



Carlos: Trilogy: Part Two

Author: *Elise Gedicke*

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Description: Carlos Santiago, Sheriff with the Mount Grove Police Department, has been at odds with himself, his brother, and the VDMC for nearly six months. The war between right and wrong, lawful and unlawful, rages in his head and heart. Carlos fears losing himself to anarchy.

Zoe Rutterson is on the run from the law—and a life in hiding is no life at all for her young son. Sheriff Carlos extended a hand of friendship to her and, despite her reservations, she finds herself drawn to the small-town officer. When her secrets are revealed, is she really ready to put her trust in the law for the sake of her and her son's freedom?

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PROLOGUE

Zoe Rutterson jumped at the sharp, unexpected rapping on the front door. Her eyes immediately flew over to where her toddler son lay, sleeping soundlessly in his crib on the far side of the one-room cabin.

Brooke, the mountain woman who had been dropping off supplies to Zoe, pulled a revolver out from the small of her back. It was early fall and the mountain air was growing cooler. Brooke and the others who dwelled on this mountain were helping Zoe prepare for her second long winter. Though daunting that she and Kyle would be stuck in the cabin for four to six months, it was also a relief. The same harsh winter weather that kept them secluded on the mountain, would keep others off the mountain.

Still, she had to continuously remind herself that she'd survived last winter: she could survive this one too.

Brooke was taller than Zoe, around five-seven. She had long blonde hair and bright blue eyes. Her skin was naturally tanned from long hours in the mountain sun. She was also more of a badass than Zoe could ever hope to be. The former NYPD detective had created a living for herself on this Montana mountain. She and her fellow mountaineers worked with a local in town named Jack to help protect those who needed a home, a safe haven. Zoe didn't know the full extent of their network, and honestly, didn't want to. She was no warrior woman—not like this Brooke.

The woman looked like she could hold her own against any opponent without her gun. In comparison, Zoe had allowed herself to be verbally and physically abused by

her husband for three plus years. He'd forced her to have sex with him when he desired, even immediately after she'd given birth to their son. Brooke was so strong. She weathered and thrived in this harsh environment like she was born to the wilderness.

Zoe could never see a woman like Brooke being at the mercy of any man.

Brooke approached the door with caution. The handgun frightened Zoe, but then again, she'd only ever held a gun once in her life—the morning she'd murdered her husband.

Brooke threw the door open, her gun trained on whoever was outside. Zoe was standing in front of her son's crib and could not see the doorway. She could see Brooke lower her gun, though. "Jack didn't say you were coming."

A man entered the cabin. He was average height for a man with sandy brown hair cropped in a military fashion. His eyes were almost golden, a unique shade of amber. They brightened when they landed on her.

Since the abuse started in her marriage, there had only been one man whom Zoe felt entirely safe with: Conner.

He'd been the one to set in motion the events that had led to her being in a cabin in the middle of a Montana mountain. Mind, his plan had been to get her and her son away from her abusive husband instead of having to break her out of police custody after she'd shot her husband, but the end result was essentially the same.

"What are you doing here?" Zoe rushed forward to meet him. "Based on your last letter, you weren't coming for another couple of weeks."

"I was able to get leave early," he answered with a soft smile. "I know it's coming up

on the one-year anniversary and I wanted to be here for you.”

A year... Somehow, it had been a year since she'd murdered her husband. The date had snuck up on her. She hadn't been paying attention. Time seemed to have little meaning on the mountain.

The fact that Conner had taken leave so he could be here to support her, though... Well, that just filled her chest with warmth. She didn't know what else to say except, “Thank you,” because she meant it.

Brooke moved towards the open cabin door, tucking her gun into the small of her back again. “Clara, I'll be going now. Remember, you have three go-bags in the woods.” She pointed in the direction of each of the three. “Get Kyle, get a bag, and run. Send up a flare when you can.”

Zoe nodded once. Brooke and the rest of the mountain men only knew her by her alias of Clara Everwood and her son as Kyle. She didn't know if Jack knew her real name, but suspected he did. “Thank you for everything, Brooke.”

Conner waited for Brooke to leave before he turned to Zoe. “Is everything okay? Why is she telling you about go-bags and flares?”

Zoe shook her head. “Everything's fine. She says the same thing every time before she leaves. I think of it as her parting line.”

Conner still looked worried. “No one should know you're here. Jack hasn't said anything to me otherwise.”

“She's just being cautious,” Zoe assured him. “Come in, sit down. I'm sure you're tired from your trip. I feel bad that you're torn between coming here and staying with your grandpa.”

“Owen is going to see him,” Conner told her as he sat on her small couch.

The cabin was a single room with a kitchenette, a fireplace, a couch, a kitchen table, a queen bed, a dresser, and Kyle’s crib. She was getting better at referring to her son as ‘Kyle’. It helped that she did not want to call her son the name of her dead husband. She had never liked that Kyle had been named after Davis, but she hadn’t been given the choice on what her son’s name would be. She had no doubt that Davis would have cared if Kyle had been born a girl. He’d been very vocal about needing to have a son. As soon as it was known that they were having a boy, Davis had announced their son’s name without even asking her if she had a different one in mind.

She’d always liked Andy or Andrew. ‘Kyle’ was a nice name, but again, not one she would have chosen if she was re-naming her son.

“Does Owen take on your identity when he goes?” Zoe had been holding in that question for a long time. Owen was Conner’s twin brother. As far as the world knew, he was dead, killed in action years ago. Zoe had been with Mr. Arnold, the twins’ grandfather, when he’d gotten the news that one of his grandsons had been killed.

Then, last year, Zoe had been let in on the secret: Owen wasn’t dead. She didn’t know why he’d faked his death or how, but she knew she was only one of a few people in the world who knew that Owen was still alive.

Conner nodded. “It’s one of the reasons I was able to get here. I have an alibi if anyone questions where I go on my leave.”

Zoe bit her lip. “Can I ask... I mean, it’s really none of my business, but was Owen ever you when I was working at the nursing home?”

Conner studied her for a long minute before he admitted, “Twice. I don’t think he had any interaction specifically with you. If you’re asking which one of us confronted you

about your bruises and told you to call me if you ever needed anything, that was me.”

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Relief filled her. She wasn't sure how she'd feel if any of those conversations had been with Owen. To her, Owen was a stranger with Conner's face.

"How are you?" Conner asked her with a studious look. "Really?"

Zoe let out a shaky breath. "Most days, it seems like a dream. If it wasn't for Kyle, I'm pretty sure I could convince myself that I made my whole marriage up. Then there are the dreams and feeling the gun in my hand but not remembering pulling the trigger. Every sound I hear is the hitmen or the police or a rabid bear." She shrugged self-deprecatingly. "But I'm alive—all thanks to you. I know that I never would have made it out of the courthouse that day if you hadn't sent Owen to help me. I just..." Her voice trailed off as she looked at her son. "I just don't know what sort of life this is for Kyle. Right now, it's fine. He's too young to know the difference, but there's going to be a time in the future where I have to consider his wellbeing over my freedom."

Conner scooted closer to her on the couch. "You will never have to worry about that. I'm getting out soon. I only have another year and then I'm free. Once that happens, I'll find a place to settle down and I'll send for you. We'll raise Kyle together and you'll be free, Zoe. I promise."

It sounded too good to be true. A pipe dream. She would never be free of her past so long as Davis's parents were as powerful as they were greedy.

They talked for a few more hours before Zoe got up to make dinner. Conner offered to help, which she accepted gratefully. Davis had not believed in helping in the kitchen. Conner even offered to feed Kyle so Zoe could eat uninterrupted.

Looking at Conner holding her eighteen-month-old son, she couldn't help the smile on her face. "You're going to make a great father someday," she told him.

He looked up at her and met her smile. "Someday. After I meet the right lady," he added.

Not for the first time did Zoe try to find a hidden meaning in his words or a concealed look in his eyes. Conner had never said or done anything to make her think that he viewed her as more than a friend.

But what other reason could there be for why he'd done all of this for her if he didn't have feelings for her?

"She's out there," Zoe said softly. "And she's going to need to be amazing to be worthy of you."

Because it wasn't Zoe. She'd loved once and look how that turned out. No, she was done in the love category. She'd checked and destroyed that box off her bucket list. Zoe had her son and she had Conner, platonic though the relationship was. Besides, she was living on the side of a mountain in the middle of Nowhere, Montana. A man would literally have to fall into her lap out here.

Zoe offered him her bed, as the couch was far too small for a man of his size, but Conner wouldn't hear of it. He bunked on the floor by the front door. As Zoe laid awake, she wondered about the pipe dream Conner had mentioned. It could never be, but still, it was tempting. A fantasy. A father for Kyle and a home where she was safe, loved, and respected.

Sighing in frustration, Zoe rolled over onto her belly. It could never be. Conner was sweet to think it was, but it wasn't realistic.

Still, she dreamed that perhaps love would find her again...

CHAPTER 1

Sheriff Carlos Santiago immediately had to bite his lips closed when the door in front of him opened. For a moment, he couldn't breathe.

"Not a fucking word, asshole," his older brother warned in a low, menacing voice. The threat, however, was dispelled by the red lipstick, green eyeshadow, pink blush, and multicolored nail polish his six foot-five older brother was wearing.

Even their mother, whom Carlos had brought over to Bulldog's house, was having trouble keeping a straight face. Though she put a hand to her mouth, a muffled giggle still escaped.

"Daddy!" came shouting from behind Bulldog. He turned to find his six-year-old daughter rushing towards him. Lila was wearing a very odd outfit that somehow fit her personality perfectly. She was dressed in red leggings with a pink tutu and a blue bathing suit top. The devil-horned hairband held up the sparkly princess crown atop her head.

She put her hands on her hips and stared her father down like there wasn't a three-and-a-half-foot height difference between them. "Your hair's still not done for my tea party."

Carlos's eyes landed on his brother's bald head.

Bulldog glanced at Carlos and said in a soft, pained voice, "She means the beard."

The fact that Bulldog was able to translate his daughter's statement told Carlos this wasn't the first tea party his brother was attending. Bulldog was then dragged away

by his daughter to complete his hairdo.

Chuckling, Louisa stood on her tiptoes and kissed Carlos's cheek. "Thank you for the ride, mio figlio. Have fun shopping today."

"I want pictures," he whispered to his mom as she walked past him.

His mom just winked before closing the door.

Zoe watched from the passenger seat of Carlos's police cruiser as he walked his mom to his brother's front door. Her blood was still singing from the passion they'd shared the night before. She'd never in her life felt so cherished...and by essentially a stranger.

Looking back on her life with Davis, she wondered what had ever possessed her to marry him. The love that she thought she'd felt for her husband paled in comparison to the pull towards the man walking back to her now.

She wasn't in love with the sexy sheriff, but she knew she easily could be. Carlos had shown her more kindness in the little time she'd known him than Davis had in the six-plus years they'd been together, from the time of their first date to the day she killed him.

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Zoe's eyes landed on the rearview mirror. Her nearly four-year-old son was playing with a dinosaur toy in his car seat, completely unaware that his mother had murdered his father. No matter how justified her actions had been, there would still be a day in his future when she would have to confess what happened to his father or that he was not safe from his paternal grandparents.

He would be free in fourteen years. The moment he turned eighteen, Davis's parents would no longer have a hold over him. But she? Well, there was no statute of limitations on murder.

The sheriff climbing into the driver's seat next to her knew that better than she did. And yet, he'd pledged himself to her yesterday. He'd gotten down on his knees before her and swore that, though the law had failed her, he would not.

Was she ruining Carlos's life? His career? She knew him well enough to know that he loved being a cop. During their date the other night, he'd told her how he'd signed up to become a deputy the day of his high school graduation. He loved his town and he loved his badge. Was she dooming them both by being in his life?

And yet, despite her fears, a feeling of contentment washed over her the moment he picked up her hand and brought the back to his lips.

"Ready to go?" he murmured against her skin.

Zoe felt a shiver of anticipation course through her. He turned her on with such a simple touch—and in front of her son! She nodded, because she wasn't sure she could form words without embarrassing herself.

Carlos gave her a knowing smile. He knew damn well what his touch did to her.

Putting the cruiser into Drive, Carlos drove slowly through the Via Daemonia property. The few members who were here and not at their day jobs waved as they passed. Since Carlos still had a grip on her hand, he could only raise a couple fingers off the steering wheel in acknowledgement or tip his chin in that manly nod men did.

The motorcycle club that had taken Zoe in was an oddity. First, they worked with the police. They weren't criminals—yet they were willing to harbor one. And second, they had an honor code that extended beyond what the law limited. Family meant everything to them, even if that family wasn't related by blood.

Looking over at Carlos as he pulled onto the road, Zoe wondered why Carlos hadn't joined the club. She knew that he could ride a motorcycle, though he didn't own one.

Carlos glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "Can I help you, pretty lady?"

She tried not to smile. "Why didn't you join the club? I know you're not a veteran, but your brother surely would have bent the rules for you."

Carlos gave a noncommittal shrug. "Six years ago, I'd just gotten my promotion as deputy sheriff. The club didn't have the reputation in the community that they do now. I thought it better to support them without joining them."

"Did you want to join?" she asked, curious.

"Not really. I enjoy riding my brother's hog sometimes, but I'm not into riding as much as they are."

Zoe nodded once. "I don't think I'd enjoy it all that much either. Cars just feel safer."

“For many of them, being inside a car is stifling. That’s why bikers call cars ‘cages’.”

“That makes sense,” she mused. “Still, I think it suits you better.”

“What does?”

She squeezed his hand. “The badge.”

As Carlos pulled into the furniture store parking lot, he shot her a wicked smile. “The handcuffs come in handy too.”

Flashes of their intimate activities from the night before crossed her mind. Zoe blushed, which only made Carlos grin wider.

When Bulldog moved out of their mom’s house, he left behind a king size bed frame. Carlos planned to turn his brother’s old room into Kyle’s new bedroom, but the four-year-old could not continue sleeping in a king size bed. They would figure something out to do with the frame. Maybe sell it at a yard sale or put it into storage. Kyle needed a twin bed, which would also make room for a toy chest, a desk, and anything else he needed.

