

You Once Called Me Wife |

Chapter 6

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The week leading up to the festival was full of surprises, the biggest one being that the man I hadn't seen in years was suddenly all over the place. I saw him at the diner, the supermarket, and then at the gas station.

Normally, Zane was like an elusive animal: you knew he existed, but you could never find him. Now, he was everywhere. It would be a lie to say that I didn't enjoy having him around; I just didn't know what to think about it.

All week, I wondered if he was flirting with me at the ranch. Part of me thought he was, but the other half wasn't convinced. I was a complete newbie to all this.

So, when I arrived at the festival that Saturday, I decided I would let all my expectations go and just enjoy the day. If Zane was flirting, he would do so again that day. If he wasn't, then we would have fun as friends.

Before meeting up with Zane, I went to talk to my mother, who was preparing for the pie-eating contest. Satisfied that she was doing fine, we made small talk for a while. Then she asked, "Did you hear the rumors going around town about the bank?"

"No..."

"Word is that there have been men all over the bank lately. They looked all official. The teller told my friend that they are there looking into things that have been going on there," Mom said, her brow raised.

"Do people think there's money missing or something?"

I couldn't believe anything like that would happen. Everyone who worked at the bank had been there for years because the Westons treated their employees better than anyone in town. I couldn't imagine one of their workers would do something to hurt the business.

"The teller said that's exactly what they think is going on. Did Chris ever mention anything like this happening when you were married?"

I shook my head. "Never. Chris wouldn't tell me anything about the bank. He acted like the place was locked up tighter than a vault."

Mom shrugged. "The teller also said that the men kept asking everyone if they knew a man named Gavin. She said it felt like they thought this man had something to do with all this."

I couldn't let my past sneak up again, so I decided to put the conversation behind me and instead meet my hopeful future. "Whatever's going on there, I'm glad it's got nothing to do with me," I said just as a voice startled me.

"Don't you look nice today?"

I turned and smiled. Zane looked amazing in a T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. He wore a baseball cap and sunglasses as well.

Mom greeted him, then made her exit.

"You look pretty good yourself," I said. "Annabeth not with you?"

He walked closer and took my hand. "No," he whispered in my ear. "I told you a real man was biding his time, and now he's about to pounce. Do you know who that real man is, Kenzie?"

I shook my head, afraid that if I even breathed I would wake up from this dream.

"Me. I let that asshole take you from me once, and I'm not planning on making that mistake again."

As Zane pulled back and looked me in the eye, my brain ran a hundred miles an hour, trying to understand what he was saying. *Did he like me before I started dating Chris?*

"You never said anything," I whispered.

"That's a conversation for another time. Right now, I want to spend the day getting to know you again and start making my move. I want to claim you as mine."

Dear Lord above, this man is going to melt me into a puddle of goo right here at the church festival.

I felt flushed but managed to shake my head at his words. I didn't know if I would be any good at this, but damn if I didn't want to ride it to the end.

Then I heard an all-too-familiar voice say, "McKenzie?"

When I turned around, I saw Chris. He was holding hands with Opal, but his eyes were focused on where Zane held my hand.

He looked up at me, then at Zane. I saw something cross his vision, maybe hurt, but why would he be hurt when he was the one who wanted us to end? He was the one who had an affair and demanded a divorce.

"Chris. Been a long time since I've seen you around," Zane said. He let my hand go so he could wrap an arm around me.

"Yeah, it has," Chris responded, not looking away from me. "Are you two here together?"

"Yes. We are hanging out today, and then I plan to take her on a date tonight."

I looked at Zane, trying not to show my shock. He never asked me out, so maybe this was his way of helping me out of an uncomfortable situation. Sure, he'd been flirting hard, but that had to be what was going on.

"You always were salty that I got her first," Chris said through clenched teeth. "I guess you're okay with my sloppy seconds."

I snapped. "Well, at least he has the decency to not be screwing around behind my back. So, in truth, he's not getting your sloppy seconds; she's getting mine."

As I took Zane's hand and walked away, I felt anger radiating off him. I kept moving forward, not wanting to face anyone right now.

How could that asshole say something like that? I have not badmouthed him in public once, and there he is saying something so cruel where half the town can hear.

I led Zane to the Ferris wheel and got on without stopping to ask him if he wanted to ride. Once we were strapped in and the car started to move, I asked, eyebrow raised, "Dinner tonight?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I already planned to ask you today, but the asshole made me lose my cool. I swear, McKenzie, I wanted to punch him so hard just now."

