



Carlos: Trilogy, Part Three (Carlos: A VDMC Trilogy #3)

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Category: LGBT+

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 sons freedom?

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CHAPTER 1

Sheriff Carlos Santiago tossed his badge onto the top of the desk. His uniform shirt and utility belt went next. He kept his gun, holster, and cell phone. The white short-sleeved undershirt he wore was thin, but it would have to do. He didn't have any other option but his beige work pants and boots. There certainly was no time to go home and change into something else.

He rushed out of the diner seconds behind Owen. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Kelly the waitress standing behind the service counter. Carlos did not have time to explain or thank her for her help. While he didn't know Owen that well, or at all really, instinct told him Owen would not hesitate to leave him behind.

Ghost and Ranger were outside by their bikes. Ghost was on his phone, though Carlos didn't know who with.

"Keys!" he shouted to both of them.

Ranger's eyebrows shot up. The man looked like he was a gene away from being labeled an Albino. Carlos had never seen anyone with such bright, natural white-blond hair before, but Ranger swore he didn't dye it. On more than one occasion, Carlos had overheard him offer to show the questioner his pubes when they still doubted him.

Owen was already straddling Ghost's bike. It was a Harley-Davidson Limited Edition El Diablo Low-Rider in the iconic shimmer red. Ranger's was a sleek gray Nightster.

Ghost turned, his flaming red hair as bright as his bike's paint job. "Carlos, what?—"

"No time," Carlos said quickly. Owen looked seconds away from hotwiring the bike he now straddled. "We need your keys."

It only occurred to Carlos then that the reason behind Ranger's confusion was because he'd assumed Carlos was calling out for his club brother Keys and not demanding Ranger's bike keys .

Carlos was fairly certain if he was anyone else, they would have laughed in his face and never relinquished the keys to their beloved bikes. What biker willingly gives their bike over to someone else? Someone who wasn't even in their club and also a cop.

But Ranger and Ghost knew Carlos like he was one of the club. They knew he could ride because they'd seen him on Bulldog's hog more than once. They knew that Carlos would never take their bikes unless it was an emergency.

It was Owen that both of their gazes turned hesitantly on. Ghost's back had been to his bike when Owen had mounted it, so he hadn't seen Owen until he had turned at Carlos's first demand for his keys.

Ranger held out his keys. Ghost was slightly more hesitant, but Carlos grabbed for them as soon as they were in view.

He tossed them over to Owen, who caught them with ease. The man was wearing jeans, boots, a black t-shirt, and black lightweight jacket. However, now that he was sitting, Carlos could see the outline of the gun holster at his chest.

Carlos untucked his undershirt to help cover the gun on his hip.

Without a word to anyone or putting on a helmet, Owen spun the bike in a quick fishtail and then sped away.

Carlos hurried after him.

He didn't care what it took. He didn't care how many laws he broke. He was getting Zoe's son back from the bounty hunter who took him.

Carlos was having second thoughts. Not about going after Kyle. Never that. But the speed in which they left. Carlos, by nature, was a strategist, a thinker. He did not make impulsive, split-second decisions.

And yet he'd done so twice in the past week.

The first was moving Zoe and Kyle into his home. It had felt right. Like they belonged there. Carlos wasn't a person who acted based on how he felt in the moment. Hell, he hadn't even asked his mom first before moving them in. And, technically, it was her house. Louisa, though, had taken it in stride and had never uttered a word of complaint—or questioned his sanity.

Then there was now. As soon as Owen had said he was tracking down the bounty hunter, Trapper, Carlos had jumped to follow. He'd made a vow to Zoe that he would not return until he had her son with him. Carlos wasn't the boy's father, but he did feel responsible for him. He'd made a vow he wasn't even sure he could keep.

He prayed he could. Fuck, was he praying. If anything happened to Kyle beyond the abduction, Carlos wasn't sure what he would do. Zoe and he were so new as a couple. He wanted a life with her. He wanted to one day be "Dad" to Kyle, as well as any future kids they might have.

But that would never happen if he failed to bring Kyle home. If he broke his vow.

Carlos had no information. He was blindly following Owen, and that wasn't like him.

His brain wasn't in control, though. Carlos knew himself well enough to know that the monster currently held the reins. He was the driving force of Carlos's more vengeful side. The raging beast inside that demanded blood and carnage as recompense.

Carlos knew that if he wanted to get Kyle back before his identity could be confirmed as Davis Rutterson Jr., he couldn't be the sheriff. He could not risk the red tape and the law getting in his way. Sheriff Carlos could not keep his vow to Zoe.

But, perhaps, the monster inside could.

They rode east for nearly three hours before they stopped. Owen needed to make a phone call and they both needed to top off the gas tanks of their procured motorcycles.

"What's the plan?" Carlos asked. "Where's Trapper?"

Owen was standing at the pump opposite Carlos. He had his phone out, having just hung up with whomever it was he needed to call. "My people are getting me his location now. We can't be too far behind him."

"How do you even know which vehicle he's driving?" Danny, one of Carlos's deputies, had put a BOLO out for the rental Trapper had had in Mount Grove the week before, but it had come back as returned to the rental dealership.

Owen put his phone into his pocket. Again, Carlos caught a glimpse of the gun shoulder holster he was wearing under his jacket. "He has a cousin who lives in the area. Last time he was here on a bounty, he borrowed the cousin's truck. That license plate was just captured on camera at a toll booth."

“Still doesn’t prove he took or still has Kyle.”

“Trapper was in Mount Grove. You saw proof yourself of that. The chances that he just happened to be there and a week later Kyle is taken without his involvement are extremely low.” Owen straddled Ghost’s bike. “Let’s go. If we can catch him before he hits the city, it will make our lives easier.”

Carlos started Ranger’s Nightster. He’d been tempted to call or text Zoe during their pitstop, but he honestly didn’t know what to say. Asking her how she was doing was pointless. She wasn’t okay and she wouldn’t be okay until her son was returned to her.

They continued towards Philly.

In a way, the trip seemed to go by in a blink of an eye. Carlos saw Kyle’s little face with his wide brown eyes and his cute brown curls the entire way. Like a beacon guiding him forward. He knew that he wasn’t returning to Mount Grove without Zoe’s little boy.

On the other hand, each mile seemed to take an eternity. They were going close to twenty miles per hour over the posted speed limit, weaving their way in and out of traffic. As a cop, Carlos wondered where all the speed traps and patrolmen were. His mind whirled with thoughts of how scared Kyle was right then, how he could have possibly let Kyle be taken, how he was going to make this up to Zoe, how he was going to make it up to Kyle ...

Carlos didn’t know Owen, yet he was trusting and following him. What if Owen was leading him into a trap? But what would be the point of that? What if Owen was taking him away from Mount Grove and Zoe? But why would he do that? What if Owen’s information was faulty and Trapper wasn’t even headed to or in Philly?

Every mile stretched. How was it possible that time could go by so fast and so slow all at once? Carlos needed to get to Kyle faster, but he also needed a plan. He did not like blindly following Owen into the unknown.

Yet, Carlos knew just enough about Owen to know that he wasn't working alone. The person or people he worked with were like Keys and could get information without the red tape Carlos's badge forced him behind. Trapper would have answers as to where Kyle was—he had to. Because if he didn't...

If he didn't, then Carlos was back to square one without a place to start.

Owen suddenly swerved off an exit. Carlos had to hit his brakes and dodge a Prius to follow him. He pulled off to the side of the road.

Carlos squared up next to him. "What is it?"

Owen pulled out his phone. "Trapper's at a motel about six miles from here."

Carlos's heart started beating faster. "Kyle?"

"Unknown, but he had a suitcase with him."

Carlos felt sick as his stomach dropped. The bastard had put Kyle in a suitcase?! The monster seethed. He looked in the direction of the motel.

Six miles.

Carlos throttled the engine. I'm coming, Kyle. Hold on...

For as long as Zoe could remember, it had been her and Kyle. Even when he'd been born, Davis had refused to hold his son. All of the birth announcements and pictures

that Davis had insisted on going out had been Zoe holding her baby while Davis had his arm around her. Kyle had been so small, though he'd been born full-term.

Though she'd been in denial about it at the time, a part of her was grateful Davis had never shown a paternal side. He'd struck Zoe for the first time when she'd gotten her first period following their wedding. That was all it had taken—her failure to get pregnant—for Davis to show his true colors. It had been an underlying fear of hers every time Davis had gotten close to his son.

What small, insignificant trigger would set Davis off enough to harm his son as he had hurt his wife?

The old argument of nature versus nurture. Had Davis even had a chance at being a good man given the house he'd grown up in? Davis's parents had been harsh and strict. More than once, Davis had expressed how much he resented his father's success and complained that nothing came as easily for him as it did for his father. Davis had joined the police force, not out of a sense of duty, but to prove he could triumph over his father's career and records. The more Davis had tried, though, the more he had failed, and the more he failed, the angrier he got.

Zoe had met his parents on multiple occasions. His mom was a stay-at-home mom who did no mothering. Davis had been raised by nannies until his teen years. The only time Mrs. Rutterson had shown any maternal affection was in front of the press cameras. As the son and grandson of Philadelphia's Police Commissioner and retired Supreme Court Judge, respectively, Davis had always fallen short of expectations.

It was why he'd pushed so hard to get married and have a son. Davis needed to prove he could at least do that .

But he had never loved his son.

Davis had proven that the day he'd knocked Zoe unconscious while she'd been holding her baby and then gone downstairs to watch television.

Even up in the mountains, it had been her and Kyle. Others had visited, like Brooke, the mountain woman who had helped her with home repairs and to stock her groceries, and Corbin or Dalton, the mountain men who checked in on them to ensure she had enough firewood and checked on the cabin's amenity stores. Conner had come as often he could but it was never as often as either of them liked.

For a long time, Zoe had needed that solitude with her son. She needed time to heal, to move on. In truth, she hadn't moved on. She'd never come close to moving on while squirreled away in a cabin in the middle of nowhere.

