



Carlos

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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

Steel,

Fuck, man, if you're reading this then something happened to me. Christ, I hope I go out swinging. Definitely sucks that I survived overseas only to kick it when I'm finally home. Truth is, I need a favor and it's not an easy ask. I don't know when you're reading this if I got my rockers yet. Still, I hope you'll grant it. If not for me, then for them.

Her name is Actually, I'm not going to write it down. Just in case. She needs your help, Steel. The law says she's wrong, but how can she be wrong when what she did was right? I wasn't there to protect her when she needed it. I could only help her afterwards.

The identity I gave her is solid. She and her son need a home. If I'm gone, then they can't stay where they were and she knows it. I've given her your name. The police will be after her. If she got to you through our escape plan, she's clean. If not, they'll come for her.

Look up the name Davis Rutterson. You'll understand. I swear to you, she's worth fighting for. The boy deserves to grow up with his mom at his side, not behind bars.

I have an account. It's different than the one for my grandfather's care. Please make sure she gets it. If she can't stay with you, please get her to someone else who can ensure her safety.

I owe you. I don't know how I'm going to pay it back since apparently I'm either incapacitated or dead. Figure it out and let me know.

Conner

PS—You told me years ago that a victim should never have to pay the price for defending their right to live. I hope you still believe that. She needs you, Steel. She deserves to have a life away from pain and violence.

CHAPTER 1

Deputy Sheriff Carlos Santiago stared up at the building before him with a feeling of trepidation. So much had changed in six months. Had it only been February when he'd last partied with the Via Daemonia, celebrating Bear and Tessa's re-wedding? How had so much changed in so little time?

He was man enough to admit that a good part of that change was himself. He thought he could live with the decisions he'd made guilt-free, but his conscience was coming back to haunt him. There would be pandemonium, chaos, and anarchy without the law. He knew this better than anyone as a cop. Carlos believed that, even if some laws were out of date or inaccurate, they were just.

Until that night.

That April night over a year ago. Ohiopyle.

Carlos closed his eyes and internally winced.

The horrors of that night should have vindicated the vigilante justice. All those women. Those two little girls. Madison Mitchell.

His heart and head screamed that whatever his brother and the Via Daemonia had done to Mark Connelly and his accomplice was justified. He knew Madison. He knew her parents. Because of the Via Daemonia, she was now about to start her sophomore year of college. She was happy, alive, and thriving. She hadn't been sold to become some deviant's sex slave.

But his soul? It felt stained. Like he'd dishonored the badge he cherished since he'd earned it at eighteen years old.

Carlos had been thirteen when his mom had been diagnosed with breast cancer and his piece of shit dad had decided that in sickness and in health was not a worthy vow to keep. His older brother, José, had joined the Army to get a solid paycheck and insurance to cover the cost of their mom's treatments. Carlos had become his mom's live-in caretaker. Though he'd never admit it out loud, as a teen, he'd resented the fact that their roles weren't reversed. His brother had gotten to see the world! While Carlos had gotten to see and learn how chemotherapy worked.

He'd been so close to joining the Army too. He'd had the application in hand.

But then reality had come crashing back down when his mom had relapsed. Cancer had come for her again.

No. His dreams, his ambitions to see the world, would wait. His mom, the woman who had birthed him, the woman who had given him everything, the woman whose smile could light up a room—even if that room was in a hospital—needed him.

Carlos had stayed.

He'd thrown out the Army application and gone straight into Sheriff Longhill's office the day of his high school graduation to apply to be a deputy. Longhill already knew him from the Junior Deputy program Carlos had been involved in during high school.

The resentment had not come back as Carlos had expected it to. He'd gotten to protect and serve, even if it was on a smaller scale.

His mom had been so proud of him.

His badge had never felt heavy. It had always been a compass for him. Right versus wrong. Black versus white.

Except that his black and white universe had recently turned gray.

Steel had been prepared to question Connelly in Ohiopyle. He'd started to—and it had been Carlos who had told Steel to do it elsewhere. He might as well have signed Connelly's death certificate himself. At the time, his mind had been on getting the women medical care. Some... Well, the blood on their thighs had been telling.

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A horrible, vindictive side of Carlos could not stand that rapists and murderers, stalkers and abusers got to live another day. Some days, it felt like he was reining in a monster. Certain arrests... But if he went down that road, where would it end? Mount Grove was not littered with crime like a big city. He hadn't had to face that turmoil often.

That night, though? When he'd learned that his fellow deputy, a man he'd worked with for over five years, had been involved in human trafficking? That he'd kidnapped a seventeen-year-old girl? That he'd tried to rape her and it had only been happenstance that had stopped him? That he had raped two other women prior?

The monster had won out.

The Via Daemonia were not bad men. They were honorable men. Sheriff Longhill would have never allied himself with them otherwise. Carlos had been in the station the day Steel had walked in to inform Longhill that he was creating a motorcycle club in Mount Grove. At first, Longhill had been skeptical. An honest motorcycle club? By the end of the meeting, though, Steel had been shaking hands with Longhill.

Carlos had felt himself breathe a sigh of relief. If the VDMC built in Mount Grove, then his brother was staying. Though their mom was in remission for a second time, Carlos always had a fear the cancer would return.

Third time's the charm...

The honor that ran through the VDMC stemmed from a desire to protect. More than once, Longhill had called on the Via Daemonia to back up the police department. He

knew that the veterans who made up the club were better trained than his deputies. Carlos had gotten to see his brother be Bulldog, the Army soldier, in action.

When Carlos had told Steel to take Connelly away, Carlos could argue that he hadn't known what the Via Daemonia had planned for his fellow deputy. He could claim there had been no history of violence from the club and, therefore, how could he have known that the club would choose a lethal form of punishment. He could even point out that he didn't know without a shadow of a doubt that Connelly was dead because he'd never seen his body.

But there was no point in saying any of that. He'd known. He'd stood there and watched as Connelly and his cohort were dragged away by his own brother.

He'd known.

Perhaps that was what bothered him the most. That knowledge.

Carlos wanted to say he slept easy, knowing that an evil man was no longer free or carrying a badge, but he couldn't. Not at first, anyway. It had taken a long time for him to start to move past it. Almost make it seem like a bad dream. That denial had been shattered when certain things had come to light. The man Connelly had worked for, the brother of a cartel kingpin, had come to Mount Grove for his vengeance.

Carlos had known that his boss, Ronald Hannigan, was involved. It was hard to think of him as innocent since he'd done his hardest to derail the VDMC and place blame on them that had rightfully been his own son's. Bottom line, though, Hannigan was innocent. It had not been his doing that had caused Mateo Castillo to set his sights on Mount Grove.

It had been his son, Richard. A man the Via Daemonia had known about but Carlos had not. He'd been the real person to blame. The sheriff's only crime had been

standing back and watching. He had not arrested his son but, instead, protected him. He'd tried to frame the VDMC for his son's crimes.

Could Carlos really blame the man when he was doing the same for his own brother?

Carlos did not like the hypocrisy.

The monster had reared its ugly head again. Carlos had stood back and watched the Via Daemonia take Castillo away. There'd been no doubt about the man's fate. Not when he and his minions had nearly gang-raped Lucky's fiancée and Hannigan's daughter, Harper.

His internal war between right and wrong had continued. Castillo was powerful, his lawyers could have gotten him off...but who was Carlos, a simple small-town deputy, to decide the man's fate?

And then... Then there was Abby.

Carlos remembered Abby as a teenager. There was a five-year age gap between Carlos and his brother. Abby had probably held him as a baby. She'd practically grown up in the Santiago house. Long before his brother had taken a moniker, Bulldog had been in love with her. Carlos had thought of her as a sister even after her family had moved out of Pennsylvania.

Abby had become a person from his past. His brother had refused to speak her name for sixteen years and Carlos had followed his lead.

Last February, Danny had called for assistance with an abandoned vehicle on the side of the road. Only...it hadn't been abandoned.

The monster inside him had wanted to tear every man who had harmed Abby limb

from limb. He'd wanted to set the Via Daemonia loose on the community who claimed their god had given them permission to treat women like broodmares.

He couldn't. Where did it end? It had to end. The violence. The lawlessness.

Carlos had stood his ground. If he broke for Abby, he'd never be able to control the monster again.

Now he stood outside of the Via Daemonia clubhouse with his boss, Sheriff Hannigan, and fellow deputy, Jeff Miller. Carlos liked Jeff. He was a good man with a loving wife and three grown or nearly grown children. Jeff also had not been pissed off that Longhill had given Carlos a promotion when Jeff had been there longer.

Carlos didn't know why Steel had summoned them to this meeting. He glanced at Jeff, who was completely blind when it came to Hannigan's and Carlos's crimes. What if someone said something and Jeff reported it? That would be the right thing to do. Carlos wouldn't even judge him for it, even though Carlos was too much of a coward to do it himself. He had the contacts; he should report himself.

Looking over his right shoulder, his eyes landed on the Pentagon. Five homes that the VDMC had built on property with a communal, pentagon-shaped backyard. Steel and Jenna lived in the first house with their daughter, Melanie, who would be starting college in a few weeks; Lucky and Harper had the next house with their teenage son, Scotty, who had Down Syndrome, and their new baby, Conner; Bear and Tessa were next with their infant, Maggie; Angel's house was different in size and shape to accommodate her paraplegic adopted-daughter, Bree; and then there was Bulldog's horde. Carlos's brother's house was the newest. He'd built it for Abby and their four children, Carlos's nieces and nephew, Cassie, Lila, Caleb, and Georgie.

Christ, Carlos loved those kids. Even Cassie, who had gone through horrors no teenager should ever have to deal with, was starting to come out of her shell. Her

agoraphobia was not as intense as it was in the beginning. And Lila? He was pretty sure she had the energy equivalent to the Energizer Bunny after he downed several Red Bulls. Caleb and Georgie were Irish twins and looked so much alike they could be mistaken for real twins.

If Jeff turned him in, Carlos couldn't blame the man. But a chain reaction would start that would disrupt the serenity and families, both real and found, living here.

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People would go to jail, including Bulldog and Carlos. Cancer hadn't gotten their mother, but seeing her sons incarcerated might.

Why would Steel invite the sheriff here? Why now? Carlos briefly wondered if it had to do with Jasmine and Sophia. Those two hooligans were going to be the ones in jail if they didn't stop their investigation.

Growing up, Carlos had had the biggest crush on Jazz. People assumed he hung out with the two besties because of Sophia. She was old-money rich and her family could be traced back to the original settlers of Mount Grove. However, as much as he enjoyed Sophia's company, it had always been Jasmine who had drawn his attention. She was the shy one of the two, uncomfortable in her own skin. Carlos had never minded that she didn't have the traditional Barbie-esque body. Even as a teenager, he'd liked her for who she was.

Then Jasmine and Sophia had left Mount Grove and gone to Penn State for college. With Sophia's money, she could have gone anywhere in the world, but she'd chosen to go to the same school as her best friend, who had needed scholarships and student loans to pay for her education. Carlos had been sad to see his friends go, once more left behind in this small town. It had been fun to visit them, but then reality would call him home.

As they entered their twenties, Carlos realized that he no longer had a crush on Jasmine. He was grateful he'd never made a move or asked her out. Even more grateful that Sophia had never divulged that she and Carlos had shared a drunken one-night stand back when it had been illegal for them to be drinking. Regardless, Sophia and Jasmine fit back into his small-town life as his friends. Nothing more.

The picture of a shy brunette entered into his mind. Clara, Jenna's niece. She'd been living with Steel and Jenna over the winter but had since moved on. Carlos didn't know where. He knew she had a son and that she was recently widowed. Beyond that, though... He wished he'd gotten a chance to know her. She was...compelling, to say the least. Her utter sadness had gripped him in a way no other woman in his life ever had. Even if nothing came of it, he felt like Clara could have been someone to him. If only a friend.

Another missed opportunity.

That feeling of trepidation nearly reaching a boil, Carlos followed his boss inside.

Zoe Rutterson peeked around the closed living room curtain. It didn't matter that she had been in Mount Grove for a year with no issues and no hint that anyone knew where she was. Every knock was the Marshals, every noise in the night was the cops, every thunderstorm was the crack of that awful belt...

The trailer Zoe and Kyle had moved into was small. Jenna had made several comments about it being too small, but Zoe assured her that it wasn't. Small meant there were less places for an adult to hide and take her unawares. The windows were also small enough that she knew she and Kyle could escape out of them, but a grown man could not.

"Clara," she heard called out, "it's Jenna. I have groceries."

It had been almost three years since she'd taken the name Clara, but she still didn't feel like a Clara. She felt like an imposter. It had been easier in her head to switch Kyle's name. She hadn't wanted him to carry his father's name anymore; it was bad enough that he carried the bastard's DNA. Kyle was young enough that there had been little confusion. It was difficult to believe her little boy was almost four.

Though Zoe knew Jenna's voice, she still had to check. When she'd first arrived, Steel and Bulldog had offered her firearms lessons. It wasn't like she could legally carry, but she felt better knowing that there was a handgun on top of the fridge out of Kyle's reach.

A wave of sadness hit her as she saw Kyle hurry to his hiding place. They'd practiced for days after moving into the trailer. Kyle had a hiding place in each room.

Until Zoe said the magic word, Kyle was to remain hidden. The only other person who knew the magic word was now dead. It occurred to Zoe, not for the first time, that she should confide in Steel, and maybe even Jenna, what had brought her to Mount Grove on her hands and knees begging for sanctuary. Fear always clamped her lips closed. They knew the basics, but not everything. They did not understand her fear, her need to stay hidden.

No child should ever be instinctually scared when someone knocked on his door. Not for the first time did Zoe wonder if she was a bad mother to have taught her son so young to be afraid.

It was that concern, the apprehension that she was teaching Kyle to be scared of the world, that made Zoe accept Jenna's invitation to come to their house for lunch. Though Jenna was obviously surprised by her acceptance, she hid it quickly with happiness. Zoe had never accepted one of her invites before.

They had been in Mount Grove for over a year. Steel assured Zoe that no one knew she was here. Besides, it wasn't like they were leaving the club's property. They had lived in Jenna's house with them for over six months and had shared many meals with them during that time. What could happen?

CHAPTER 2

SIX YEARS AGO

“I just heard the news. Congratulations, Zoe.”

Zoe looked up to see Mr. Arnold’s grandson, Conner, standing in front of the nurse’s station. He was dressed in a Marines t-shirt, cargo pants, and boots. His dog tags were on the outside of his shirt. Despite the new ring on her finger, Zoe could appreciate the man’s good looks and masculine physique.

She liked Conner. Many of her residents’ family members treated her like she was a servant, but Conner had always treated her like a person. He didn’t come around often, being active duty military. It was admirable that he spent his leave-time with his ailing grandfather. Mr. Arnold was lucky to have family who cared so much for him. Not many of her residents were so fortunate.

Zoe held up her left hand as she’d been doing all day with her residents and co-workers to show off her new bling. “Thank you.”

“When’s the big day?”

“June, I’m hoping.” Zoe looked down at her hand and realized, not for the first time, that she wasn’t as excited as she should be when she reached this moment in the life. Since she was a little girl, she’d always dreamed of getting married in the same church her parents had been married in. Unfortunately, it had been condemned recently due to asbestos.