Carlos was in no way trying to step into the role as Kyle’s father. He wasn’t ready for that, and frankly, neither were Zoe or Kyle. Zoe’s and his relationship was so new. They needed to find a rhythm for them before Carlos could take on any paternal figure role.

However, that did not mean Carlos couldn’t be Kyle’s friend or a man that he could look up to. Carlos knew his mom was already envisioning herself as Kyle’s grandmother. He didn’t want to dissuade her, but he also needed to be realistic. It might be a long time before Kyle was ready to look at him as a dad and Louisa as a grandma.

Carlos parked his cruiser and got out. He walked around to Zoe's door to open it for her. She took his offered hand with a smile, which only prompted Carlos to lean in and kiss her gently on the lips. He loved that light blush on her cheeks.

He wasn't in love with Zoe Rutterson, but he knew he was on his way to being so. He'd felt something that first day he'd seen her back in February. It had been like an inkling, a sense... It was only her obvious fear and discomfort that had kept him from pursuing her back then. She'd never been far from his mind.

As she stared up into his eyes, there wasn't a trace of any fear. He saw only lust, trust, and joy.

A car pulled in next to them, breaking their trance. Zoe stepped further behind him, as if using his body to shield her from view. Carlos thought it unnecessary. He still had to have a talk with Keys to figure out the entirety of Zoe's situation and who was looking for her, but he knew no one was legally looking for her in Mount Grove. He was the law in this town and no one had ever approached him about Zoe Rutterson, or her alias Clara Everwood.

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Still, he didn't want her to feel uncomfortable. It wasn't much, but he pulled his sunglasses out of his front pocket and put them on her face. Then he took his hat off of his head and placed it over her brunette curls.

Her expression was startled before it turned grateful.

Carlos moved back so he could open the rear door and get Kyle out of his car seat. "Ready to get you a bed?"

Kyle nodded enthusiastically. "I want a dino bed!" He held up the toy T-rex he'd been playing with during the ride.

Carlos had never seen a dino bed before, but he was open to whatever Kyle wanted. As they walked into the furniture store, Kyle between Zoe and Carlos while they each held one of his hands, Carlos wondered what it would be like one day to claim that mantle of fatherhood. To have Kyle look at him like he was his personal hero.

It was certainly something to aspire to.

CHAPTER 2

As soon as he walked into the sheriff's station, the look on Jeff's face told him that he wasn't going to have a good day. Carlos headed over to the coffee table to pour himself a mug. He'd already had two cups between home and the ride in, but it was an excuse to get close to Jeff without being obvious.

"You have a visitor," Jeff told him, keeping his voice low, "and you're not going to

believe who it is because I don't believe it."

Carlos's eyebrows about hit the roof. Who the hell could be in his office that would raise such a statement from Jeff? "Who is it and what do they want?"

"Well, since it can't be who I think it is, I have no idea how to answer that first question. What does he want? To speak with the sheriff." Jeff turned around and held his mug up to his lip without taking a sip. "Pretty sure he didn't get the memo about the new regime change and you're not the only one in for a surprise."

Carlos couldn't help but glance down at his new badge. The council had made it official and he'd been handed Hannigan's badge before he'd left work the day before. Jeff now wore his old one that named him the deputy sheriff. Carlos had also gotten the approval to hire two full-time deputies. He'd been planning on spending his morning sending messages out to surrounding towns and cities to notify them of his new position as well as let them know of the open jobs. It wasn't poaching if the other departments were the ones to initiate a transfer.

Not liking Jeff's nebulous words, Carlos collected his coffee mug and headed towards his office.

The sheriff's station was larger than one would expect for such a small-town police station. Former Mayor Boone had commissioned a larger Town Hall building during his tenure. The old sheriff's station, which was the building Carlos had started his law enforcement career in, was now a town storage supply building, utilizing the old jail cells in the basement.

The old Town Hall building had become the new Sheriff's Station. Upon entering was the lobby with a wide front desk. Chairs for visitors and the coffee bar were out front too. Belinda, now his secretary, was supposed to keep it stocked with donuts, cookies, apples, and bananas. Like many of her duties, though, this seemed too

challenging for the ditzy blonde. Past the front desk were two swinging saloon doors that led into the back bullpen. Facing each other were three sets of two desks where Deputies Bert Anderson, Danny Weiss, Scott Pan, and Carl Kostrab worked.

While Carlos was the only one who knew for a fact that Connelly was not, and never would be, returning, no one had sat at Connelly's desk since his disappearance. Even over a year later, Carlos's internal monster still glowered at the fact that he'd had a rapist under his command and he had not known.

Carlos's old office was now Jeff's new office. The sheriff and deputy sheriff offices were cookie cutter spaces with glass windows that gave them a full view of the entire bullpen as well as each other's office. Shades could be drawn if needed.

If Carlos succeeded in hiring Zoe as his secretary and finally getting rid of Belinda, who was utterly useless, then Carlos foresaw those curtains being down more than they were raised. He needed to talk to Keys to figure out how solid Zoe's alias as Clara Everwood was and whether it was good enough to get her hired by the sheriff's department.

The station's overnight janitor was Bill Anderson, Deputy Bert's younger brother. Bill had been in a serious car accident when he was sixteen, which resulted in nerve damage on his entire left side and the death of his best friend. Each month, Bill journeyed to the high school to counsel the teens against drinking and driving. He used his own body as a living example. Since Bill could not drive himself or hold down a standard nine-to-five job, Bert had gotten him a job as a janitor to the town's buildings. He would travel between Town Hall, the Sheriff's Station, and the Fire Station each night to help clean, take out the trash, and scrub the bathrooms. It also allowed Bert to keep an eye on his younger brother, which was why Bert generally was on night-duty shifts.

Though Carlos hadn't asked for it to be done, Bill must have scraped the vinyl

lettering off of the sheriff and deputy sheriff offices doors. Hannigan's name had been replaced with Carlos's and Carlos's name had been replaced with Jeff's.

Not looking at the man currently sitting in a chair that had not previously been outside his office, Carlos walked up to his door and took a picture of his name to send to his mom and brother. He'd have loved to send it to Zoe, but she didn't have a phone. He needed to rectify that as soon as he talked to Keys. Worst case, he could get her a burner phone, but he'd rather get her a real one either on his plan or her own.

Putting his phone back in his pocket, Carlos finally turned towards the man patiently waiting for him. Carlos's jaw dropped—and he suddenly understood Jeff's words with perfect clarity.

Because the man sitting outside his office could not be here.

Because Carlos had gone to his funeral.

The brunette man with amber eyes stood up as Carlos stared open-mouthed at him.

“Unlock your office, Sheriff. Unless you want your entire station to know some not so pleasant details about your girlfriend.”

At the mention of Zoe, Carlos snapped out of his stupor. He glanced to his right to see Jeff was watching them closely. Carl, the only other deputy in residence, was collecting his gear for a day on the streets in his cruiser and not paying attention to the station's visitor.

Carlos unlocked his office and headed inside. His hat went to the coat tree by the door, but he left his gun belt on. It was uncomfortable to sit in and would normally be hung up with his hat. However, he was not allowing what could very well be a ghost

into his office without keeping his gun on him.

A part of him felt like he should grab some salt too.

That idea was dismissed when the man proved himself to be corporeal enough to close Carlos's office door. The man was shorter than Carlos's six-four but he held himself tall. There was nothing small or demeaning about him.

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The man looked at the name on the door and then Carlos's nameplate on his desk. It still read Deputy Sheriff Carlos Santiago. "I was unaware that there was a new sheriff in town. Congratulations on your promotion."

Carlos steepled his fingers before his chin, trying to decipher just what the fuck was going on. "I was unaware that ghosts were kept apprised of Mount Grove's comings and goings."

The man's lips twitched. He took a seat in the left chair of the two before Carlos's desk. "I'm here to deliver a message."

"From the Great Beyond?" Carlos queried.

"Not quite so mystical," was the response. "There's a bounty hunter in your area. Goes by the name of Trapper. Keys will be able to find him if he's not in your system. Zoe's left her hidey hole. Good for her, but you need to be cautious. Trapper has no reason to come to Mount Grove, but he might."

Carlos remained quiet. He had no reason to trust the ghost of the man sitting before him. The fact that he, one, knew about Keys, and two, knew about Zoe only made Carlos even more concerned. However, he kept his composure, not wanting to giveaway his unease.

"I'll take your warning under advisement. Care to tell me how you're sitting in my office when I was present at your funeral?"

The man's straight face gave nothing away. "Were you?"

“I stood over your dead body as the coroner declared you dead, so yeah, I went to your funeral. How the hell are you alive?”

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Carlos snorted. “Quoting Hamlet only makes me more inquisitive, not less.”

The man stood. “I came to deliver a message, Sheriff. I am not in your area long and wanted to check on Zoe. Consider it me fulfilling a promise I made many years ago.” He walked around the chair and made for the door. Then he paused and turned back towards Carlos. “I am pleased she’s finally breaking free. A woman such as her was never meant to be caged. Don’t make the same mistake as her husband did, Sheriff, and try to clip her wings. Let her soar—or you won’t have to worry about her turning a gun on you too. I’ll do it without hesitation.”

Carlos did not respond. He stood and watched as the ghost of the man he’d known walked out of the bullpen. Jeff slipped into his office and closed the door.

“I didn’t want to leave him in the lobby with Belinda,” he explained. “Was that... I mean, you went to his funeral? We were there at the crime scene. I saw his body. How could he be...alive?”

“I have no fucking idea.” Carlos sat back down and pulled out his phone. “But my brother has some explaining to do.”

Steel, Lucky, and Bulldog met Carlos and Jeff in the diner. The three VDMC officers came in the back door and were wearing their cuts. They sat in a booth away from the other patrons and with a clear view of the front door.

Kelly brought them all coffee and took their breakfast orders.

“Tell them what you told me,” Bulldog said as soon as Kelly stepped away from the table.

Carlos filled them in on his visitor. He watched Steel and Lucky carefully, trying to determine if they knew anything about Conner’s resurrection. When he’d called Bulldog on the phone to tell him, Bulldog had been enraged, confused, and doubtful. It wasn’t every day that one’s younger brother called him up to tell him that the prospect they’d buried was alive and kicking.

“Alive?” Lucky repeated. “That makes no sense. I was there. I saw him die.”

Carlos had been securing Mateo Castillo in cuffs and had not been present for Conner’s last breath, but he’d been there soon after. Bulldog was the only one who hadn’t seen Conner’s body, because he’d been somewhere unknown on an unknown mission for the club that Carlos wasn’t supposed to know about.

Steel, Carlos, Lucky, and Jeff had all been there. They’d seen the blood, the bullet wound, and the body.

“There’s no way he survived that,” Lucky continued. His voice was almost insistent, like if he said it sternly enough he could make it true.

Something else occurred to Carlos then as he saw how pale and uneasy Lucky looked. Harper and Lucky had named their son after Conner. He’d died sacrificing his life for Harper’s, who had unknowingly been pregnant. That dedication meant something to both Lucky and Harper. If Conner was somehow alive... What did that mean for their son’s name? It wasn’t like they would change it, right?

But, of course, he was alive. There was no other explanation for what had just occurred in Carlos’s office.

“Why didn’t you detain him?” Bulldog asked his brother. “At least then we could question him, get some answers.”

“Next time you have the ghost of someone you saw die appear before you, see how well your brain works,” Carlos snapped at him.

Bulldog made to reply but Kelly came back with a giant tray. Jeff was sitting at the end of the table and immediately hopped up to help her lower the tray onto a folding stand. Kelly gave him a kiss on his cheek before passing around the five meals. They all thanked her and she wandered off towards other customers.

Jeff sat back down. “I both saw his body and saw him at the station. Trust me, Conner’s alive.”

Carlos looked to Steel, who had been suspiciously quiet. “Did you know?”

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All eyes turned to the VDMC President. Steel took a sip of his coffee, both his tone and his stature were casual. Too casual for Carlos's liking. "There's no doubt in my mind that Conner's dead. However," he said slightly louder when Carlos made to argue, "Conner's situation is unique. There is another explanation but not one I understand yet."

Everyone waited on bated breath for Steel to continue.

"Conner had an identical twin," Steel reminded them all.

Bulldog's eyebrows drew down. "He was KIA overseas."

Steel nodded easily, "And, according to Conner, no body had been recovered. He'd had to bury an empty casket."

Carlos's eyes went wide. "You think it was the twin? Why?"

"Unknown," Steel said. He took another sip of his coffee. No one had touched their breakfast plates yet. "But I do know this, he came to the station for a reason. He could have easily cornered you in a store or somewhere more private. There's a reason he made such a public appearance in a town who thinks a man with his face is dead."

"You think something else is going on?" Lucky inquired. "Like what?"

"I'm not sure." Steel turned to Bulldog. "Let's tighten security. Between this and the Pythons, I'm not liking having more questions than answers."

Bulldog nodded once. “Already on it. We’re even setting some traps up in the fields in case anyone decides to come in the back way.”

The property the club owned used to be a distillery. Before that, it was a farm. The club had a lot of unused acres on their land. Carlos did not like that the trailer where he had found Zoe and Kyle was so widely separated from the rest of the other homes.

“If the Pythons come at you head on, is there a safe place for you to put the women and children?” Jeff asked.

Carlos did not miss how still-faced all three officers got. It was Steel who answered. Evasive, though it was. “They’ll be protected.”

Carlos wondered what other construction the club had done recently. Was it possible they had a safe room on property that he didn’t know about?

“Longhill trusted you guys,” Jeff said, either not picking up on or ignoring Steel’s vagueness. “You’ve always helped out and had our backs before. I don’t know what Hannigan had against you, but I was happy when it ended.” Jeff eyed Lucky as if he wondered if Hannigan’s dislike of the VDMC stemmed from Lucky dating and marrying his daughter. “But I won’t see Mount Grove turned into a warzone. Whatever this beef is that the Pythons have with you, you need to solve it and fast.”