It hadn't been until a new small-town sheriff had come knocking on her door that she'd even contemplated moving on. That there had been a future she could envision for herself and her son that didn't involve daily fear and anxiety.

Now her son was missing. Kidnapped by a bounty hunter.

Zoe had never felt so hollow. The despair was debilitating. She could barely breathe. She needed her son and she needed him now.

The only other time she'd felt so helpless was the night she'd killed her husband. Not when she'd shot him, but afterwards. When she'd had to watch Davis's parents carry her infant son out of her house while she was handcuffed in the back of a police car.

"...this will help calm you down..."

The slight prick to her arm was nothing compared to her shattered heart.

Kyle... She thought as a haze fell over her. Please, Carlos, bring my baby back to

me...

CHAPTER 2

It was nearly ten at night by the time they reached the motel. Almost seven hours since Kyle's disappearance. Every minute of his absence was like a ticking clock in Carlos's ears. Tick, tick, tick... Kyle, Kyle, Kyle...

The motel was surrounded by various fast food joints, an auto repair garage, a pharmacy, and three gas stations. This was good, because it gave them cover to drive their borrowed motorcycles closer to the motel. Unfortunately, the more congested the area, the more potential witnesses. Carlos did not want their apprehension of Trapper to be on the local news or some social media reel.

They pulled into the parking lot to the left of the motel building. There was a patch of grass and a sidewalk separating the two lots. Owen and Carlos parked with their front tires facing the motel but did not dismount or turn off their engines. The rumble would help drown out their voices.

Carlos's eyes scanned the parking lot of the motel. "Red truck, two o'clock."

Owen pulled his phone out. "Delta-Tango-Sierra-Niner-Six-Two," he read and then looked up. "That's our boy. He's registered under one of his work aliases."

"Which room?"

"Ten-sixteen," Owen answered. "We need to get eyes inside."

"There's only two windows and they're in front. I don't see any bathroom windows."

If we peek in through the front window, even if the shades are pulled, he'll see us."

"Gotta think outside the box, Sheriff." Owen looked at him over his left shoulder.

"Motels, hotels, they all have one major weakness when it comes to privacy."

Small-town sheriff or not, Carlos had a feeling he knew where Owen was going with this. "The vents?"

Owen nodded, his unique amber eyes showing his approval. He reached into the front pocket of his jacket and pulled out a black box. At first impression, Carlos thought it was an old Gameboy video game, but then he saw the endoscope camera wrapped around the middle under Owen's hand.

"You just happen to carry that around with you?"

Owen shrugged. "You have your utility belt and I have mine."

Carlos's utility belt was currently sitting on the desk in the diner's back office. He also hadn't thought that through. Hopefully Ghost or Ranger had grabbed it and his uniform jacket.

"I'm going to see which rooms around his are empty," Owen said as he turned off his bike. "Go flatten the tires on his truck."

As Carlos pocketed Ranger's keys, he had the oddest notion that his friend Sophia would be proud of him for what he was about to go do.

They were in the room next to Trapper's. The television was loud enough from the other room that they couldn't hear Trapper or Kyle. As Owen threaded the camera through the shared vent while standing on the dresser, Carlos leaned his ass against the edge. He had his arms crossed over his chest as he tried not to picture the suitcase

Owen had claimed Trapper had been carrying with him.

It scared the piss out of him that the chances were high that Kyle had been, and might still be, in that case.

He could feel his phone vibrating in his pocket but once again ignored it.

“Why didn’t he scream?”

Owen glanced down at Carlos from his place on the desk. He had the camera box in his left hand and the cord in his right. “What?”

“In the grocery store, why didn’t Kyle scream?” Carlos looked up at Owen. “I stepped away to help Mrs. Guthrie with her groceries. Zoe had Kyle in the cart. How did Trapper get Kyle out of the cart so quietly that no one in the store heard anything?”

“If your small-town grocer had invested in security cameras, maybe we’d have an answer to that.”

Carlos could hear the disdain in Owen’s voice and glared at the other man. “Mount Grove is a small and peaceful town. It is completely reasonable that we don’t need the entire town under surveillance.”

“And yet, in the past two years, you’ve had a teenage kidnapping, a town official tortured, a murder, a molested teenager dumped on your main drag, a dogfighting ring, and now a kidnapping all within the borders of your ‘small and peaceful’ town.” Owen’s eyes remained focused on the camera screen. “I think you need to reconsider your security policies, Sheriff.”

Carlos felt his hackles rise, but the fact that the murder Owen had mentioned had

been his own twin's, kept him from rebutting harshly. "Hannigan brought almost all of that to our town." Then he added, "I am sorry about Conner. I didn't know him well, but he seemed like a good man."

"Far better than me," Owen muttered. Without waiting for Carlos to answer, he turned the camera around for Carlos to see. "Suitcase is empty but I can't see Trapper or Kyle."

The screen showed a dark picture of the motel room with its queen bed. The one they were in held two double beds, but otherwise looked the same. The rolling suitcase was open on the mattress and, as Owen stated, completely empty. No clothing, toiletries, or belongings in sight.

It was also larger than what was necessary to hold a four-year-old boy. Kyle could have stood up in the bag instead of being forced into the fetal position.

Carlos's eyes narrowed. "What's next to the bag? There's something there on the bed. Can you zoom in?"

Owen turned the screen around and fiddled with the controls. He swallowed hard. "It's a luggage lock."

The monster churned in his soul. Kyle had been locked in the suitcase.

He pulled his Glock-22 from the small of his back. It held fifteen rounds and he had no spare magazines. But he wouldn't be needing them. Despite that he'd never had to shoot to kill in the decade he'd been on the job, Carlos was a very good shot. He and Bulldog frequented the gun range often.

It would only take one bullet to end Trapper's life.

Carlos chambered a round and flipped the safety off.

Owen hopped off the desk next to him. “The bathroom door is closed. Most likely he’s keeping Kyle in the bathtub.”

Watching as Owen readied his own weapon, Carlos had to wonder how many situations like this Owen had been in for him to be so calm. Carlos was a cop and he felt like he was flying by the seat of his pants.

Owen pulled what Carlos originally thought was a wallet out of his back pocket. It wasn’t; it was a lockpick set. He knelt next to the adjoining door. “He put a chair in front of the front door, but this one was clear. Most likely this way was his escape plan, anticipating law enforcement to come in through the front.” Standing, Owen put away the lockpick set. “Ready to get your boy back, Sheriff?”

Your boy... Kyle wasn’t his . Not yet anyway. But there was still a sense of possession and kinship with him. Carlos wanted the privilege of one day calling Kyle his son.

Carlos nodded once.

Owen carefully and quietly opened the door. It let out the smallest of protesting squeaks. Using his weapon, he cleared the room first. Carlos followed behind him, the barrel of his Glock facing downward.

Hand flat, Owen chopped it in the direction of the bathroom. Carlos raised his gun and slowly crept forward, the carpet eating up the sound of his work boots as he drew nearer.

The smaller of the two doors was obviously a closet. His training told him to clear there too, though his heart demanded he break down the bathroom door with all haste.

Training won out and Carlos opened the linen closet. It was empty but for the bolted safe and a folded luggage rack. A part of him acknowledged the disappointment that Kyle was not hiding inside.

The other part, the bigger, more monstrous part, turned his attention towards the bathroom door.

Carlos put his ear to the door. He heard the faint sounds of splashing and dripping water over the bathroom vent fan. A glance behind him told him that Owen heard the sounds too. The man was frowning, like he was wondering if they were about to walk in on Trapper innocently taking a bath.

Then a low gravelly voice that showed signs of years of smoking said, “Just tell me what I want to know, kid, and all of this will be over. Where is she?”

Carlos didn't hesitate. He took a single step back and then kicked the door open with all his might. The cheap, hollow wood splintered at the contact. Carlos rushed into the small room with his gun raised.

Out of habit, “Police! Don't move!” came shouting from his mouth.

But it was Carlos who froze where he stood at the horrible sight before him.

Trapper looked just as he expected from the diner's week-old surveillance video. He was a tall man in his late forties with a rounded figure and beefy arms. The gray shirt he was wearing had a hole in one of the armpits and was sticking to his body from the water splashed onto it. His jeans rode too low on his waist, revealing the whiteish band of his underwear along with his hairy ass crack.

He was standing over the motel room's bathtub. In the porcelain was not a terrified four-year-old boy, but a lean, feminine body covered in jean shorts and a tank top.

Carlos was unable to determine age or features due to the wet towel over her face. She was hogtied with her bound hands tied tight to her bound legs. Her spine was twisted so her head was forced under the tub's faucet as water was poured on top of the cloth.

Trapper stood, reaching for his weapon on the counter. The bathroom was so small that he could reach the sink from where he stood over the tub.

Carlos snapped, "Don't move!"

Trapper froze. His eyes glanced between Carlos and the woman or girl in the tub, water still falling over her covered face.

"Turn off the water," Carlos ordered. "Slowly."

Carlos edged carefully into the bathroom, his boots crushing the door's splinters. As Trapper reached for the faucet knobs, Carlos reached for the man's gun. Using his left hand, he handed it blindly behind him. Owen took the weapon.

"Remove the cloth."

Trapper let out a low growl as he slowly bent and took the towel off the woman's face. And it was a woman.

As she splattered and spat water, coughing for air, Carlos took in her Native American features. Her thick obsidian hair was in a braid and was as soaked as the rest of her.

There was no doubting her beauty, flustered though she was. But there was one thing that she wasn't—and that was a four-year-old boy.

“Where’s Kyle?” Carlos demanded of Trapper.

The man’s eyes glanced down at the woman in the tub. “Who?”

“Kyle,” Carlos snapped again. “Four years old. You took him from Mount Grove earlier this evening.”

Over the woman’s gasps and vomiting up water behind him, Trapper shook his head. “No, I didn’t.”

Frustration rose, overshadowing his confusion. “Yes, you did! I saw you on the surveillance camera! You were in Mount Grove last week!”

Trapper nodded slowly, his hands still raised in surrender. “Last week, yeah. Stopped in for dinner. But not today.”

A raspy, feminine voice added, “He was kidnapping me this morning. He was nowhere near wherever you’re from.”