That was why she wasn’t entirely happy. It had to be. She loved Davis.

“Tell your lucky man that he better seal the deal before a wayward Marine tries to steal you away.”

Zoe blushed. The man was a flirt and too sinful for his own good.

FIVE YEARS AGO

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The hand came out of nowhere, making Zoe flinch out of habit. However, this hand was gentle and did not cause her pain. Mr. Arnold had grabbed her arm innocently. Zoe had to close her eyes to calm her raising heart.

After she made sure Mr. Arnold was situated comfortably in his chair with the television on the History Channel, Zoe turned to head out of his room. She froze when she realized the doorway was blocked.

Conner stepped into the room, the furious look on his face out of character for his flirty, cheerful personality. He closed the door before approaching her.

Zoe felt her heartbeat pick up again.

Carefully, Conner lifted his hand to trace the black eye she was trying to conceal with makeup. He reached for the sleeve of the long-sleeve shirt she was wearing under her scrubs. Zoe stood frozen as he pushed the material up her arm to reveal the fingerprint bruises on her fair skin.

“Your husband?” The tone of his voice was deadly.

Zoe said nothing but felt like her silence was answer enough. She looked away.

“Did you go to the police?”

She flinched at that word. It had changed its meaning in the past year of her life. She used to love that Davis was a police officer. It had been a draw to her.

“Where’s Betty?” Conner asked, referring to Zoe’s boss. “We’re going now. He won’t get away with this, Zoe. No ring gives a man the right to put his hands on you.”

He turned to leave, but the fact that he intended to go talk with her boss snapped Zoe out of her stupor. She grabbed his hand. “No, wait!”

Conner turned back towards her. “What?”

“I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but it won’t work.”

“Zoe, your husband assaulted you. The police will?—”

“Do nothing,” she confessed. She didn’t know why she was telling Conner of all people this. Hell, none of her co-workers or even Betty had noticed her eye. No one had seen the markings on her skin and thought to ask how she’d gotten them. No one had noticed...except for Conner. Perhaps that was why she was suddenly loose lipped. It felt good, to be noticed. “You don’t understand. My husband is the police.”

Conner just stared at her for a solid minute. Then his face turned angry. Very angry. “Your husband,” his voice was practically a growl, “is a cop and he is the one who hit you.”

Zoe didn’t see any doubt on his face. Just anger. And yet... Davis got angry often. She knew the signs and did everything in her power to avoid seeing him like that. She feared Davis when he was angry. Conner, though? It was different. Anger was anger, but Conner seemed in control. Davis blamed his anger on Zoe. Zoe was the one who over- or undercooked dinner. Zoe was the one who did not get his laundry done or folded on time. Zoe was the one who did not get the house cleaned fast enough or well enough. Zoe was the one who forgot to pick up his dry-cleaning.

Zoe was the one who had failed to get pregnant.

“Go to his boss then.”

Zoe shook her head. “I can’t.” Davis’s captain was his old partner. The two were still tight. Monank had seen Zoe’s eye the night before and had said nothing. Additionally, Zoe’s father-in-law was the current police commissioner and Davis’s grandfather was a retired judge. There was no hiding or running or leaving. She was a Rutterson for life.

“I’m not letting this go, Zoe. You deserve better than this.”

Zoe’s own anger finally showed. She ripped her arm out of Conner’s hand. “It’s none of your business. You have no right to tell me how I should live my life.”

Conner watched her for a long time then he finally nodded. “You’re right.” He stepped out of her way. As Zoe started towards the door, he called after her, “But I’m here if you need me. If you ever call me and mention anything about my grandma, I’ll know that you need me and I’ll come.”

Zoe looked over her shoulder. Mrs. Arnold had passed away almost three years ago. Not knowing what else to say or do, Zoe nodded once before leaving the room.

FOUR YEARS AGO

“You’re looking good.”

Zoe turned, her large belly narrowly missing the picture frame of Mr. and Mrs. Arnold with their twin grandsons that was sitting on Mr. Arnold’s nightstand. He was lying in his bed, muttering to himself about butterflies. Zoe couldn’t help the smile on her face as she saw Conner standing in his uniform in the doorway. He’d been gone for over seven months on this deployment. She’d seen him only briefly over video calls that she or one of the other nurses set up for him to talk to his grandpa.

“You’re looking good yourself.”

He dropped a large rucksack by the door, which indicated to her that he’d come straight from the airport. His eyes were a lot kinder than the last time she’d seen him. Zoe waddled her way around the end of his grandfather’s bed.

“When are you due?”

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“Not soon enough,” she half-laughed. “Got another six weeks to go.”

He nodded easily. Zoe could see him assessing her, looking for bruises or marks that he wouldn't find. Davis hadn't laid a violent hand on her since the day she'd shown him the positive pregnancy test. There was a part of her that feared what would come once she gave birth, but she had to believe that that chapter of their life was behind them. Davis had only been upset because she'd struggled to get pregnant. Things were even better at his work and he'd recently gotten a promotion.

Carefully, Conner leaned over and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “I wish you all the best, Zoe.”

THREE YEARS AGO

Zoe hated having to quit her job, but Davis refused to pay for daycare or a babysitter for their son.

“Why should I pay for a service? That's what I have you for.”

She missed her residents. She missed her co-workers. But her son was her priority. She was taking care of the household and her son. She no longer had time for family, friends, or work. Davey was the sweetest baby in the world, and she loved him with all her heart. It was a good day if she could get Davis to even hold his son.

After Davey's birth, Davis had demanded a paternity test. Davey had been born with brunette hair that had turned into curls and large, green eyes. Even Zoe had to admit that he looked nothing like his parents, but she could see the resemblance to baby

pictures she'd seen of her own father. She had not had an affair and she'd been faithful to her husband, which the paternity test proved.

Davis never stopped claiming she'd forged the test results, though. "Ain't no way that baby's mine!"

Davis had black hair with brown eyes. He had naturally tan skin and a lot of bulk. Zoe was fair skinned with bright blonde hair and blue eyes. The fact that his son was a brunette was only the start of Davis's mistrust of her.

He installed cameras in their house so he could watch her throughout the day. When she'd taken Davey to the park without his permission, he put tracking devices in all of her shoes. After Zoe had purchased a toy for Davey that Davis had not authorized, he took away her credit and debit cards. Even money that she'd earned from her previous paychecks was no longer hers.

Recently, he'd been making comments that Zoe had not gained back her figure after giving birth. Zoe hadn't been actively trying to lose weight, but she'd also only given birth a few months ago. Davis had put her on a strict diet. While she still made him full meals, Zoe was restricted to a carb-less diet that mostly consisted of vegetables.

She was also no longer allowed to breastfeed their son to slow her milk. Davis did not like having to share his wife's body with his son. He also had not waited the full six weeks after she'd given birth before he'd demanded sex again. She'd tried to find other ways of pleasing him, but Davis would not relent. Sex now was so painful that even the thought of being intimate with her husband brought tears to her eyes.

But worse than all of that was how furious Davis got when Davey would cry.

"Shut that fucking thing up or I'll shut it up for you!"

It. He called his own son an it. Like Davey was at fault. Like Davey wasn't a person or his flesh and blood. A thing that could easily be disposed of.

One day, Zoe broke down and carefully made a phone call she never thought she'd have to. Thankfully, though Davis went through her phone daily, she still had many of her old contacts saved in it. After making it look like she'd read about the death of a resident in the newspaper, Zoe picked up her phone and made the call she swore she never would.

It rang and rang before finally going to voicemail.

Zoe had to fight not to glance at the camera in the corner of the kitchen. She could practically feel her husband's eyes on her even though he was at work.

"Mr. Alessi," she said, using a made-up surname, "this is Zoe Rutterson. You knew me as Zoe Ballas. I used to work with your grandmother at her senior center. I just saw her death in the paper and I wanted to pass along my condolences. I have some pictures and videos of your grandma at my house. If you're interested in them, please reach out to me. Again, I am so sorry to hear about her passing. She was a lovely woman."

That evening, Davis questioned her about the phone call. His voice was accusatory, like she'd done something wrong by speaking to another human being. Zoe was careful to be nonchalant and express her sympathies for her former resident's passing. Davis continued to eat in silence. Zoe picked at her salad, wondering what she would do if Conner did not call her back.

Davey got an ear infection. It seemed such a simple thing. Babies got ear infections, but Davis acted like Zoe had done something wrong. He called her a bad mother. He said she was worthless and incompetent. When she argued back that babies are prone to ear infections, Davis backhanded her across the face.

As she'd been holding Davey at the time, Zoe was unable to defend against the blow and lost her balance. Fear for her son had her instinctually clutch him tighter and land unprotected on the carpet. Her head smacked against the floor and Zoe lost consciousness.

She awoke to the sound of Davey crying. Somehow, she'd kept her grip on him. Her head screamed at her as she tried to rise. The nursery was dark and there was no sign of her husband. Though, Zoe could faintly hear the echoing sounds of the television downstairs. She checked herself for blood and found none.

Tears fell freely. Both from pain and from sorrow. She hated her life, but what could she do? Her husband was a police officer with many friends in the city. Where was she to go? She had no money. Her every move was watched by him.

She couldn't stay though. Davis could have killed Davey today. He'd left her unconscious on the floor with their infant son on her chest. Anything could have happened.

No. Zoe didn't know how she was going to do it, but she was going to leave her husband. She had to. For her son.

It took almost a week before Zoe got an acknowledgement from her phone call. It came in the form of a text. At first, it looked like a spam text message, but a second glance had her wondering if perhaps it wasn't.

Unknown Number: Dirty House? Call Arnold Sweepers! We clean, dust, and take out the trash! Call or download our app today! We get all up in your business! [link]

Zoe stared at the message for so long. It was the name 'Arnold' that gave her pause, but also the trash and business lines. Could it really be? If so, why would Conner reach out to her in such a clandestine way? It seemed so cloak and dagger.

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Yet what was the worst that could happen? If it was a spam message, she either deleted the app or it corrupted her phone. Not exactly a bad thing, other than it would piss Davis off that he'd have to pay for a new one.

Zoe clicked on the link. Rather than bring her to her phone's application store, it downloaded the app automatically. A screen that resembled an everyday calculator appeared. For a minute, nothing happened. Then, in the space where the calculations would write, words appeared. They scrolled to the left quickly like an ad.

Hello, Zoe. My name is Owen. I am here to help you.

The screen immediately went blank. It happened so fast that Zoe wondered if she'd even seen it or just imagined it.

Your husband is watching you on the monitors. Put the phone down and look like you're doing something else while I talk to you.

Zoe put her phone down on the kitchen counter where she could see the screen but her body blocked it from the camera. She picked up the dishes in the drainboard and started to dry them off with a towel.

The words continued on the app, reminding her of the Speak and Spell toy she had as a kid.

Good girl. Conner called me when he was denied leave. I've been watching you. We're going to get you out but it will take time. You cannot pack or take anything. I will get you what you need. Stay strong. I'll be in touch.

The words on the screen scrolled to the left and away. One more message came across before disappearing.

If you need to go, go. Type the number 9 in this app as many times as you can and ditch your phone. I'll find you.

If Davis noticed the new calculator app on her phone, he said nothing. Zoe continued to check for more messages from the mysterious Owen but never saw another come through. She was starting to fear she'd somehow missed a message.

Five days later, the doorbell rang. It was a messenger delivering flowers. The name on the card was for Amelia Cromwell. Zoe explained that no one at her address had that name. The messenger apologized and left.

Zoe went back into the kitchen. She had had to take Davey out of his highchair to answer the door. After putting him back in the chair, she went to reach for his pureed carrots and squash—and froze.

On the kitchen table next to the cup of baby food was a bottle of men's vitamins. She recognized it immediately because she bought them for Davis every month. The fact that the bottle was in her house was not the issue. The issue was the fact that they had not been on her kitchen table prior to Zoe leaving to open the door.

She picked the bottle up, the pills inside rattling familiarly. Cautiously, she looked around her kitchen. The backdoor was closed and she could see the deadbolt was still latched. Was she imagining things? No one else was in the house or could have gotten into the house. Maybe Davis had left it on the table and she was only just now noticing it?

Zoe went to put the bottle away when she noticed something on the bottom. Carefully, she turned her body so her body blocked the camera's view. Turning over

the bottle, she saw a small piece of paper stuck to it.

Swap bottles.

That was it. That was all it said. Swap bottles. As in Davis's vitamin bottles? She glanced over her shoulder at Davey in his highchair. He was safe. But clearly someone had been in her house. How had they gotten past the cameras? Wouldn't Davis have seen them or will see them when he reviews the footage?

Zoe's heart was beating extremely fast. What was she supposed to do?

Before she could think twice about it, she reached into the cabinet and swapped the bottles.

Zoe never did learn what was in the vitamin bottle or how it ended up on her kitchen table. Something happened at work that led to Davis being reprimanded. He came home drunk and fuming. As instructed by Davis himself, Zoe had had dinner ready for him by six-thirty. He did not get home until after eleven. By then, Zoe had packed up his dinner and put it in the fridge so the food did not spoil.

"Where's my fucking dinner?" Davis stumbled into the kitchen.

"It's in the fridge. I can heat it up for you—" The slap across her face cut off her words.

"I told you to have my fucking dinner ready for me when I get home, bitch! Do I have to do everything around here?! Is it too much to ask you to get off your fat, lazy ass during the day to cook me dinner so I have a hot meal when I get home from work? Is it?"

He was not keeping his voice down and Davey was already sleep in his crib upstairs.

“Davis, please, Davey is sleeping—” Another slap. She backed herself up against the kitchen sink to put some distance between them.

“I DON’T GIVE A FUCK!” Davis roared. “This is my house and I can fucking shout if I want to.” He approached her faster than she would have thought possible in his inebriated state. His hand circled around the top of her forearm. He dragged her over to the fridge and threw her against the hard door. Zoe barely had a chance to catch herself before he had his hand gripping the back of her hair and slammed her forehead against the fridge. She could feel his hot breath as he spoke in her ear, smell the alcohol. “Get me my fucking dinner.”

Her head throbbing from the impact, Zoe could only nod.

After she served him his dinner, where he drank two more beers and had a shot of whiskey, Zoe started to clean up the kitchen again. He had not liked that she planned to reheat his earlier dinner plate and had demanded she make him a new meal.

Zoe was exhausted, and her head felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. All she wanted to do was finish cleaning up the kitchen and go to bed.

She thought Davis was in the living room. She had not heard him approach her from behind. Her hands were ripped out of the dishwater, flinging soap bubbles and suds everywhere, as she was thrown backwards onto the hard kitchen floor.

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Her shoulder connected awkwardly, causing her to cry out in pain.

Davis stood over her. He started to undo the buckle of his belt, and Zoe felt a cold dread seep over her.

“No, Davis,” she moaned, clutching her hurt arm to her chest. “Please, I don’t want to?—”

“I don’t care what you want,” he slurred. “You’re my wife. You don’t get to say no.”

Zoe did not sleep that night. Following what Davis would call her wifely duties and she called rape, Zoe sat numb on the kitchen floor. Her shoulder throbbed and it felt like she had a hot, burning stake sticking out of her.

As the sun started to rise, Zoe stood. She wasn’t entirely sure where her train of thought was. Her memories of the following moments was fuzzy and bleak. Like she was in a fugue state.

