

Unbroken
Bonus Scene
Hope Valley
Thea

We spent our fourth afternoon in New Bodega at the Hope Valley farm. All of Hunter's symptoms from the vaccine had finally fizzled to nothing, I'd gotten a sunburn from the deceptively overcast skies while exploring the beach with him and Little Foot, and it was time to get back to work.

I stood at the pasture with Dani to officially meet all eight of the horses we'd be taking back with us—one horse in particular.

"This is Sadie," Dani said as the palomino mare came trotting up to the fence. It was natural to assume Dani had beckoned her with her mind. Sadie whinnied and nudged her, requesting a quick pat.

"She's beautiful," I said. Sadie's coat was the color of Hunter's wheat field in the afternoon sunlight, her mane a blonde tangle that hung around her eyes.

"She loves the kids too—I think she relates to them more than us old farts." Like Sadie knew exactly what Dani was saying, she meandered back out to the pasture to join the other horses with a bit more spunk in her step.

The warm breath of a black gelding fanned across my arm as he inched closer, his ears perked toward us in curiosity. "And who is this beauty?" I asked as he scented my skin, no doubt smelling a mixture of sweat and herbs and summertime goodness from a day of my helping in the fields.

"That's Peanut," Dani explained. "Ceara named him."

I grinned. "Well you're a tall, handsome boy—aren't you, Peanut?" There was movement by the barn and I noticed Hunter walking toward us.

"Oh, geez," Dani groused. She glanced at Ceara, splashing with Jack at a small frog pond between the apple orchard and the farmhouse. "Of course the munchkin's soaked right before the picnic." She flashed me a regretful grin. "I better get her inside and cleaned up before we eat. Zoe's been extra sensitive to smells lately." Dani mimicked a big belly and grimaced. "I don't want to be responsible for Zoe's gag reflex when she gets a whiff of Ceara at the picnic table."

I laughed as Dani jogged toward the pond, Ceara completely oblivious as she giggled and splashed through the mud with Jack. I recalled the warm days of summer when Little Foot and I would play in the Yukon River.

“I remember those days,” I said wistfully, my chin jutting toward the pond as Hunter walked up to me.

He followed my gaze.

“Warm summer sunshine. The boggy scent of the water in the shallows, and wet dog, which I knew I’d get an eye-scolding for later.” With an exaggerated sigh, I smiled. “Those were the days.”

“You had a happy childhood then,” Hunter seemed to think the thought out loud, and his slightly pinched features told me he was surprised.

“Yes, I did.” I tilted my head, waiting for him to say whatever thoughts perplexed him.

“It’s just . . . It’s good to know that. After what happened with your mom and—” My brow crumpled, and Hunter shook his head. His cheeks flushed slightly as he glanced away. “I don’t know why I brought that up. That was insensitive.” He reached through the fence and stroked Peanut’s mane absently.

The fact that Hunter cared much about my past at all was worth more than any discomfort in him bringing it up. “It’s fine,” I said. The wood poked into my back as I leaned against the pasture fence, but I barely noticed. I’d been thinking about what Becca had told me, about how I was exactly who I needed to be, and I realized that, regardless of my future, I knew she was right, even if I struggled to forget the past sometimes. “We both have things we don’t want to remember, but sometimes we don’t get the choice,” I said.

Hunter’s head angled slightly, as if he was surprised by my sudden optimism.

“It’s part of who we are, right? The good and the bad parts.”

He practically snorted and draped his arms over the fence. “I don’t think you have any bad parts, Thea.”

“Ha! Oh, I do, trust me. In fact, I think you’re one of the only people who’s seen some of the worst in me, and not always for good reason.”

“Maybe, but you’ve never said anything to me I didn’t deserve at the time.”

“That’s not true,” I admitted, staring into his eyes. They shined like liquid amber in the afternoon, yet were clouded like wood smoke too, housing so much pain and longing and strength, all at the same time . . . I couldn’t have forced myself to look away if I’d tried.

“Well, your intentions have always been good, at least,” he said, and he was the one who looked away, breaking the spell.

“Oh, and yours haven’t?”

Hunter glanced at me, his chiseled jaw slightly dusted with scruff. He paused from petting Peanut’s nose and dropped his hand.