Carlos wanted to look back at Owen, but he couldn’t risk taking his eyes off of Trapper. The bathroom was too small and Trapper was a big guy. If he charged Carlos while Carlos was distracted, he wouldn’t have time to defend himself.

“Owen, get the chair. We need to get some answers.”

Using the rope that had once bound the woman, Trapper was lashed to the chair that had once blocked the door. Neither Owen nor Carlos put their guns away though. The chair was flimsy at best and could easily be broken. The only reason Trapper went into the chair so docilely was because Owen had threatened to shoot off the man’s kneecaps if he didn’t. There must have been something in Owen’s eyes that told him he wasn’t bluffing.

While Owen started questioning Trapper, Carlos helped the woman. She was soaked, shivering, and kept hacking up great amounts of water.

“What’s your name?” he asked. He was standing in the doorway of the bathroom without entering it.

She had her long, black hair out of its braid and was using a towel to dry it and herself off. Bent over by the sink counter, the woman looked at him under her right arm. “What’s yours, oh noble white man?”

Feeling a little awkward, Carlos cleared his throat. “Carlos.” He nodded his chin towards the bedroom area. “That’s Owen.”

“Zitkala.”

Carlos wasn’t sure if she was saying a word in her native language or if that was her name. “What?”

“Zitkala,” she repeated. She then made a wrap with the towel and flipped her hair up over her head. “My name, white man.”

“Oh,” he felt his cheeks redden at having to have her clarify. While he was familiar with the Amish who resided near Mount Grove, there weren’t any legal reservations in or around Pennsylvania. He’d had little to no contact with the Native American culture. “You haven’t seen a little boy?”

Zitkala shook her head. “Like I said, he took me this morning. We’ve been on the road since.”

“Where is he taking you? Why did he take you?”

Her eyes narrowed slightly. “That’s my business and none of yours, white man.” Softer, she said, “I’m sorry for the missing boy. Are you his father?”

Not knowing how else to answer without a long, drawn out story, Carlos nodded. “He was taken from the grocery store in our town. I recognized Trapper from the diner last week. Infamous bounty hunter seemed like the logical choice for his kidnapping.”

Zitkala raised an eyebrow. “Your son goes missing and you assume a bounty hunter took him? Did he rob a toy store?”

“That’s my business,” he threw back at her.

To his surprise, she wasn’t angry he’d repeated her words. The woman smiled. “Where are we, by the way?”

“About an hour east of Philadelphia.”

She cursed under her breath. “I need to go.”

Carlos put a hand out to stop her. She froze, and he saw fear enter her eyes. He regretted that, dropping his hand. “Sorry. Not holding you against your will. It’s just...you don’t have shoes,” he indicated to her bare feet, “and I’m guessing you don’t have any money on you. I just wanted to offer our help getting you back to where you need to go.”

Zitkala raised her chin slightly, but he saw the fear leave her body. “I guess that would depend on where you’re going and if it’s in the same direction as me.”

“I need to get back to Mount Grove.” If Trapper didn’t have, and had never had, Kyle then Carlos had just wasted the entire evening tracking him down and chasing after him. His phone was starting to feel unusually heavy in his pocket. He needed to

contact Mount Grove. He hadn't checked his phone since departing with Owen, his sole focus on finding and retrieving Kyle.

Pulling out his phone now, he saw he had a bunch of missed calls and texts, especially from his brother. He cursed under his breath.

Zitkala spoke, "As long as it's in the opposite direction of Philadelphia, I'll take the lift. Thank you, white man."

"Carlos," he stressed without looking up from his phone. He clicked on his brother's name. Putting the ringing phone to his ear, Carlos glanced up.

Zitkala was smiling at him, one that could only be classified as mischievous. "That's what I said."

Bulldog didn't pick up the phone. Carlos cursed and returned his phone to his pocket.

Together, they exited the bathroom. Trapper's face was a bloody mess. The television was still turned up high, drowning out or disguising the sounds of Owen's punches.

"We need to get back," Carlos told him. "What did you learn?"

Owen's face darkened. "Only that this piece of scum has nothing to do with Kyle's disappearance."

"It really was just a coincidence?" Pain stabbed his chest at the knowledge that he'd allowed the monster to control his actions—and had led him down the wrong path.

Owen nodded gravely. "I've contacted my people. We'll schedule a pickup for him." His eyes went to Zitkala. "Who are you?"

“I am the sun and the moon and the earth beneath your feet,” she said in a mystical voice. Owen just stared at her, unimpressed. She rolled her eyes. “My name is Zitkala.” She pointed towards Trapper. “May I?”

Owen stepped aside.

Zitkala walked up to Trapper. Without hesitation or remorse, she lifted her bare foot and kicked the man in the groin.

CHAPTER 3

The ride back to Mount Grove was long and quiet. They left a bound Trapper in the motel room, additionally gagging him with a sock. He was then placed in the bathtub, much to Zitkala's satisfaction. Owen's 'people' would be by to pick him up. Carlos was specifically not asking questions and Owen was not offering any more information.

Zitkala rode on the back of Ranger's bike with Carlos. She thankfully was not holding him too tightly or intimately. In fact, she was barely touching him. The gas station across the street from the motel had provided a pair of cheap flip flops for her. It wasn't great protection, but at least it was something. She was over eighteen so a helmet was not required by law for her—which was good, because they didn't have one for her. Carlos felt bad enough that she had to ride in a tank top, shorts, and flip flops.

It was nearing two in the morning when they rode into town.

Bulldog, Steel, Ranger, and Ghost were waiting for them on the side of the road just outside of town. Neither Ghost nor Ranger looked happy that they were riding bitch to their President and SAA. If the situation wasn't so grave, Carlos would have taken a picture to commemorate their displeasure.

Owen and Carlos pulled over to the side of the road and walked up to the others.

"Who's she?" his brother asked, his eyes narrowing suspiciously.

“Took her from Trapper,” Carlos answered shortly. “He didn’t have Kyle.”

“We know. If you’d answer your fucking phone, I could have told you that. Keys found evidence that Trapper was traveling northbound on seventy-nine when Kyle was taken.”

Carlos mentally kicked himself again. This was why he couldn’t trust the monster. There was no logic when he lost control—only actions driven by poorly managed emotions. “You kept the investigation going here?”

Bulldog nodded once. “Zoe’s at my house, by the way. Tessa had to sedate her to get her to calm down enough to sleep.”

Carlos flinched, guiltily. “Thank you.” As awful as it was to say or think, Carlos couldn’t worry about Zoe right now. Not if he wanted to keep his vow to her. He had to trust the others to take care of her in his stead.

Bulldog’s sympathetic gaze told him he understood, even if he didn’t agree with it. “Everyone who was in the grocery store was cleared. No one can recall seeing anything unusual or suspicious around the time of Kyle’s disappearance.”

“Well, he didn’t teleport away,” Carlos snapped.

Steel stepped between the brothers. “There’s only one account that differs from the rest. Mrs. Guthrie placed Penny at the grocery store, but no one else could.”

Carlos’s eyebrows met. “Penny? Yeah, she was there. She basically volunteered me to help Mrs. Guthrie out to her car. It was why I left Zoe and Kyle alone. Why? What does Penny have to do with Kyle?”

“No one else remembers seeing her,” Steel said. “When asked, she said she never

entered the store because she realized she forgot her wallet.”

“She was near the entrance,” Carlos countered, “but I couldn’t tell you beyond that. Are you suggesting Penny took Kyle?” Penny was a waitress at Tony’s Pizzeria . He’d known her his entire life. She had no reason to take Kyle. It made no sense.

“Just trying to figure out what she saw. Besides you and Mrs. Guthrie, no one else was by the front entrance.”

“And the back is covered by their only security camera,” Carlos added, disgruntled. It wasn’t even that good of a camera and only placed there to let employees know when a delivery truck had arrived.

“Can I interrupt here?” Everyone turned to Zitkala. “Is it possible your son is still in the store?”

No one corrected her on Kyle’s relationship to Carlos.

Carlos shook his head. “We searched everywhere. Roof, closets, back room, storage areas, office...”

“Kid’s four, right?” Zitkala said softly. “Kids know how to hide when they’re scared.”

“He was with his mom at the grocery store,” Bulldog argued gruffly. “What could he possibly have been scared of?”

Zitkala shrugged at Bulldog and turned to Carlos. “I’m an experienced tracker. Care if I take a look? I do owe you for my rescue.”

“It’s a grocery store,” he reiterated. “What could you possibly track?”

“Take me and we’ll see.”

Everyone was silent as they waited for Carlos’s decision. He’d already been on one wild goose chase that day. He couldn’t afford to go on another...but he also had no other clues. No one witnessed Kyle’s disappearance.

He didn’t know anything about Zitkala. He didn’t even know why Trapper had kidnapped her or been waterboarding her. But he did know people. Zitkala was staring at him with sympathy and kindness. There was nothing deceptive in her expression or offer.

Slowly, Carlos nodded. “Let’s go.”

Carlos and Zitkala stood in the vitamin aisle. The flip flops she’d been wearing had been left by the entrance, saying she needed to feel connected to the store. Steel, Bulldog, and Owen were waiting by the front of the store too, per Zitkala’s request.

The shopping cart Zoe had been using was still off to the side as he had last seen it. Black forensic dust now covered the push bar.

“Crazy white folks stomping on everything.”

Carlos turned at Zitkala’s low muttering. “What?”

She just shook her head.

Carlos was about to lose his patience. He was trying his damndest not to allow the monster to overtake him again. Rage and impulsive decisions were not going to help find Kyle.

Since entering the store, which was blocked off by crime scene tape, she’d been

muttering to herself. Every few steps she'd squat to look at something or would even sniff the air like a bloodhound. If Carlos had more funding, a tracking dog would be helpful. The closest he had was Aerial, Jumper's service dog. She was a former police dog and had been retired at an early age due to being shot while on the job. Unfortunately, Jumper had recently been injured and was in the hospital following brain surgery. Due to his severe PTSD and current confusion following surgery, Aerial was at his side until he was released.