How had this become her life? When she’d been dating Davis, he’d been so sweet and kind. It wasn’t until she said, “I do,” that things changed. That he changed. Zoe knew that she had no family protection. Her parents were old; she’d been a later-in-life miracle baby. She could not risk going to them. His parents were even worse. His father the commissioner and his father a former judge. They owned Philadelphia. Their reputation was everything. There was no one she could turn to. No where to go.

The calculator app and the vitamin pill bottle never even crossed Zoe’s mind as she opened Davis’s gun safe. He thought she didn’t know the code, but she did. The man

was not as cunning as he believed himself to be. There was no one in the world Davis loved more than himself. Of course, he would use his birthday as the code.

Zoe had never held a gun before. She'd never wanted to. Davis had never offered to teach her either. Television had taught her the basics.

Davis was asleep in their bed. God, Zoe hated him. She'd given him everything and the only good thing he'd ever given her was her son. A baby he had only wanted as a prop, something to tout about.

She recalled the first time he'd struck her. Zoe should have left then. How stupid was she that she actually believed his words that she had been at fault. That it wouldn't have happened if she had gotten pregnant.

"You had one job, Zoe! One job!" His words from that terrible night rang in her head like a bell.

Zoe didn't remember flicking the safety off the gun. She didn't remember lifting her hand towards her sleeping husband.

She did not remember pulling the trigger until there were no bullets left.

Zoe sat in handcuffs in the back of a police car. The red and blue flashing lights over her head hurt her eyes. She had yet to be read her rights or be asked why she did it. No one seemed to care that her drunk husband had assaulted her the night before or that her shoulder was in pain. The cops all treated her like she'd taken the best man they knew from this world too soon.

The worst part was watching Davis's parents carrying Davey out of her house. She did not want Davey to go to them.

Tears fell down her cheeks. Not for what she'd done but the consequences of what she'd done. Davis was dead. He was never coming back. But the universe had one more trick to play. She would go to jail for his murder and his parents would raise her son.

The tears continued to fall. More than the physical pain she was experiencing, she hurt for her son and the future she'd doomed him to. What have I done...

Zoe was being escorted into the courthouse. She could barely see with the flashes of lights from the press cameras. Her useless lawyer and the police did nothing to try to keep them back. Someone ended up pushing her and Zoe lost her balance on the concrete stairs.

Hands caught her and a voice in her ear said, "Make a scene. You need to get to the bathroom."

Zoe's head whipped around to see the back of a man walking away from her. But she knew that man. Her heart started thumping harder. Conner!

Once inside the courthouse, Zoe begged and pleaded to be allowed to use the bathroom. She showed the police officer the scrapes on the palms of her cuffed hands. He finally relented, though it looked like it pained him to do so.

No one, not even her own lawyer, believed her story. She could see it in their eyes. The Davis she knew was not the man they knew. His father and grandfather were encouraging the District Attorney to seek the death penalty. If they succeeded, Zoe would be the first person in over twenty years to be executed by the State of Pennsylvania.

She'd begged and pleaded, but no one would allow her to see her son. She didn't even know if her own parents had been allowed to see him.

In the women's room, a female officer escorted her to the sink. Even the woman showed no sympathy for Zoe.

“He never deserved you.”

Zoe looked up into the mirror at the officer. “What?”

“Davis, he never deserved you. I told him from the start that you weren't good enough for him, but he didn't listen.” She sneered, “He loved you and you killed him.”

Zoe looked back down at her hands. They weren't that bad, but she still winced as she used soapy water to clean out the wounds. “He was a monster.”

“He was not!” the woman snapped, slapping her hand down on the counter by Zoe's elbow. Zoe flinched away. The female officer leaned in close and whispered, “Did you know that he was sleeping with me too? My partner and I would share him. He was the best fuck I ever?—”

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An arm came around the woman's throat, cutting off her words. Zoe leapt back and gasped as she saw Conner put the officer into a choke hold. As she slumped over, Conner gently laid her on the bathroom floor.

"Well, that's enough of that." Conner reached into the woman's utility belt and pulled out her handcuffs and keys. He cuffed her arms around the column between two stalls. Then he took the handcuff keys and undid the ones on Zoe's wrists. He dropped both items into the trash can.

Zoe gasped out. "What are you doing here?"

"Saving your life," he answered. "We don't have a lot of time. My team is getting everything into place now." Conner looked down at his watch. "The judge paid a hitman to take you out after court this afternoon."

Zoe's jaw dropped open. "What?"

Conner went to the lady's room door and peeked outside into the hallway. "You're going to need to walk fast. Can you do that?"

Not sure what was going on but trusting Conner, Zoe nodded. "My baby?"

"I've had someone in place to guard Davey since the night you killed Davis," Conner answered. He seemed too calm, too sure of himself. What the hell was going on? "It'll take time but we'll get Davey away from the Ruttersons too."

He approached her and gave her his jacket. He placed a hat and sunglasses over her

head. A press badge then went around her neck.

“Wait,” Zoe pleaded. “What is happening? Where are we going? I can’t escape?—”

“Did you not hear me when I said the Ruttersons took a hit out on you? Zoe, if you stay, you die.” The fire alarm suddenly blared. Conner raced to the bathroom door and peeked into the hallway. It was now filled with smoke and screaming people seeking the exits.

He held out his hand to her. “It’s your choice, Zoe, but now is your only chance.”

After leaving the courthouse, Conner and three other men escorted her to a motel. Zoe didn’t know where, but it was way off of the highway. It was only after they got there that Zoe recalled Davis had put trackers in all of her shoes.

They left her shoes behind and narrowly escaped after a gunfight was exchanged between Conner’s people and whoever was hunting her.

It was nearly a day after her escape that Zoe finally got some answers. “Conner, what is going on?”

Conner sat down in front of her. They were now driving cross country in a large motorhome. “First, I’m not Conner. My name is Owen, I’m Conner’s twin.”

Zoe’s jaw about hit the floor. “What? No. You... You died.” She had been there when Mr. Arnold had received the news that one of his grandsons had been killed in action overseas. She knew Conner had been an identical twin, but...damn.

“Conner is working on an alibi in case anyone spotted me at the courthouse yesterday. We’re getting you to a safe house in Montana. I have a buddy there who is going to look out for you. His name is Jack.”

Her mind was spinning and not everything he said made sense to her. “What about Davey?”

“He’s coming too. Like I said, it’ll take some time.” Owen leaned forward, his arms on the table. “Look, Zoe. No one can know I’m alive. I’m doing all of this as a favor to Conner. Once I get you to where he wants you, I’m out of here. I can’t be seen and I can’t be involved. I’m sorry if that sounds harsh, but that’s the way it is.”

Since Zoe still had no idea what was going on, she could only nod. “Thank you,” she offered. “For saving me. I can’t believe the Ruttersons put a hit out on me.” The whole thing was so surreal. Everything, from the moment she’d pulled that trigger.

“Several,” Owen corrected. “We neutralized two of them but it’s an open bounty, Zoe. You’re going to need to be extremely careful. The police and the Marshals are looking for you too. Zoe Rutterson is a wanted fugitive.”

She winced. “So what happens now?” Maybe Davey was better off away from her. Should she tell Owen to bring him to her parents?

“I got you a new identity. Davey too.” He reached up into an overhead cabinet. “You are now Clara Everwood. Davey is Kyle Everwood.”

She took the manila envelope from him with a shaky hand. “I was arrested. They have my fingerprints on file, my DNA. This is great, thank you, but it’s not going to change who I am if I’m caught.”

He leaned closer and, with a wicked smile that matched Conner’s, said, “Then I suggest you don’t get caught.” Zoe swallowed hard and Owen sat back again. “We swapped out your samples. If they were corrupted then someone would be tempted to look into the matter. We only exchanged them so if they’re ever compared to the ones taken at the time of your arrest, they won’t match.” He gave a half-shrug. “Davey’s

DNA can't be fooled. He's half Rutterson. You need to do everything in your power to ensure that his DNA is never compared to any of his living relatives."

"Have you heard anything about Davey? Is he safe yet?" Zoe had not liked leaving him behind but, after the gunfight at the motel, she'd stopped pushing the matter. She was beyond grateful Davey had not been around flying bullets.

"They're extracting him tonight," Owen told her. "I'll let you know as soon as I do that they have him."

"Where in Montana are we going?"

Owen gave her a devilish smile. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

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TWO YEARS AGO

Clara,

I hope you are well. Jack says you rarely leave the cabin. I'll take you and Kyle out during my next visit. Stay safe.

Conner

Clara,

I am finally free! The Marines are no longer my master and I am no longer their slave. I'll be up in about two weeks. I have a present for Kyle that I think he'll love!

Conner

Clara,

I got recruited into a motorcycle club today. I know, right? But they're really good guys. The president and VP were also Marines. I know I complain a lot about my time in the military but I really do miss the atmosphere, the brotherhood. Maybe I'll find it here.

If everything works out with them, I'll be a patched member in a year. That will be 3 years since everything. I want to bring you to come live with me. We'll fake being a family and raise Kyle together.

Think about it.

Conner

Clara,

Jack believes you are safe where you are, but I need to know you'll be safe if something happens to me. One of my club brothers had a close call today. His entire family nearly died in a fire. I spoke with Jack. If something happens to me, I need to know you're still protected. There's no one I trust more than the brothers I have found here. Jack has your escape plan. I pray you don't need it, but I also will sleep better knowing you're prepared. Just in case.

Conner

Clara,

If you're reading this, then I'm gone. All I can say is sorry. I feel like I keep letting you down. Follow the escape plan Jack has to the letter. I mean it. Don't take any chances and do exactly as he says. The man you need to see is Jack Duncan—a different Jack. I know, confusing. No one calls him Jack, though. He goes by Steel. Give him the envelope with his name on it.

I know it's too late but I feel like I owe you this, especially with the fact that you'll only be reading this letter if I'm dead. You have to be wondering why I did all of this for you. Jack (the one you know in Montana) thinks it's because I'm in love with you. I'm not, just to be clear. You're a great woman and I do love you, but I'm not in love with you. The first day I saw your bruises, I felt like I needed to protect you. My parents weren't killed in a simple car accident. My dad killed my mom and then killed himself. I was too young to remember but my grandparents told us about it. My dad abused my mom and, when she tried to leave, he killed her. I couldn't let that

happen to someone else.

I wish you the best, Clara. Trust Steel. He'll protect you. Tell Kyle bye for me.

Love Conner

CHAPTER 3

Carlos stared at Hannigan, unsure he'd heard his boss correctly. In fact, he wasn't sure he'd heard any of this conversation correctly.

The Black Pythons were a notorious one-percent motorcycle club out of Pittsburgh. They were the stereotypical MC that people thought of. Unlike the Via Daemonia, the Pythons dealt in drugs and the flesh trade mostly with the occasional gun deal. Now they were trying their hand at dogfighting? Except that their dogfighting ring had been shut down. Steel hadn't said it, but the implication was there that the VDMC had been the ones to shut it down.

In doing so, the Pythons now had their eyes on Mount Grove, when they had never ventured this far south before.

Steel had put his cards on the table: the VDMC would do whatever it took to protect Mount Grove with or without help from their police force.

Hannigan had remained silent for a long time. He'd studied Steel and Lucky, who was also his son-in-law. Then he sat back in his chair and let out a sigh.

"The council gave me an extension on my interim status after my attack. At the time, I was grateful, but now I'm not. I'm tired, Duncan," he told Steel, using his surname. "The town council wants me to start campaigning to become the official sheriff after November's election. I turned them down."

The seven VDMC officers before them weren't the only ones to look at Hannigan in shock. Jeff and Carlos did too.

"I'm resigning. I want to spend my time repairing my marriage. I want to spend time with my grandchildren." Hannigan indicated towards Lucky. "It has been difficult knowing my own daughter did not want me to walk her down the aisle at her wedding. I want to fix what I broke. I can't do that if I remain sheriff."

Hannigan looked to his left where Carlos sat. "I told the council I'm endorsing you for the job. It should have been yours from the start, Santiago. I'm sorry it wasn't. Miller's a good cop. He'd make a good deputy sheriff."

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Then Hannigan stood up. "I'm taking medical leave until my interim contract is up. Santiago would be filling in for me anyway, but I have no doubt he'll be your new sheriff soon. Maybe then this town will get back to normal."

Hannigan made to exit but paused at the double doors leading out of the conference room the VDMC called Church. He looked to Steel. "I am sorry for my involvement in...everything," he hedged. "If I had worked with you instead of against you when I first arrived, maybe not so many people would have gotten hurt."

Carlos had no doubt Hannigan was including his wife, daughter, and himself in that number.

"I'd like to go see Conner, if that's all right." It took Carlos a moment to realize Hannigan was speaking directly to Lucky.

Lucky stared at the man for a tense minute. "I'll never forgive you for the way you treated Harper or for pointing your gun at Scotty." Though it looked like it pained him, Lucky admitted, "But you risked your life to save Harper and Conner is your grandson. Harper wants me to let bygones rest, but that's not the type of man I am. As long as she's happy and wants you around, I'll deal. But I don't trust you, Hannigan. I never will."

Hannigan gave a sad nod before leaving the room.

Lucky picked up his phone. "Will's on the gate, right?"

Bulldog nodded. "Sara's downstairs. She can take him."

It only took Carlos a second to follow along with what Bulldog already understood. Lucky wanted a prospect with Hannigan while he visited with Harper and Conner since Lucky wasn't available to. Carlos wondered where Scotty was, though figured he was with Lila. Those two were thick as thieves.

After Lucky finished texting, he put his phone down on the wooden table before him. "Looks like there's a new sheriff in town, boys!"

As his brother and friends cheered, Carlos looked across the table at Jeff. His co-worker and friend looked equally as enthusiastic. There was no resentment on his face at all. Carlos really hoped that was genuine.

When Sheriff Longhill had had his stroke, Carlos had arrogantly assumed that he'd get the job. He'd of course been worried for his boss, but he'd also made assumptions. When the council had announced they were bringing in an out-of-town retired detective to become sheriff for the rest of Longhill's term, Carlos had been...resentful. And that was before Hannigan had ever stepped foot in Mount Grove.

Eric Clapton's version of I Shot the Sheriff suddenly rang out and Carlos's head snapped towards his brother.

Bulldog grinned widely at him, holding up his phone with a little shake. "Been waiting for years to set that as your ringtone, fratellino."

Carlos and Bulldog had always had a good relationship. He loved his brother. Recent events had not changed that. It would kill Abby, as well as their mother, if Bulldog ended up in prison. The law did not care that Bulldog was protecting his woman or avenging the heinous wrongs done to her.

In that moment, though, it had been as it had always been with them. Pride shone off

of Bulldog, just as it had when Carlos had first gotten his badge at eighteen.

Steel eventually calmed everyone down. "I know we're all excited to see Hannigan go, but I do have to acknowledge how hard that must have been for him. It's not easy for a man to admit his faults." He gestured to the chair Hannigan had vacated across the long table from himself. "Sheriff Santiago."

It was so weird to hear that. For years, it had been all he'd wanted. Did he deserve that title anymore? He wasn't clean. There was blood on his hands, even if he had not been the one to put it there.

Stiffly, Carlos stood and moved seats. He was ambitious enough to want the job and position. He wanted to be his town's sheriff. Was he still worthy of it?

