

Zar – Zenarian Series Book 1

Chapter One

Callie stood on the balcony of her luxury apartment overlooking Cincinnati, Ohio. It was eight in the evening on a Friday night. The city was lit with the colorful lights of the nightlife. She glanced down at the wine glass she held in her hand. The crystal was easily eighty dollars. The white wine was from a bottle she'd snagged from her father's prized collection. When she'd purchased the expensive, long-stemmed glass it'd seemed important because she'd paid for it with her first paycheck as CEO of HealthTec, Incorporated. Blood, sweat and tears had gone into that title. Late nights and little sleep. Callie earned the position and she'd earned the wine glass. And what the hell was it all for? So she could stand in her fancy, two-bedroom, spacious high-rise apartment with her spectacular view alone on a Friday night? Happiness was supposed to come with the CEO position. She was supposed to earn her father's admiration and respect finally. God knows buckets of determination had gone into achieving a certain level of success. Her father respected hard work. He understood ambition. And still he looked right through her. She wasn't the child he'd wanted. She had made the horrible mistake of being born a girl. Then her mother had died as a result of a brain aneurysm, and he'd been left without his precious, male heir.

HealthTec had been her father's brainchild. He cared more about the company than he did his own flesh and blood. Not that it mattered. Callie knew at the age of ten that her father was never going to be the doting dad. Her friends had parents that would come to class plays and show up for teacher conferences. Her father had always been too busy building his empire to care about his only child's education. Why had she thought becoming CEO of the company he treasured above all else in life would mean something to him. Her cell phone chimed and she looked at the message on the screen. A work email. Callie didn't get messages from friends or loved ones.

That would imply she actually had friends and loved ones. And she was the one to blame for that. She'd sacrificed so much and for what? A fancy apartment, nice car, and pretty wine glasses. God, she was pathetic.

A beeping noise came from the front of her apartment signaling a call from the doorman. She went inside, then closed and locked the sliding glass door. She placed her wine glass and cell phone on the Brazilian agate coffee table that her father had purchased for her last birthday. The unique teardrop shape would cause lots of oohs and ahhs if she ever had company. In fact, most of her one-of-a-kind furniture and artwork would have any designer salivating. Her busy schedule and lack of friends meant no one but her had ever appreciated the décor.

With her thoughts heading south by the second, Callie walked across the room to the intercom and pushed a button on the display. "Yes, Fred?"

"Ms. Wilson, I'm sorry to interrupt but there's a man here who insists on speaking with you. He says he knows your father."

Odd that an associate of her father's would show up at her apartment. "Name?"

"He says his name is Mr. Zenarian," Fred replied.

She had no idea who it could be, but she had to wonder if it had something to do with her father's newest decision to discontinue one of their products. Their company was responsible for creating a genetically modified form of ginseng that promised a boost in metabolism. In theory the powdery substance should've flown off the shelves, but that hadn't happened. Probably

because it didn't work as claimed. At least, it hadn't worked as well as claimed. Epic failure. Something not to be tolerated by the mighty Quinn Wilson. Someone had dropped the ball during testing and her father was still spitting mad over it.

Callie pushed the button on the intercom and said, "I'll be down in a moment, Fred. Thank you."

"Of course, Ms. Wilson." Callie went to the bathroom and checked her appearance. Her hair was still pulled back into a French twist. Her makeup still appeared as fresh as when she'd put it on at six o'clock that morning. She even had on the black skirt and white blouse she'd worn to work. "God, my life is dull," she mumbled to her reflection, half expecting her image to disagree with her. She flicked the light switch, then grabbed her cell phone from the coffee table before taking her purse and keys from the table next to the door. Callie left her apartment, locking up behind her. It was a secure building in a safe neighborhood, but her dad had drilled it into her early on that there were bad people everywhere. When she was fifteen, he'd enrolled her in self-defense classes. By the time she was twenty-two she'd taken shooting lessons and possessed a concealed carry license for the gun in her purse. Never let it be said that her dad did anything half-assed.