Zitkala squatted down by the vitamin bottle Zoe had tossed when Carlos had startled her out of her trance. He still didn't have a clear understanding as to what had happened to cause Zoe to space out as she had.

Picking up the bottle, Zitkala stood. She played with it in her hands, rolling it back and forth between them as she carefully walked towards where the cart was. Carlos didn't know what she was looking for or what invisible trail her eyes were following. It was like she could see footprints he could not.

Zitkala placed the vitamin bottle in the seat of the cart where Kyle had been sitting the last time Carlos had seen him. She squatted down again, only this time she went down further into a plank position. In a controlled descent, she laid flat on her belly on the linoleum flooring.

Like most of the buildings in town, the grocery store was old. Hell, it had only gotten HVAC put into it in the last decade or so because it meant having to redo the duct work on the roof of the building. The old furnace in the basement used to be the only source of heat in the winter prior to the construction.

It was likely the original wood floor under the peeling and discolored linoleum that was probably put in close to fifty years ago. All of the shelves and racks were older than most of the residents in town, and like most of Mount Grove's furniture, built by the Amish. Carlos could remember climbing on them as a kid to reach something

taller than him and his mom scolding him for treating the store like a jungle gym.

Laying supine and her right cheek pressed to the linoleum, Zitkala closed her eyes and let out a long breath. Carlos had no idea what it was she was doing or hoping to accomplish by lying on the floor. He was starting to think this was a waste of time when Zitkala opened her eyes and smiled.

“Hello, Kyle.”

Carlos wasn't sure how to feel in that moment. His first instinct was to think that Zitkala was having some imaginary, spiritual conversation with Kyle, like she'd somehow astral projected herself to his unknown location. His next was disbelief, followed closely by shock and awe.

Then he rushed over to stand by Zitkala's head. He got down on his hands and knees and lowered himself to the floor. The long shelves had a six inch hollow gap under them, separated by stabilizers every three feet or so.

There, lying flat on his belly and squeezed in amongst the dirt and dust bunnies, was Kyle.

Carlos thought his heart might burst the moment their eyes met, his green to Kyle's big brown. “Kyle,” he breathed out, not truly believing what he was seeing. “Hey, buddy. We've been looking for you.”

Carlos reached under to touch him, but to his dismay, Kyle flinched away from him. Carlos froze with his arm out, not wanting to scare him. He glanced over to see Zitkala had clocked Kyle's reaction.

“Kyle, buddy, can you come out here?” he asked softly.

Kyle didn't move.

Not sure what else to do, Carlos pushed himself up onto his knee and called out, "We got him! He's here! Get Zoe!"

The sudden squeaking of boots on linoleum filled the empty store as the others came running. He heard his brother's voice also demanding to "get Zoe here" and assumed he was on the phone.

Carlos laid himself back down. "Kyle. Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

Kyle remained where he was. Carlos was beginning to wonder if Kyle was stuck, jammed in under the small space between the shelf and the floor. But it didn't make sense why Kyle wasn't speaking to him or acknowledging him.

"Where is he?" Carlos heard Owen demand, and because he was looking at the boy and not the others, Carlos saw Kyle's head turn. Like he recognized Owen's voice.

No, not Owen. Conner. Zoe had said Kyle didn't know Owen, but he would know his deceased twin brother.

Carlos looked up in time to see Zitkala scooting away and Owen getting down on his belly. He watched as Kyle's eyes went even wider at the sight of Owen. But, Kyle still didn't move. There was a look that crossed his little face, almost like he was expecting something from Owen.

Heavy footsteps suddenly came around the corner. "Micro-saurus!" Bulldog shouted. "Zoe said to tell him 'micro-saurus'!"

Both Owen and Carlos turned their heads to look under the shelf, but Kyle must have heard Bulldog's shout. He was starting to scoot himself sideways.

This time, when Carlos reached for him, Kyle did not flinch away. He even stretched his little hand and arm forward to take hold of Carlos's hand. His head barely fit beneath the wooden shelf. Carlos was afraid he was going to hurt himself, but like a cat, the kid squeezed his way through.

Getting up on his knees, Carlos helped Kyle stand. The strong scents of dust and urine clung to him. The boy threw his arms around Carlos's neck, pressing his tiny little face into Carlos's shoulder. He felt Kyle's body trembling as his tears soaked Carlos's shirt.

The overwhelming relief that hit Carlos in that moment was indescribable. He squeezed Kyle to his chest and swore on everything he was and everything he could be that he would never allow this little boy to come to harm again.

The others were talking around them, but Carlos ignored most of it. Owen was blaming crappy investigative work, Bulldog was saying that Bear was on his way with Zoe, Steel was trying to calm Owen down and say that they still didn't have all the facts...

None of it mattered to Carlos.

Kyle was alive, well, and safe. That was all that mattered.

Zoe still felt groggy from the aftereffects of the sedative. She was still pissed at herself for having agreed to take it. She knew that she shouldn't have, but she hadn't been able to get her body to calm enough to function. Now her baby had been found and she felt like every action she made was done at a snail's pace.

Bear's SUV pulled into the parking lot of the grocery store where her nightmare had started the day before. Ten hours. Her son had been missing for going on ten hours when they found him. Anything could have happened.

Her sluggish brain kept blaming herself. Of course , Kyle had been hiding. He had done nothing wrong. She had been the one to teach him to hide and to not come out until she used their code word.

Each time Conner came to visit during their last year on the mountain, he would bring something dinosaur related for Kyle. Books, t-shirts, toys... In one of those books, it described a dinosaur with a twenty-three letter name. It was called a 'Micropachycephalosaurus', which was a word that Zoe had no idea how to pronounce. For some reason, the fact that this dinosaur had such a long name that she always butchered was hilarious to Kyle. Eventually, Zoe had to call this dinosaur a 'micro-saurus' because it was the only way she could remember it if the book wasn't open and in front of her.

Knowing it was something that Kyle would never forget and a random person would never know, Zoe had chosen 'micro-saurus' as their codeword.

Zoe had taught Kyle to hide...and in her panic of discovering Kyle was gone from the shopping cart and cursing herself for panicking over a bottle of vitamins , she'd forgotten. If she'd said "micro-saurus" ten hours ago, Kyle would have come running to her. Because she'd taught him, no matter what he saw, no matter what he thought he heard, he was never to come out of his hiding place unless she—or Conner, who was the only other person she'd ever told the codeword to—said 'micro-saurus'.

"You can't blame yourself," Bear told her as he parked.

Zoe unbuckled herself. "There's no one else to blame," she said sharply. It took her two tries to get the door handle to open.

She managed to get herself out of the car. Her mind kept telling her to run, but her body would not move that quickly with the sedative still in her system. Bear swore they'd given her a low dose, just enough to take the edge off for her to sleep, but

damn she wondered. Was it all in her head or was she actually walking that slowly?

Bulldog met her at the door. He guided her inside with a hand at the small of her back. Bear followed them inside, his medical bag in hand.

The day before, Zoe recalled thinking that the small-town store was small . She'd been impressed it even had a pharmacy section. Now, it seemed like a massive big box store that took her forever to get to the other side.

She rounded the corner of where her nightmare started to see Carlos sitting on the floor with his back up against shelves. Kyle, her beautiful baby, was straddling Carlos's legs while Carlos checked him over for injuries. The adults could tell what Carlos was doing while Kyle giggled and thought it was a game.

Carlos looked up—and their eyes met.

She wondered what he saw in hers. Sorrow, pain, worry, frustration, joy, happiness, relief... Even with her fogged mind, she knew she'd been horrible to him. She vaguely recalled even hitting him. Zoe flinched at that. As the survivor of domestic violence, she never thought she'd strike out at another person unless it was in defense.

His eyes, in turn, were not accusing. Relief was the prime emotion she saw in them. He gave her a small smile, almost as if he was concerned she was going to blame him . The idea had never even crossed her mind.

Seeing Carlos's attention turn, Kyle looked to his left. He smiled big and wide. "Mommy!" Kyle fought to scramble up off Carlos. He ran down the aisle to her.

Zoe went to her knees as she embraced her son. Tears flowed down her cheeks and there was no better feeling in the world than having her little boy safe and whole in

her arms again.

Big, strong arms encircled them both. Zoe felt Carlos's lips press into her hair. She couldn't make her arms release her son, but she managed to lift her fingers enough to entwine her two smallest with his.

CHAPTER 4

As Bear gave Kyle a full examination, taking pictures of the bruising on his right arm, Carlos was busy informing his deputies that Kyle had been found. They had to cancel the Amber Alert and notify NCIC. He slipped back into Sheriff Mode, still kicking himself for having left Mount Grove in the first place.

The others were still around and even more showing up. No one was paying much attention to Owen or Zitkala.

Zoe had yet to let Kyle go—which was understandable. What surprised Carlos more was the fact that she seemed reluctant to let him step more than a few feet from them. Every couple of minutes or so, her head would snap up and she would look for him. Carlos would step back towards her and she would place her hand on his leg or hip for a few seconds and then she would return her attention to Bear and Kyle.

Carlos had even followed them into the bathroom when someone brought Kyle a change of clothes. As one might expect, Kyle had been unable to hold his bladder the entire time he'd been in his hiding place. Wet wipes provided a bird bath and Carlos placed his soiled clothing into an evidence bag.

Bear had said he was in perfect condition. A little hungry and thirsty, but not harmed. The bruises on Kyle's right arm were his only injury. Carlos needed to interview him, but his health and comfort took priority.

Jenna even sent a prospect over with dino chicken nuggets, juice boxes, and fruit snacks. In a town this small, everyone would know Kyle had been found by morning.

Carlos's mind was piecing together the events of what had happened. The biggest question he had was why Kyle had hidden. Zoe had explained their codeword, and Carlos was all for having a family safe word, but he didn't understand why Kyle would have gotten out of the shopping cart and hidden without Zoe having told him to. The bruises on his arm told Carlos he might have had help getting out of the cart.