He looked to Jeff. "Are you okay with this?"

Jeff nodded, a wide smile on his clean-shaven face. "You deserve this," he told Carlos. "You care about this town and its people more than anyone I know. Besides, being sheriff is a young man's game. I'd be honored to be your deputy sheriff."

While the sheriff position was elected, Carlos would have the right to choose his own number two. As Longhill had chosen Carlos.

Carlos nodded. "Of course. There's no one else I'd want at my back." The response was immediate and true. The only exception was perhaps Danny, but he was still too young and green. Maybe in a few years when Miller was ready to retire.

"We need to get you caught up on some things," Steel told Carlos. "Mainly that we have a new member of our family."

Carlos was confused by this statement. He'd been removed from the club over the

past couple of months, but not that removed. He'd have known if one of the ol' ladies was pregnant because his mother would have been over the moon about the addition.

“There's a boy. His name is Ollie. From what we've been able to piece together and from what little he's divulged, his mother is one of the Black Python's club whores. It's possible he's been there his entire life. When I saw King slap him for no reason, I stepped in. His mother's a consenting adult, but he's an innocent kid. We brought him home with us.”

Carlos blinked. “You kidnapped him?”

“We got her permission,” Ghost sneered. There was obvious disgust on his face and in his voice. “Bitch was fucking a member—openly and in front of him—and couldn't get rid of her kid fast enough. The boy's better off without her.”

Carlos felt his stomach roll. In front of her kid? That was some fucked up shit. Carlos had never been one for voyeurism. He'd seen the club brothers out in the open with a hang-around or a Honey at their parties over the years. It was not for Carlos. Hell, Bear had been the worst exhibitionist until he'd become a married man. He'd loved an audience. Not anymore. According to Bear, Tessa was his and his alone. No other man would ever see or touch her in a sexual way. Bear was also a dad now.

Carlos wasn't. At this rate, the closest he would ever be to being a father was being an uncle to his nieces and nephew. Even if he did have a kid, he couldn't imagine being so sexually flamboyant that he'd have sex in front of them. And no doubt, Ollie's mother hadn't just been ‘having sex’. It was likely the very definition of a down and dirty fucking.

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That boy was going to need some serious counseling. Steel hadn't said how old he was, but any age was unacceptable.

"Are you anticipating any backlash?" Carlos asked, getting back to the topic at hand.

"Unlikely," Ghost replied.

"Keys is working up a new identity for him. He'll make it look like Ollie has always been here," Steel explained.

Like Keys had done with Abby, Cassie, and Lila. He'd somehow backdated a wedding certificate to make it seem like Abby and Bulldog had been married for years and had adopted Cassie and Lila from the foster system. As far as paperwork was concerned, Caleb and Georgie were Bulldog's biologically.

Carlos knew that something similar had been done with Bree's adoption, but Keys had not been the one to do that work. From what Carlos understood, Angel had a contact through WITSEC who had handled Bree's new identity.

If Jeff was confused or amazed by anything that was being said, he was smart enough to keep his mouth shut.

"Which of you is taking him in?" Carlos asked, looking between the four men at the table who had homes and families on property.

Steel shrugged, "We're letting the ol' ladies figure that out. Point is, he's Via Daemonia now."

Carlos knew better than most that that was not just a statement to Steel. That claim meant something to Steel fundamentally.

The discussion was moved onto how to best protect the town. Steel indicated that he was gathering intel on the Pythons, to try and figure out their plans. Since all of this might be speculation and the Pythons might not decide to come to Mount Grove, it was hard to make any decisions.

“We’re revoking the right to openly wear colors within our borders,” Steel said towards the end of the meeting. “Make sure your deputies know. If they see any cuts but ours, they’re to inform you immediately.”

Carlos nodded once. He was going to need to set a meeting with the others anyway. They were still down a deputy after losing Connelly, and now they were losing Hannigan. With recent budget cuts, Hannigan had not replaced Connelly. Carlos wondered if he had the funding to hire at least one more deputy now. He was fine with his current salary if that was a sacrifice he needed to make to ensure the town’s safety.

He was going to need a secretary too. Belinda, who had been Longhill’s predecessor’s secretary, was still running the front office. Technically, she was the mayor’s secretary too but Snowdon didn’t go to her often for things. Belinda had a tendency to promise things that couldn’t be done in an unreasonable amount of time. Longhill had always laughed it off like Belinda was pulling a joke. Hannigan had tried to fire her on his first day but she still kept showing up.

It had been the only decision Carlos had ever agreed upon with Hannigan prior to him showing his true colors.

Steel invited Carlos and Jeff to lunch at his house. Carlos had been about to decline, needing time alone to process the last hour of his life, but Jeff accepted before he

could.

“Never one to turn down a free meal,” the deputy said with a harty laugh.

Bulldog hung back as the others made to depart. He grabbed Carlos’s arm but waited until it was just them in the room to speak.

“You deserve this. There’s no one better for the job.”

Carlos flinched. “Eighteen months ago, I would have agreed with you. Now? I’m not so sure.”

His brother was just barely taller than Carlo’s six-three. While Carlos was clean shaven with closely cropped raven hair, Bulldog had a long full beard and was bald. The brothers’ bodies were similar in build, taking after their Mexican father. Their Italian mother was in their eyes.

“You,” he tapped the side of his fist against Carlos’ chest, “are,” tap, “the,” tap, “best,” tap, “man,” tap, “I know, fratellino.”

Problem was, Carlos wasn’t sure he believed that either.

Zoe should have known that Jenna’s lunch invitation wouldn’t be exclusive to just her and Kyle. The walk from the trailer the VDMC had been allowing her to stay in was pleasant. The August morning was hot but accompanied by a nice mountain breeze.

Kyle ran ahead while Jenna and Zoe walked more casually.

“He’s getting so big,” Jenna said with a trace of awe.

Zoe watched her son play and giggle. He didn't often have this type of freedom. Her fear kept them indoors more than not. "He's almost four."

"Oh," Jenna put a hand on her arm, "we have to throw him a party, Clara. When's his birthday?"

Zoe automatically shook her head. "I can't?—"

Jenna pulled her to a stop. The older woman was about the same height as Zoe. She had reddish-brown hair that only had a few gray strands. Zoe didn't think she dyed her hair and was just someone who didn't gray quickly. Her husband was the literal definition of a silver fox.

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But there was only one man who had caught her eye recently. Even if she wasn't in hiding, she'd never get involved with a cop again. Never.

"It's been almost a year, Clara. No one's looking for you. No one's come here for you. I think, maybe, it's time to consider building a life here." Jenna indicated her head towards where Kyle was running and jumping like he didn't have a care in the world. "Go out into town and let him meet kids his own age." At Zoe's horrified expression, Jenna amended, "Or just hang out more with the club. You never have to leave club property if you don't want to. We've expanded the number of club kids by a lot since you joined us. I think it'll do both of you some good, Clara."

Not knowing what else to say, but also knowing that she wasn't ready yet to consider expanding her safe space, Zoe said, "I'll think about it."

The look Jenna gave her told Zoe that she knew very well what Zoe was really saying. "You're coming to lunch. That's a good start."

Kyle and Zoe entered Jenna's familiar home. They'd lived in this house for over six months before moving into the trailer. Kyle ran right up to the fridge and asked for a cup of lemonade. Zoe started helping Jenna get out the supplies for sandwiches. She had made homemade potato salad, coleslaw, and bean salad too. Jenna always seemed prepared to feed an army.

They brought everything out into the back porch. Zoe thought they were just waiting on Steel to join them—until she saw others crossing the backyard towards Jenna's house.

Zoe swallowed nervously. She knew who most of them were, but had not spent any time interacting with them. Jenna was the only person she'd really spent time with over the past year, and that was only because Zoe didn't want to be rude when the woman was giving up her house for them.

Women and children started to fill the porch. Zoe was about to grab Kyle and make their excuses when she saw an older boy with Down syndrome—Scotty, she thought his name was—start up a game of tag with Kyle. Her son's loud laughter froze Zoe in place. She didn't get to hear that sound often enough.

Jenna met her eyes from across the patio. She gave Zoe a kind and patient smile, her eyes encouraging.

Zoe hadn't realized she'd backed herself to the paneled siding of the house until she stepped away. She could tell the other women were watching her but were allowing Jenna to take the lead. Feeling like she was entering a lions' den, Zoe slowly stepped forward to meet Jenna by the food table.

Jenna took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. Then she turned to the ladies present. "Everyone, this is Clara. Her son, Kyle, is the little one playing with Scotty."

And that was it. Like Zoe and Kyle hadn't been hiding out on their property without socializing with any of them for nearly a year. Jenna just introduced them like this was her first day here. Neither Tessa nor Harper pointed out that she'd been invited to their weddings and had turned down the offer.

A little girl joined Kyle and Scotty when their game of tag brought them to the playground equipment, which was in the center of the communal backyard. That must have been added after Kyle and Zoe had moved out of Steel and Jenna's house—or she never would have gotten Kyle off of it. Even now, she was anticipating the fight to come when it was time for them to leave.

Sorrow pierced her. Maybe she was a bad mother.

Zoe was making a plate for herself and Kyle when movement out of the corner of her eye made her freeze. A middle-aged police officer in a beige uniform stepped onto the back porch. He was carrying his wide brimmed hat and chatting with one of the club's members.

The plate fell from between her hands as fear gripped her. Kyle! She had to get Kyle! The police had found her!

CHAPTER 4

Carlos followed his brother through the gate that had recently been built between Bulldog's and Steel's houses. They could hear the voices of the VDMC women and children as they walked around the house on the grass. Just as they reached the corner that would allow them to see Steel's back porch, a loud crash rang out, followed by a hushed silence that only lasted a second, and then panicked voices.

Bulldog and Carlos exchanged a look before they hurried around the corner and towards the porch. Carlos reached the wooden stairs first.

Jenna's niece, Clara, was trying to push her way through the crowd of people gathering for lunch. A broken plate was on the patio floor by the food table. Others tried to get her attention, but Clara ignored them. She was keeping her head down as she made to leave—and ran headlong into Carlos at the top of the stairs.

The two of them seemed to be suspended in midair for a heartbeat until gravity got the better of them and they went tumbling down.

Carlos instinctively wrapped his arms around Clara and tried to take the brunt of the many impacts. His knee collided with something sharp, his chin clipped something

solid, and his back smacked down hard onto the steppingstones on the grass where they came to a halt. Additionally, his utility belt was digging painfully into his hip.

Voices and shouts arose as everyone tried to reach for them. Wincing, Carlos released his hold on Clara when he realized she was trying, quite frantically, to get off of him. They were a tangle of limbs as she scrambled to stand. In her haste to rise, her knee collided with his balls.

Raging hot fire radiated through his entire body. Carlos grunted and groaned, rolling into the fetal position. Nausea roiled and somehow Carlos did not throw up. All air left his lungs and he could not get his body to recall how to breathe for several seconds.

At twenty-eight, Carlos could proudly say he'd gone through his life without having ever felt a man's greatest fear. Christ, he never wanted to feel this level of pain again. It was agony incarnate.

He felt hands try to get him upright and then he saw Bear in front of him. The giant man was a registered nurse and his wife a doctor. But Carlos knew there was no magic cure or medication to help him through this pain. Only time could help.

Bear reached behind him and grabbed something from one of the guys. It took Carlos a second to figure out Bear was trying to get him to move his hands away from his throbbing jewels to put an icepack there.

Carlos glared at Bear as the man let out a small chuckle. "What the fuck, man?" It came out more as a whine than a complaint.

Bear grinned wider. "How's your first day on the job going, Sheriff?"

Carlos could only groan.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:20 am

As the others gathered around the deputy she'd fallen down the stairs with, Zoe frantically tried to make her escape. She looked around for Kyle. Spotting him across the lawn, Zoe headed towards him but Jenna stepped in her way.

“Stop! They’re not here for you.”

Zoe froze at her words. Her heart was still thundering loudly in her chest. Both from the fear of having been discovered as well as her tumble down the stairs. The deputy, the one with the sweet eyes, had protected her from harm.

Jenna reached for her hand. “They’re here for lunch too. That’s all. They don’t know who you are and aren’t suspicious of you—unless you run off. Then they might start asking questions.”

Zoe swallowed nervously. Should she believe her?

“Please, Clara,” Jenna encouraged. “They only know you as my niece. I promise.”

Zoe looked across the lawn at Kyle, who was playing on the swings, oblivious to the possible danger. If Jenna was wrong, she would be arrested. Would she even make it to jail? Did she still have a bounty on her? Not for the first time, she wished there was a way for her to contact Owen or Jack to find out.

“I can’t risk it,” she finally managed to say.

“You’re safe here. If Steel did not trust these two deputies, they would never have been allowed on our property.”

Zoe looked over her shoulder at the crowd that had gathered around the good-looking deputy she'd accidentally taken down. Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment for having kneed him in the groin. She recognized him from almost six months ago when she'd still been living in Steel and Jenna's house. He had been respectful and sweet to her—and she remembered thinking him handsome.

But he was a police officer. She could not, would not, trust the police again.

“You may trust them,” Zoe told her, “but I don't.” She pulled her arm free of Jenna's hold. “I'm sorry. I can't risk being taken away from my son. I shouldn't have come here.”

Zoe rushed across the lawn to the swings to get Kyle. As they made their way back down the path to their trailer, Zoe wondered if she meant ‘here’ as in lunch...or ‘here’ as in Mount Grove.

CHAPTER 5

Despite being distracted by the excruciating pain radiating from his testicles, Carlos did catch sight of Clara running away with her son. Mind, it was more of a fast-paced walk, but there was no doubt in his mind that she was running. From what? It couldn't have been him, because she hadn't seen him until they were falling down the stairs together.

As Carlos hobbled over to a lawn chair with the icepack still between his legs, he took an assessing look around. More people had shown up since his tumble down the stairs. Steel and Jenna were standing around a teenage boy, who must be Ollie. He was very thin and very tall. Steel hadn't given an age for him, but Carlos guessed around fifteen.

Hannigan was on the back porch with Conner in his arms. He was still in his uniform,

though badge- and gun-less. Carlos had locked both in his cruiser prior to coming over to Steel's house. His own gun had fallen off of his belt down the stairs, but thankfully one of the brothers had grabbed it and not one of the kids. It was now sitting on the table next to Carlos.

Looking around, Carlos compared the couples versus the singles. Most who were here were coupled off. Steel and Jenna, Lucky and Harper, Bulldog and Abby, Bear and Tessa. Hell, he could include Hannigan and his wife Cindy in that grouping too. The couple he didn't see was Jumper and Jasmine; he wondered where they were. Of the singles, there was Demo, Cage, and Grumpy. Carlos knew all three members lived in the clubhouse and, knowing Jenna, likely had an automatic invite to lunch.

The club kids running around were growing in numbers. If his mom was here, Louisa would be all over them. She loved being a grandma now. Though four didn't seem to be enough for her, and she was now bothering Carlos to add to those numbers.

A sharp pain radiated up from his balls, as if warning him they were in no condition to start reproducing.