She took the elevator to the lobby and when she stepped out she was brought up short by a tall man with long silver hair. He had to be at least six-foot-six. He was built linebacker tough and when she approached, his gaze swung her way. She couldn't look away from the silver-grey eyes and half wondered if maybe they were contact lenses. Hair dye too probably. Had to be.

She walked towards him, noticing the way he tensed, his eyes narrowing. "Hello, you must be Mr. Zenarian," she said with a smile, hoping to put the man at ease. "I'm Callie Wilson. What can I do for you?"

He reached out and shook her hand. His skin was warm, the skin of his hand a little rough. “My boss wishes an audience with you, Ms. Wilson.”

Okay, that was cryptic. “I’m not sure who your boss is, Mr. Zenarian, but you’re welcome to call my office on Monday and set up a meeting.”

“That’s unacceptable,” he replied, his voice deep and edged with steel. “Now, is preferable.”

She laughed. Who did this guy think he was? “I’m sorry, but I’m busy at the moment. Please have your boss call my office.” She turned to leave, but suddenly the man was in front of her. How had he gotten around her so fast? She hadn’t even seen him move.

“If you do not wish for your doorman to die a painfully slow death, you will come with me. Now..”

Callie’s heartbeat sped up at the threat. She tensed and reached inside her purse for her gun, but he stopped her with a hand on hers. He squeezed, not painfully, but enough to drive his point home. He inclined his head towards the front of the lobby and Callie followed his line of sight. Fred sat behind the front desk, completely oblivious to the threat that surrounded them.

She shot an angry glare at the stranger. “What is this about?”

“Come with me and you’ll soon learn,” he stated, his voice dropping to a whisper. “I mean you no harm, Ms. Wilson.”

She stood firm, afraid if she left the safety of the building she might not be coming back. “How do I know you won’t just kill me as soon as we walk out those doors?”

“You do not, but if you resist then I’ll be forced to hurt your doorman because he will come to your aid,” he stated, his voice totally devoid of emotion. “I don’t think you want that.”

She looked at Fred again. She’d known him a short time, but he was kind to her. He had kids, grandkids. A wife of fifty years. The need to defend herself warred with her need to keep Fred from harm. In the end the choice was clear. “I’ll go, but if you hurt him in any way, I’ll shoot you.”

Some emotion flickered in his silver eyes and he almost smiled. “I believe you, Ms. Wilson. But I have given my word that Fred will come to no harm. I keep my word.”

She sighed. “The word of a kidnapper. Terrific,” She grumbled.

He took hold of her arm and led her out the front door. Fred waved and told her to have a good evening. She wanted to give him some signal that she was definitely not going to have a good evening. She was being kidnapped for Christ’s sake.

Once outside her kidnapper leaned close to her ear and whispered, “I’ve stated you are in no danger. When your meeting with my boss is concluded I will return you to your home.”

Callie clutched her purse tighter and waited for the opportunity to pull out the gun hidden inside and save herself from the bizarre situation. He led her to a big, black SUV with blacked-out windows. Was he a drug dealer? What the hell? He pulled open the passenger side door and

stepped back for her to get in. Once seated, he held out a hand. "I'll take the purse, Ms. Wilson." When she hesitated, his gaze narrowed. "Now."

She handed it over, along with her only chance at possible escape. He slammed the door shut and came around the front and got in behind the wheel. She watched him pull out her gun and slide it inside his jacket pocket, before stashing her purse under his seat. Unless she was able to overpower the giant man, not likely, her chance of getting to her gun just went up in flames. Callie tried the handle, but it wouldn't budge. She searched for a lock and came up empty. No way out. Were the windows bullet proof too? The entire situation was starting to feel like something out of a movie. Mobsters came to mind. Her father was wealthy. Was she being held for ransom?

She looked over at the stranger with the intense eyes and oddly beautiful hair. "If it's money you want, my father will pay. This isn't necessary."