Carlos nodded his agreement. “I know you guys stumbled upon the Python’s involvement in the dogfighting ring, but it made them take a closer look at you and Mount Grove. We need to stop this before it escalates.”

“We’ll handle the Pythons, but I won’t be the one to shoot first,” Steel said seriously.

“Hopefully there will be no shots fired,” Carlos stated, though even he could hear the doubt in his own voice. “What about Conner’s twin?”

“Nothing we can do,” Steel answered. “Sounds like he came to deliver a message. It was one he could have left anonymously and chose not to. We’ll just have to wait and see if the reason presents itself. The bounty hunter, Trapper, is now on our radar. If he crosses into our town, we’ll deal with it then.”

Jeff was the only one at the table who didn’t know there was a wanted fugitive in town. Carlos needed to decide if he should read his deputy sheriff into the situation. As much as he liked having another pair of eyes on the lookout for Zoe and Kyle, it was one more person who knew, and could potentially tell, her secret.

Carlos wasn’t sure if it was worth the risk. For now, it was enough that Jeff knew there was a dangerous bounty hunter in their area.

CHAPTER 3

Zoe could not remember ever smiling so much in a single day. Before going to work that morning, Carlos had dropped Zoe and Kyle off at the clubhouse to spend the day with Jenna and some of the club kids. Zoe promised to make an effort to be social and she was going to try her hardest to keep her word.

Cage, one of the patched members, offered to drive them back to the Santiago house around dinner time. He borrowed a car seat from one of the ol’ ladies and packed Louisa, Zoe, and Kyle into his work truck. One of the other members wasn’t feeling well and Cage was running out to the store to buy them some crackers, soup, and the like; he was going to drop them off on his way. Zoe wasn’t sure if Carlos had had a chance to ask Cage about adding an additional bathroom to his house. She didn’t want to overstep or speak out of turn, so she did not inquire with Cage herself.

Additionally, Zoe wasn’t sure how to act around Louisa when Carlos wasn’t present. She was a stranger now living in the woman’s home. What did Louisa think of Zoe? She obviously knew that Zoe and Carlos hadn’t known each other very long. They

were as much strangers as Louisa and Zoe. Yet, Zoe was now living in Carlos's house and had moved into his bedroom. Did she think that Zoe was after Carlos's house, his money? Using him for protection?

As they waved to Cage pulling out of the driveway, Louisa leaned over to Zoe and said, "Let's give this one some screen time so you and I can talk."

Zoe's heart had nearly stopped at those words—but she shouldn't have worried so much. Within minutes, Louisa had her laughing so hard with stories of Carlos's childhood that she peed a little. The cookies Kyle and Louisa had made two days ago were on a plate in the middle of the table and they both had a cup of coffee. The sounds of Paw Patrol could be heard echoing from the living room over their laughter.

Louisa was doubled over laughing, holding onto the edge of the table for support. "I kid you not," she finished up her story. "No hesitation, no questioning if he should do it... Just walked right up to that goat and plunged his finger in like he was taking its temperature."

"Oh God, Momma! Not this story again!"

Zoe picked her head up, her smile so wide that her cheeks hurt, to see Carlos standing in the kitchen doorway. He wasn't alone. Keys, the VDMC's computer genius, was behind him, looking far too happy to have overheard the ending to Louisa's story.

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Despite his annoyed and a little embarrassed expression, Zoe's heart did a little pitter-patter at the sight of him. He was still dressed in his uniform, though she did notice that his gun belt was off. She knew he had two gun safes in the house. She'd put her own handgun inside the one in their bedroom the day before. Technically, it was illegal for her to have the firearm—but what was one more law broken?

Keys pulled out his phone from his front pocket. "I am so texting the guys about the time you stuck your finger up a goat's ass."

"Do and I'll tell them about the non-research related golden showers porn I just caught you watching," Carlos said with a bit of a growl in his voice.

Keys stopped texting mid-type. "Ew, I don't watch golden shower porn!"

Carlos raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, but who are they going to believe more? After all, it's always the quiet ones you have to watch out for." With a grin that resembled that of an evil mastermind, Carlos walked the rest of the way into the kitchen. He leaned down and kissed Zoe. "Missed you," he murmured against her lips.

"Missed you too," she admitted. Their relationship was so new that her statement shouldn't have been true. But it was. They'd spent most of the day before together furniture shopping with Kyle and then had a wonderful time exploring each other's bodies in the night. This was their first day separated since she'd moved in.

Carlos turned his head, still leaning over Zoe, to look at his mom. "Really? The goat story?"

She smiled adoringly at him. “I thought she should be aware in case you get any future pets.” Louisa’s voice was so innocent that an unexpected laugh escaped Zoe as Carlos bowed his head.

Zoe reached up and pulled Carlos’s head down to her chest, cradling him. “Don’t worry. I’ll protect all future pets,” she told Louisa.

Keys still looked like he was debating on sending that text message, regardless of the backlash on his reputation. As Carlos went to his knees to fully embrace her cuddle, Zoe saw Keys shrug to himself and then continue the text message. When he looked up and saw she was watching him, he just smiled and put a finger to his lips.

“Save me,” Carlos moaned against her, though she was positive he hadn’t seen Keys send the text message.

Zoe brushed her fingers through his hair. “From your mom or the goats?”

Teasing a lover was new to her. The words had come out of her mouth as a reflex to the light mood in the room. Immediately, though, fear started to creep into her mind. Carlos was clearly embarrassed by the story his mom had told her. Though a cute, funny story of a four-year-old boy with a curious mind on a school field trip to a farm, she could understand how a grown man would not want that story told to his new girlfriend—the same girlfriend he’d opened up to and admitted to enjoying anal stimulation during sex.

It was clearly not the same thing. One was the act of a child and the other an adult, but Zoe wondered if Carlos was feeling out of sorts about what they’d shared again the night before. It had been hot and steamy and Zoe desperately wanted to continue, having awoken something sexy and wild inside of herself that she hadn’t even known existed.

Joining in on his mom's teasing, though... She couldn't help but feel a pang of concern that Carlos would get angry at her. That he would not appreciate her laughing at him.

The memory of Davis's first backslap across her face made Zoe stiffen and quake in her seat.

Carlos must have felt her reaction. He sat up quickly, all mirth and embarrassment gone from his expression. When he reached for her face, it was slow. He moved with caution. "What is it, sunshine?"

As his hand touched her cheek, so gentle and comforting, Zoe realized how foolish she'd been. Her reaction had come from experience, yes, but it was not warranted here. Carlos was not Davis. If she thought for a moment that there was an ounce of similarity between the two men, she never would have left the safety of the club's property. She would never allow Carlos within a mile of her son, let alone move him into his house.

Shame rolled through her. Carlos would never hit her, no matter how angry he got. Which, she realized now, he never had been. He'd played along with his mom's story in spite of the humiliation it brought him.

Davis would never have laughed at himself. If someone ruined the perfect image he'd constructed of himself, Davis would have destroyed that person. Not in a literal sense, but their reputation, their name, would suddenly be so ruined that no one would ever want to be associated with them again.

Carlos had not scolded his mom. He'd gone to Zoe as if seeking her protection, which was hilarious in and of itself. Zoe was small in comparison to his large build and height.

Carlos didn't hesitate to show what others would perceive as weakness. Which, in turn, showed his true strength.

Zoe laid her hand over his on her face. She turned her cheek, allowing his hand to cradle her more. "Memories," she answered him. "But they can't hurt me now."

He smiled proudly up at her, still on his knees on the kitchen floor. "I can't shield you from memories, sunshine, but I can give you new ones so full of happiness that they chase away the bad ones."

She leaned down and gently pressed her lips to his. "Thank you," she whispered, leaning her forehead against his.

Zoe had forgotten about their audience until she heard something being placed on the kitchen table. She looked over to see Keys putting a backpack down. He gave her an encouraging smile as he reached for a cookie.

"Mom, do you think you could go sit with Kyle for a little bit?" Carlos hadn't moved from the floor. He still had a tight hold on Zoe, like he somehow knew she needed his silent strength.

Without argument or fuss, Louisa went out into the living room. Zoe had learned earlier in the day that she was a two-time breast cancer survivor. It was why she wore a scarf on her head. After two rounds of chemotherapy, her hair had not returned healthily or evenly. She continued to shave her head bald and wore wigs or scarves, depending on the occasion.

Keys opened his bag and pulled out a laptop. "You might want to leave the room too, Carlos. We're not exactly going to be talking about anything legal."

Carlos pulled out the seat next to Zoe. "I'm staying. I left my badge at the door for a

reason. Besides, we need to discuss my visitor this morning.”

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Keys looked to Zoe, who nodded. She trusted Carlos. She wouldn't have moved in with him if she didn't. However, she did ask, "What visitor?"

Carlos turned to Zoe. "How well did you know Conner? You told me that he rescued you from the courthouse and informed you about the hitmen your in-laws hired. How did he know about any of them? How did he get you out of there and to Montana without anyone seeing him or suspecting a thing?"

Zoe swallowed nervously, trying to push past the ache in her heart for her deceased friend. She'd left out specific parts of her story, not wanting to break Conner's confidence. "He brought me to Montana in an RV. About three days later, he brought Kyle to me. We had to travel separately."

She didn't miss the look passed between Carlos and Keys. They had picked up on her evasiveness. She was not a very good liar. She didn't know why they were asking about Conner. She wasn't even sure how much she should say about the people she'd been with in Montana. In truth, she'd been so filled with grief over Conner's death when she'd left Montana, she'd forgotten to ask those specifics. Obviously, it couldn't be common knowledge that there was a mountain in Montana where innocent fugitives and the like were brought for safekeeping.

"Why are you asking about Conner?" Her voice cracked on his name.

Again, Keys and Carlos shared a look. She felt like she was missing something important. Carlos explained, "I had a visitor in my office this morning. He... Well, he looked a lot like Conner. But it couldn't be?"

“Owen?” Then realizing what she’d said, Zoe slapped her hands over her mouth in a horrified gasp. As Carlos and Keys stared at her in astonishment, Zoe clamped her eyes closed. She bowed her head in shame. She really was the worst liar! How could she have just spat out his name like that? After she’d sworn never to reveal his secret?

Zoe blinked. Wait. Owen had revealed his secret. He knew that his twin was dead. Actually dead, not dead like Owen was dead. Why would Owen return to a town where people would recognize him? Conner had sent her and Kyle here because he knew that the MC could be trusted—but Owen hadn’t gone to the MC. He’d gone to Carlos, a cop.

She spun around towards Carlos. “Are you okay? Did he threaten you? Was he warning you away from me?” If there was one thing she’d picked up on from her short time with Owen, it was that he was dangerous.

Not to her or to Kyle. He’d protected her so completely that he’d been a danger to those who wanted to harm her, not the other way around.

“Well, that answers some of my questions,” Keys finally said with a chuckle. “Conner’s twin is alive. He faked his own death while he was in the service. Do you know why?”

Zoe was grateful she didn’t have to lie or try to evade answering that one. She shook her head. “No.”

“So it was Owen, not Conner, you were in contact with in Philadelphia?”

“No,” Zoe interrupted Keys. She dropped her head back down into her hands again. Carlos’s hand came up to rub soothingly along her back. Zoe tried to center herself and raised her head. She couldn’t have them thinking she’d never known Conner. He’d been her friend, her savior. She would not have his heroic actions transferred

over for Owen to take the credit.

Zoe took a deep, shaking breath. “I knew Conner. He was my friend. He rescued me and my son. I didn’t know Owen was alive until after the courthouse. That was Owen, but only because Conner couldn’t get emergency leave to come to me himself. He sent Owen to me. But I only saw Owen that one time and never again. It was Conner who visited me in Montana. Conner was,” her voice cracked on the past tense word, “my friend.”

Carlos’s hand continued to make soothing circles on her back. With his other hand, he reached over to take her trembling ones clasped together on the table. “If it wasn’t Owen that you were friends with, though, why would he risk coming here with people who would recognize him to deliver a message that easily could have been left anonymously?”

Keys shrugged. “I don’t have that answer. But at least we know that Lionheart didn’t fake his death and betray us.”

“Lionheart?” Zoe inquired.

“When Conner died, he was a prospect,” Keys explained. “However, Bear pushed to have him buried in full colors, as a patched member. We gave him the road name ‘Lionheart’ to honor the sacrifice he made. I’m not sure if you know this, but he died saving Harper’s life, and the life of her unborn son, though she hadn’t known she was pregnant at the time.”

Zoe had to blink away tears. “No, I didn’t know that. Steel had told me he died honorably, but I didn’t know about Harper. Is that why her son’s name is Conner?”

Keys nodded. “She wanted to honor him in her own way.”

Zoe felt a tear escape the corner of her eye and quickly wiped it away. “That’s very sweet of her. He was my hero too.”

“I’ve been in contact with the people you were with in Montana.”

Zoe’s eyes widened at Keys’ words. “You have?”

Keys nodded. “I’ve known about the Mountain Mutineers for some time. That’s what they call themselves, by the way. It’s not that big of a stretch to suggest that Owen works for them. There aren’t many of us in the world who can do what I do, but they have a hacker among them that is nearly to my level. Because of that, they’ve been on my radar but I’ve never had reason to reach out to them before.”

Zoe was beyond impressed. She had never asked about the mysterious calculator app that had appeared on her phone or how Owen had known that Davis had been watching her on the camera planted inside her house. Anything more technologically challenging than downloading an app had always been out of her wheelhouse.

Creating fake identities was certainly not something she ever thought she’d need to know either.

“The identity of Clara Everwood is solid. The Mutineers have kept up appearances on it to make it seem like it’s an active identity.” Keys turned his laptop around to show her the screen. “They’ve even been updating your Facebook account.”