Carlos spotted Bree and Cassie. They were on Bulldog's back porch. While most of the club property had been transformed to make access for Bree's wheelchair, there were still some areas that she wasn't able to go. Bulldog's back porch did not have a ramp. Cage, who managed the club's construction company and a licensed contractor, had explained that Bulldog's back porch was too short to the ground, which would make the ramp either too long or too steep. This was due to the slight incline that Bulldog's house rested on. Therefore, he could only add a ramp to the front of Bulldog's house.

Bree and Cassie were in no way excluded from the party. Jenna and the other ladies would never allow that. Carlos wondered if Cassie's agoraphobia was keeping them on the back porch. Most likely one of the ladies was on food duty for them. That was

when Carlos realized Angel's absence. Was she at work?

Cage made his way down the porch steps carrying two plates of food. He gave Carlos a chin lift as he passed. The club brother climbed up the stairs of Bulldog's porch and delivered the food to the two teenage girls.

Bulldog came down the stairs next. He was holding up a soda can and a beer bottle.

Carlos glared at his brother. "I'm still on duty."

"And if a bank robbery was in progress right now, do you honestly expect me to believe you're capable of running down the perps?" Bulldog wagged the beer in front of Carlos's face.

He snatched the bottle away. "That's why I have deputies. They do the running for me."

Bulldog laughed as he took a seat on the other side of the table from Carlos. The house provided them with enough shade that they did not need to put the umbrella up. "You're the boss for less than an hour and already you're delegating while you sit on your ass?"

Carlos held up his middle finger.

He didn't realize his eyes had gone back to the spot between Steel's and Lucky's houses where he'd last seen Clara disappear until Bulldog said, "Give her time."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:20 am

Carlos's head snapped around towards his brother. "What?"

Bulldog tipped his beer bottle in the same direction. "Clara. There's a reason she ran, and it wasn't from embarrassment about getting up close and personal with your nuts."

Carlos's eyes narrowed. He had the distinct feeling his brother was trying to tell him something without telling him anything. "I thought she'd left Steel and Jenna's. I figured she went back home."

"She did leave." Bulldog took a sip of his beer. "But she didn't go back home."

That made no sense. Other than the houses in the Pentagon and the apartments in the clubhouse, there were no other living spaces on the club's property... Right?

Bulldog scratched his long beard. "I saw the way you looked at her."

Carlos looked down at the unopened beer bottle in his hand. Condensation dripped down the dark glass. "I don't know what you're talking about."

After a long moment of silence, Carlos looked up to see his brother assessing him. It had been a while since the two of them sat and talked. Carlos had been keeping his distance, knowing he'd let his brother down. Bulldog had needed his support and Carlos had let his morals get in the way. But what choice did he have? If he let the monster loose...

Their mom had fought her second battle with cancer during the last two years of

Bulldog's military service. During that time, Louisa had wanted to get in touch with her Italian roots. Her sons wanted to give her a reason to keep fighting, so they made her a promise: kick cancer's ass a second time and they would take her to Italy. All three of them had studied Italian and Carlos had discovered that a second cousin of their mom's owned a vineyard in Italy. Eventually, their mom had been declared in remission and her sons took her to Italy for almost four months.

Almost eight years later, the three Santiagos still continued to speak Italian around each other. Louisa wanted to go back. She'd been in the process of researching another trip when Abby had come back into their lives, along with four kids. Now Louisa wouldn't go back unless it was with the entire family. At this time, though, neither Abby nor Cassie were able to travel. Louisa claimed she was fine waiting.

Lila had picked up on Italian rather quickly. To the point where, in the six months since she'd become Bulldog's daughter, she was able to hold nearly an entire conversation in Italian. The kid was smart and Carlos was a bit jealous that she was learning so quickly.

Generally, the brothers only held conversations in Italian around their mom to keep their language skills up. They still intended to take their mom back to Italy and didn't want to lose the progress they'd made in the language between now and then.

So for Bulldog to start speaking in Italian when it was just the two of them around, it made Carlos pay attention. "Cassie's been cooped up in the house a lot this week. Why don't you see if she and Bree want to take a stroll with you?" He stood up. "Maybe follow the new walking path we had put in that circles the property."

Carlos tried to keep the suspicion off of his face. Clara had been headed in the direction of the walking path too. "Am I looking for anything while on this casual stroll?"

Bulldog just shrugged and then walked away.

It took nearly an hour before his balls felt well enough for him to ditch the icepack and walk towards his niece and Bree. He left both the icepack and the unopened beer on the table.

Carlos would never forget the sight of Cassie, Abby, and Lila in that rusted old minivan six months ago. The utter fear in Cassie's eyes. He'd been thirteen years old the last time he'd seen Abby, but he'd known her immediately. Too thin and very pregnant. He'd remembered.

It had taken her some time to remember.

"Oh God! Carlos. You're all grown up. Where is he, Carlos? Where's my José?"

The monster had roared. Abby had been like a big sister to him. Who could have hurt her in such a heinous way?

And not just her. Cassie too.

Carlos did not fault Cassie her agoraphobia in the slightest. If he'd suffered what she had, he wouldn't want to go outside either. Cassie couldn't see her strength, but her adopted parents could. Carlos could.

Looking at the two teenage girls, Carlos felt for both of them. Bree had been kidnapped and abused for over two years by a pedophile who might be a cop. Then he'd sold her to a pornographer who made snuff films as a way to dispose of people for profit.

The monster demanded vengeance for both these innocent girls.

Pushing aside his inner-turmoil, Carlos tried not to wince as he walked up the stairs to his brother's back porch.

"Afternoon, ladies."

"Hi, Uncle Carlos," they both said to him. Bree smiled widely at him, happy to see him. Cassie, though, just looked sad.

Carlos leaned forward conspiratorially. "What do you two say about going for a walk? We won't go far," he assured Cassie. She'd stiffened at his offer. "I'll be with you the whole time, sweetheart. You'll be safe. I promise."

Bree pushed her wheelchair forward enough to tap her feet against Cassie's leg. "Please, Cass? We'll come right back if you need to. Let's get some exercise."

As much as Carlos was doing this because he was curious about his brother's cryptic behavior, Carlos also wanted to help Cassie. If she felt better about leaving the house to go for a walk with him by her side, then he'd gladly go for that walk with her. Regardless of what he may or may not find.

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He didn't know why Bulldog was being cryptic, but he did know that it had to do with Clara. And Carlos was very interested in learning more about her.

Finally, Cassie agreed. They had to go through the house to get to the ramp for Bree. The difference in Cassie's anxiety from being inside to outside was visibly noticeable. Her entire body tensed and she walked like she had a hundred-pound weights tied to her ankles. Carlos was about to nix the whole thing and take Cassie back inside when she took his hand.

Looking down at his niece, he saw her gave him a tight smile. "Let's do this."

Carlos nearly missed it. The new path the club had put in surrounded the clubhouse, pavilion, pond, and the Pentagon. It was about a half mile long around and made out of smooth cobblestone so Bree's chair and the kids' strollers and bikes could travel easier. Carlos knew about the path being built; he even brought his mom over to take walks with some of the ladies when the weather was nice. The club had started the construction a year ago when Bree had still been in the hospital. They did not want her to be restricted to where she could go because of her wheelchair.

What he hadn't known about was the second path. It wasn't obvious, and he could understand missing it. The only reason he noticed it was because of a broken branch. One that a little boy likely kicked in his tantrum at being taken away from the swing set he'd been playing on.

Carlos didn't know why, but he knew that Clara and Kyle had gone onto that second path. Unlike the main path, it wasn't marked or cleared. It was dirt and grass with foliage and trees. But once he saw it, he couldn't lose it.

With Bree and Cassie in tow, he couldn't follow the second path. They were walking slowly for Cassie, who seemed to be concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other. Carlos was still holding her hand. Bree couldn't hold her other hand and push herself in her wheelchair, so Cassie had her hand on the handle of Bree's chair.

Carlos's balls did not mind the slow pace. Plus, he was enjoying catching up with his niece and Bree. Though Bree also called him 'uncle', Carlos was not one of her club uncles. She'd picked up on Scotty referring to Carlos as an uncle when she'd first come around the club and had followed his example.

Bree was telling Carlos how she did not want to have a birthday party. It was coming up on her year anniversary of her kidney transplant surgery. She was also starting high school in the fall. Since the only people in Mount Grove that she knew were already in the club, Bree had asked Angel not to throw her a party. Instead, she wanted to throw Cage, her kidney donor, a "thank you for saving my life" party.

"You'll come, right?" Bree asked around Cassie.

Carlos hadn't been to a club gathering since Bear and Tessa's wedding. He'd declined attending Harper and Lucky's. There was no way that he was getting out of attending Bulldog and Abby's though. His own mother would flay him alive if he even suggested it.

Carlos regretted missing Harper's wedding. He'd thought distancing himself from the club would help soothe his monster, but he'd been wrong. The monster couldn't be soothed.

"Of course," he told Bree. He wasn't about to disappoint the girl, regardless of his earlier feelings. He needed to make peace with what he had done, what he knew had been done, and what he might have to do in the future.

Maybe he should make an appointment to see Dr. Rutenberg, the town's therapist. He'd need to be vague about some things, but it couldn't hurt to talk to the man.

They made it all the way around the circle. It took them about a half hour. Bulldog was waiting for them outside his house and walked towards them as soon as they were in view. He wrapped Cassie up in his arms and pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

"Proud of you," he whispered against her hair.

Cassie was shaking and hung tightly onto Bulldog. "I did it."

He squeezed her tight, rubbing his hand up and down her back. "Yes, you did." Bulldog turned so they could continue their walk towards his house. He kept Cassie against his side, an arm around her shoulders. She clung to him like she needed to borrow his strength to make it the rest of the way.

Bree headed towards her house. Carlos still hadn't seen Angel, but both her car and motorcycle were in her driveway. Was she not at work then?

As they neared Bulldog's house, Carlos pointed his thumb over his shoulder. "I think I'm going to take another loop around."

Bulldog nodded once. "Thank you," he said and guided Cassie inside. She waved behind her at Carlos just before the door closed. Carlos wasn't sure if she saw his wave back.

Kyle was in his hiding place. Zoe had been expecting Jenna to visit, maybe bring them some lunch plates or to scold her for leaving so abruptly. As soon as Zoe saw it was the cute deputy, though, panic took hold once more. She had an emergency button that would alert the club that she needed help, but what could they do? It

would go to Bulldog and Ghost, and she'd been around long enough to know that this specific cop with those sweet eyes and kind smile was Bulldog's brother.

He wouldn't stand between her and his brother. If the deputy was here to arrest her, she was screwed. Why had she come here? Why had she left Montana?

She knew Montana was only meant to be temporary. The cabin that she and Kyle had stayed in was not to be their permanent home. Conner had meant to bring her to Mount Grove once he was no longer a prospect for the club. The only thing that differed from his original plan was that he was no longer here with her.

Conner would have stood between her and the world if he was still alive.

Now she had a deputy knocking on her door and no Conner to help her. Jenna had said that she trusted the deputy, that Steel did too, but a deputy was obligated to follow the law. And the law said that Zoe was a criminal.

Knowing she couldn't hide, Zoe opened the door to face her fate.

CHAPTER 6

Zoe's jaw hung open. A date? Had she heard the man correctly? He'd tracked her down to ask her on a date?

"I'm sorry, what?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:20 am

Carlos's cheeks tinted red slightly. "I know this probably seems out of the blue. I've been thinking about you since we met last February. Do you remember, in Steel's kitchen?"

Zoe nodded. Oh, she remembered all right. At least then she'd only nearly run into him, unlike at lunch earlier. Manners dictated that she should apologize and thank him, but she couldn't seem to form the words.

"I understand if you don't want to. I know you recently lost your husband. I just thought..." Carlos shrugged, a little self-conscious. "Anyway, if you're interested, Clara, I'd love the chance to get to know you better."

Zoe stared at him. The last man who had asked her out on a date she had murdered because he turned out to be an abusive, controlling asshole. Clearly, she did not trust her instincts when it came to men.

But, looking at Carlos now... Zoe wished she was someone else, someone who could say yes to him. He looked to be about the same age as her, late twenties. Despite her aversion to the profession, he looked damn good in his beige deputy's uniform.

Her panic upon opening the door had vanished when she'd seen his nervousness. He'd knocked, hat in hand, to ask her out on a date. That took guts. He didn't strike her as the type of man who got nervous or bashful easily. It...humanized him. Made her see Carlos and not the deputy.

Regardless, her answer couldn't change. Even if her heart hated her tongue for what she was about to say.

Since Carlos believed she was Jenna's widowed niece, Zoe chose her next words based on that lie. "I'm flattered, really. But I can't. My husband was a cop. The job... It killed him. I can't..." Her voice broke. "I won't go through that, or put my son through that, again."

The disappointment on Carlos's face nearly had her backpedaling. It was a date, not a marriage proposal. But his gun and his badge were as prominent as his uniform. She had no choice but to say no.

Carlos nodded stiffly. He was rotating the brim of his hat around in his hands. "I understand. I'm sorry, Clara, for your loss." He made to step away. Zoe had her hand on the door, ready to close it, when he suddenly turned back. "Clara?"

She looked up. "Yes?"

"What if it's not a date? What if we just happen to meet at the diner one night and happen to sit at the same booth for a nice meal and some conversation?"

She shook her head slowly. "I don't understand."

"I haven't seen you around town. I'm assuming you don't go out much." Carlos indicated to the trailer she was currently inhabiting. "I didn't even know these were back here. This, and what happened at lunch today, tells me you're not comfortable being out and about. So, what if, rather than us going out on a date, I just take you out to the diner? No pressure, no romance, no implications. We can just sit and chat while you enjoy some of the best apple pie in the state. I'll be there to help you if you need it and take you home if you get uncomfortable."

Zoe felt frozen. She couldn't... She shouldn't... "I have a son."

"I know," Carlos said with a small nod. "If you want to bring him, I don't mind."

Otherwise, I'm sure one of the club ladies would be happy to watch him."

Jenna certainly would, especially if it meant Zoe was going out.

"I shouldn't," she said softly.

He tilted his head, assessing her. "I'm a cop, Clara. I've been a cop since I was eighteen years old. My boss has recently quit and I'm basically a shoo-in to be the town's new sheriff. It's not glamorous and the hours suck, but Mount Grove is a safe town. I've worked hard to make it that way. Accidents can happen, sure, but the people here are good." Carlos tipped his head back towards the hidden path in the trees. "I have to get going. I'll be at the diner each day this week for dinner around seven. I hope you'll join me."

He started to walk away.

"Carlos!"

Damnit, what the hell was she doing?

He turned back around. "Yes?" There was a small smile on his face and it took Zoe a moment to realize their roles were now reversed.

She couldn't keep her lips from twitching too. How long had it been since she'd smiled? "Dinner sounds nice." His smile widened. "Just dinner," she reminded him. "It's not a date."

He nodded once and put his hat on. "Not a date."

"Tomorrow?"

“Tomorrow,” he confirmed and then walked away.

Zoe didn't stop him this time. She slowly closed the door, leaning heavily against it. What was she doing? Date or no, she could not risk going out with the town's new sheriff. But... Zoe closed her eyes as she took in a shaky breath. Bottom line was, she wanted to.

She was tired of being afraid. She was tired of feeling like a bad mom for keeping her son hidden away. She was tired of being alone.