Exhaustion pulled at everyone, including Carlos. Danny arrived with coffee and pastries, courtesy of his mom, for all of the adults. After Kyle had eaten all of his dino nuggets, Zoe had allowed him to have half of a donut too.

Steel started sending bystanders home, which Carlos appreciated. He might be back in Sheriff Mode but he was still torn between being present for Zoe and being a cop. She was still looking for him every couple of minutes, so he was sticking close.

"Kyle," he started off gently, "can you tell me what happened? Why were you hiding?"

Kyle looked up at Carlos's questions. He had pink frosting and sprinkles from the donut up his left cheek, looking entirely adorable. Zoe wasn't even scolding him for eating the toppings and not any of the actual donut. "The lady told me to. She said it was time to hide."

Zoe and Carlos exchanged a look. Even though Kyle had said 'lady' instead of 'Mommy', Carlos had never questioned whether Zoe had been the one to tell Kyle to hide. Her fear had been too real. No one was that good of an actress. Beyond that, Carlos trusted Zoe. She would not have put on this big show for no reason.

"Did you see anyone, Zo?"

Zoe shook her head. "I was..." She flinched. "The vitamins, they were the same brand Davis used. I don't know why... Looking at them, it hit me hard... I don't

know how long I was out of it.”

Carlos reached for her hand. “It wasn’t your fault, sunshine.”

The look in Zoe’s eyes said that she didn’t believe him.

Carlos turned back to Kyle. “Did this lady take you out of the cart?” At Kyle’s nod, Carlos asked, “Why didn’t you cry out for your mom?”

“She said it was a game and Mommy would come find me.”

“Do you know the lady, Kyle? Did you recognize her?”

Kyle nodded. “She gave us pizza.”

Danny, who had been standing just behind Carlos, whirled around. “Penny?” While Tony’s had other female waitresses, Penny was the only one who had been placed in the vicinity of the grocery store at the time of Kyle’s disappearance.

“You know her?” Zoe questioned.

“She was our waitress at Tony’s,” Carlos explained quickly. “I’ll be right back, Zoe.” He gave her a quick kiss before pulling Danny away from them. “I don’t understand. Penny wasn’t even in the store. I saw her outside but she left.”

“Could she have come back in through the back?”

“The camera,” Carlos argued. He caught Jeff’s eye from across the store and waved him over. “Regardless, Kyle just identified her. Whether her intent was malicious or not, she still needs to be brought in and questioned.”

As Jeff approached, Danny said, “I don’t understand what she was thinking. Penny would never hurt a fly.”

One could argue that Kyle hadn’t been hurt, but Carlos certainly wouldn’t.

“Bring Penny to the station,” Carlos ordered Jeff. “Take Danny with you.”

Jeff’s eyebrows nearly touched his receding hairline. “Penny? As in Penny Sails?”

“Kyle just identified her as the woman who took him from the shopping cart. He says she told him to hide.”

Jeff could not have looked more shocked if Carlos had just told him he was going to have a sex change. “Yes, sir. Come on, kid,” Jeff said to Danny. The two of them left.

Carlos called Bulldog over. “Take Zoe and Kyle home. Check on Mom too. I need to get to the station and deal with whatever it is that’s going on.”

“We have witnesses including yourself that place Penny outside the store,” Bulldog reminded him. “She was here.”

“Without a confession, though, it’s going to be hard to have a prosecutor accept Kyle’s word against hers,” Carlos said in a low voice. “I need her scared.”

“You also need a motive.” Bulldog put a hand to his shoulder. “I’ll get them to Mom’s. Remember, you haven’t slept tonight. Might be better to get some sleep and deal with this in the morning.”

Carlos shook his head. “I’m fine.” He wasn’t—but he also wouldn’t be able to sleep until he understood what was going on. It made no sense for Penny to touch Kyle, let alone tell him to hide. Like some twisted game of hide and seek.

The brothers approached Zoe and her sprinkle-covered son. At first, Zoe protested, saying that she wanted to stay with Carlos, but Carlos encouraged her to go home and sleep. Kyle was exhausted, though full of sugar, and still needed an actual bath.

Zoe looked over to Bulldog. “You’ll stay with us?”

Her fear, though reasonable, was unnecessary. If Penny was the culprit then Kyle’s disappearance had nothing to do with her former identity or the warrant out for her. No bounty hunters knew where she was nor did her in-laws. Carlos needed to keep it that way and make sure that no reporters tried to interview her or take pictures. The beauty of a small town was that they might gossip amongst themselves, but they did not support outsiders.

“I’ll stay until Carlos gets home,” Bulldog promised.

After a quick kiss and hug from both Zoe and Kyle, Carlos watched his brother guide them away. He felt Owen’s approach before he saw him.

“Kid was here the whole time,” Owen muttered softly. “Unbelievable.”

“Why didn’t she tell me they had a codeword?” Carlos wondered. He wasn’t blaming Zoe, but still felt like it was something he should have been told.

“Point of a codeword is that it’s kept secret,” Owen pointed out. “Additionally, Zoe might have subconsciously thought the codeword unnecessary around you.”

He wasn’t sure if that made him feel better or worse. “Kyle identified a local as the person who removed him from the cart.”

“I heard. You mind if I sit in on the interview?”

“Observation only,” Carlos said sternly. “I need to know what the fuck is going on and then I need to get back to my family.”

Owen turned so he was facing Carlos. “I noticed you didn’t correct our guest when she referred to Kyle as your son.”

Carlos met the shorter man’s unwavering gaze. “I have every intention of making that classification a reality. It might take time, especially after this, but I do plan on claiming him one day.”

“You going to make an honest woman out of her?”

Carlos crossed his arms over his chest. “Not that it’s any of your business, but yes, eventually.”

Owen nodded approvingly. “What do you want to do with Zitkala?”

Carlos looked around, finally spotting her sitting cross legged on the floor by the apples. “I have no idea. Trapper had her for a reason. She’s also not my priority right now.”

“I’ve had my people looking into her. She’s Cherokee.”

“Should I know what that means?”

“They’re an Indigenous tribe that lives mostly in Oklahoma.”

“What is she doing up this way then?”

Owen shrugged. “There is a Lenape tribe in Delaware. Your great state doesn’t recognize any Indigenous Tribes.”

Ignoring that comment, Carlos asked, “Anything suspicious pop as to why Trapper had her?”

“Not yet,” Owen answered. “I’ll let you know what I find though.”

Carlos nodded his appreciation. “I need to finish up here and get to the station. Let me see if Steel’s willing to put Zitkala up for the night with the club.”

The station didn’t have an ‘interrogation room’ like on television cop shows. They were a small town station that rarely had big enough crime to need a jail, let alone a designated room for interrogating people. Most of the crimes in Mount Grove were citations at best and misdemeanors at worst.

Despite it being after three-thirty by the time they got to the station, Bert had on a fresh pot of coffee and was looking more awake and alert than Carlos thought he had a right to. Carlos unlocked his office. His utility belt and badge, as well as his hat and uniform shirt had been returned to him. His cruiser had been moved from the diner and was parked outside the sheriff’s office. In a way, his trip out of town seemed almost fictional. Had he really disregarded logic so much that he’d chased Trapper to a motel near Philly?

Yes, unfortunately he had.

They weren’t in the station ten minutes before Jeff and Danny returned with Penny. She was wearing shorty-short pajamas and a spaghetti strap top.

As Danny placed her in Carlos’s office, Carlos turned to Jeff. “You could have at least let her get dressed.”

Jeff looked uncomfortable as he said, “She insisted on coming now .” After a pause he added, “She seemed disappointed that you hadn’t come to get her. Danny thinks

she was waiting for you.”

Carlos’s brows drew down. “And what do you think?”

“I think that a woman in her thirties is sorely underdressed and a little too excited about being woken up in the middle of the night by the police.” Jeff scratched his chin. “She wasn’t surprised to see us, Carlos.”

Carlos did not like the sound of that. Penny was looking more and more guilty, but the why of it did not make sense. Carlos clasped Jeff on the shoulder in thanks before heading into his office.

Owen was already sitting on the edge of his desk, staring Penny down. She looked warily at Owen, like she was trying to place who he was, but perked up into a smile when she saw Carlos enter.

“Carlos, I?—”

“Sheriff Santiago,” he interrupted, walking around his desk to take a seat in his big chair.

Her smile faltered some. “I’m sorry?”

“This is an official inquiry into the attempted kidnapping of a four year old boy, Ms. Sails. You will address me as ‘Sheriff Santiago’.”

Penny sat back in her chair, the action making her chest stick out further in her small top. “Of course, Sheriff.”

At Owen’s grunt, Carlos glanced over at him. There was no doubt he was picking up on Penny’s not-so-subtle cues. The woman hadn’t even put a bra on, meaning that

both of them could see her nipples as clearly as if she wasn't wearing a top. His tired brain wondered if somehow he was being pranked by a porn company trying to film him unawares.

Fortunately, though tired, Carlos had his priorities straight—and his main one was to get this interrogation over with so he could return home to his woman and her kid. He hated that he had to leave them in his brother's hands. It should be him with them, protecting and comforting them.

“Ms. Sails,” Carlos started, “where were you at forty-thirty-seven yesterday afternoon?”

Penny's eyes glanced between the silent Owen and Carlos. “You know where I was. You saw me outside the grocery store.” She sat forward some, revealing even more of her cleavage. “I'm sorry, Sheriff, but I don't understand why I'm here?—”

“And yet you didn't question my deputies when they brought you in?”

Her cheeks pinkened. “I assumed it had to do with your girlfriend's missing son. Anything I can do to help, you know I will.”

“And why would I think you could help me at three-thirty in the morning in your pajamas?”

She licked her lips. “I assumed you wanted...comfort.”

Owen snorted before returning to his stoic expression.

Carlos ignored him. “Comfort? Because you kidnapped my girlfriend's son?”

Her jaw dropped. “Kidnapped ? What, no... I mean, that poor woman. She lost her

son and is probably blaming you.”

“She’s actually blaming herself. What I find more interesting than you trying to point Zoe’s finger at me, is that you were the person who separated me from Zoe and Kyle in the store.”