Zoe looked closer. A woman that could have been her—same height and body type—was standing by a waterfall with the caption Another great hike today. The hat and sunglasses made it hard to see the woman’s face fully.

Keys turned the computer back around. “You can live your life as Clara Everwood. There’s nothing stopping you. We can even make it official and hire movers to make

it look like you moved to Mount Grove recently.”

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“You say that as if she has another option?” Carlos stated, taking Zoe’s hand on the table. She hadn’t realized her hand had been shaking until he took it and laced their fingers together.

Zoe looked down. The grip was somehow reassuring. From anyone else, it might have seemed controlling...but not from Carlos. She raised her head and saw he wasn’t even looking at her. Like he’d subconsciously known she’d needed his steadying grip.

“Well, I looked into what happened in Philadelphia,” Keys went on. “Zoe Rutterson is a wanted fugitive. There’s no getting around that. The Mutineers did an excellent job of corrupting your DNA and trading out your fingerprint samples. Unless they’re run again, no one will know the difference. Zoe Rutterson can’t live in Mount Grove. However, you don’t have to be Clara Everwood either.”

“Who would I be then?” she asked. “I want to—” She glanced to Carlos. “I want to start living again. Kyle deserves to have a life, a real one. He needs to go to school and have friends.”

“I don’t know what you know of Bulldog and Abby’s history,” Keys said softly. “I was able to backdate a marriage for them. As far as the government is concerned, they’ve been married for years and Bulldog fathered her two youngest children. ‘Abigail Knight’ couldn’t exist anymore so I made it so she never existed.

“I can do something similar with you and Kyle. It won’t be as clean cut or perfect, due to the publicity and the federal warrant out for your arrest. But I can tweak it so no one believes Zoe and Davis Junior are still alive. Hell, I know some people who

might even have some extra bodies lying around we can use to at least fake your death more thoroughly.”

Zoe’s jaw dropped. Keys made it sound like he could do all of this with a click of a button. And bodies? Where did people get ‘extra bodies’ from?

“I can make you be Zoe again,” Keys told her. “No more hiding, no more running. The question I have for the two of you, though, is what sort of history do you want? Kyle is the only...issue,” he hedged. “Because he has living relatives. If his DNA is run against theirs, there isn’t anything I can do. As good as I am, I can’t hack actual DNA. However, I can make it look like there’s no reason to ever test his DNA. If we give the two of you a thorough enough backstory, why would anyone question it?”

“I don’t understand.” Zoe’s eyes glanced between the living room where she could hear the tv, Carlos, Keys, and back to the living room. “What history are you referring to? You said ‘the two of you’ like you meant Carlos and I, but Carlos doesn’t have to fake an identity or anything.”

“Not an identity, no, but it will make yours a stronger one if I backdate a marriage between the two of you and a birth history for Kyle that claims he’s Carlos’s son.”

Zoe felt like the floor had just dropped out from under her chair. Marriage? Keys wanted to marry her and Carlos?

They’d only been on one date. They’d only had sex twice. They weren’t... She wasn’t... No. Zoe’s head snapped around towards Carlos’s—and she felt her stomach start to sink. She could see it. In his eyes. He wanted this.

Zoe pulled her hand out of his grip.

She shook her head. “No, I...” She stood up, her entire body was shaking. “I can’t...

I don't..."

Carlos stood up too. He walked around to her other side to face her. "Hey, sunshine, hey, easy. Look at me please. Deep breaths... In, out... Good. Again. In, out... There you go."

Zoe's breathing became more controlled as she followed his commands. She liked how he was running his hands up and down her arms. Zoe shook her head and mouthed, "I'm sorry."

He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Nothing to be sorry about. Keys was only proposing on my behalf. It's not a real proposal unless you see me down on one knee, okay?"

"But you want it," she said out loud. "You want to get married."

"Not today," he insisted. She wasn't sure she believed him. "Zoe, unlike my brother, I haven't been in love with you since I was six years old. You've heard the term 'high school sweethearts'? Well, they were kindergarten sweethearts. There hasn't been a day since they met as kindergarteners that my brother hasn't known he's wanted to marry Abby."

Zoe hadn't known that—only that they'd been dating as teenagers before Abby had moved away.

"So it is completely reasonable and not at all out of character for my brother to marry Abby after only reuniting with her for a couple of days. But you and me? We're different. We have feelings for each other, sure, but I am not ready to marry you or to claim Kyle as my son. We, you and me, are not ready for that. Even if it is just legal and never mentioned again, the implications will always be there. We'll always know the difference and I'm not willing for us to ruin what I think is a pretty fantastic start

to a new relationship just to claim we're married."

Zoe felt her racing heartbeat start to slow. His words were so sincere, so Carlos, that it helped calm her.

"Davis...my husband," she added, because she hated to say his name. "He changed after we got married. It was like he was a completely different man. All he cared about was making a son and how we looked to the outside world. Perfect life, perfect family, perfect home... Everything had to be just so. He," her voice cracked, "he only started hitting me after we got married. If he'd done it before... Well, I'd like to think I'd have left him..." Zoe let her voice trail off.

There had been no leaving Davis Rutterson. Not before their wedding and certainly not after.

Her eyes flitted up to Carlos and then back down to her feet. "I don't think that's you. I know you wouldn't... I know that," she stressed, "but the idea of marriage... It's terrifying."

Carlos helped guide her back down to her seat. She finally was able to meet and hold his eyes when he knelt in front of her. "Two knees," he pointed out. "Not proposing."

Zoe let out a choked sob. But it worked—he got her to smile.

"Zoe, sunshine, I hate what you suffered through. You have the most beautiful soul and to think that some fool tried to quash that? Well, it makes me wish he was still alive so I could kill him myself." Zoe's eyes widened at his words. "Violence aside," Carlos added pointedly, "I want you to live. I want you to thrive. Yes, you moved in here with me. I loved coming home to the sound of your laughter today. If I thought for a second you weren't happy here or I couldn't make you happy here, I would have left you on the club's property and dated you properly."

“Really?”

His nod was earnest. “Really, really,” he said with a crooked smile.

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Zoe turned to Keys, who was so enthralled by whatever he was doing on his computer that she had to wonder if he'd even heard anything of their conversation or her panic attack. "Keys?" she asked to get his attention.

"Huh?" He looked up, almost startled to see them. "Oh right. So I have an alternate solution. We can fake your marriage, but we kill off your husband."

Zoe was confused, because wasn't that already the truth? "What?"

Carlos moved around to retake his seat and Zoe scooted on her chair to face forward again.

"No one outside of the club except Carlos knew about you being on property. The story given to him was that you were Jenna's widowed niece." Keys tapped his screen. "Jenna does have a sister—or did. She died about fifteen years ago. It says she didn't have any kids, but I can easily change that. Make it look like you came to live with Steel and Jenna as a teen after your mom died. Then you left, went to college, got married, had a kid, and then your husband died. Giving you the tie to Jenna is probably more realistic than Carlos keeping a wife hidden away from the town for the past four-ish years. Jenna and Steel only moved to town six years ago when the club was formed."

Keys started typing as he talked. His fingers moved so fast across the screen Zoe got dizzy from watching them and had to look away. Suddenly, he slammed his computer closed. Zoe jumped, startled. Keys grabbed his bag, shoving his laptop inside, and practically ran out the door. A second later, the door opened back up and a flustered Keys returned. "Gotta go, but I'll work on this. Bye."

And then he left again.

“Is that normal behavior for him?” Zoe asked Carlos. She really didn’t know Keys all that well.

Carlos shrugged. “It’s not surprising behavior,” he said offhandedly.

“So what now?” she asked. “We didn’t really get any answers.”

“Well, now,” Carlos turned her face towards him, “I kiss you and give you a proper greeting after being away from you all afternoon.”

She smiled and leaned into his kiss.

“How about you, Kyle, and I go out for dinner?”

“What about your mom?”

“We can invite her, but I’d like to spend some time with Kyle. Get to know him. For now, we keep with the story that you’re Jenna’s niece if asked.” He moved a strand of her hair out of her face. “What are you in the mood for?”

Zoe didn’t have to think about it. “Pizza?”

“Pizza it is.”

CHAPTER 4

Though Mount Grove was a small town, they had their staples. Mabel Weiss owned Loafin’ Around, one of the best bakeries in the state. The fact that she was also the mother of Danny, one of Carlos’s deputies, was just a bonus because all law

enforcement got a discount. The diner where Carlos, Jeff, Steel, Lucky, and Bulldog had met for their meeting as well as where Carlos and Zoe had had their one and only date was one of the businesses owned by the Groveton family, the founding family of their small town. While the name of the business was Groveton Diner, everyone referred to it just as ‘the’ diner because it was the only one. Others had tried to build but they were all run out of business. Even the McDonald’s that had been built just outside the town’s borders had eventually closed because no one wanted fast food over the diner’s food.

The only other restaurant that could compete with the diner was the pizzeria, which was owned by Tony DeLuca. He was one of the only residents in Mount Grove who spoke flawless Italian, having immigrated from Italy when he was in his early twenties. Unfortunately, his wife, who had been a native of Mount Grove, had died in a car accident on the highway almost a decade ago. Tony had remained in Mount Grove, saying it was where he felt closest to “Bella Mia”. When Louisa and Carlos had been struggling to learn Italian in preparation for their pending trip eight years ago, they’d come to Tony for help.

Carlos held the door open for Zoe and Kyle. The aroma of tomatoes, bread, and spices flooded their senses. The diner knew it was beat in one category: pizza. It was the reason it had been taken off of their menu when Carlos had still been a kid.

Kyle’s eyes went wide as he took in the establishment. The booths were maroon and worn with traditional red and white checkered tablecloths. A real candle rested at the center of each table with a narrow vase holding a single flower. Eight booths lined the two large windows separated by the door. Six four-seater tables were spread out in the center of the room. What had once been the milkshake bar of a failed restaurant was now a quick service bar with metal stools.

“Booth or table?” Carlos asked.

As good as Tony's pizza was, residents rarely ate in. The place was too small and it was known that service was slow. Tony was the only cook and he only kept two or three servers on hand to work the front and the phones. Most of the town got pick up or called for delivery because, despite the wait, Tony's pizza was worth it. Tony had finally broken down about five years ago and hired a driver to work deliveries in Mount Grove. He did not "fiddle" with apps or technology.

Per Tony, "If you want a Tony's pizza, you have to talk to Tony."

"Booth," Zoe said. There was only one other family seated in the restaurant. However, there were a number of people at the bar waiting on their takeout orders.

Carlos acknowledged all of them with a wave or a chin lift as he led them down to the far booth. He seated himself so he was facing the dining room.

"Do you mind watching Kyle?" Zoe pointed to the ladies' room door. "I can take him with me?—"

"We're fine," Carlos assured her. She helped Kyle up onto the booth opposite of Carlos. "Can I order you a drink?"

"Water for me and milk or juice for Kyle please."

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At Carlos's nod, Zoe hurried off towards the restroom. Carlos turned to Kyle, who was seated on his knees so he could reach the top of the table. He was surprised to see the boy was studying Carlos.

Based on Zoe's story she'd told him the day before, Kyle was almost four years old. He had brown curly hair and large brown eyes. The kid was certainly cute. Carlos had not seen a picture of his birth father to know how much Kyle took after him.

"Who are you?"

Carlos blinked at the question. "You know who I am." They'd spent most of the day together yesterday.

Kyle shook his head with as much indignation as a four-year-old child could possess. "I know your name but not who you are. Are you my mommy's friend?"

Carlos thought about that a second. He was more—or rather, hoped he was more—than Zoe's friend, but he wasn't sure how to explain that to a four-year-old. "Yeah, I am. Is that okay with you?"

"Mommy needs friends. She misses her friends."

He didn't know who the boy meant. Kyle was too young to remember his birth father or any possible friends Zoe had had in Philadelphia. Did he mean the people who had helped them in Montana, the Mountain Mutineers? Conner?

"What about you, Kyle? Do you miss your friends?"

“I have my mommy,” was the boy’s answer.

It would make sense that he didn’t have any friends his age, but Carlos still felt bad for the boy. For the past year, they’d hadn’t left the club’s property. Four days ago when Carlos had seen Kyle running around the pentagon-shaped backyard with Scotty and Lila was the first time Kyle had met the club kids.

“Can I be your friend?” Carlos asked as Penny, one of the waitresses, approached.

“Evenin’, Sheriff.” The brunette greeted them with a smile. She was a few years older than Carlos and had been working for Tony as long as Carlos could remember.

Carlos was dressed in jeans and a polo shirt, but he still had his badge and gun on him. Even though the official announcement hadn’t gone out yet, the entire town knew about Hannigan’s resignation and Carlos’s appointment to sheriff.

“Penny, good evening. Can we get two waters and...” He turned to Kyle, “did you want milk or juice?”

“Milk,” was the definitive answer.

“And a milk, please,” Carlos added to Penny.

“Sure thing. You got company tonight?”

Carlos nodded. “My girlfriend’s in the bathroom.”

“Girlfriend?” Penny’s voice rose with surprise.

There was a loud clank up at the counter. Carlos looked around Penny to see what had happened, only to find everyone in the restaurant had paused and was facing him.

He frowned. Kyle shifted around too, his big eyes going wide when he saw everyone was looking at them.

Which of course is when Zoe exited the bathroom. She had her head down, looking at something in her shoulder purse. She was partway back to the table when she looked up and found the entire restaurant staring at her.

Carlos saw her face pale as the fight or flight instinct kicked in. Her eyes immediately flicked to the exit and he imagined she was working out her escape in her head.

He quickly rose and went to her. He moved to block her from the prying eyes of the restaurant goers. "Small town," he whispered into her ear. "You're safe. They're just really surprised to see that I have a date."

"I'm just... I don't like... What if someone recognizes me? This was a bad idea. We shouldn't have come out."

"Shh..." he soothed, rubbing his hands up and down her arms. "Sunshine, no one will recognize you. I wouldn't have brought you here if I thought it was unsafe. Just remember, you're Jenna's widowed niece. That's all anyone needs to know for now."