She'd made her decision. Leaving lunch had been a mistake. She'd panicked when she shouldn't have. Zoe needed to learn how to live again. It had been three years since she'd killed her husband, and yet she was still acting like she was under his thumb. Not anymore! Zoe was going to go out with Carlos. Regardless of him promising that it wasn't a date, they both knew it was.

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Zoe could only hope that history was not about to repeat itself.

Carlos made sure to pack a spare set of clothes as he headed to work the next day. He did not want to meet Clara for their non-date in his uniform. He packed a nice pair of jeans and a Henley. He'd also sent Kelly, one of the waitresses at the diner, a text asking for the back booth to be reserved for him at seven. Generally, the diner didn't take reservations, but Kelly was a friend and she didn't mind doing favors for the police and fire departments. She probably thought that it was for him and some of his deputies. Carlos did not correct this assumption, knowing Kelly would not keep her mouth shut about Carlos bringing a date to the diner.

In retrospect, the diner was probably a bad choice to bring Clara. There were no secrets in a small town like Mount Grove, and others would want to meet her. Carlos hadn't even told his mom about his non-date.

Hannigan had already cleaned out the sheriff's office of everything personal. Carlos wondered when he'd done so. Hannigan's keys were inside the desk drawer. Carlos had the same set. He made sure there weren't any extra keys on Hannigan's keyring and then put them aside to give to Jeff when he arrived at work.

Carlos sat down and looked around the office. His office. He'd sat in this chair before, but it hadn't been his. It had always been Longhill's or Hannigan's and he'd just been a fill-in. But now? Carlos ran his hand over the wood of the mahogany desk. A feeling of possession and rightness came over him.

He was sheriff now.

Picking up his phone, he took a picture of his office before opening up his text messages.

Carlos: [picture] There's a new sheriff in town.

Bulldog: Fuck yeah! You tell Mamma yet?

Carlos: Not yet. It hadn't felt real until I came in this morning.

Bulldog: Be proud, fratellino. You deserve this.

Bulldog: Did you find what you were looking for yesterday?

Carlos: I did. Meeting her for dinner at 7.

Bulldog: New job and a date! You might want to buy a lottery ticket. Today seems to be your lucky day.

Carlos snorted, but also thought his brother might have a point.

Carlos: It's not a date. It's dinner.

Bulldog: It's a date.

Carlos: I know. Can I ask you something?

Bulldog: Of course.

Carlos: When did the club add in trailers? Why are they back there?

Bulldog: After Abby and cramming all of us into our house, we decided to invest in

the trailers. Just in case.

Carlos's eyes narrowed on his phone. His brother was being cryptic again.

Carlos: In case of what?

Bulldog: Just in case.

Bulldog: You never know who needs protection.

Bulldog: Steel knows you know about the trailers. He's open to telling you more when you're ready.

Carlos stared at his phone for a long moment. You never know who needs protection. Does that mean... But Clara didn't need protection. Did she? She was Jenna's niece. But... The cryptic way Bulldog was acting, the clandestine positioning of the trailers, his suspicion that she hadn't left club property since arriving in Mount Grove...

Carlos: Do I need to know something before tonight?

Bulldog: Her story is her own. Steel wants to talk about the Pythons.

Not the answer Carlos had been expecting. Clara mentioned that her husband had been a police officer. She'd said that the job had killed him. Carlos wondered if maybe her husband had seen or heard something that had gotten him killed. Had Clara gone to her aunt for protection after her husband's death?

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Carlos: I hate secrets.

Bulldog: But you love solving a good mystery.

Bulldog: Promise me one thing?

Carlos: Yeah?

Bulldog: I've seen the way she looks at you. I think you can help her heal. When she does tell you what happened to her husband, I need you to promise you'll listen and not make assumptions. The law isn't always black and white.

Carlos flinched. Had her husband been a dirty cop? But that didn't mean Clara was dirty. If anything, it made her even more innocent and in need of protection.

Whatever her reasoning, Carlos knew she was worth the fight. Worth protecting. Both her and her son.

Carlos: I promise.

Zoe took a deep breath before knocking on the door. It took a minute before Jenna answered and, when she did, her smile broadened.

"Come in," she opened the door wider to allow Zoe and Kyle inside.

Kyle ran to the backdoor and stared longingly outside at the playset in the yard. Zoe still felt bad for taking him away yesterday.

“Can we sit outside so he can play while we talk?” she asked Jenna.

“Of course. Head on out. I’ll grab us some drinks and be right there.”

Kyle was out the door before Zoe could agree to Jenna’s offer. She hurried outside after her son.

Next to the playset was a wooden pergola with a two-person swing hanging from chains. Zoe took her seat while Kyle climbed, fearlessly, up the rungs to the platform. He continued up two more platforms until he reached the tallest with an attached twisty slide. Kyle bounded down with no hesitation.

“Remember the metal ones we used to have to sacrifice a layer of skin to go down?”

Zoe let out a small chuckle as her son immediately started his climb all over again. She accepted the offered drink from Jenna. “I have a scar on my right thigh from one. There was a metal spider-climb at my childhood church that I cut myself on. I think my dad’s words were ‘walk it off, it didn’t hit an artery.’”

Jenna took the open seat next to Zoe. “We certainly grew up in a different era.”

Zoe glanced at Jenna, who was probably about twenty-five years older than she was. “I’m sorry I left yesterday. I should have stuck it out. That was rude of me.”

“I understand your fear, Clara. I don’t know your story but I can sympathize.”

Zoe took a deep breath before she said, “Zoe. My name is Zoe.”

Jenna tried to keep the shock off of her face, but Zoe saw it. “It’s wonderful to meet you, Zoe. But I think I’ll stick with ‘Clara’ until you’re ready to tell more than just me your name.”

Zoe nodded her agreement. “You should... I lived with you for six months and you never asked. You should know what happened, what I did.”

“Does my husband know?”

“I don’t know,” Zoe confessed. “Conner wrote him a letter but I never read it. He might have explained everything or nothing.”

“Do you want me to ask him to come here?”

Zoe looked over at the playground where her son was starting his fifth journey down the slide with the same enthusiasm as his first. “No,” she finally said. “I think... I’ve never told anyone what happened. The only ones who know were involved. I don’t think I can handle an audience right now.”

Jenna nodded her understanding. “Fair enough. Do you want me to keep this from him?”

Zoe turned to her right to look at the other woman. “Would you? If I asked you to?”

“Of course.” Jenna pointed between the two of them. “We women have to stick together. The other ol’ ladies and I have a weekly group. The men aren’t the only ones with their secret meetings.”

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Zoe didn't know a lot about how the club functioned and the different terms, but she knew that there were certain things they considered to be 'club business' that only patched members, and sometimes their ol' ladies, could know.

As much as Zoe did not want others to know her story, Steel had an equal right to know as Jenna. Without being sexist, he probably had more of a right to know since he was the one working to keep her safe.

"You can tell Steel, but only him."

Jenna patted her thigh. "I'll make sure no one else is around. Ollie has been sleeping a lot. I'll wait for him to go to bed before I talk to Steel."

"Thank you."

Over the next hour, as Kyle switched from going down the slide to the swings and then the rocking mushrooms, Zoe told Jenna everything. From meeting and marrying Davis to the first time he struck her. How Conner had tried to champion her and she'd turned him down. To her joy at finally seeing that positive pregnancy test and being able to hold her son for the first time in her arms. She explained in graphic details how her husband dehumanized her, forced himself on her body, and spied on her with cameras and trackers.

To the best of her recollection, she told what had happened the night before she shot her husband and, finally, what happened afterward.

The only part she left out was Owen's involvement. She'd sworn she would keep his

secret, and she would. She fibbed and said it was Conner who had gotten her away from the courthouse and had been involved in the gunfight with the hitman or men that had tracked her through her shoes.

Zoe told Jenna about Montana, though she left out the town of Whitefish's name. She explained about the cabin they had lived in for over two years in the mountain, snowed off from civilization for over six months of the year. She described the beautiful landscape and how the men and one woman who called that mountain their home made sure she had plenty of supplies and firewood. She even told her about Jack, the older shopkeeper who seemed too knowledgeable and savvy with computers to be running a small-town general store.

Finally, she explained that it had always been Conner's plan to bring her and Kyle to Mount Grove, but he had died before he could do it himself.

Throughout it all, Jenna kept silent but for the occasional gasp or reaching across to squeeze Zoe's hand.

At the end of her tale, Jenna wrapped her arm around Zoe's shoulders. "You have nothing to be shamed or afraid of. Even if Steel doesn't know what happened, he would never blame you for the decisions you made. You will always have a home and be protected with us."

Zoe leaned into Jenna. It had been a long time since she'd taken comfort from another human being, excluding her son. "I think I did something foolish."

"What's that?" Jenna kept her hold on Zoe, which she appreciated.

"Carlos asked me out on a date."

Jenna sat up with a gasp and a smile. "Really? Oh, Clara, that's wonderful."

Zoe wasn't entirely sure about that. She was so torn. She wanted to go to dinner that night with him. "What if it's a mistake? What if he discovers the truth?"

Zoe appreciated that Jenna didn't automatically push aside her worries for fanciful, romantic cliches, like claiming that love would win out. Instead, Jenna sat for a moment and thought before answering.

"You like Carlos, right?"

Zoe felt her cheeks heat as she nodded. "He's...sweet. I like his eyes."

Jenna nodded slowly. "He is very sweet. I've known him for over ten years. Steel and I came to visit Lucky here before we moved our family down and started the club. Bulldog and Carlos are also natives. I don't know if you knew that. He was a new deputy when I met him, and I've watched him grow up to be the honorable, sweet man you met. He is nothing like your husband," Jenna stressed. "And, I swear to you, you'll have an entire club of men standing between you and him if he does anything you don't like. Physical or otherwise. Hell, his own brother would be the first to stand in front of you if he tried."

Zoe liked the idea of so many protectors. She had really only spent time with Bulldog and Steel, but she knew the names and faces of most of the others. "I want to go out with him, Jenna, but what if I end up liking him even more?"

"I'm not sure I'm following. Wouldn't that be a good thing? To build a life here?"

"He's a cop," Zoe reminded her. "I can never tell him the truth about me. He already believes me to be your widowed niece."

Jenna nodded slowly, deep in thought. "I can't tell you whether you should or shouldn't tell him everything you just told me. That's between you and him."

However, I can tell you that Carlos is trustworthy. He does not stand for any mistreatment of women and children. But he is an officer of the law. I don't know how he'll react."

"You still think this date is a good idea then?"

Jenna smiled. "Absolutely. Come on. Let's get Kyle inside to cool off with a snack while you and I go through my wardrobe. We'll find something nice for you to wear."

CHAPTER 7

It was twenty minutes after seven. Carlos was sitting alone at the far booth in the diner. Kelly had been by to refill his Coke twice already, each time with an air of curiosity about her. He still claimed he wasn't ready to order yet. He was very tempted to text Bulldog to ask if he knew a way to get ahold of Clara but held off.

The bell over the entry door rang, and Carlos looked up. His heart about leapt out of his chest. Clara stepped nervously into the crowded diner. She wore a cute yellow summer dress that flowed around her knees with a pair of black flats. Her hair was done up in an intricate knot and she had a sunflower clipped above her left ear.

Fuck, she looked like a ray of sunshine.

It took Carlos a moment to catch his breath. During that time, she stood awkwardly by the hostess stand. It wasn't until Kelly made to greet Clara that Carlos got his ass in gear. He leapt out of his seat and walked down the aisle between the window booths and the milkshake bar towards her.

As soon as she saw him coming, the nervousness left her and she smiled.

Carlos smiled back. He stopped just before her. "You look beautiful."

A blush appeared on her cheeks. "Thank you." She reached up and fingered the flap of his Henley. He'd left two buttons open at the top. "I think this is the first time I've ever seen you out of your uniform."

"I wanted to look nice for you too."

A throat cleared behind them. Carlos turned to see Kelly. She had a knowing look in her eye as she glanced between Clara and Carlos. "I take it you're ready to order now?"

Zoe remembered her first date with Davis like it was yesterday. He'd taken her to a noisy bar where they drank beer and danced the night away. They'd barely spoken with the loud music, but their chemistry hadn't required words.

She hadn't slept with him that night, which she'd naively taken as him being a gentleman. After finding out that he was not only an abusive bastard, but also a

cheating one, she had to wonder if he'd just gone to another woman's bed that night after dropping her off at her apartment. Zoe recalled telling her roommate at the time that Davis was "the one".

Looking back on it, she couldn't remember ever having a real conversation with Davis. Their dates were generally group events and their alone time was filled with intimate moments with no deep discussions.

Immediately upon escorting Zoe to their booth, Carlos helped her into her seat. Her back was facing the diner, which she didn't mind. He handed her a menu and said right off the bat that dinner was on him so she should get whatever she wanted. This struck home for Zoe. Davis had always ordered for her—until he'd stopped taking her out in public. He'd say that she wasn't fit to be seen in public until she lost her baby weight.

Even though Zoe knew that this really was a date, she hadn't been positive that Carlos would be paying for her meal and had to borrow cash from Jenna just in case. While Davis did pay for their dates, he always did it in a flamboyant way, to show off that he came from a wealthy family. And, of course, he always expected something in return for his generosity.

By the end of the date that wasn't a date, Zoe had to wonder what she had ever seen in Davis. Carlos was funny, sweet, and kind. He got up in the middle of their dinner to help an old woman he knew by name into her seat. When a man interrupted Carlos's story about a beach trip his family had taken when he was five to complain about a pothole that still had not been fixed, Carlos took out his phone and handled the situation immediately. Their waitress, Kelly, was cute and Zoe had picked up on the familiarity between Carlos and Kelly, but Carlos's eyes never strayed from Zoe.

It made her feel all the more foolish that she'd never picked up on Davis's infidelity because his eyes had always wandered.

They talked for hours. Long after others came and went for their meals. Zoe had even split a piece of apple pie with him and vowed that she would get her own next time because it was so good.

Zoe could not recall the last time she'd laughed so much in such a short amount of time.

She felt...comfortable with Carlos. In addition to his funny small-town stories, he talked a lot about his mom and her two battles with cancer and about how his dad had abandoned them when she'd first been diagnosed. Zoe admired his dedication to his family. It made her miss her own parents, whom she hadn't seen since the day after her arrest.

They were careful not to bring up the topic of her marriage. Zoe talked—probably too much—about Kyle. Carlos did not seem to have an issue with her having a son. He did mention, though, that he did want kids of his own someday too. Zoe wasn't sure if, emotionally, she could handle another pregnancy. She almost explained her trepidation but didn't want to ruin their time by bringing up Davis and how her pregnancy had affected their relationship.

Eventually, Kelly came to them and gently kicked them out. Zoe hadn't realized the rest of the diner was empty but for them.

Carlos held the door open for her, calling another “thank you” over his shoulder towards Kelly and the cook.

The warm August night had a nice breeze. Zoe stared up at the stars and moon. She missed the open air of Montana. There was too much light pollution in Philadelphia to see it clearly. She hadn't been paying attention enough in Mount Grove to notice, but she saw it now.

Carlos took hold of her left hand. "I don't want this night to end."

Zoe let out a long sigh. "Neither do I."

"Want to take a walk with me?"

She nodded immediately. "Yes."

He gently tugged her to the right, putting himself on the outside of the sidewalk.