"Zane, that wouldn't make a difference. He's not worth getting an assault charge. But I never thought he would be so cruel."

I turned to look out over the festival, and Zane took my hand again. "He was right, you know, about me being upset that he got you. I never said anything because you were younger, and I didn't know if you even felt the same. But then you started dating Chris, and I had to step back."

"Why didn't you say anything?" I asked, looking him in the eye. "I always had a little crush on you. Maybe if you had said something I would've given you an answer that you liked."

He chuckled humorlessly. "Oh yeah? And what would your parents have said if you brought home a twenty-two-year-old boyfriend?"

"They would have been concerned, but I think if it was you, they would've understood and trusted you," I told him honestly.

"Would you have done that?" Zane asked, leaning closer. "Brought me home to your parents?"

My breath hitched. This close, I wanted nothing more than to reach out and kiss him. I might have been in love with Chris all those years, but you never lose feelings for your first love.

"Yes," I answered.

Zane closed the space between us, but just before his lips could touch mine, the ride stopped. He cleared his throat, took my hand, and helped me out of the car.

Judging by the faces of the people waiting in line, they saw everything. I was sure the news would go around the festival in a matter of seconds. My face turned red.

Life in a small town, folks. Gossip was like currency, and everyone wanted a piece of it.

As Zane and I walked around the festival, looking at all the booths with their cute little crafts and foods, the speakers began to crackle. "Pie-eating contest in five minutes at the stage area," the announcer said.

I smiled. "Wanna go watch?"

"Your momma make the pies again?"

"You know it." Mom made the pies every year. It was the only way they could get anyone to compete.

"I'm gonna enter then," Zane said. "Her pies are better than sex."

I spit out the drink I had just taken a sip of and looked at him like he'd completely lost his mind. What kind of sex had he been having if pie was better?

As if hearing my thoughts, he leaned close and whispered, "But don't worry, Kenzie. I'm sure with us it will be explosive."

Zane gave me one last smirk, then left to sign up and get ready. Overwhelmed, I found Annabeth and Erika.

A few minutes later, while we were laughing, Chris and Opal approached. "Did your boy toy already leave you?" she asked.

The look on Erika's face was murderous, so I put my hand on her shoulder, letting her know it was all right. "No," I replied, looking at Chris, "he just joined the pie-eating contest to win me that surprise. He's sweet like that. No one's ever done something like that for me before."

It wasn't a lie. Chris would never lower himself enough to try to win me something. He would say all the games were rigged, and he didn't want to waste his time or money.

"Why don't you try to win it for your mistress, Chris?" Erika said. "I'm sure she could use all the help she can get in remembering why she chose you."

Chris glowered at us but stomped off and signed up for the contest. He took a seat on the stage right next to Zane, and I heard Zane ask, "Do you know how to eat anything without a knife and fork?"

Chris looked like he was ready to explode. Zane, on the other hand, looked as relaxed as he would be lounging at home.

When the contest started, the eaters took off fast. By the second pie, Chris looked ready to be sick, and I couldn't help but hope he lost control. But somehow, he stuck it out.

As the clock counted down the last minute, the only contestants left were Zane and Chris. They were neck and neck, Chris somehow managing to catch up, but my ex looked a little green. The crowd cheered as he tried to pull ahead, but then all at once he grabbed the bucket beside him and buried his head in it.

Zane looked over at him, shrugged, and continued to eat. When the time went off, he stood, smiling, and pulled my mother in for a hug.

After he released her, she walked over to the mic stand. "And we have a winner! Zane Templeton has won a two-person, two-night stay at the Shady Mountain Retreat." In a less excited voice, she added, "Second place is Chris Weston. He's won a free car detailing from AJ's Cleaning Service."

As Zane walked off the stage, he stopped to shake hands with anyone who wanted his attention. I smiled seeing how loved he was by the community.

Then I looked over and saw Opal standing with her jaw clenched, obviously trying not to show her disappointment. Chris walked toward her, still looking like he might be sick at any moment. She reached out for him, but he held his hand out, keeping her at bay. He walked past her, and she quickly followed him like a trained puppy.

"I hope you know I expect you to join me on that two-night stay," I heard Zane say from behind me.

Annabeth and Erika both made kissy faces and exaggerated *oohs*. They were eating this up, but I couldn't blame them. Teasing your friends was a rite of passage around here.

Before I could respond, Zane added, "So, does this win mean I get to take you to dinner tonight?"

He gave me yet another sexy smirk, and all I could think was, *This man has to tone it down or I'm going to combust right here in front of everyone.*

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