He heard Zoe swallow nervously. Still, the last thing he wanted was for her to be uncomfortable.

Carlos spun around, keeping Zoe behind his broad body. "Quit your staring!" he snapped. "She'll never go out with me again if you guys turn our date into a spectacle."

That seemed to snap the onlookers out of their astonished gazes. Conversations started back up slowly as people turned away from them. Carlos waited another second to ensure there were no stragglers and then guided Zoe back over to the booth.

She sat opposite of him next to Kyle.

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Penny still stood at the end of the table. Her eyes were wide, like she wasn't sure if she was supposed to stay or go.

Carlos sighed. "Penny, this is Zoe and her son Kyle. Zoe, Kyle, this is Penny. She's worked here for as long as I can remember."

Penny scoffed and swatted him with her order pad. "Don't say that. That makes me sound old!"

Carlos winked at her. "No older than I am, sugar."

A flush speckled her cheeks. "I'll grab your drinks for you. It is nice to meet you, Zoe."

Zoe nodded but didn't say anything. She turned her attention to Kyle, pulling a coloring book and crayons out of her purse. Kyle stood up and leaned over the table as he started coloring in typical four-year-old fashion. As in, all over the page with no regard to the lines of the zoo animals.

Carlos watched as Zoe fiddled with her purse some more, then grabbed a napkin out of the dispenser and started to wipe the table down, then helped Kyle organize his crayons, then took another napkin and place it over her lap... Anything but look at him.

"We're a small town," he reminded her gently. "You're new. That makes you news. The fact that you're with me and I've made it known that I don't date within the town... Well, it's bound to draw the locals' attention. I'm sorry if it made you

uncomfortable.”

Zoe shrugged but still didn’t look at him.

Penny returned with a tray of their glasses and a paper cup with a lid and straw for Kyle. “You ready to order?”

When Zoe still didn’t look up, Carlos turned to Penny. “Can you give us a minute?”

“Sure thing.” She put her pad back in her apron and walked away.

Carlos waited a second to ensure Penny was out of earshot and then he reached across the table. Zoe’s hands were on her lap, so he couldn’t reach them. He tapped the table in front of her to catch her attention.

She startled, looking up.

“Why are you hiding from me?”

Her cheeks reddened as her eyes cast downward again. “I’m not.”

“Liar.” He said the word without malice or rebuke. “Baby, you might as well be sitting at a completely different table. Tell me what’s wrong. If you don’t want to eat here, we can take our pizza to go.”

“It’s fine,” Zoe said shortly. “We can eat here.”

Carlos glanced to Kyle but he was focused entirely on his drawing and not paying attention to either Carlos or his mom. Carlos scratched the back of his neck, trying to figure out what had happened, what had triggered her. If it was them being here in public, wouldn’t she have taken the out he’d offered and asked to leave?

He was about to ask what type of pizza she wanted, just to have something to talk about. Their first date had gone so smoothly, effortlessly. There'd never been an awkward pause or that first date lull where they tried to think up something to say. They'd talked for so long that the diner had closed down on them and Kelly the waitress had had to gently kick them out. He was completely baffled about what had happened now to evoke such a one-eighty change.

"You called her 'sugar'."

Carlos blinked at Zoe's words. "What?"

"The waitress. Penny. You called her 'sugar'. Are you... Have you...?"

Though she was staring down at her hands on her lap, Carlos understood where her incomplete questions were leading. "No." She glanced up at him and he repeated more sternly, "No."

Zoe's eyes came up—except she was looking anywhere but at him. "It's just... You two seemed friendly."

"Zo, will you please look at me?"

Her eyes stopped dancing around. Slowly, they traveled over to meet his.

"Hi," he smiled at her. Her cheeks pinkened. Carlos reached a hand across the table, palm up. It was an invitation, not a demand. Hesitantly, Zoe lifted her right hand and placed it into his larger one. "Zoe, do you think me such a player that I would move you into my house, into my room," he said evasively, eyeing Kyle, "while dating or seeing other women?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't think that. I just... I don't like... I didn't like..."

“I was a deputy of a small town for ten years and now I’m the sheriff. People know me. People relate to me. I might use a familiar endearment like ‘sugar’ or ‘darling’ but it’s not a term I use intimately.” He squeezed her hand. “You’re the only one I call and will ever call ‘sunshine’.”

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Zoe looked away, her chin quaking slightly. “I’m being silly.”

“You’re reacting to what you know,” Carlos defended. “I’m guessing your husband flirted with other women in front of you.” She nodded slowly. “I would never do that, Zoe. You’re the first woman to ever touch my heart. I’ve vowed to protect you. That includes from me too. I’d never hurt you.”

She wiped her eyes with her free hand. “I know that. I never would have agreed to move in with you if I didn’t trust you, Carlos.”

“You’ve had a rough couple of years. Topped with moving twice and the fear of discovery, I can understand your reaction.” Carlos waited for Zoe to look at him again. “All I ask is that you talk to me. Don’t keep anything in, sunshine. If you have a concern, a worry, a thought—hell, a plot for world domination, I want to hear about it.”

Zoe cracked a smile. “World domination?”

He shrugged. “You never know.”

She squeezed his hand back. “I promise. I’ll get better at this. I just need some time.”

“I can give you all the time you need,” he promised. Leaning closer, he added, “But there is one thing that I need from you right now.”

Zoe swallowed nervously. “What’s that?”

“Your pizza order,” he said straight-faced. “My stomach is about to gnaw its way out of my belly.”

Zoe watched him for a bewildered second and then started laughing.

Zoe felt so foolish for her reaction in the pizzeria. The rest of their meal felt light and Kyle started peppering Carlos with his knowledge of dinosaurs. Carlos even made a promise to look into some dinosaur-themed parks or kid museums for Kyle, which gifted him a large, pizza-sauce covered kiss on the cheek.

Their night ended with Zoe tucking Kyle into the king sized bed. Kyle’s new bed wouldn’t be arriving until the next day. Zoe laid down beside Kyle and started reading him a book warning him not to turn the pages, because there was a monster at the end of the book. Kyle giggled each time the monster Grover appeared on the last page and demanded she read the book again.

During their third reading, Kyle’s eyes started to droop. During their fourth, he was passed out against her chest.

Zoe gently placed the book on the large mattress beside her hip. She dipped her head and pressed a kiss to her son’s brunette curls. But she made no move to separate herself from him, even though she knew that Carlos was waiting for her in the living room.

She kept having to remind herself that she trusted Carlos, that she wouldn’t have moved in with him if she hadn’t. Twice in the same day. Laying quietly in a giant bed listening to her son’s light snores, she felt like she trusted Carlos. Her heart thrummed at the picture of him in her head and anticipation seared her veins at the thought of what sexy fun they could get up to tonight.

But...

But what if that was all it was? Lust? What if she was mistaking trust for lust?

She'd moved herself and her son in with a man, slept with a man, she barely knew. There was no denying that she was falling for Carlos. He was everything and more that she'd ever dreamed of. He was the sort of man she'd thought Davis to be.

But did she actually trust him?

Zoe did not like her current line of thinking. It saddened and frightened her that she didn't know her own thoughts and heart. The conflicting feelings made her wonder if she was moving too fast, if it had been a mistake to take Carlos up on his offer...

Sunlight woke her. Zoe blinked, and it took her a moment to realize she was in bed with Kyle, still dressed in her clothes from the day before.

Kyle had rolled over in his sleep and was now star-fished beside her on his belly. Stifling a yawn, Zoe adjusted the blankets over her son's small body and scooted herself out of the bed.

Zoe carefully peeked into Carlos's bedroom. He hadn't hesitated to call it theirs, but Zoe still struggled with the word. Shame washed through her. Was she truly second-guessing her decision to move into Carlos's house after only three nights? Two of which, they'd spent making passionate love and the third... Well, she could argue she'd just fallen asleep reading to Kyle, but she doubted Carlos would believe the lie.

And she didn't want to lie to him. Not after everything he'd done for her.

The bedroom was empty, despite the early hour. For a moment, Zoe wondered if Carlos had fallen asleep on the living room couch waiting for her. The bed, though, looked slept in, so Zoe doubted that theory.

Still in her outfit from the day before, Zoe hurried over to the closet for some new clothes. She would worry about showering later. She needed to speak with Carlos first. She owed him the honesty of her fears.

She found him in the kitchen. Coffee was already brewing in the large pot. He was standing at the stovetop in his plaid pajama bottoms and nothing else. Her eyes freely roamed over the hard muscles of his back.

He must have sensed her presence because he turned his head over his shoulder. “Morning, sunshine.”

Though his tone was light, she could see the hurt in his green eyes. Guilt gripped her heart tightly. “Good morning.”

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He turned back to the pans on the stovetop. She smelled eggs and bacon. “Take a seat. This is almost ready.”

“You cooked for me too?” Surprise kept her where she stood in the doorway.

Carlos was quiet for a minute too long and she realized, again, that she’d hurt him with her question. She hung her head, her dyed brunette curls falling forward to hide her face. Despite her feelings for him, how could this relationship ever work if she was constantly doubting both herself and him? Zoe didn’t want to hurt Carlos. That was the last thing she wanted.

She heard the click of the knobs being turned off, followed by the scraping of the pans and clank of the ceramic plates being picked up and brought to the table. Still, she stood in the doorway. Would he even want to have breakfast with her? Why would he?

Strong arms encircled her, warmth infused her, and Zoe sagged against him on instinct. This felt right. In his arms, there was no doubt, no fear. Her arms looped around his broad chest, tucking under his pits. He was so big that her fingertips couldn’t even touch at his back. Her fingers dug into his hard muscle and she ridiculously wished she could burrow her way inside him. The ultimate shield.

“I’m sorry,” she mouthed against his bare chest. The fuzz there tickled her lips.

Carlos lifted his hands to her face. He cupped her cheeks, gently coaxing her to lift her head. As soon as she did, his lips were on hers. One hand shifted around to grip the hair at the base of her head. Her arms around him tightened as she went up on her

toes to meet him with equal intensity.

Carlos bent his knees, scooping her up under her butt by his free arm. The summer dress she'd put on was loose enough that it did not impede her legs from looping around his hips.

"Breakfast can wait," he murmured against her lips. "Our talk can wait. I have to have you, sunshine. Please."

She'd barely nodded before he started walking them down towards their bedroom. Funny, she thought, as he closed the door with his foot. She didn't have an issue calling it their bedroom when she was in his arms.

CHAPTER 5

Zoe trembled as he laid her out on their bed. The other two times they had sex, it had been fun and lively. Zoe could not recall a time with any man where she'd laughed during sex. It gave those times with Carlos an elated feeling that surpassed passion. The fact that he'd made himself vulnerable to her had relaxed her in a way she hadn't thought possible after Davis's treatment of her. She'd never enjoy the company of a sexual partner more than she did Carlos.

As she watched him strip off his pajama pants, there was an intensity between them that heated the air. Zoe felt her nipples pebble against her dress, moisture pooled between her legs, and her tongue dampened her lips in anticipation of his touch.

Staring down at her, Carlos took his thick erection in his hand and started to leisurely stroke himself. "Are you wet enough for me? I don't think I'll be able to hold back once I get my mouth on you."

Zoe shuddered. She hiked up her butt enough to pull the long dress up under her hips,

revealing the fact that all she'd been wearing was the dress. No bra, no panties.

His eyes darkened. "Fuck. Naughty girl, you were standing in my kitchen with no panties on? If I'd known I'd have bent you over the counter instead of carrying you to our bed."

Heat seared her at the idea of him taking her in the kitchen. It did not occur to her until later in the day that it shouldn't have turned her on so much, considering the last time Davis had forced himself on her had been in their kitchen. But right then, that thought never even crossed her mind. All she saw was Carlos bending her over the kitchen counter, hiking up her dress, and entering her from behind.

He must have picked up on her increased mood. "You like that idea, don't you, sunshine?" He continued to stroke his cock. "You want me to take you, use you, in the kitchen. How about the living room? Bend you over the arm of the couch and spank your little ass until it reddens with the print of my hand."

Zoe's breath hitched at his words. Her back bowed off of the bed and she felt her clit throb with nothing more than him voicing a fantasy. "Carlos... Please..."

Carlos moved over to the nightstand. He reached inside to pull out a condom packet. Using his teeth, he tore it open, but he didn't move to take it out of the wrapper. Instead, he held it out towards her. "Put it on me, sunshine."

Zoe rose up onto her knees. She pulled the dress off over her head, leaving her just as naked as he was. She crawled on her knees on the mattress over to the edge of the bed.

Feeling more wanton and adventurous than she had the first time they'd made love, Zoe pulled the moist latex from the wrapper. Making sure it was facing the right way, she placed it to her mouth instead of the head of his cock. She stared into his eyes as

she lowered herself down and used her mouth and tongue to roll the condom down the length of his erection.

Knowing he wasn't averse to a bit of pain mixed with pleasure, Zoe carefully scraped the edge of her teeth along his hard shaft as she backed her mouth off of him. Carlos let out a low moan. His hand went to her hair and he held her face in place for a couple of extra thrusts before he removed himself from her mouth. Using her hair, he tipped her head upwards to stare up at him.

Crouched as she was on her knees before him on the mattress, she acknowledged the submissiveness of the position. More importantly, though, she realized she wasn't scared of him. He had a tight hold on her hair, but she did not fear him.

"Where in the world did you learn to do that, sunshine?"

Zoe bit her lip before admitting, "I've been doing some research. You let me borrow your tablet yesterday, remember? I probably should have erased the history."

His grip on her tightened slightly, though not painfully. She knew to the marrow of her bones that if she showed a hint of pain that he would back off. Carlos led her to rise up on her knees by her hair. Zoe's hard nipples scraped against his hard chest as she rose.

"And what other wicked things were you looking up on my tablet?" His voice was deep, dark, but there was a hitch to it that portrayed his intense arousal. She had a suspicion that he was barely able to keep himself under control.