He didn't respond. "It's not necessary to take such drastic measures."

"Money is not an issue. It's you my boss wishes an audience with, Ms. Wilson."

How was that possible? She'd lived her entire life alone. She didn't have friends, much less enemies. "I don't even know your boss. If you would only tell me what this is about then maybe I can help."

He took his gaze off the road for a brief moment and looked at her. If it were at all possible it seemed his eyes glowed. God, I'm losing it. "Seriously, I can just speak to him on the phone and clear this up. I think it must be a case of mistaken identity."

“You are Callie Wilson. You work at HealthTec, Incorporated. You reside at 222 East Seventh Street. You are twenty-five years old. Your income is—”

She held up a hand in surrender. “Yeah, yeah. Not mistaken identity. I get it.”

“All will be clear soon,” he said, his voice annoyingly calm. “It’s a long drive so you might want to get some sleep.”

She rolled her eyes at the absurd statement. “Sure, because I’m not at all freaked out over the fact you just kidnapped me.”

He shoved a hand through his hair, the first sign that he wasn’t as cool and collected as he appeared. “I do not like that term.”

“Kidnapper?” his lips thinned. “Uh, too bad. That’s what you are since you quite clearly kidnapped me.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “It’s a crime, by the way. Kidnapping. You will go to prison for this.”

“This is not a kidnapping. The term implies that you are being taken and kept against your will. That is untrue. My boss wishes an audience with you that is all. As I’ve stated before no harm will come to you. You will be returned as soon as the meeting is concluded.”

He turned a corner and Callie realized he was driving her out of town. The thought terrified her.

“Where are we going?”

He was silent for another few miles and she really didn't think he would answer. When he finally did, she noticed his voice had softened. "The meeting isn't held near here. It's two hours at least."

It didn't escape her notice that he didn't actually give her the name of a city or town. She also didn't know the name of his so-called boss. Callie wasn't sure what was going on. He swore it had nothing to do with her father, but it was the only logical explanation. The only person that her father had pissed off enough to seek revenge was Edward Sinclair III. He was her father's old business partner. Edward originally had the idea to use the genetically modified ginseng, but her father had stolen the concept, then he'd sold his half of the business back to Edward and started his own company. Her father had effectively killed Edward Sinclair's business when he'd left. It'd been over eight years ago, but Edward definitely still held a grudge against her father. Maybe Edward was done watching from the sidelines as HealthTec raked in the dough. He'd come to collect.

Callie would figure out the why later. First, she needed to get away from Mr. Ice. She started to formulate a plan of escape. At some point her kidnapper would need to gas up the vehicle. Or she could make like she had to use the bathroom. Somehow, she'd get him to stop the SUV. She could get away from him then. She only needed to be patient and wait for the right moment. A depressing thought struck then. No one would even miss her. God, her own dad probably wouldn't even miss her. At least until Monday when she didn't show up for work. How pathetic? She didn't have friends who would come check on her. Her dad didn't spend time with her outside of work. She couldn't even remember the last time they'd shared a meal together unless it was a business lunch or dinner. How had she let her life get so lonely?

Callie pushed those maudlin thoughts away and looked back over at the man taking her God knows where. She was struck again by the sheer beauty of him. His hair flowed down around his shoulders to the middle of his back. The silvery color shown in the dim light from the dash. She'd never seen anything quite so brilliant before. Certainly not out of a box. No way was it the man's real color though. And he was tall enough to barely fit into the car without skimming the roof. He kept twitching his heavily muscled shoulders as if he were uncomfortable. The black suit he wore with the crisp white shirt beneath was tailor-made to his frame. She knew clothes and this man wore a suit that cost upwards of three grand easily. Probably more considering it fit him like a glove. He seemed to sense her staring at him and he glanced her way, flashing those grey eyes. They looked right through her, as if he could read her thoughts. It was not a comfortable sensation.

“What's your name?” Maybe if she got him talking he'd see her as a human being and not just a job. Maybe he'd sympathize with her.