“Of course,” she said with a sly smile. “Strong man like you? Mrs. Guthrie needed help getting her groceries to the car, poor lady.”

“Did you go back inside after we spoke?” Carlos asked.

“Inside the store?” Penny shook her head. “Silly me, I forgot my wallet. I had to go back home to get it.”

“Really? Because I have a witness that places you in the aisle with Kyle and his mother.”

Penny’s cheeks paled. “W-w-witness?” she stammered.

Carlos nodded, his face giving away nothing. “He saw you pick Kyle up out of the cart. He didn’t hear what you said to him, but he saw you with Kyle.”

Penny’s eyes flitted about. She swallowed hard and Carlos saw sweat appear above her brow. “I... I... I needed, um, something, but then I realized I forgot my wallet.”

“So you did go into the store?” Carlos questioned. “You just said you didn’t.”

“Like I said, silly me.” She uncrossed and recrossed her legs, as if trying to draw attention to them.

“Yes, silly you, Ms. Sails. When you were forgetting your presence inside the

grocery store in the very aisle where a child went missing, did you happen to talk to Kyle?”

Penny shook her head. “No, of course not.”

“So my witness is lying? You didn’t pick Kyle up?”

“Yes, yes, of course, it’s a lie,” Penny said hastily. “I would never hurt a child, Car—I mean, Sheriff . You know me better than that.”

“Actually, I don’t. We aren’t friends, Ms. Sails. You serve me pizza on occasion, but we aren’t friends.”

His harsh statement made her flinch. It wasn’t entirely untrue. They weren’t hang-out-together friends, but they were friendly. As friendly as any two people who grew up and lived in the same small town all their lives.

“Sheriff, I—” Her eyes glanced to Owen and then back. “Could we speak in private please?”

“No,” Carlos said shortly. “Why did you take Kyle out of the shopping cart, Ms. Sails?”

She swallowed nervously. “I... I... If his mother had been watching him, he wouldn’t have wandered off. A poor mother that one is. She... She needs to watch her kid better instead of laying the blame at your feet when the kid misbehaves. Wandering off like that. I’d never allow my kids to do that.”

As far as Carlos knew, Penny didn’t have any kids. Yet, he had a sneaking suspicion that when she said ‘my kids’ she meant ‘our kids’... As in Carlos’s and Penny’s kids.

“Kyle didn’t wander off,” Carlos said, ignoring the ick feeling crawling up his spine. Penny wasn’t a bad looking woman and only a few years older than him. She just wasn’t a woman Carlos had ever looked at as more than a fellow resident and his occasional waitress.

“I just... I may have waved at him, said ‘hi’, I don’t remember. I didn’t hurt him though.”

Carlos fought the urge to rub his temple. “Ms. Sails, in the past ten minutes since this interview started you have gone from being outside the grocery store and never having stepped foot inside, to being inside and not seeing Kyle or his mother, to seeing his mother being neglectful of Kyle, to waving and saying ‘hi’ to Kyle... Please make up your mind as to where you were and what you were doing.” When Penny just sat there, Carlos snapped, “The truth now, Ms. Sails.”

She jumped in her chair so high that Carlos was impressed her boobs didn’t pop out of her tank top. “I just... I didn’t mean... It wasn’t supposed to go this far!” Carlos continued to stare her down, not giving an inch. “She wasn’t...” Tears started flowing down her cheeks and Carlos realized for the first time that she was wearing makeup. “I just wanted to scare her. Make her think twice about moving here, maybe, I don’t know. I thought if you saw how unfit she was as a mother that you’d lose interest in her.”

Though Carlos’s heart sank into his stomach, he kept his expression blank. She’d done this for him ? It was so sick and twisted that Carlos had no idea what to make of it. Penny flirted with him at the pizzeria, but as far as he knew, she flirted with everyone.

Tears continued to flow and the dam broke. “I panicked. I told him to hide but he didn’t act like normal kids do. He didn’t run off or cause a fuss. What kid doesn’t know how to play hide-and-seek?” Penny scoffed like Kyle’s actions were his fault

and not hers as the adult. “Then the mom, Zoe ,” she said with scorn, “just kept standing there. She didn’t even notice the kid was missing! I just... I panicked and I left. I know where the camera is at the back entry and I skirted around it. Next thing I knew, the kid’s missing! Full on manhunt-missing and how was I to know he wouldn’t come when his mom called him? I just wanted to scare her,” she added, like it justified her actions. “It wasn’t supposed to go this far!”

Disgust filled Carlos. “I don’t get it, Penny. Why ? What would possibly make you think that any of this was okay?”

She shrugged offhandedly. “I just wanted to show you she was a bad mom.”

Carlos shook his head. “You have no idea what she’s been through. You have no idea how good a mom she is. You sicken me, Penny Sails. Even if Zoe and I broke up tomorrow, I’d never look at you.”

Her jaw dropped. “You come to Tony’s every week! Sometimes more! You can’t tell me that’s not to see me!”

Carlos snorted, standing. “No, Penny. That was for the pizza . Tony makes a damn good pie. You just happened to be there.” He rounded the desk. “Penny Sails, you’re under arrest for child endangerment and attempted kidnapping of a minor.”

CHAPTER 5

Bulldog and their mom were sitting on the couch by the time Carlos got home. He was beyond tired. It felt like there was sand in his eye sockets, grating against his eyes with every blink. He still had to follow through with his routine, though, of putting away his gun and belt, putting his hat and keys on the hooks by the door, and his boots in their place on the mat with their laces partly tied so he could throw them on quickly in case of an emergency.

In sock-clad feet, Carlos made his way into the living room. He laid down on the couch between his mom and brother, putting his feet on his brother's lap and his head on his mom's thigh.

“Il mio povero bambino ,” his mother crooned as she combed her fingers through his hair. “Are you okay?”

Carlos shook his head. “It was Penny.”

“Sails?” Louisa gasped. “No! She's in my Bible study.”

“I can't tell if she was just jealous or just plain crazy, Momma . She didn't like that I came to the pizzeria last week with a girlfriend. She thought by taking Kyle, she could prove Zoe was a bad mom and I would lose interest or something.”

Louisa was silent for a long moment. “Love can make people do crazy things.”

Bulldog snorted. Carlos peeked an eye open to glance down his body at his brother.

Bulldog was sitting slouched with his long legs crossed in front of him. His hands were crossed at his chest with his head lying back on the cushion of the couch. He looked as tired as Carlos felt.

Carlos nudged his foot against his brother's stomach. When Bulldog cracked an eye open to look down at him, Carlos said, "Thank you. I appreciate everything you did tonight."

"Beyond that that kid is under my protection too, there's a good possibility that he'll be my nephew one day. That makes him family, regardless of blood."

His mom's fingers through his hair were starting to lull him to sleep. "How are they?"

"They finally fell asleep about an hour ago. They're in your room."

Carlos nodded. He expected as much. Zoe likely wouldn't be separated from Kyle for a long time to come. "You better get home and get some rest."

"Momma offered me her room," his big brother told him. "I just need a few hours and then I'll head back. I called a prospect over to help Abby with the kids."

Carlos glanced up at his mom. "Do you need a ride somewhere before I crash?"

She flicked him on the forehead. "Like I trust your driving at the moment. You're half dead to the world. Get some sleep, both of you. José is sending over another prospect to be my chauffeur today."

During his mom's first bout with breast cancer, her driver's license had expired. She'd been too sick to renew it, and by then Carlos had been driving her everywhere regardless. Even during the first time she'd been in remission, he continued to drive her or arrange for someone in the community to help her. When the cancer had

returned, Louisa driving herself had never been a consideration because she'd been far too weak and sick from the treatments and symptoms of the cancer.

Though she'd been cancer-free for nearly eight years now, both of her sons considered it their privilege and responsibility to still drive her where she needed to go. Louisa thought herself a burden to them and had even gone to renew her license behind their backs. She had a car and could technically drive herself if she chose.

Carlos personally enjoyed the extra time in the car to take his mom places. There'd been too many times when he feared losing her to ever think she was taking advantage of his generosity. He knew his brother felt the same way. Even after moving out and having a family of his own, Bulldog still made their mom a priority.

Neither Carlos nor Bulldog ever wanted their mom to ever feel as abandoned as she had when their shitty-ass father had walked out on his wife sick with cancer and their two young sons. Their care for their mom might have differed due to their ages and abilities, but both had sworn to never make their mom feel less or unworthy.

Additionally, though neither brother would ever say so in front of Louisa and risk getting their backsides whipped with a wooden spoon, because she didn't drive often, they didn't really trust her behind the wheel of a car.

"You two get some sleep," their mom encouraged. "I'll head over to spend the day with my grandbabies so the house will be quiet."

Carlos didn't remember getting up off of the couch or kissing his mom goodbye. Bulldog might have remained on the couch, even with their mom's offer of her bed. All he remembered was slipping into his room, sliding under the covers and wrapping his arms protectively around Zoe and Kyle.

Zoe drifted awake. Her head felt foggy, almost sleep deprived. The sun beating down

on her face confused her. It took a moment for her to figure out that Carlos was in bed with her and that Kyle was squished between them. Both of them were still sound asleep. Carlos had his arm draped over Kyle to rest on Zoe's hip. She vaguely recalled Kyle falling asleep with his head buried in her chest. At some point, her son had turned and was now cradled against Carlos's large bare chest.

Zoe's heart fluttered at the sight. When she'd been bathing Kyle before getting him to bed earlier, she'd feared Carlos had separated himself from them, not due to his job, but to step back from her. She'd struck him. Yes, it had been in pain and fear, but she'd still struck him. As a woman who'd been on the other end of that fist, she knew there was no excuse in the world to make up for that act.

But seeing that Carlos had come to bed with them? That he openly embraced her son as well as her? It gave Zoe hope that he might one day forgive her. Abuse of any kind was unacceptable.

The fullness of her bladder forced her out of bed, though she was loath to move. She didn't like having Kyle out of her sights. Her heart knew that Kyle was safe with Carlos watching over him, but the echo of fear she'd lived through the day before still lingered in her mind. Believing she'd lost Kyle, that he'd been taken from her, had been worse than the pain of watching his manipulative paternal grandparents carrying him away while she sat handcuffed in the back of a cop car.