Suddenly, she knew that she didn't want Controlled Carlos. She wanted Wild Carlos, Unabashed Carlos, Naughty Carlos.

Zoe leaned in, nipping at his jawline that he hadn't shaved yet that morning. "I was

looking up the best strap-ons with large dicks made for anal pleasure.”

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Quick as a flash, Carlos released his hold on her hair. He placed his hands behind her knees and took her legs out from under her. Zoe landed, bouncing, on her back on the mattress. Her legs still in his hands, he widened them to step between as he pulled her butt to the edge of the bed.

“You are without a doubt the most erotic woman I have ever had the pleasure of making love to.” He took his sheathed cock in hand, rubbing the head through her wet folds. Zoe moaned as he stroked over her engorged clit. “If I have my way, Zoe, you’ll be the last woman I’ll ever make love to.”

Declaration stated, he plunged into her wet core. Zoe cried out as he stretched her before slapping a hand over her mouth, conscious of the fact that his mother and her son were in rooms nearby.

Carlos draped her legs over his shoulders, nearly bending her in two, as he fell forward onto the mattress. His hands by her waist, he thrust his cock inside her again and again. Faster and more powerful than their previous times, this was not lovemaking as he’d called it, but down and dirty fucking.

Zoe felt her orgasm start as her inner muscles clenched around him. He hadn’t even touched her clit and she was already coming.

Carlos swiped her hand away from her mouth, collapsing on top of her so he could claim her lips as surely as he claimed her body. He swallowed her screams. She felt him grow inside her and knew he was following her right over the edge.

Perhaps both of them were falling harder than they were prepared to admit.

Not having a bathroom readily available and not willing to journey naked across the hall where a potential audience could catch him, Carlos pulled the used condom off his softening cock and tied it off. He balled it into a clump of tissues before tossing it into the trash. Then he picked up his pajama bottoms to clean Zoe between her legs. He had wet wipes in his drawer, but for some reason liked the idea of cleaning her with his clothes.

The image of his cum, leaking from her core overtook his sight for a moment. The idea of not just taking her bare but breeding her... Of her swollen and luscious with his baby...

Carlos had to shake the image from his head. That reality, if it was even a possibility at all, was very far off in the future. Zoe had had a hard pregnancy with Kyle. Or, rather, she'd had a hard experience getting pregnant. Her husband's abuse had started due to her inability to conceive right away. While that could have been just as much the man's fault as it was hers, Carlos had no doubt her husband had placed the blame solely on her shoulders.

He would never do that. Regardless of how much he wanted to see her pregnant with his baby, it was no excuse to beat her.

Carlos easily maneuvered a lax Zoe up to the head of the bed. He scooted in behind her, spooning her smaller form, and pulled the covers over them. As great as he felt post-orgasm, it was time they talked. They couldn't use sex to avoid their issues.

No matter how tempting an idea it was.

He rubbed his fingers gently up and down her left arm and shoulder. She shivered, but he didn't think it was from the cold.

"Why didn't you come to bed last night?" He kept his voice low, making sure there

was no way she could place anger in his tone.

He wasn't angry. Not really. Disappointed and worried more than angry. He was angrier at himself for not having seen what was bothering her so he could fix it.

"In all honesty, it wasn't my intention to spend the night away from you." Carlos moved her curls over so he could see her profile more clearly as she answered. "I did hesitate to leave Kyle. I was...ashamed of how I acted at the pizzeria, but it also brought up some concerns. I was thinking, lost track of time, and eventually fell asleep with him. I am sorry, Carlos. I wasn't trying to stay away."

"Are you glad you did?"

Her hesitation was answer enough. Still, she said, "In a way and probably not for the reason you think."

"And what reason do I think?" he asked, not liking the assumption of his thoughts.

"That I wanted to stay away from you. That I was afraid of you or didn't want to face you."

All right, he had to give her that one. He had been thinking those were her reasons.

"And what was the real reason then?"

"It gave me perspective, I think. When I was drifting off last night, I was thinking we were moving too fast. I was actually second-guessing moving in here with you." Carlos stiffened at her words. She reached behind herself and gripped his bare hip with her small hand. "I don't," Zoe clarified. "It was only an errant thought. I don't regret it, Carlos, I promise."

That was great to hear, but still... "What made you question it in the first place?"

“Time. Or, rather, the lack of time.” Zoe turned around to face him. Not liking the space now between their naked bodies, Carlos hooked one leg over her hip and rested his arm around her back. Her cheeks pinkened beautifully as his dick started to wake back up, even though only minutes had passed since they’d made love.

Zoe cleared her throat. He loved how one minute she could be a sexy vixen rolling a condom down his cock with her mouth and the next she acted like a shy, blushing bride. He found the contradiction enticing and, if he was being honest, encouraging.

“Can you bear with me for a second? No interruptions. I want to make sure I explain this correctly.”

He nodded.

The fact that she wasn’t looking away from him was reassuring that, though she might struggle to find the right words, he was going to want to hear what she had to say. “For six years, I thought I was in love with a man because he had family money, standing in the community, and a respectable job. I know that I did love him, or I wouldn’t have married him. Take away the mental and physical abuse, I can’t see that I was so blind as to marry a man I did not love.

“But here’s the thing I’m struggling with. It pales in comparison.” She lifted her hand to cup his scruffy face. “Carlos, I’ve known you less than a week and you mean more to me than he ever did. It’s like...you quiet the voices and he created them.” She shook her head, scoffing at herself. “That makes me sound insane.” Carlos chuckled softly but did not speak as she’d requested. “I feel more safe, more loved in your arms than I ever did in his. I know it’s not fair to compare the two of you, because he’s nowhere close to your league, but there will always be that comparison. It’s there in my head.”

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Zoe leaned forward and pressed a light kiss to his lips. “But there’s no comparison in my heart, Carlos. I spent two nights in your arms and one out of your arms...and there’s no comparison. I will always choose you. I will always pick you. I don’t care that it’s too fast, I don’t care that my brain hasn’t caught up to where my heart is. I need you in my life.

“We’ll figure out my identity, what sort of relationship you want to have with Kyle, and anything else that comes along. So long as we do it together, preferably with your arms around me.”

She paused long enough that Carlos asked, “Am I allowed to speak now?”

Zoe let out a light giggle. “Yeah.”

Carlos tipped his head down and claimed her lips. “You already know how I feel about you. I started falling for you when we bumped into each other in February. I have never felt such a pull towards another person. I saw you and your Bambi eyes and all I wanted was to take you into my arms, guard you and protect you. It kills me, not that you were married but that he treated you so despicably that you could ever compare me to him. I get it,” he added when she made to defend her words. “Trust me, I get it. And you know what? I don’t mind the comparison. Because I know it’s one way that I can kick his ass since you already shot him dead before I could.”

Zoe blinked at him in shock and then burst out laughing. “Carlos!”

He smiled before taking her lips again. “Sunshine, never be afraid to tell me your fears or discomforts. Believe it or not, I’ll have some along the way too. We need to

be open and honest with each other. That's the only way this will work. And I swear," he added more sternly, "that I will always quiet the voices in your head."

Zoe laughed again. "Thank you. I hope I do the same for you."

Carlos rolled her onto her back. "You do, sunshine. You do that and so much more." He kissed her again, knowing they weren't leaving this bed until he made love to her at least one more time.

Zoe and Carlos walked down the hallway with their arms wrapped around each other, giggling like high schoolers in love. They rounded the corner into the kitchen—and froze.

Kyle sat at the kitchen table in his pajamas, drinking a cup of milk. He had a plate of half-eaten eggs and bacon in front of him.

Louisa stood at the stovetop, cooking up more food. "Good morning, lovebirds," she said with a knowing look. "Did you forget you had a child?"

CHAPTER 6

It took less than two days for Keys to get back to them. He had set up Zoe with a new identity as 'Zoe Scanlon' and linked her as Jenna's niece. He even took family pictures of Steel and Jenna with their children and somehow added a young Zoe into the mix. All three of Zoe's 'cousins' had been filled in on the situation and were given Zoe's backstory in case anyone ever questioned her presence in the family. It helped that both Jenna and her deceased sister Carolyn were estranged from Jenna's parents, to the point where none of Jenna and Steel's children had even met their maternal grandparents. It was completely believable, per Jenna, that Carolyn could have had a child and their parents would have never known. They had not even bothered to attend their own daughter's funeral.

Jenna then spent a day going over her family history with Zoe. It was weird for Zoe. Not being integrated into another family or even the reminder that she'd lost her place in her own, but the fact that she'd lived under Jenna's roof for over six months and she hadn't even known anything about the struggle Jenna had gone through to be able to marry Steel. They were high school sweethearts, but he was from the proverbial wrong side of the tracks. Jenna's parents had gone to extreme measures to keep them separated, but Jenna had risked it all. Her inheritance, her family, and her reputation to run away with "Jack" on her eighteenth birthday. Her parents had even gone as far as to have Steel arrested for kidnapping, but the charges had to be dropped because Jenna was over eighteen and did not back her parents' story. Additionally, her father had tried to pay Steel to leave Jenna.

Steel had taken the money...but then used it to pay for their wedding.

Zoe's jaw dropped. "What? Isn't that stealing?"

Jenna shook her head. "They gave him the money. It wasn't like he'd signed a contract."

"Can I ask... I mean, how much was it?"

Jenna snorted. "A penny under ten thousand. But they thought Steel was so poor and would be so money-hungry that that would have been enough to entice him."

Zoe looked around Jenna's living room, at the memories upon memories of family pictures and the life Steel and Jenna had built together. "I can't imagine. A part of me wishes my parents had tried to step in, seen who Davis was and warned me. But they were as blind as I was."

Jenna reached across the table to grip Zoe's hand. "We'll find a way to get word to your parents that you're safe and happy. That's all we can hope for right now."

“Thank you.” It would mean a lot to Zoe if that was possible.

Another couple of hours later and Carlos came in through Jenna’s front door. He had a massive smile on his face. “Ding-dong, the witch is dead!” he called in an excited voice. Though in uniform, Zoe noticed that his holster was empty.

Her eyes landed on his handcuffs and her cheeks immediately reddened at the memory of what they’d done with them the night before. Unsure of how she would handle being tied up, Carlos had suggested an alternative: they bind themselves together. Her right wrist had been cuffed to his, making for some interesting positions. Their laughter had been as loud as their moans.

His knowing smile as he bent down to kiss her in greeting told Zoe that he could guess where her mind had gone. Had he left the cuffs on his belt on purpose to get a response out of her?

Jenna gave Zoe a look too that said she wasn’t fooled, even if she didn’t know the specific cause behind Zoe’s sudden arousal.

To draw attention away from her, Zoe asked Carlos, “Who’s the witch that’s dead?”

“Belinda,” he answered, pulling up a chair next to hers. “Sat her down and told her in no uncertain terms that if she tries to show up for work again that I’ll have her arrested. The only way I could fire her more is if I literally put a match to her.”

Zoe still couldn’t believe the woman had had the nerve to continue showing up for work after Sheriff Hannigan had fired her. Like she thought his terminating her was some big comical joke.

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“That means you have a job opening?” she asked, excited.

“I do. Happen to know a sexy lady who’s looking for work?”

Zoe turned to Jenna. “Are you happy with your job?”

Jenna laughed as Carlos growled. He forced Zoe’s face back towards her. “Let me try that again: do you know of a sexy lady who’s looking for work that also lives in my house and shares my bed and is living under a false identity?”

Zoe’s face scrunched. “That’s really specific. I mean, how would that résumé even look? Like—” Zoe’s words were cut off by her laughter as Carlos near tackled her, dragging her up onto his lap.

His hat nearly fell off, but Zoe caught it and placed it over her own head. She looped her arms around his neck, kissing the underside of his chin. Calming, she settled herself against his shoulder.

Carlos tipped his hat out of the way enough to place a kiss on her forehead. “No pressure, sunshine, but the job is yours if you want it.”

Zoe smiled against his beige uniform. “I want it. I’m just nervous about having such a public job.”

“Sometimes the best disguise is the one right in front of you,” he said as if quoting from somewhere. “If we present you as someone who has nothing to hide, why would anyone think you’re hiding?”

Zoe nodded. He had a point, but it still didn't completely settle her nerves.

The telltale snap of a camera startled Zoe so much, she sat up, almost clipping Carlos's chin with her forehead.

"Sorry," Jenna said with a soft smile. "I couldn't resist. You two just looked too perfect." She turned her phone around to show Carlos and Zoe the picture she'd taken of them cuddling.

Surprised, Zoe blinked. They looked...content. Like there were no challenges or angst in their world. "I love it," she sighed. "I wish I had a phone so you could send it to me."

She was about to ask Jenna to send it to Carlos's phone when he suddenly sat up more. "Shit, I'm such a dumbass." He had to shift her hip slightly to reach into his pocket. He pulled out a cell phone. "Here. Keys handed me this on my way in just now."

"For me?" she gasped. She hadn't had a phone in over three years.

"You need a phone, Zo. Keys set this up and backdated it so it looks like you've had it for years. He even added baby pictures that look a hell of a lot like Kyle."

Zoe clicked the screen and found a picture of her son swinging on the swings in the communal backyard as the wallpaper. "How... I mean, when..." Her eyebrows scrunched in confusion. "Is that Photoshop'ed?"

Jenna shook her head. "I saw Keys outside taking pictures of the kids earlier."

Abby and Bulldog had volunteered to watch Kyle for her so Jenna and Zoe could talk uninterrupted. Her first instinct was to not allow Kyle out of her sight, but she

managed to tamp that down. Beyond Bulldog being Carlos's brother, Bulldog had proven his loyalty to protecting her and her son when he'd help shelter her for a year.

Zoe unlocked the phone to see a text message waiting for her. The fact that it wasn't the only text message in her phone shocked her more than the message itself.

Keys: Remember to set a password.

"I don't know what to say," Zoe said, flabbergasted. "The last time I had a phone, Davis used it to control me. He always checked my messages and used it to track my movements. I couldn't send a message or make a call without him knowing about it."

