mind that maybe Jessica reached out after Jonah died, one mother who lost a child comforting another through the worst time of their life.

“Grace was the one who told me you would be here today,” Jessica adds.

“Seriously?”

“I think she felt it would be good for us to talk, face to face. She was right, as usual.” Jessica shrugs. I open my mouth to talk but I



don't know what to say, suddenly overcome with emotions for my mother-in-law, for the relationship we have built together, that there is somebody in the world besides Aiden who cares deeply for me, wants to make my world a better place, wants to make me feel like I'm cherished and loved. "You know, I never thought I'd see a day where you were lost for words," Jessica teases when it's clear I'm struggling for words.

I laugh. "Oh, trust me, there are plenty."

"Are you planning on staying long?" she asks, and again her gaze wanders to the headstone.

"I was just going to sit for a while," I say.

"Then I'll sit with you."

She reaches for my hand, and we sit in silence for a few minutes. It doesn't take long for the words to start flowing, remembering Caterina. We tell story after story about her. Jessica tells me stories about Caterina as a child, the way she'd always had the whole family wrapped around her little finger. I talk about the university years, the fun we'd had together, and how much fun we'd tried to find in the days when we were trying to get the company off the ground. We laugh and cry, and I realise this is the most freely I've spoken about Caterina in years, speaking about her only for the pure joy of remembering her, rather than analysing it with therapists or talking about the guilt I felt about her death. Talking about her because I loved her, rather than denying myself remembering the happy times because I was punishing myself about how it all ended.

When the sun starts to dim in the sky, I smile at Jessica.

"I probably should get going. Aiden's been painting the nursery this afternoon. Apparently, I wasn't helping with my recommendations, but I'd promised him I wouldn't be home too late," I explain.

Jessica gets up and once she's upright, she offers her hand to help me up from the floor. It's not an easy task and I see her smiling slightly, probably thinking about how Caterina would have admonished me for being so silly so sit like that or joked about how heavy I was to pull up.

We walk out of the cemetery together and when we reach my car, Jessica pulls me close for a hug. She's always been a dainty type of hugger, but this is a full *'I've missed you dearly'* type, and I hold her back just as tightly. Before she lets go, she kisses my cheek.

"I'm looking forward to meeting Hope, Zoey. Give Aiden our love, okay?"


"I will. Oh, erm, Grace is throwing a baby shower next week. It would be great if you could be there," I say. I busy myself with looking in my bag as a distraction, searching for my keys, hoping she means it about staying in touch but bracing myself for a rejection. It's a natural reaction, built into me because of years of rejection from my family. Then, when I did find people who never rejected me, I'd been the one to push them away. I'm learning though to lean into those relationships, accept the love that is on offer, live the life that I've got because I know that time is precious.

"Who says Grace didn't already invite me?" Jessica teases.

"You're coming?"

"Yes. I just thought it would be good to meet first, to focus on the baby shower rather than a reunion. Only tears of joy from now on, Zoey."

She gives me a quick kiss on the cheek and then she walks off to her car. I watch as she gets into hers and then I slip into my own car, starting the engine. I pull my phone from my bag to change the volume settings from the silent I'd set it on, seeing I have a text from Aiden.



*Oh, honey, you were right. The blush is so much better than the buttercup. Room is all painted, get home safely so I can show off my handiwork and feed you.*

I smile to myself and type a message back.

*Hope will love it. See you soon, love you.*

When the phone pings, I smile to see the heart emoji he's sent me, telling me he's glad I've finally made my mind up about the name, followed by the words '*love you for eternity.*'

I throw the phone back into my bag and then start the drive, heading home to my husband, feeling light and at peace.