“Mr. Zenarian,” he said, as his gaze went back to the road. “But you know this already.”

“No, I mean your first name.”

He seemed to hesitate, but then came to some kind of decision. “Flare.”

She couldn't have heard him right. “Say again?”

“My name. It's Flare.”

Ookay. “Um, that’s very unusual. Are you from a different country, Flare?” Could he be Russian? Oh, God, please don’t be the Russian mob.

“I live in this country.”

Lordy, it was like pulling teeth with this guy. “But were you originally from somewhere else? Russia maybe? You have a slight accent.”

A hint of a smile played at the corners of his mouth. “I am not Russian. My ancestors were not from here, but I was born here. So, that means I’m not foreign.”

“Oh, okay. You don’t look like the typical men I see around here, that’s all. I mean, your hair alone makes you stand out.”

He frowned over at her, taking his gaze from the road for a for few seconds. “What’s wrong with my hair?”

God, she’d actually offended him. She’d offended her kidnapper. Nice going, dipshit. “Nothing at all. It’s beautiful. The color is just very unusual.” She fisted her hands in her lap before continuing. “So, Flare, you mentioned your boss wants a meeting with me. Can you tell me what it’s about?”

“My task is to pick you up and bring you to him, Ms. Wilson. You will have to hold your questions for him.”

Meaning he didn't know or wasn't willing to share? She didn't know which. "What's his name? I feel like I at least have a right to know who I'm meeting with."

"His name is Zar," Flare said. "He will treat you well. You have nothing to be concerned about."

Another strange name. What is up with these people? "If Zar wanted a meeting why didn't he come himself? He could have. I wouldn't have turned him away." Callie wasn't sure that was strictly the truth, but Flare didn't need to know that.

She watched as he clenched and unclenched his fists around the steering wheel. "It wouldn't have been a good idea," he answered, the softness in his voice beginning to disappear. "The trip would've made him...sick."

Callie glanced out the passenger window as she digested that information. Was boss man elderly maybe? The more information she pried out of the guy the less likely it seemed that all of this had anything to do with her father's old business partner. Maybe it really was about her. But why? Had she made an enemy that she wasn't aware of?

A chime sounded interrupting her thoughts. She looked over and saw Flare take out a cell phone. He glanced at the screen, then put it back in his pocket. "We will stop to refuel."

Callie's heart sped up. Okay, this was her chance. Somehow, she needed to get away. A single moment while he was distracted, that's all she'd need to run and find help. Her life depended on it.

“You’re thinking to escape,” he stated, his voice totally devoid of emotion.

What the hell? He really could read minds. “I’m not,” she lied. “I’m just scared.” That part was true at least.

“I know you want to get away. It’s what I’d do in your situation.”

“Then take me back home!” she cried, feeling more than a little frantic. “Set up a phone meeting or have your boss go through the proper channels. Hell, I’m even willing to meet him halfway somewhere. Neutral ground as it were. But simply taking me and forcing me to go with you is unacceptable.”

“I regret that the situation is so distressing to you,” he said in a gentle voice. “I know that you don’t have any reason to trust me, but I swear on my life that you are not in any danger. You must believe that.”

There was desperation in his tone. As if he really did mean what he said. As if he really didn’t want to cause her any harm. Did she dare believe him? Pfft, hell no, because her life clearly depended on it. Without thinking, Callie reached across the middle console and grabbed hold of the steering wheel. She yanked, taking Flare off guard. The car swerved into oncoming traffic and Flare cursed. He pried her fingers off the wheel and shoved her, hard. She smacked her head into the dash. Everything sort of spun and she felt something trickle down her forehead. Callie shook her head, but that only made everything tilt sideways. “Oh, God,” she groaned. The short surge of adrenaline disappeared like smoke. Someone touched her shoulder, but she couldn’t

make herself focus. She closed her eyes. Just for a minute, until the nausea wears off. That was the last she remembered before the blackness sucked her in.

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