"Mount Grove's small, but we do have a nice park."

"Wouldn't it be closed by now?"

He smiled down at her. "Who are they going to call? The police?"

In spite of herself, Zoe laughed and let him lead her down Main Street.

Jenna and Steel were waiting up for her on their couch. Zoe had asked Carlos to drop her off at their house, since they had Kyle during her date. The sweet kiss he'd given her on the side of her mouth like he was dropping her off on her parents' doorstep sealed the fact that this was a date.

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“How did it go?” Jenna’s wide smile told Zoe that she’d seen Carlos’s goodnight kiss.

“It was wonderful,” Zoe practically swooned. She sat down in the chair cattycorner to the couch. “How was Kyle?”

“An angel,” Jenna said with no hesitation. “Come on, girl, spill. Tell us everything.”

Steel’s expression said he could care less how Zoe’s date had gone but he would indulge his wife’s prying. Zoe loved the way Steel looked at Jenna. Like his entire universe, his very being, revolved around her and her happiness.

Davis had never looked at her that way. There were times when he looked at her like she was lower than the grime on the bottom of his shoe.

“We had dinner and then he took me for a walk in the park,” Zoe said evasively. She wasn’t even sure she could explain it. Carlos had made no sexual advances on her and yet she’d never been on such an intimate date in her life.

She looked to Steel. “I want to tell Carlos. I need to. I won’t continue to see him unless he knows everything.”

From the understanding on Steel’s face, Zoe knew Jenna had told him everything. Or, maybe, Steel had already known.

“That’s a big step for only having been on one date,” he cautioned.

“And a very different tune than what you were singing this afternoon,” Jenna added.

Zoe was very aware of both facts. “I know. I just... I won’t live a lie. Carlos deserves to know everything. I won’t play games with him.” She licked her lips before adding, “I won’t let him develop feelings for me before he knows the risk of being with me.”

Jenna and Steel exchange a look. One that she’d seen many times before with her parents that told her a very close couple was having a silent conversation.

“I think that’s very good of you,” Jenna finally said. “I think it shows how much you care for him.”

Zoe felt her cheeks heat and she looked away. “I have to know my son is safe. Regardless of what happens with Carlos and me, I need you to swear to me that Kyle is safe with you.”

“Of course,” Jenna and Steel speak together. Then Jenna said, “But, honey, I don’t think you have anything to worry about. Based on what I saw through the window, that boy’s already half in love with you.”

Thinking back on their date, Zoe feared he wasn’t the only one falling.

CHAPTER 8

Carlos pulled through the club’s gate with a wave at Mitch, the prospect on duty. He didn’t know much about the older prospect and had to wonder why a man in his early sixties would want to prospect for a motorcycle club. Though their mother could drive, she didn’t often. Carlos picked Louisa up on his way so she could spend time with the grandkids. When Bulldog had texted him, he’d said to go to Steel’s house. After parking his cruiser in Bulldog’s driveway so his mom didn’t have to walk, Carlos headed over to Steel’s.

He wasn't sure what he had been expecting, but to find Clara and Jenna in the living room with Bulldog, Steel, and Lucky was not it.

"What's going on?"

Carlos had been walking on a cloud nine. Nothing could get him down this day. His date with Clara had been wonderful because she was wonderful. Fuck, he couldn't remember the last time he'd ever felt like this. He wasn't sure he ever had. Clara was special. He knew she was holding back from him details about her marriage. There were times when the topic could have been brought up, but neither of them did.

He should have known that his euphoric feeling wasn't going to last.

The look on Clara's face... If he didn't know any better, Carlos would think someone had died. But he knew this was not the way his brother would tell him.

"Clara has a story to tell you," Jenna told him softly. She patted Clara's leg reassuringly. "We'll be in the kitchen if you need us."

The others started to walk out of the living room. Bulldog paused next to Carlos. "Remember the promise you made me. She's putting her future, her son's future, in your hands."

Carlos nodded stiffly. He would listen to whatever Clara had to tell him. He had a feeling he knew or suspected a portion of it.

He walked into the living room. "Where's Kyle?"

"With Abby and your mom at Bulldog's." Clara's voice was so small. He could hear the fear in her tone—and hated it.

Carlos wasn't sure if he should sit or stand. "What's going on, Clara?"

She took a shaky breath and then patted the couch next to her where Jenna had been sitting. "I need to tell you how I ended up in Mount Grove. I can't—I won't start something with you without you knowing first. And," her cheeks pinkened, "I really enjoyed our time together, Carlos. I... I want to continue seeing you."

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He immediately took her hands. “Me too.”

“My husband’s name was Davis and...three years ago, I murdered him.”

Carlos kept his promise. He sat there and listened. He heard everything, not interrupting or uttering a single sound. All the while, the monster inside raged. At the end of her story, Carlos stood up off of the couch. Without a word to her or anyone else in the house, he walked stiffly to the front door and outside.

The monster seethed.

Clara—fuck, Zoe was the sweetest person he’d ever met. She had an aura of innocence about her that was intoxicating. She’d married a man who had vowed to serve and protect but had ending up harming and squandering her. No wonder she didn’t trust cops.

There were times he hated his gender. Fuck. No man ever had the right to force himself on a woman. No church, ring, or vows gave him that power.

If Zoe hadn’t done it already, Carlos would track her husband down and kill him himself. It was like a wall of glass shattered in his soul. No amount of morals or his love of the badge could contain the monster now.

It wasn’t just her husband who had hurt her. By allowing their friend, son, and grandson to get away with hurting her, they were just as guilty. The only person who had done anything to help her had been practically a stranger.

What if Conner hadn't stepped in to help her? Zoe would have been killed by a hitman and her son would have been raised by her murderers. And...and she never would have come to Mount Grove. Carlos would have never met her.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Carlos didn't turn at his brother's voice. "Is this how it felt when you found Abby again? The need to destroy everyone who ever hurt her?" His voice shook with the monster's rage.

Bulldog didn't answer for a minute. Finally, he said gruffly, "Yeah."

"I was wrong to have stopped you. I should have let you burn that place to the ground."

Again, Bulldog didn't answer right away. "Why did you stop me? The real answer this time."

"Because I would have helped you," Carlos confessed. "I would have been right by your side burning it all down...and I couldn't do that and put my badge on the next day."

"So you chose the badge?"

Carlos rounded on his brother. "I chose what I thought I could live with. Connelly's death had been weighing heavily on me. Then that business with Hannigan and Castillo." Carlos shook his head. "I didn't know, though. I didn't know it felt like this when..."

"When it's your woman?" Bulldog offered up for him.

Carlos nodded stiffly. “What do I do, fratello?”

“Do you blame her?”

Carlos shook his head. “No. I wish I had been there to protect her or that Conner had done the deed so she didn’t feel guilty.”

“And if he was alive today?”

“He’d be dead by tonight,” Carlos growled.

Bulldog wrapped a large hand around Carlos’s neck, bringing the brothers chest to chest. “Then it’s your job to protect her, fratellino. Every fucking day. You protect her with everything you are and everything you have. Even if it means standing between her and the law that let her down.” Bulldog tapped Carlos on the chest. “Now, go in there and prove to your woman that you’re not out here calling the cavalry.”

“Fuck!” Carlos ran his hand down his face.

Bulldog waited for a moment and then pushed Carlos towards the door. “Go, dumbass. And get your woman.”

Jenna held Zoe as her tears fell uncontrollably. She’d told Carlos everything—and he’d left. He hadn’t even said a word to her. Nothing. He’d just stood up and left.

“If they find Kyle, they’ll take him away too,” she sobbed to Jenna. “You have to keep him safe. You have to!”

Jenna tried to console her by rubbing a hand up and down her back. “Easy, sweetheart. No one’s taking anyone anywhere yet. Give him a moment. I can see him

in the driveway talking to Bulldog. I don't think he's calling anyone."

Zoe only half heard her words. What had she been thinking, telling Carlos the truth? How stupid of her? Nothing was worth her life with her son. Not even a sweet small-town sheriff who had caught her eye. Nothing.

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The front door opened. Zoe leapt to her feet, nearly clipping Jenna's chin with the back of her head.

With unwiped tears and snot drenching her face, Zoe stood still as Carlos hurried over to her. She was anticipating him reaching for his handcuffs but, instead, the man fell to his knees before her.

Zoe's eyes widened in shock.

A part of her registered their audience. Bulldog had followed his brother in from outside. Lucky and Steel came in from the kitchen and Jenna was still behind her on the couch.

Carlos took her hands in his and bent down to kiss her knuckles. "What can I say, sunshine? I'm in awe of you. The strength you possess is immeasurable. The law failed you, but I will not. You put your faith in me, Zoe, and I will never betray that."

Her breath hitched and her heart thrummed loudly. She sniffled pathetically. "You believe me?"

"I never doubted you for a moment," he swore. "I needed to...step away. I'm not as strong as you. I did not want you to see my anger and think it was aimed at you." He turned her hands over and pressed a kiss to each palm. "Zoe, I need you in my life. Everything I am, my heart, my badge, is yours now. Please say you'll stay, that you'll be with me."

Zoe sank to her knees in front of him. "I'm a wanted fugitive, Carlos. One day, the

law may catch up with me.”

“I am the sheriff here. I have ways to protect you too. If needed, we’ll run. You, me, and Kyle. We’ll head back to Montana and live up in the mountains where no one can find us.”

Her chin trembled and she felt more tears leak from her eyes. “You would do that?”

He nodded. “In a heartbeat. If it means being with you.” He reached to her right and grabbed a handful of tissues from the box on the coffee table. He started to clean up her face, which made a gasping sob escape her lips.

“I can do that,” she told him, though she made no move to take the tissues from him.

“The point is you don’t have to.” He put the used tissues into his pocket and then took her face gently between his hands. “I do have one stipulation.”

She felt her breath hitch. “What’s that?”

“You come live with me. You’ve been hiding for too long, love. You need to remember how to shine.”

Zoe swallowed hard. “Don’t you live with your mom?”

He nodded. “Consider her a live-in babysitter.”

“You have the room for Kyle and me?”

He nodded again. “Bulldog’s old room is free. We can easily turn it into a kid’s room for Kyle.”

“And...what about me?”

“Well, my bedroom has always seemed a bit dull to me. Could really use a woman’s touch.”

Zoe let out an elated hiccup. “We’ve only been on one date.”

Carlos shrugged. “You stole my heart six months ago in that kitchen,” he pointed over his shoulder with his thumb, “and you’ve owned my balls since you squashed them two days ago.”

Zoe put her hand to her mouth to stop her giggle. “I am so sorry about that.”

Carlos leaned in and pressed a very gentle kiss to her lips. “You can make it up to me later. Stay,” he kissed her cheek. “Move in with me,” he kissed her other cheek. “Be with me.”

Zoe found herself nodding. “Yes.”

“Yes?” Carlos questioned.

She nodded more sternly and said louder, “Yes.”

Carlos let out a whoop and leapt to his feet. He helped her to her feet and took her into his arms. “She said yes!” he shouted to their audience, though all of them had heard her answer too.

CHAPTER 9

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Zoe didn't have that much to pack. If Mrs. Santiago was surprised by the fact that Carlos was bringing home a strange woman and boy, she didn't act like it. In fact, she seemed to be thrilled by the idea. Zoe didn't know what Carlos had told his mom about her. She and Jenna had gone to the trailer to pack up her meager possessions.

Jenna had been sweet enough to verify that this was what Zoe wanted once away from the men, especially Carlos.

Zoe had assured her that it was.

Carlos's house was a single-story with a small porch in the front. He lived in a neighborhood with kids playing on their lawns, dogs barking, and people who waved as they passed. Zoe was sitting in the front of his cruiser. They had borrowed a car seat from the club to get Kyle in the car. Mrs. Santiago was sitting in the back, listening to Kyle chat away about dinosaurs.

Kyle's eyes widened when they backed into the driveway. "Whose house is this?"

"Mine." Carlos put the cruiser into park and then turned in his seat. "You and your mom are going to come and live with us. Is that okay with you?"

Kyle crunched up his face for a moment before asking, "Do you have cookies?"

The adults all laughed. It was Mrs. Santiago who answered. "I make the best peanut butter double chocolate cookies," she told Kyle. Giving Zoe and Carlos a knowing looking, she then added, "How about you and I go make some?"

“Yes!” Kyle bounced up and down in his harness.

Mrs. Santiago got out and then walked around to unbuckle Kyle. “Take your time,” she told them before she followed a running Kyle into the house. The sun was starting to set and the porch light turned on.

Once she saw her son was safely inside, Zoe took a moment to inspect the neighborhood.

Carlos reached over to take her hand, drawing her attention back to him. “He’ll have plenty of kids to play with. This will be good for him.” He brought her hand up to his mouth. “But especially for you.”

“This is a big step,” Zoe said carefully. “Two days ago, I was terrified of you. Now I’m moving into your house.”

Carlos studied her for a moment. “Terrified of me or my badge?”

“Your badge,” Zoe amended.

“My badge is now your shield, Zoe,” he vowed.

A tear escaped her eye. She quickly wiped it away before he could. “I want to make this work,” she told him. “I want Kyle to grow up normally. I don’t want to teach him how to hide or to be afraid of a knock on the door. I want him to go to school and have friends and bake cookies and be a kid. That’s all I’ve ever wanted for him.”

“Trust me, sunshine,” he squeezed her hand, “this will work. I can feel it.”

“Why do you keep calling me ‘sunshine’?” she asked him.

He smiled widely. “Because you reminded me of the sun when you came into the diner yesterday.”

“Probably a good thing I didn’t come in wearing a brown dress then,” she deadpanned.

Carlos burst out laughing. He reached for her and drew her close over the center console. “You’re moving into my bedroom and we haven’t even had a proper kiss yet.”

Her heart start beating wildly in her chest. “Probably something we should amend.”

“Definitely,” he agreed, leaning in closer. “And frequently.”

Zoe learned quickly the one downside to moving in with Carlos and his mom. There were now three adults and a toddler in the house and only one bathroom.

“I sent Cage a message,” Carlos told her later on as they got ready for their first night together. Kyle, full of cookies and exhausted from exploring in his new bedroom, was passed out on Bulldog’s old king-sized bed. They would need to go shopping for a more kid-appropriate bed. Carlos had also promised Kyle that he could pick out the color of his bedroom.

“Cage?” Zoe questioned. She was wearing a long nightgown...and nothing else. While she wasn’t sure she was ready to go through another pregnancy, she was sure she was ready have sex again. She wouldn’t have agreed to this arrangement if she wasn’t.

“The club owns a construction company. Cage is one of their patched members who runs it for them. I’m going to have him stop by tomorrow to see if there’s a way of adding a second bathroom to the house.”

Zoe pulled down the covers. “Sounds expensive. I need to look into getting a job.”

“How secure is your identity?” he asked her carefully.

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“I haven’t had to use it yet. Not officially, anyway. Why?”

“Well, I need a new secretary. Mine is...utterly useless,” he said in the nicest way possible. “What do you think about coming to work with me?”

Zoe perked up immediately. “Really? You’d hire me?”

He crawled onto the bed and knelt next to her. “Of course. Though, I probably should start calling you ‘Clara’ again. I can also ask Keys to get you an entirely new identity. One that we know is secure.”

“He can do that?” she gasped.