Hurrying back to the bedroom after taking care of business, Zoe found neither Carlos nor Kyle had moved. When Zoe slid back under the covers, though, she saw that Carlos's eyes were open.

She paused, startled, before settling herself down.

He lifted his hand to rest his palm on her hip, just as he had been doing when she'd woken up. "Hi," he mouthed.

Zoe smiled tentatively at him over Kyle's sleeping form. "Hi," she mouthed back.

She felt his hand start to caress the skin of her hip revealed between her shorts and top. "How are you?"

His voice was low, barely a whisper. Kyle didn't stir.

Zoe shrugged, not entirely sure how to answer. It certainly wasn't a conversation they could have softly over her sleeping son. "What happened?" she asked instead.

"It was Penny," he informed her. "She's been arrested."

Zoe closed her eyes. She felt relief that the incident had nothing to do with Kyle's grandparents. Their identity was still safe. But there was still the feeling of unease. She opened her eyes to see him watching her closely. "Was she trying to take him? Why did she do it?"

Carlos shook his head. "She was trying to give you a scare and didn't know he'd hide like that."

Zoe winced. She still couldn't believe she'd been in such a panic that she'd forgotten their codeword. She was the mom—she was supposed to be level headed in a crisis. Kyle had been the only one to act accordingly with what she had taught him.

He moved his hand from her hip to cup her cheek. "Do you want to go out and talk or stay here?"

Zoe's eyes moved down to Kyle's mop of hair. He was pressed so tightly against Carlos's chest that his nose was squished upwards. As much as she needed to say to Carlos, she did not want to leave Kyle alone. Would Carlos think less of her or that she was trying to hide from him if she didn't want to talk just then?

Regardless, her maternal needs would not allow her to separate from her son just yet. “Stay,” she answered softly.

Carlos gave her a reassuring smile, as if he knew her thoughts. Knowing Carlos? He probably did.

Placing his hand back on her hip, Carlos dragged her closer to him. They were just shy of squeezing Kyle between them. He leaned over and pressed a quick kiss to her lips.

No words were spoken, but Zoe knew everything was going to be fine. Between them, with Kyle, and as a budding family. Feeling more content than she could remember in a long time, Zoe tangled her legs with Carlos’s under Kyle’s little feet.

Neither of them fell asleep. They stayed for hours just looking into each other’s eyes and basking in the feel of rightness, of family, and—dare she say—love. Every once in a while, one would move to touch the other’s face, leg, hip... Didn’t matter. They cocooned themselves around her son like the protective barrier parents should be between children and the world.

At one point, Bulldog stuck his head into the room. He saw they were awake and indicated silently that he was leaving. Zoe mouthed a thank you to him, to which he inclined his head in acknowledgement.

Kyle woke up nearly two hours after Bulldog left. As much as Zoe wanted him to sleep, she was also grateful. She was starting to get hungry and Carlos’s stomach had already rumbled a couple of times.

Carlos went to get breakfast—which was really an early dinner, given the time—started while Zoe got Kyle dressed and ready.

His room, Bulldog's old room, was slowly becoming more of the ideal kid's bedroom. The twin bed was not dino shaped as Kyle had wanted, but it did have dinosaur sheets and comforter. Carlos had even ordered Kyle decorative pillows that looked like dino chicken nuggets. At some point, Carlos promised they would paint the plain beige to something more vibrant.

The nightstand was Bulldog's old one. They had found a nightlight that shined dinosaur constellations onto the ceiling. There was a kid's table and chairs by the window. Carlos had also installed kid safety locks on all of the doors and windows. The dresser was new and smaller, as Kyle did not need an adult size dresser and Zoe did not want him climbing to reach the top. There was nothing 'dinosaur' about the dresser, but Carlos had insisted on getting one that was white so he could stencil dinosaurs on it with Kyle one day soon.

"Mommy, was I bad?"

Zoe froze at her son's question. She was kneeling by his dresser, working on getting Kyle into clean underwear. Though she'd showered him the night before when Bulldog had first brought them home when Carlos had gone to the sheriff's station, she'd given him another quick washing just now.

Snapping out of her stupor, Zoe finished putting the white boxer briefs with CAT dump truck graphics on him. He had such a little butt and skinny legs that they were a little baggy on him, but the size smaller was too tight.

"Baby, I need you to listen to me very carefully." Kyle raised his eyes up to look at her. She saw the trepidation in his big brown eyes and it nearly broke her heart. Zoe brought her arms around him, clutching him to her chest. "You did absolutely nothing wrong. You remembered our secret word when I didn't. You," she tapped his bare chest, "were the one who did the right thing. I am so sorry it took me so long to find you."

“Carlos found me,” he corrected her.

Zoe’s mouth twitched. “Yes, he did.”

“I like Carlos,” Kyle announced in that matter of fact way four-year-olds talked.

Zoe had to suppress a laugh. “Oh, do you? Well, I like him too.”

“I know. You kiss him a lot.”

At the masculine chuckle behind her, Zoe turned to see Carlos standing in the doorway of Kyle’s bedroom. He was holding a cup of coffee and leaning against the doorframe with his arm raised to grip the top brace. Her eyes roamed greedily over his bare chest, loving how his stance accentuated the muscular V of his navel.

God, she was tempted to burn all of his shirts.

Carlos raised an eyebrow, as if reminding her that she still had to answer her son. He obviously knew that he’d struck her brain dumb. The cockiness practically oozed off of him.

Zoe narrowed her eyes at him and he took a sip of coffee to cover up his chuckle. Zoe forced her eyes away from the image of male perfection behind her to face her son again. “I do kiss him a lot, don’t I?”

Kyle nodded. His eyes glanced between Carlos at the door and his mom. “Is Carlos going to be my daddy?”

Uncertainty gripped her heart. She didn’t know how to answer that question. Carlos had already stated he wasn’t ready to become a father to Kyle. But how did she explain that to a four-year-old who craved a masculine presence in his life?

Zoe had no doubt that she could raise Kyle on her own without a man. When Conner had died, she'd resigned herself to having to. Conner wasn't Kyle's father, but he'd talked about their future and moving to Mount Grove in such a way that Zoe had believed he would have taken on that role. To the point where he would make others believe he was Kyle's father, even if there was nothing romantic going on between him and Zoe.

She understood and respected Carlos's desire to build a relationship between himself and Kyle before he became a father-figure to Kyle. He did not want to confuse Kyle or overstep any bounds while he and Zoe were still figuring out their new roles in each other's lives.

His logic was sound and Zoe agreed with him becoming Kyle's friend for the time being.

But seeing the longing and desire in Kyle's big brown eyes as he looked up so innocently at her... It tugged on her soul to deny him. Would a four-year-old understand Carlos's logic and not see it as a rejection?

Heat came up behind her. She glanced up to see Carlos place his coffee mug on Kyle's new dresser. He then knelt down next to her before swinging his legs around to cross them in front of him.

Unexpectedly, Carlos pulled Zoe onto his left thigh. He then reached over and pulled Kyle onto his right thigh.

Kyle was so small that his legs hung off Carlos's knee as he looked up at Carlos eagerly.

Carlos glanced at Zoe first, as if asking permission to answer Kyle's question. She nodded, because she honestly didn't know how and hoped that Carlos would be able

to explain his stance better than she could.

“Kyle, do you understand what a daddy is?”

Kyle nodded. “Daddies are like mommies but they’re boys. Like me!”

“Very good. Daddies are also protectors and providers. Mommies and children deserve to be protected and that’s what a daddy does too. But, most importantly, daddies are friends. They help teach and play. They’ll even clean, do laundry, and cook, just like mommies do. I’m sure you’ve read books and seen movies where a kid like you has a mommy and a daddy, and you’re wondering where your daddy is.”

Kyle nodded slowly.

Carlos didn’t look at Zoe as he continued. “Kyle, you deserve a daddy. You deserve to have the best daddy to help guide you into becoming the best man you ,” he squeezed Kyle lightly, “can be. I want to be that daddy for you. But I’m not ready yet. I have a lot of things to learn before I can become your daddy. I’m learning though. And, someday, hopefully soon, I’ll come to you and I’ll ask you if you want me to become your daddy. If you say ‘yes’, then I’ll take on that responsibility. There’d be no honor greater than that.” Zoe’s vision started to become cloudy with tears. “Kyle, do you understand what I’m saying?”

Kyle’s lips scrunched to the side as he thought. It was adorable. Both Carlos and Zoe waited patiently for his answer. “You’re saying you want to be my daddy but you’re not my daddy yet.”

“Very good. That’s exactly what I’m saying.” Carlos jiggled his leg slightly to make Kyle bounce.

Kyle’s laugh was carefree and brought pure joy to Zoe’s ears. “Mommy says I have

to wait a whole year for Christmas. I can wait for you to be my daddy too. I'm a good waiter!" Then his eyes light up as if he just had a great idea. "Christmas! You can be my daddy at Christmas."

Carlos's eyes glanced to Zoe, but she only saw amusement in them. "That's what you want for Christmas this year?" he asked Kyle. "No presents, just a daddy?"

Kyle frowned. "No," he declared. "I want presents and a daddy."

Carlos and Zoe both laughed. Carlos leaned down and pressed his lips to Kyle's temple. "Tell you what. We'll write Santa a letter and make sure he adds a daddy to his list for you."

Kyle beamed. "Okay!" He squirmed to get off of Carlos's lap. He picked up the shirt Zoe had placed on the floor when she'd been dressing him. "Wait." He turned to Carlos. "Will you still be my friend while I'm waiting for you to grow into my daddy?"

Zoe covered her mouth to hide her smile. Kyle made Carlos sound like a plant!

Carlos reached forward and tapped his pointer finger on Kyle's nose. "I'll be the best friend you've ever had."