Carlos's arm came around her, touching her hand over the phone on the table. "Sunshine, I swear to you. This is your phone. I'll even ask Keys to back off and not look in it anymore. I will never ask you to check your phone. It is yours and only yours."

Zoe swallowed hard. "You gave me your tablet without hesitation. I could see everything of yours on it. But I..."

"I will never ask for your password," Carlos continued when she hesitated. "I will even look away now as you set it."

Zoe, though, shook her head. They'd sworn to be honest with each other, so she was. "No, it's not that. I mean, it is. The idea of being controlled again frightens me, but not by you. I think just in general."

He rested his chin on her shoulder, tall enough to do so even though she was sitting on his lap. "That's a legitimate fear. Hell, some people don't have cellphones because they think the government uses it to track them. Here." He covered his eyes with a hand. "Make your password. I'm not even looking."

“No, it’s not necessary, really?—”

“Sunshine, I’m not looking until you have a password on your phone. I’m stronger and more stubborn than you, so don’t even try to test me on this.”

Zoe looked down at her phone and then across the table at Jenna, who had a hand over her mouth like she was trying to contain a smile or laughter.

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Just to end Carlos's blindness, she quickly typed in her new password.

Immediately, another text message showed up.

Keys: Good girl.

Zoe frowned.

Zoe: How did you know I set my password? Can you see me?

She covered the front camera with a finger to see if that would work.

Keys: I see EVERYTHING.

Keys: Kidding. I set an alert to notify me once your password was set. The phone is no longer attached to my programs and solely yours.

Zoe cracked a smile.

Keys: I'm sending a message out to all the brothers and ol' ladies with your new number.

At the ding across the table, Zoe glanced up to see Jenna checking her phone. She turned it around to show Zoe the message from Keys with Zoe's new number. Jenna now knew it when Zoe didn't, ironically.

Zoe's phone let out a sharp ding too.

Jenna: [picture]

Zoe smiled when she saw the picture of Carlos and her. She saved it to her camera reel.

“Is this the world’s longest password or am I being punished for something?”

Zoe jumped, having forgotten about Carlos’s hand over his eyes. Just for the hell of it, she said, “I’m almost done.” Then she put the phone down on the table, turned on his lap, and kissed him.

On Zoe’s first day at work, she realized just how little work her predecessor did before her. Her desk was not only a disaster, but there were over three dozen sticky notes with random complaints, concerns, and suggestions. It took her over twenty minutes just to find her computer mouse. It was no wonder everyone thought Belinda was utterly useless. What did the woman do all day? File her nails?

By lunch time, Zoe had finally gotten her desk cleared off. Problem was, she now had a conference room full of miscellaneous paperwork, notes, and files to now organize.

“Ready for lunch?” Carlos leaned over the top of her desk. It had a high reception counter with a wooden top.

“You owe me so many orgasms for taking this job,” she said in a low, threatening voice. “I cannot even begin to describe the disaster that this place was.”

Carlos grinned down at her. “Gladly. I was thinking the diner for lunch, but I’ll happily take you into my office and have you instead.”

Zoe’s face blazed, both with arousal and with embarrassment for her unchecked words. They were not the least bit professional. “Who sits at the desk while I’m on

break?”

“Generally, no one. If you hit that button on your phone there,” he pointed, “it will forward the dispatch calls to either my cell phone or yours. When you leave for lunch, make sure you take a radio with you, even if I’m with you. At night, before you go, make sure you forward the calls to Bert’s cell.”

She nodded slowly. “I need to make a manual or something. This seems like almost too much for one person to do.”

“I have it in my budget to hire two more deputies. We’ll take a look at it and see if we can hire a part-time receptionist too.”

“Even a volunteer,” Zoe suggested as she grabbed her purse from the bottom drawer where she stashed it. “I’m sure there’s some people in town who would be willing to help out. I can’t imagine how much has been missed under Belinda’s reign.”

“Most everyone has my cell.” Carlos stepped back as Zoe walked around the counter. “Pretty sure the entire town knew not to count on Belinda if she was the one to take down a message.”

“Why did she last so long? From what you told me about Sheriff Longhill, I can’t imagine he handled such disorganization well.”

“He honestly thought her ditziness to be humorous. I never understood it, but I also wasn’t one to question my boss. Well, that boss,” he added, likely hinting at Sheriff Hannigan. “I respected Longhill too much to say anything and just made sure that the townsfolk knew they could call me instead.”

“That’s a lot on you.” The more time she spent with Carlos, the more she realized just how much he took on. He cared so much about his town and the people who lived

there. He really was a good, honorable man.

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Carlos shrugged her statement off. "It's my job."

"It's more than that," she said as he held the door to the diner open for her. Having been at her desk all morning organizing, she realized how much she needed to pee as they entered the diner. "Grab us a seat?" she asked. "I'll be right back."

He nodded once. "Iced tea with lemon?"

"Please."

She headed towards the bathroom. After taking care of business, Zoe exited the stall and headed towards the sink to wash her hands.

Zoe jumped when she saw a man was standing against the counter, arms crossed casually over his broad chest.

Her shoulders sagged. "What's with you and ladies' rooms?"

Owen smiled down at her. "It is good to see you, Zoe."

She gave him a sad smile. "I'm so sorry about Conner, Owen." Though it had been just over a year since his death, this was the first time she'd seen Owen since the night he'd rescued her at the courthouse to pass along her condolences.

"He died protecting those he cared about. It was the way he would have wanted to go."

Zoe wasn't sure what comfort that truly was. The end result was still the same. His twin had still died. Though his face was emotionless, Zoe saw the concealed pain in Owen's eyes.

"Why are you here?" she asked him.

"Jack sent me to check on you. He hadn't realized WiseWave620 was among the club Conner had sent you to until a couple of days ago."

Zoe blinked. "Who is among what now?"

"The club's hacker, Keys. That's his handle."

"Why is it concerning that Keys is here?"

"Not concerning," he corrected. He moved out of the way so she could start washing her hands. "Actually, pretty damn convenient. I'm glad he was able to set you up with a better identity than we were."

"He said yours was solid too." She reached over for the paper towels.

Owen studied her for a minute. "How are you and the sheriff doing? The two of you seem pretty cozy walking arm in arm down the street."

Zoe's cheeks heated. Carlos was making it known to all that he was dating her, that she was Jenna's niece, and that she was his new secretary. In a way, it was admirable. He wasn't trying to hide her like she was some dirty little secret. "We're doing really well."

"And he treats you good?"

Recalling the number of orgasms Carlos had given her the night before, she had to bite back a smile as she confirmed, “Very well.”

“Good.”

“Was that all?” she asked, a bit confused. “You came here just to ask me how I’m doing? There has to be more, Owen. You wouldn’t risk showing your face in this town otherwise.”

He shrugged. “I’m looking for someone who was rumored to have been in the area. Figured as long as I was here I’d stop in to check on you.” With a slight shrug of his shoulders, Owen added, “Conner made me promise to keep an eye on you if anything ever happened to him.”

That sounded exactly like something Conner would say to his twin.

Owen reached forward and chucked her under her chin. “Keep your head up, Zoe. You’re finally coming out of your shell. I can’t wait to see you fly.”

That said, Owen left the ladies’ room. Zoe stared after him for a moment before following. She didn’t see him anywhere in the diner and wondered if he could have already exited.

“Everything okay?” Carlos asked as she sat down in the booth opposite him.

Zoe nodded. “I just had the strangest conversation I think I’ve ever had in a ladies’ room, which is actually saying something...”

CHAPTER 7

In addition to her phone, Keys got her a bank account, checkbook, credit cards, social security card, birth certificate, passport, and driver's license. Based on the history he provided her, it looked like she'd had all of them for several years.

Having her own checking account, she was able to receive a real paycheck from her new job at the sheriff's station. When she asked Keys where the money in her account came from, as she hadn't received a paycheck yet, he just smiled at her and wished her a happy birthday—even though it was nowhere close to the fake birthdate on her fake driver's license.

As soon as she had enough money from her new job to feel sufficient, she was writing Keys a check for the amount he'd given her. Then again, she thought as she looked at the price of some of the groceries in her cart, that might take a long while.

It hadn't occurred to Zoe how much it had cost, first the Mountain Mutineers and then the VDMC, to feed and house her and Kyle. She owed both groups so much. How could she even begin to repay such a debt?

She had her eye on Kyle in the kid's seat of the shopping cart as she browsed the vitamins aisle. When her eyes landed on the vitamin brand Davis had used, a cold sweat appeared on her skin. Gooseflesh rose and, for a moment, Zoe couldn't breathe.

It was so stupid. It was a vitamin bottle. It couldn't hurt her. Davis was not standing in front of her. Just his particular brand on vitamin pills.

A hand touched her shoulder. Zoe jumped, the pill bottle in her hand went flying. It clattered to the floor.

Spinning, she met Carlos's worried eyes. "Zoe, where's Kyle?"

Zoe blinked. "What?"

"Where's Kyle?" he demanded.

The worry in his voice snapped her out of her haze. She turned to the cart, prepared to say that Kyle was "right here", but she froze, the words caught in her throat.

The shopping cart was pushed further down the aisle than the arm's length it had been. The empty shopping cart. Her groceries were still inside the large basket, but her son was not.

"Kyle!" she shouted, fear gripping her like an iron fist. "Kyle! Carlos, where is he?"

Carlos bolted away from her. He was still in his uniform. They had gone straight from work to pick up Kyle at Jenna's consignment shop, where Kyle had spent the day 'helping her out' with all his four year old workplace experience, to the grocery store. Louisa had dinner cooking at home but was running low on some groceries.

"Attention!" came over the intercom. "There is a missing child, Kyle Scanlon, four years old. Brown hair, brown eyes. The store is on lockdown. If you see him, please call out."

The small-town grocery was small enough that anyone could shout and the whole store would hear.

"Kyle!" Zoe yelled at the top of her lungs. "Kyle, if you're hiding, you're not in

trouble. I need you to come to Mommy!”

Kyle wouldn't run off. He knew the rules. Things had been different since moving in with Carlos and Louisa, but he knew better. She'd drilled it into him a million times. He was not to wander off, he was to always stay within arm's reach.

“Kyle!”

Panic was taking over. Her heart was thundering in her chest. How could she have taken her eyes off of him? How had a vitamin bottle so completely distracted her that she hadn't seen her son be taken out of the cart?

Because he could have only been taken. But by who? Why? Had they been found? Had the Ruttersons found them? Found Kyle, the grandson they knew as Davey?

Zoe spun in circles, running up and down the aisles. Searching... Searching... Others were looking too but she ignored them. Where was her son?

“KYLE!!!”

Three police cruisers raced into the parking lot, followed immediately by a dozen motorcycles.

Wanda, one of the cashiers from the store, was sitting on a bench with Zoe. Carlos was utterly torn, because he wanted to be the one consoling her, but he had a job to do. Beyond that as sheriff, as her man. She needed his strength now more than ever before.

The entire store had been searched, including the bathrooms, storage room, pharmacy, and offices. All three exits had someone posted on them.

“Search the roof,” Carlos ordered Danny seconds after the deputy exited his vehicle.

Danny ran off. Carlos turned his attention to Jeff. “Interview everyone. Someone had to have seen something. Wanda says the cameras are only on the loading dock area so they can watch for deliveries.”

Jeff ordered Carl and Scott to follow him inside.

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Steel, Bulldog, and other members of the MC came up to him, but Carlos only had eyes for one of them. In a whispered voice, he asked, “I am required by law to report a child abduction to NCIC,”—the National Crime Information Center—“is there a reason why I shouldn’t in Kyle’s case?”

Keys shook his head. “It’s unfortunate but with the heads up, I can block any DNA searches from flagging in the system for his previous case. Do what you need to do to keep this above board and I’ll do what I need to do.”

He took a backpack off of his shoulders. On the hood of the nearest cruiser, he pulled out a laptop.

“What do you need from us?” Steel asked. His voice barely contained the rage Carlos saw in his eyes.

“Block the exits out of Mount Grove. Others start scouring the town. It’s been less than fifteen minutes, but he could be anywhere by now.” Carlos ran a hand through his hair. How the fuck had this happened? How could he let it? He was the fucking sheriff and he couldn’t protect his girlfriend’s kid?

Carlos’s fists clenched. His internal monster that called for the most primal of justices lifted its ugly head. He hadn’t felt this out of control. Ever. Not even when Zoe had told him her story and what her husband had done to her.

A kid? Kyle was four years old. An innocent.

Carlos rounded on Keys as Steel and some of the others climbed back onto their

bikes. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that his brother had remained behind. Did Bulldog sense the rage brewing inside him? Was that why he'd stayed?

"I need you to look into the Ruttersons. I don't have time for warrants and I doubt I could get one against them anyway."

"Would certainly lead people to connect Kyle's alias with his birth name," Keys mused offhandedly. "I was already looking into them. I didn't want any surprises." He looked up at Carlos. "I don't think it's them. They have had no large money withdrawals or changes in their schedule. I would have seen it coming if it was them."

Carlos's hand slammed down on the hood of his cruiser. "Then who the fuck took Zoe's son?"

Kyle was so small. The few times he'd allowed Carlos to hold him, he'd been so light. The boy was obsessed with dinosaurs.

Keys looked sick as he said, "We have no registered offenders living in town. Doesn't mean one didn't come passing through."

Carlos's stomach rolled. It was the bitter reality of their world that such monsters existed. It was bad enough when an adult like Davis existed, who had hurt a woman he should have died protecting, but when an adult went after a kid... It was worse. It was so much worse.

A hand landed on his shoulder. "Deep breath, brother."

Carlos flung off Bulldog's hand. "Don't treat me like a child."

"Wasn't," Bulldog said shortly.

“We need more traffic cameras in this town,” Keys said to no one in particular. “I don’t see anything suspicious on the ones we have.”

Danny came out of the store. “Roof’s clear. We did another sweep of the store and nothing.”