He nodded. “Pretty sure there’s not much that man can’t do with a computer.”

Zoe bit her lip. “I miss being Zoe. Not Davis’s Zoe or Zoe Rutterson. I miss feeling like me. Just Zoe.”

“We’ll talk to Keys in the morning,” he promised her. “Figure out your options, but I would love for you to come to work for me.” He ran his hand down her arm, leaving goosebumps in his wake. “Though I might have to install shades in my office. Not sure I’d be able to survive a full workday with you without needing some private time.”

Zoe leaned up and pressed her lips to his. “I’m not on birth control. Do you have condoms?”

He nodded. "I do."

His kiss was soft but filled with devotion. Slowly, he brought his arms around her. Zoe pressed closer and opened her mouth for him. Carlos dipped his tongue inside, deepening their kiss. She couldn't help the whimper of desire that escaped her.

In a way, despite the fact that they had only been on one date and their first kiss had only been a few hours before in his cruiser, Zoe felt closer to Carlos than she ever had Davis. Carlos was real in a way Davis never was or could have been. For Davis, it was all about him. If he did this, then he got that. With Carlos, though, it was all about her. If he did this, then she got that. Call her selfish, but Zoe could do with a bit of pampering in her life. Not too much, but just enough to make this feeling of cherishment last forever.

Carlos separated from her for only a moment to take off his undershirt. Zoe's hand raised as if magnetized. She wasn't expecting him to have so much chest hair. She ran her fingers through it. He let her play for a moment before drawing her back to him.

Together, they stood up on their knees. A shiver ran through her as his hand journeyed downward to her breast.

He paused. "Are you okay?"

Zoe had to take a deep breath and assess her reaction. Finally, she nodded. "Yes. I... It's been a long time. I think I just forgot."

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Don't ever hesitate to tell me 'no' or to ask me to stop. I will never take what you are not willing to give, Zo. I am here," he pressed a kiss to her shoulder, "for your pleasure. Not the other way around."

Another shiver went through her—only this one was for an entirely different reason. “How about we pleasure each other?”

Carlos’s smile was sinful. “Fuck yeah.”

Zoe sat back and lifted the hem of her nightdress over her head. She knelt before him completely bare. Her breasts weren’t overly large, but bigger than before she’d had Kyle. She still bore the stretch marks from her pregnancy as well as some flab around her middle. Davis had hated the fact that she had not gone back to her one-hundred-and ten, size three body following his birth. But Carlos?

The look in his eyes as he stared at her naked form... Zoe felt nothing but beautiful. If it wasn’t so soon for them, she would have sworn she also saw love.

Carlos reached for her breasts again. She closed her eyes against the onslaught of emotions she saw on his face, wanting to concentrate on the feel of his touches. His tongue on her nipple surprised her and she nearly jumped.

He left a trail of kisses along her breast to the valley between and to the other. He continued upward to her shoulder and neck then switched to her other side.

Slowly he laid her back onto the pillows. He carefully arranged himself between her legs and she was so grateful she’d shaved that morning.

“You deserve to be worshiped every day of your life, Zoe, and I plan to be the man who falls at your altar.”

He dipped his head down, running his tongue up and down her slit. Zoe let out a low whimper. “Carlos, I’ve never...”

He picked up his head. “Never what?”

She refused to say that bastard's name. He had no place in bed with her and Carlos. "No one's ever gone down on me."

"No one?" Carlos looked stunned and Zoe shook her head. "Utter fools. I plan on going down on you multiple times a day."

Zoe gasped out in shock and then in pleasure as he took her clit into his mouth. He devoured her sex like he was a starving man and she was a three-course meal. Heat rose from her core as he sucked and lapped at her wet folds. Carefully, he slid a finger into her center, searching, searching...

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Zoe cried out as he found her sweet spot. Her inner walls trembled around his digit as she experienced her first orgasm.

Carlos withdrew his finger, placing kisses on her stomach and all the way up to her mouth. He lay on the bed next to her side, keeping her close as she came down from her high. He continued to devour her neck, patiently waiting.

Zoe blinked, her euphoria like a buzz under her skin. “That was... I didn’t know it would be like that.”

He nibbled on her earlobe. “Get used to it, sunshine.”

Zoe pulled his face to hers, tasting herself on his lips. She could feel his thick cock in his sweatpants pressed against her hip. Zoe knew that there would be a lot that she would be taking from this relationship that would not be even. But there was something that she could do for him that would show her appreciation.

“Roll onto your back,” she instructed him.

When Zoe had told Carlos her past, she’d told him all of it. Including how she had tried to persuade Davis to use her mouth in place of vaginal sex following Kyle’s birth.

He knew what she had in mind. “You don’t have to,” Carlos told her softly.

“I know.” She smiled at him. “That’s the difference. I want to.”

Carlos smiled back at her. Then rolled onto his back. He lifted his hips so she could pull his sweats down his long legs. She flung them onto the floor.

Carlos was tall, over six feet, with long, thick legs. It was no surprise his cock fit him proportionally too. Zoe reached up and wrapped her hand around his thickness. He spread his thighs wider to give her more room.

Zoe dipped her head down and ran her tongue along his mushroomed tip. Then, looking up his tall body and making sure his eyes were on her, she dropped her mouth over his thick cock. She was careful to avoid her teeth touching his sensitive skin. He let out a long groan, his hand going into her hair.

“Fuck, sunshine, just like that.”

Zoe worked her tongue up and down his long shaft, rubbing her hand in unison with her bobbing head. She placed her other hand on his balls. They were tight and heavy as she rolled them carefully between her fingers.

Knowing she was giving him pleasure, gave her pleasure in return. She could feel the wetness between her legs increase.

“Zoe, love, stop. I’m going to...” He hissed. “I want to come inside you.”

Though a part of her wanted to keep going, she backed off of him. “Where’s the condom?”

Carlos pointed to his nightstand.

Zoe hopped off the bed and walked naked to it. She opened the draw...and blinked. There were a few condoms in the drawer. Three, to be precise, along with some wet wipes, but there was a couple of items that Zoe did not expect.

She reached inside and pulled out the large orange dildo. She turned towards Carlos, holding it up.

He stared unabashed back at her. “Straight men can enjoy anal sex too.”

A shiver ran through Zoe as the image of her using the toy on Carlos came to the forefront of her mind and a feeling of power she’d never felt before. Taking the dildo but leaving the condoms, Zoe crawled back onto the bed next to him.

“You have no idea how much I want to use this on you.”

He grinned wickedly at her. “Sunshine, you can do whatever the fuck you want to me.” He tipped his head towards the nightstand again. “But the use of lube is nonnegotiable.”

Carlos had never shared his secret with anyone before. He wasn’t ashamed of the fact that he liked to masturbate while stimulating his prostate. He’d done it for the first time on a dare while visiting Jasmine and Sophia at their college. He was so drunk, he didn’t really remember the experience, but he did recall liking it.

He’d never had the time or the inclination to share his kink with a woman. Generally, his experiences were quick fucks or out-of-town one-night stands. He’d even been with a few of the club Honeys because he knew it wouldn’t mean anything to them but a night of shared pleasure. There’d been no passion.

The idea, though, of Zoe fucking him with that dildo? His balls tightened at the very thought. Carlos wasn’t a domineering man. Dominant, yes, but not controlling or manipulative. He did not see himself as weak or less of a man because he liked anal sex. The fact that it was turning Zoe on made it all the more appealing.

She’d told him what her husband had done to her. Ring or no, it had been a violation.

If Zoe wanted him to buy a strap-on and fuck him for the rest of their days, he was more than fine with that. Her cute mouth wrapped around his cock would just be the cherry on top.

Zoe grabbed the half-full lube bottle from his nightstand. Her eagerness showed in her haste, which Carlos could only agree with. One of the downsides of having to share a bathroom with his mom and brother was the fact that he had to keep certain things in his bedroom and not readily accessible in the bathroom, like his enema treatments.

“I’ve never done this before.”

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“I have,” he assured her. “I’ll walk you through it.”

“And you’re...” Zoe hesitated, glancing down at the dildo in his hand. “I mean, you’ll come. Which means we won’t...”

“Love, I told you that you can do whatever you want to me and I meant it. If you want this, which it seems like you do, then I’m all for it. If you want to grab one of those condoms, I’ll make love to you so sweetly, you’ll never question my devotion to you. The choice is yours.”

Zoe bit the inside of her lip. Then she got a devilish glint in her eye that made Carlos shiver in anticipation. “Tell me what to do.”

Zoe opened the lube bottle and dribbled some onto the tips of her fingers. “Shouldn’t you, you know, turn over?”

Carlos shook his head. “I want to see you when you make love to me.”

She personally considered what she was about to do to him ‘fucking’, but it certainly romanticized it when he said ‘making love’. She had no idea why the idea of getting him off by anal stimulation was so intoxicating to her. Maybe it was the reverse roles or the fact that he was letting her have free rein of his body? Zoe didn’t know and, frankly, she didn’t care.

She brought herself closer between his bent knees. Carlos was watching her, so trustingly, that it made her feel powerful. For the first time in her life, she felt in control. That was the gift Carlos was giving her. More than a home, more than a safe

haven, he was giving her a chance to find herself. To be Zoe.

She reached her lubed fingers forward between his ass cheeks. As soon as her fingers found his puckered hole, Carlos moaned low from his throat. She would have wondered if that was a good sound, except he pushed his hips into her hand. Her finger pressed inside.

“Fuck, Zoe. You’re killing me.”

She looked up at him in slight panic. “What? Am I hurting you?”

He chuckled low. “No, but if you don’t hurry up, I’m going to give you a show on what to do.”

That perked up her ears. “I think I’d like that.” He raised an eyebrow at her and she giggled. “But not today.”

He met her smile. “Agreed. You don’t have to go slow or gentle with me, love. I can take it.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t,” he promised.

Zoe pushed her finger further inside, and she saw him automatically relax. He said she needed to open him up and spread the lube around inside too. Zoe worked her finger in and out of his ass.

“Add another.” His voice sounded strained but she complied.

Zoe pressed her middle and pointer fingers into his tight hole. Carlos groaned. “Are

you sure this is okay?”

He nodded. “Very. Keep going, love.”

Zoe continued to work her fingers in and out of him. All the while, she watched for any signs of his discomfort.

“Lube up the dildo,” he instructed.

Zoe pulled her fingers from his body and he groaned. He brought his hand to his cock and started to pump himself as she got the lube bottle again. “How do you normally do this?”

“You mean what position or in general?”

Since she didn’t know the answer to either, Zoe said, “Both.”

“Here in my bed. Generally on my back because I’m not flexible enough to be in any other position. As to the other question, I’ve always been alone. You’re the first person I’ve shared this with.”

She looked up from where she was running her lubed palm up and down the silicone shaft. “Really?”

Carlos nodded. “You’re the only person I’ve wanted to share this with.”

Zoe crawled on top of him, straddling his belly. Careful of her sticky hands, she draped herself over him and took his lips. “I don’t know why this turns me on so much, but I love that you’re giving this to me.”

He smiled up at her. “Anything to make you shine.”

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Zoe couldn't help but roll her eyes at him. "You really need to stop comparing me to the sun."

"Never," he vowed.

"Probably not a good time to point out that I'm a natural blonde?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

She nodded. "I dyed it to match Kyle's. I used to keep it really short too, but I let it grow out while we were in the mountains."

He reached up and pulled on a lock of her brunette hair. "I'd love to see you as a blonde."

Her smile was a little sad, because they both knew that it was safer to keep her hair dyed. "Maybe one day I'll buy a wig." Zoe scooted off of him and retook her place between his legs. "You ready?"

"Wait," he said. She paused, the tip of the fake dick nearing his cheeks. "Grab the condom."

She did as she was told, though confused. Why would he have her lube up the dildo if she needed to put a condom on it? Why would a dildo need to have a condom on it if it was clean?

"Put it on me," he instructed.

“Why?” Unfortunately, her hands were too slippery that she wasn’t able to open the packet. She tossed it to him.

As Carlos ripped it open and slid it down his erection, he explained, “I still want to come inside you.”

Maybe Zoe needed to go back to anatomy lessons, because she was not understanding what he was getting at.

“When I tell you to, climb on top of me and sit on my dick.”

Zoe still had no idea what was about to happen, but she was too turned on to be overly curious.

She picked up the lubed dildo again. Carlos moved his legs back, holding them open wide with his hands behind his knees. This gave her a very clear view of his sheathed cock, his heavy balls, and his lubed pucker.

Zoe positioned the dildo at his entrance and carefully pressed inside. She’d never been the penetrator before, and it was exhilarating to watch his body take the fake phallus. She leaned in, adding her weight. Completely mesmerized, she watched his face as his breath changed and his eyes dilatated.

“Keep going,” he encouraged.

Zoe pushed in further. It was nearly halfway inside him. She pulled back out before pushing back in. His head rolled back on the pillow.

“Carlos?”

“It’s fine!” he gasped out. “I’m fine. It’s so different when it’s someone...” He stopped and picked his head up off the pillow. “It’s so different because it’s you.”

Zoe thought her heart was about to burst out of her chest. “I know the feeling,” she admitted. She shifted her weight on the bed and incidentally pressed the dildo further inside him.

“Oh fuck!” he panted. “Do that again.”

Zoe pulled the cock out and then pressed her weight into him as it reentered him. A part of her wished she had her hands free. What would it feel like to fuck him with her hips? There were strap-ons with clitoral stimulators too. Zoe really needed to get a job so she could go shopping for one.

“Whatever the fuck you’re thinking about, I’m a hundred and ten percent behind you,” he gasped out. “Oh fuck. Keep going.”

She repeated the action, over and over again, all the while imagining what it would feel like to be over him, kiss him, to play with his nipples... His utility belt and weapon were stored in his safe, but the man did have handcuffs. What would it be like to cuff his hands behind his back, put him on his belly, and take him from behind?

“Fuck, fuck, fuck! Hurry,” Carlos pleaded, releasing the hold he had on his legs. “Get on my cock.”

Zoe didn’t bother to take the dick out of his ass. She scrambled up over his hips. She was so turned on that there was no preparation needed on her part. She slid the top of his penis through her drenched folds before sinking down on top of him. Zoe was so grateful for his foresight to put the condom on ahead of time.

Her groan from the fullness inside of her was cut off by her gasp as she was suddenly flipped over onto her back. They were now horizontal on the bed, her hair hanging off the end. He claimed her lips as he pounded into her. Zoe opened her legs wider, tipping her hips up higher, trying to get him deeper inside.

Hindsight, they were not being quiet. Neither of them seemed to remember that his mother and her son were in the surrounding rooms. If the universe was looking out for them, they were both sound asleep and would know nothing of what took place inside the new couple's bedroom.

Neither of them lasted long. Zoe could not recall ever feeling so frenzied. They both shouted out their releases, clinging to the other like they were their reason for living. Zoe zoned out, riding her high of endorphins and oxytocin. She vaguely recalled Carlos getting up and hurrying across the hall. He came back with a warm washcloth, using it to clean her and then himself up. He dressed her back in her nightgown and pulled on his sweats.

As Carlos curled himself around her, pulling the covers up, she felt his mouth at her ear. She heard his words and wondered how in two days she'd gotten so lucky to be falling in love with a sexy small-town sheriff.