“Uh-oh, I’ve said something wrong,” I muttered, only half joking. “And we were doing so well.”

His gaze swept the pasture and he shook his head. “No, nothing wrong. But you do make me question a lot of things,” he mused. I had to bite my tongue from asking more questions. As much as I wanted to know everything there was to know about the mysterious Hunter, it didn’t feel right to ask either, and the tension was already thickening between us again.

“Come and get it, guys!” Kat called to us from the picnic tables they’d moved out onto the lawn. Bert was spreading out blankets, and Jake and Jason carried racks of meat out to the buffet. Becca, Annie, and Alex followed behind them with other dishes, setting food along the line of picnic tables so the fourteen of us could eat together.

Hunter and I said goodbye to Peanut and made our way around the pasture.

“They wouldn’t even let me help move tables,” Hunter grumbled, glancing at the cluster of people hustling around, getting dinner set up. “I’m not sure if they think I’m contagious, or if they think I might break.”

I nudged his shoulder, trying not to laugh. “Hey, just accept it. You’re taken care of here, instead of taking care of someone else. This is what it feels like.” I inhaled a deep breath and exhaled. “Relish it.”

Hunter looked at me, unmoved, and was about to say something snide when we heard a familiar chuckle behind us.

Glancing back, we found Harper swinging his daughter, Zayleigh, up onto his shoulders. She giggled. Her tawny hair was in pigtails with wisps that fluttered in the breeze, and her eyes were bright green, like her father’s.

“She’s adorable, isn’t she?” I asked, my attention shifting to Hunter.

He watched the little girl and nodded, and I saw a spark of amusement in his eyes. “As if you’ve ever found a kid you didn’t think was adorable.”

“Ha! That’s a fair assessment,” I conceded.

A small smile tugged at Hunter’s mouth.

“She looks just like you, Harper,” I said as he and Zayleigh drew closer.

Harper’s grin widened as he eyed the both of us up and down. “Wow, it’s amazing what a little sleep can do,” he joked. “You both look reborn.”

“It’s not the sleep,” I told him as he fell into step beside us. “It’s the ocean.” I looked at Hunter. “Don’t you think? It’s rejuvenating.”

Hunter smirked, an expression I found myself craving. “Sleep helps a little, though.”

With a chuckle, Harper shook his head. “I wouldn’t know anything about it.” He glanced up at Zayleigh as she pulled at his hands.

“Hurry, Daddy.”

“Dustin . . .” The three of us paused.

“Uh-oh, Daddy’s in trouble,” Harper muttered. I knew immediately it had to be Chris, because, according to him, she was the only one who called him by his first name.

She walked toward us, distracted as she pilfered through the bag slung over her shoulder. She wore cargo pants, a tank top, and her hair was up in a blonde bun, just like Kat’s always was. “Where’s Zay’s drops? Did you bring them?”

His expression fell. “Shit.”

“Daddy!” Zayleigh giggled and leaned forward to look at Harper, her hair flopping in front of him and hanging in his face.

“I mean, poop,” he corrected himself. He moved Zayleigh’s curtain of hair to the side. “We used the last of them the other day—I forgot to get another with everything going on.”

“What’s the tincture for?” Hunter asked. “If you don’t mind my asking.”

“Headaches,” Chris groaned. She sighed, as if she’d given up looking for a hidden or forgotten vial tucked away somewhere. “She has Harper’s *gift*, and sometimes it’s too much for her.”

Fleeting, I thought of Fiona’s Ability, which resembled both Alex and Sophie’s. Being a conduit for amplified feelings and emotions wasn’t exactly easy for a five-year-old either. Suddenly, growing up with my Ability didn’t seem all that bad.

“I brought a flat of salves and tinctures from Henni,” Hunter said. “I know there’s some of her iris-cayenne remedy in there. It helps with headaches. I’ll go grab you one.”

Chris’s blue eyes lit up. “Oh, would you? Thank you. It would make me feel better.”

“It’s the least I can do,” Hunter told her. “Especially since I was the distraction.”