“Keys, I need a computer. As soon as you have a vehicle for me, I need to put out a BOLO.” To Danny, he said, “I have an Amber Alert out and need to contact NCIC.”

“I’ll head back to the station,” Danny told him. “Set up a command center and take care of that for you. Bert texted, he’s on his way in too.”

Carlos nodded his appreciation. He turned towards his brother. “Can you take Zoe to your place or Jenna’s? I need to contact Momma too.”

“I’ll take care of it, though I doubt she’ll listen to me.”

At first, Carlos thought he was referring to their mom, but then he realized Bulldog was talking about Zoe. She was up and at the door to the grocery store. She was yelling at Jeff to let her back inside to search again.

Carlos let out a resigned sigh and then walked forward. “Sunshine—” He barely got the word out before she rounded on him.

“Tell them to let me inside!” She had tears streaming down her cheeks. Her eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot. Her hair was disheveled like she’d been pulling on it. “I need to look for my son! Tell them to let me inside!”

He took a step closer, his arms out as if to hug her. Instead, Zoe raised her fists and pounded them down on his chest. She let out an ear-piercing, heartbreaking wail that shattered his heart into a million pieces.

“Where’s my son!?” she cried out. Continuing to slam her fists against his chest, she demanded, “Where’s my son!”

Carlos could care less about her fists, concerned only for her tears. Despite her fight, Carlos took her into his arms. He caged her against his body. Zoe sagged against him, her cries of agony like a branding iron to his soul.

“Carlos!” Keys shouted.

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Carlos's head whipped around, but his hold on Zoe kept him in place. He needed to go see what Keys had but how could he leave his woman in such a distraught place? It tore at him, his need to be in two places at once.

Bulldog approached. "Zoe, honey, you need to let him go. I know I'm a poor substitute for your man, but I'm here for you all the same. Let me take you to Jenna. Let Carlos do his job and bring your son home."

Zoe lifted her head. She'd worked herself into such a state that she was hiccupping between breaths. Carlos hated his brother's words as much as he appreciated them.

He took her face between his hands. "I won't return until I have him with me," he vowed. "I will bring him home to you."

It might be the stupidest promise he'd ever made in his career as a police officer. There were too many unknowns. Any doctor, first responder, even politicians, knew better than to promise that everything would be fine, that the patient would live, that the criminal would be found... He should have known better than to vow something so absolute to the woman he was falling for.

As Zoe stared into his eyes, though, he knew that there was no alternative. He had to bring Kyle home or he would lose Zoe. Maybe not physically, but emotionally. She needed her son and he needed her.

Carlos pressed a chaste kiss to her lips before passing her off to Bulldog. "Keep her safe," he told his brother, a warning in his voice. Kyle's abduction might have to do with his past—which meant it had to do with Zoe's past.

Bulldog gave him a single nod. His own vow.

Without another look at her, Carlos turned and walked back over to Keys. “What do you have?”

CHAPTER 8

The monster seethed inside his soul. He’d not only failed Zoe, but he’d failed Kyle. Carlos was the fucking sheriff. He’d been in the goddamn store when Kyle had been taken right out from under his nose. He’d stepped away to help Mrs. Guthrie, an aging widow, get her groceries into her car. When he’d returned, he’d found Zoe in some sort of trance, just staring at the vitamins on the shelf before her.

He hadn’t even noticed the empty shopping cart at first.

The monster demanded retribution. He wanted blood and carnage and justice. How dare someone take Zoe’s son? Carlos knew he wasn’t the boy’s father but that didn’t mean he didn’t care for Kyle. Beyond that, he could be Kyle’s father in the future. He wanted to be. Along with any other children Zoe might one day give him.

Carlos had to get a grip on himself. He was shaking. He was the sheriff. He had to be professional...but how could he do that when this was Kyle? His heart thundered in his chest, making it hard to hear around him.

It was like an echo inside his soul. Thump... Thump... Thump... Kyle... Kyle... Kyle...

He had to concentrate if he had any hopes of keeping his vow to Zoe.

Keys picked up his laptop and handed it to Carlos. Carlos accepted it, holding it over his left hand and arm. On the screen was a picture. He’d seen enough of them to

know it came from a traffic camera. The vehicle itself was a nondescript black sedan. The windows were tinted as dark as the law allowed and the top three inches of the windshield were completely dark.

The man driving was wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses. He had his left hand raised to the side of his face, elbow balanced on the door, as if he was blocking the sunlight from his eyes. Carlos could have bought that as the reason if the sun wasn't setting in the opposite direction. Based on the timestamp, the picture was taken less than ten minutes ago.

He probably would have gone unnoticed, except Carlos had a clear view of the bottom of his face, chin, and torso.

"Owen?" Carlos looked up at Keys. "Where was this taken?"

"Just outside of town. He's headed northeast."

Towards Philadelphia. "You think Owen has Kyle?" Why? What was the endgame? Why would he come to Mount Grove, show his face, and then take Kyle? He could have just as easily snatched Kyle and remained anonymous. After all, who would suspect a dead man?

"It's as good a guess as any," Keys argued. "He came here to warn you—us about a bounty hunter. Maybe he was trying to throw us off his trail."

"What's the point? Why would he take Kyle?"

From what little Carlos knew about Owen, the theory didn't fit. Zoe trusted Owen. Or, rather, she'd trusted Conner. Conner had been her friend and ally. Owen had only been doing his brother a favor by helping. Yet twice now Owen had made an appearance in Mount Grove where people would suspect him of being his twin's

ghost. Why?

“Maybe he’s returning Kyle to the grandparents?” Keys suggested.

Carlos shook his head. “Owen took Kyle from the grandparents. Or at least his organization did. It doesn’t fit that he would do all of that then, only to return Kyle to the grandparents now.”

Keys shrugged. “Money’s a big motivator. There’s still a hefty reward for Kyle’s safe return.”

“It doesn’t fit,” Carlos insisted. Still, he wouldn’t be doing his job correctly if he didn’t look into it. He wanted to stare Owen in the eyes and judge for himself the man’s innocence. “Let’s go get him.”

Keys, though, shook his head. “I sent Ranger and Ghost after him. They were already scouting out by the main drag. They’ll be faster and more discreet.”

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Carlos could appreciate Keys' foresight but was still annoyed that he didn't check with him first. He put Keys' laptop down on the hood of the cruiser. "What else do you have?"

"I am looking into all of the registered offenders in the area with...histories," Keys practically spat out the word, "with boys that fit Kyle's description."

"I keep a list of them too," Carlos informed him. "The closest offender doesn't live within forty-five minutes of us. His name is Ferris Hogan, but he's into boys older than Kyle. The next is up in Johnstown. There are two in that area, William Butters and Simon Olivier. Butters is still on parole, but he's never gone after boys. Likes teen girls thirteen to sixteen. Olivier was convicted of raping his nephew but is still very vocal about his innocence. The nephew was ten at the time of the assault."

Keys stared gobsmacked at him. "You have all of that memorized?"

"Of course, I do," Carlos snapped. "You're telling me that you don't know that information?"

"Well, sure." Keys held up his tablet. "But I don't have it memorized."

"My memory is not going to help us find Kyle. I'm going to contact Danny and have LEOs talk with the three offenders within in hour of us." Carlos stepped away to speak into his radio. When he returned, he asked, "What about the bounty hunter Owen warned us about, Trapper?"

"Xzavier 'Trapper' Gallows." Keys tapped twice on his tablet and then handed it over

to Carlos. “Forty-three, dishonorably discharged from the Navy for repeated violent misconduct, endangerment of himself and others, and gambling.”

“What is that in civilian speak?” He didn’t have time to read the military rap sheet on the tablet in front of him.

“He started a secret fight club on the battleship,” Keys explained. “He’s hired himself out as a mercenary and recently took up bounty hunting.”

“He’s in our area. Why?”

Keys stretched his hand forward and scrolled on the tablet in Carlos’s hand. A surveillance picture appeared of two men leaving what could have been a restaurant or a store. One had a cigar in his mouth. The second was clearly armed.

“Santos Rivera. Escaped custody on the way to his courthouse appearance in Trenton, New Jersey. He’s rumored to be hiding out in Atlantic City and recently made his way down to Philly.”

“Philly’s five hours from us,” Carlos reminded him. “Is Trapper in Philly looking for Rivera?”

“Unconfirmed. I haven’t found evidence that he’s in Philly, though I can tell you that Rivera is.” Keys swiped the screen again. “This is the last known image of Trapper. It’s a couple of years old, but it’s the best I got.”

Carlos’s grip on the tablet tightened to the point where the screen moaned a protest. “This is Trapper?”

Keys nodded once. “Last image I have of him. Why?”

Carlos thrust the tablet forcefully back at Keys. “Take the beard off of him,” Carlos snapped. He started towards his cruiser.

“Where are you going?” Keys called after him.

“He’s been in Mount Grove!” Carlos shouted over his shoulder at him. “He was in the diner two booths away from Zoe and me when we had our first date!”

“What?” Keys snapped. “How could you possibly know that?”

“Because I notice strangers in my town.” He threw the door open to his cruiser, grateful he wasn’t blocked in by the other cars or cruisers. “Find him!” Carlos ordered Keys. “I don’t know how and I don’t know why, but he has Kyle!”

Carlos was in the back of the diner going through their surveillance when there was a commotion out front. He looked away from the computer screen in time to see Owen burst through the doorway.

Kelly the waitress, who had gotten Carlos onto their surveillance system, gasped at the sight of him. No doubt she was thinking similar thoughts to when Carlos had first seen him. Conner might have only been a prospect with the VDMC but he was still known in town. His death had labeled him a small-town hero as the club made it well known that he’d died saving Harper’s life and, by default, the life of her baby.

Anyone who came into the clubhouse immediately saw the In Memoriam placard on the wall behind the bar and the framed cut underneath.

Yet here stood the mirror image of the man many had helped bury.

Owen, though, ignored Kelly and turned his furious gaze on Carlos. “You let Kyle be taken?! I warned you!” He pointed an accusing finger at Carlos. “They were your

responsibility and you failed!”

Carlos looked past the finger in his face towards Ghost and Ranger in the doorway then to Kelly next to him. “Leave us.”

His voice brooked no argument.

Ranger and Ghost waited for Kelly to exit first and then they closed the door to the backroom, leaving Carlos alone with Owen. He pulled off his wide-brimmed hat and tossed it on the desk next to the keyboard.

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He stepped right up to Owen, who had dropped his hand, and got nose to nose with the man. Carlos was taller than him, but Owen had an air of menace about him that Carlos lacked. Or he did—until someone kidnapped his woman's son.

“Look me in the eye and tell me you had nothing to do with this. Tell me that you did not kidnap an innocent little boy away from his mother in broad daylight.”

Owen did not back down. He even took a step forward. “Never. I would never harm Kyle nor would I hurt Zoe like that. My brother loved her and I choose to honor him by protecting her and her son. I would never take him away from her unless it was what she asked of me.”

Carlos waited a heartbeat, studying those amber eyes, and then nodded once. He stepped back. “I suspect Trapper has him.”

“Trapper?”

Carlos indicated towards the computer screen. “This was our first date last week.” He took out his phone to show Owen the picture Keys had edited with a beardless Trapper. He held the two screens up next to each other.

Owen's eyes narrowed. “Fuck it all. He was in Mount Grove. He shook my tail, but I was so sure he'd turned east. Why would he come here? There's no way he knew about Zoe and Kyle.”

“Yet you warned me about him?”

“I wasn’t about to let a notorious bounty hunter with no morals within the same breathing air as them.” Owen leaned over the keyboard. “He was seated before you. How did he know you were going there on your date?”

“I don’t know,” Carlos answered. “It’s one of the reasons I recognized him, because I had to walk past him to get to my booth.”

“You saw him once at a glance and you recognized him a week later?” Owen looked over his shoulder, seeming as impressed as Keys had been.

“I’m good with faces,” Carlos growled through gritted teeth.

Owen turned back to the screen. “He leaves before the two of you too.”

“It would have been suspicious otherwise,” Carlos commented. “We were talking for so long Kelly had to come kick us out.”

“Where did you go after your date?”

“For a walk in the park and then I drove her back to the club’s property.”

“He must have followed you.”

“I moved her into my house the next day.” Shame filled Carlos. He was so sure he could protect Zoe and Kyle. That his badge would protect her. He’d been so foolish, stupid. Selfish.

Owen stood up. “He must have recognized Zoe despite her being heavier and changing her hair color.”

Carlos’s eyebrows drew down. Zoe was heavier now? Compared to what? She was perfect with curves and a little belly fat he attributed to her being a mom. She’d been

thinner once? How? Why?

Owen's voice was low as he added, "Her husband forced her to only eat vegetables after she gave birth. He didn't like that she carried extra weight from the pregnancy."

Carlos's jaw snapped closed. The fucker! What he wouldn't give for Davis Rutterson to still be alive.

But Carlos had a different revenge in mind regardless of Rutterson's current deceased state: he planned to love, cherish, worship, and protect the man's wife better than Rutterson ever could have. Additionally, he would raise the man's son to be a better man, the best man.

Only, Carlos had to find Kyle first.

Jaw tight, he looked to Owen. "Why did you come to Mount Grove? If you weren't tracking Trapper, why did you come? Why show your face?"

"To be honest, it had nothing to do with Kyle or Zoe. They were only an excuse. I'm looking for a man named Cap. I've heard he has ties to the MC but I haven't been able to locate him in town. I figured I had the wrong MC. After all, if he knew your MC then he would have known Conner, which meant he would have known me."

Carlos didn't know anyone by that name. "Why are you looking for him?"

"Answering that will take longer than we have. If Trapper has Kyle, he's heading to Philly." Owen glanced behind him at the closed door. "Can you ride?"

"A motorcycle? Sure."

Owen nodded to Carlos's hip. "Lose the badge and the uniform, Sheriff. We're going to be riding fast and riding hard." Heading towards the door, Owen threw over his

shoulder. “Hope you can keep up.”