“Hey,” I said, grabbing onto his bicep as he turned away. Hunter stilled, his eyes shifting from my fingers to me. I dropped my hand and cleared my throat. “The stuff from the village is inside the barn.” I shrugged. “A person could get lost in there, if you don’t know where to look.” I figured Hunter could use the warning, since he hadn’t been around when we’d unloaded them. “The flat of tinctures is on the ground, next to the jams.”

Hunter’s lips pursed. “Thanks.” With a dip of his chin, he headed in that direction.

“Come on, Zay,” Harper said, spinning around. “We’ll go help him so you can see the kitties while we’re at it.”

“Okay!” she squeaked, and they walked back toward the barn.

Chris looked at me with an exhausted sigh and shook her head. “Sorry, I’m Chris,” she said, extending her hand.

“Thea.” I grinned. “You have a wonderful husband,” I told her. “And a beautiful little girl. She has your freckles. I *love* freckles.”

Chris laughed. “Thank you to both, and yes, she does have my freckles. And my temper.”

We started toward the picnic again; the group was already serving themselves food. “She has a prophecy Ability then, like Becca and Harper?”

“Yes,” Chris said. “Of course it keeps getting stronger. Zay gets headaches sometimes when she has visions. And when I’m around, they aren’t so bad, because I can generally help soothe her a bit with my cerebral fingers, but—” Chris shook her head. “I’m not always around.”

“I never thought about having to worry about something like that,” I realized.

Chris laughed. “Me either. It’s definitely different, worrying about these sorts of things now. With my boys—” She paused, as if she hadn’t meant to broach the past. “Well, you didn’t used to have to worry about developing Abilities and remedies.” She flashed me a weak smile.

“True, but at least you have Harper around. He’ll come up with some magical elixir for her one of these days.”

Sam and Ceara scuttled past us with pitchers of ice tea. “Sorry, sorry!” he said, and they set them on the tables. Ceara’s hair was in a damp braid after getting cleaned up, but I noticed

she already had a wet stain on her shirt. “We had a bit of a setback, but it’s all fixed now,” Sam explained. “Drinks are ready.” He winked at Ceara, as if they had a secret, and she looked sheepishly at her father as he walked up.

“Trouble again, you little rascal?” Jason said, and he leaned down to kiss the top of Ceara’s head. “I’d have it no other way.”

“Yep—come on, Jack!” she called, and she ran off again.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get your plate ready,” Jason muttered, and he glanced at me with a smile. “Grab some grub, Thea. There’s short ribs over there, and a birdy told us you love honey. Zoe made her famous honey butter corn on the cob over there. It’s about the only thing she can make, but—”

Zoe stopped beside him and punched his shoulder.

He glared at her. “Where the hell did you come from?”

“Pregnancy gives you supersonic hearing, Jason. Didn’t you know?” With a smirk, she poured herself a cup of lemonade.

He looked at me, shaking his head. “I don’t know how she does that.”

“I’ll never tell,” Zoe said, and surveyed the food on the tables. “But I *am* ravenous.” She rubbed her belly and licked her lips, as if her mouth was suddenly watering.

With a chuckle, I got into line behind them. “I’m definitely going to have some corn. And the ribs—I can’t remember the last time I had beef anything.”

“I’ll tell you what,” Jason said, plopping a blackberry from the fruit salad into his mouth. “You eat all the beef you want, and I’ll eat your portion of those moose meatballs you made.”

I laughed. “You’ve got yourself a deal. Those are one of Jackson’s signature dinners.”

When I finished heaping food onto my plate, Zoe and I sat at one of the picnic tables out of the way.

“Don’t mind me,” she said as she squatted down on the bench across from me. “I’m just going to pig out now.”

Sam was already sitting beside her. “Thanks for the warning,” he muttered, and scooped a spoonful of potato salad into his mouth. With his baseball cap on backward, his blue eyes gleamed in the sunlight.

I hadn’t had more than a few bites when Hunter plopped down on the bench beside me, he and Sam glancing at one another before we all fell into companionable silence. I eyed a

strawberry from the fruit salad on my fork, imagining how much sweeter it would taste with a bit of honey.

As if he were in my thoughts, Hunter slid an open jar of it toward me with a barely-there smile.

My breath stilled.

“I snagged the jar from the other table,” he said.

“You—are awesome. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Hunter’s cheek rounded with a grin, and my heart melted, just a little.