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CHAPTER 6

Zoe, Carlos, and Kyle had a relaxing evening at home. When Carlos had checked in with Jeff, he was holding down the fort and encouraged Carlos to take the next day off too. Other than the couple of weeks he'd been suspended under Sheriff Hannigan's tenure, Carlos couldn't remember the last time he'd taken a day off work. Jeff had pointed this out to him and Carlos appreciated the gesture.

Louisa had even said she was going to have a slumber party with Lila and Cassie. They were pitching a tent in the living room as Cassie wasn't comfortable sleeping outside. Bulldog had offered to come pick up Kyle so he could join in, but Zoe had declined. Despite having slept most of the day, all three of them were still pretty exhausted.

Kyle fell asleep during the cartoon movie that neither Zoe nor Carlos was paying much attention to. Carlos had just picked Kyle up off the couch to take him to bed when there was a knock at the front door.

Frowning, Carlos handed Kyle to Zoe. He had a gun safe close to the door, but nothing on him. Since no one was expected, Carlos cautiously looked out the window frame to see who it was. There'd been a couple of messages during the day of people proclaiming Penny's innocence or saying her actions weren't "that bad" or "harmless". Small towns tended to band together during a crisis and some of the residents of Mount Grove were only siding with Penny because she was one of them while Zoe was not. Each message that Carlos had received, he'd passed on to Jeff to send a deputy over and discuss in person with the townsperson that sort of attitude was not acceptable.

When Carlos saw who was at the door, he unlocked and opened it.

“Sheriff,” Owen greeted.

After returning to the club’s property earlier, Bulldog had texted Carlos to inform him that Owen and Zitkala had stayed at the clubhouse the night before. Keys was running information on Zitkala, though she’d expressed that she was not going to impose long.

“Owen,” came from behind Carlos. He looked over his shoulder to see Zoe standing in the hall with a sleeping Kyle in her arms.

Carlos left the door open and went to relieve her of Kyle’s weight. Zoe gave him an appreciated smile before turning her attention to Owen.

“Come in, please.”

Owen stepped into the house, closing the door behind him. “How are you, Zoe?”

Zoe shrugged. “Not ready for him to go off to college, but I’ll get there. The important thing is he’s home and safe.” She ran a hand through her dyed brunette hair. “Mostly, I feel like a fool. If I’d calmed myself enough, I would have remembered to use our codeword.”

“Conner taught you to use a codeword, didn’t he?” Owen asked gently.

She nodded somberly. “He was taught to never come out of a hiding place, no matter who is calling his name or if it sounds like me, unless he hears our word. I can’t fault him for listening.”

“Hindsight is always twenty-twenty,” Owen said. He scratched his chin stubble. “We

all jumped to the wrong conclusion. I should have guessed that that was something Conner taught you. After all, it was something he taught me.”

Carlos saw Zoe’s surprised expression and fought to keep his own shock off his face.

“He did?” she asked.

Owen nodded. “Our dad was a mean sonofabitch. When we knew one of his rants was coming or when he was in a certain mood, we’d use different words to clue the other in without being obvious. We were really young when our parents died, but we kept using them throughout our lives.”

“I’m sorry about your parents. He didn’t talk about them much.”

“Not much to tell,” Owen shrugged offhandedly. “Dad beat us for being born and Mom did nothing to stop him. Eventually he killed her when she tried to leave him before killing himself. Conner liked to believe that she planned on taking us with her, but I never did.”

Zoe stepped forward and placed a hand on Owen’s arm. “I hope you know you’re always welcome here. Conner was family to me, that makes you family too.”

“I appreciate that, but I’m going to be heading out soon. I still have my own search to conduct. I never meant to make an appearance in Mount Grove, but I needed to check in on you. It was the least I could do for my brother.”

Up until then, Carlos had forgotten Owen’s statement from the night before that he had been in town searching for someone named Cap.

“I understand.” Zoe pulled her phone out of her pocket. “Will you leave me a number? I’d like to check in on you, make sure you’re okay.”

Owen gave her a look that said he thought her statement unnecessary, but still grabbed for the phone. He typed in something. Then leaned down and placed a kiss on Zoe's cheek. It was quick, but Carlos still felt his hackles rise. He didn't like the idea of any man touching Zoe for any reason.

"You were worth saving, Zoe," Owen told her softly. "I hope you know that Conner never regretted anything."

Zoe wiped her eye with the underside of her right hand. "He was such a good man." She tipped her head, adding, "So are you, Owen."

Owen shook his head. "Not like him. If one of us had to go, it should have been me a long time ago."

"Are you headed back to Montana? If so, please tell Jack I said 'hello' and 'thank you'."

"I'll make sure he gets the message," Owen answered evasively. His eyes flicking to Carlos, he asked, "Do you mind if I speak with Carlos alone for a minute?"

Zoe shook her head. She walked back to Carlos, her arms out for Kyle, but Carlos shook his head. "Wait here," he instructed Owen. "I'll be right back."

Zoe followed him to Kyle's bedroom. Carlos placed him down on his new bed. Zoe moved to start undressing her son as Carlos left the room, closing the door behind him.

Owen had stepped into the living room during his absence. He turned at Carlos's entry. "My people picked up Trapper."

"Figure out his connection to Zitkala yet?"

“Other than it’s not an open bounty, no. And she’s not talking either.”

“Bulldog said they offered her a ride, but she insisted on being dropped off at the bus station. With no ID or money, she’s not going to get very far.”

Rather than discouraged, Owen seemed intrigued by this information. “Bus stations have more to offer a wayward traveler than most people know. You just have to know where to go.”

Carlos didn’t have to ask if Owen was one of those people who knew where to go. It was obvious by the offered information that he did. “Sorry you didn’t find your friend here, but I appreciate your help last night.”

“My gung ho approach to life wasted eight hours of valuable time.” Owen shook his head in disgust. “I am not a person anyone should be following into battle. It’s why I work alone.”

Carlos knew how the other man felt. He’d acted very out of character by following Owen. “What about your mountain group? You work with them.”

“For support, yes, but not out in the field.” Owen shrugged, looking far younger than his twenty-five years. “I gave Zoe my personal number. Very few even have it. If a man named Cap comes through here, I’d appreciate it if you would let me know. It’s been very difficult even tracking him this far. Navy SEALs guard their identities very carefully.”

That was information Carlos hadn’t known before. “There’s only two former SEALs that I know of in the club—and the area for that matter.”

“He’s not around the club that I found,” Owen told him.

Carlos shook his head. “One’s not going to be around the club right now. He’s still in the hospital recovering from brain surgery.”

Owen’s eyebrows drew down. “Which hospital?”

“Mount Grove Memorial,” Carlos told him. “He goes by ‘Jumper’ though. I’m not even sure of his legal name, they use it so seldomly. Why do you want to find him?”

Jasmine would be at the hospital with Jumper. With as little as Carlos knew Owen, he felt the man was trustworthy, but that didn’t take away the fact that he was also dangerous.

“The man I’m looking for was involved in an explosion nearly a decade ago.”

Carlos looked Owen up and down. Despite the man being declared dead, he was in good health and, obviously, alive. Though Carlos did not know why he’d faked his death or if it had been sanctioned by the government, there was no way that Owen could have been personally involved in the incident that had ended Jumper’s military career. Owen and Conner would have been teenagers at the time.

He knew very little of what had happened to Jumper to cause his PTSD, beyond that he’d been in an explosion that had killed four out of his five SEAL teammates. Jasmine had confided in Sophia and Carlos that much—with Jumper’s blessing—to assure them that she was safe with Jumper. Carlos had known Jumper for over six years, since he’d come to Mount Grove and joined the club. It was well known throughout the entire town that he had severe PTSD and Carlos had even witnessed a few of his flashbacks and episodes over the years. Asking whether Jasmine was safe with him had been a logical question, even if asking it had pissed Jasmine off.

Jumper might be a big, strong ex-Navy SEAL, but he’d found a stern protector in Jazz. Recent events had proved just how well they protected each other.

Owen's description led Carlos to believe Jumper was the man he was looking for, but why would Owen be looking for Jumper and why was he calling him Cap?

"Could be Jumper, but like I said, he's in the hospital recovering from brain surgery."

Owen nodded slowly. "I'll stop by and see if he's who I am looking for."

"Can I ask why you're looking for him? You couldn't have known him while he was in the service."

"You're right, I didn't," Owen said shortly.

The pregnant pause that followed told Carlos that he wasn't going to get more of an answer out of him.

Still, he felt the need to say, "His woman's with him. I appreciate everything you did yesterday and I owe you for helping Zoe escape in the first place, but I will hunt you down and kill you myself if I hear she came to any harm."

Owen held up his hands in the universal gesture of surrender. "I would never harm the innocent."

Carlos studied the man's expression for a moment. "If Jumper's the man you're looking for, does that include him?"

"More than you know."

After seeing Owen out, Carlos texted Bulldog a message that Jumper might be the man Owen had come to Mount Grove looking for. The club wasn't sure how to react to Owen's presence. They were keeping him away from the ol' ladies and club kids, not wanting to upset or confuse any of them. Conner had died saving Harper's life

and under Tessa's medical care. Seeing Owen or even knowing he existed might cause them unneeded strife.

Additionally, Owen was still too much of a mystery to them. Why he'd faked his death, where he was living now, why he'd shown his face, what his endgame was... Carlos probably trusted Owen more than the club did because of his connection to Zoe. He felt a sense of debt towards Owen since learning he had been the one to rescue Zoe from the hitmen her in-laws had hired.

Keys might be familiar with Owen's people, the Mountain Mutineers, but the club wasn't—and they didn't trust what they didn't know or understand. Steel wouldn't be a good leader if he trusted so blindly.

Zoe was lying on their bed when he entered. She was curled up on her side in a loose fetal position. She was still wearing her day clothes.

As Carlos closed the door, she raised her head slightly off of the pillow. "I shouldn't be so exhausted. We slept most of the day away and then were resting in bed for the rest of it."

Carlos crawled up onto the mattress, moving over her as she rolled onto her back. He settled himself down over her belly and rested his face between her breasts. Looping his arms under her back, he let out a long, contented sigh.

One of her hands went to his hair and the other started lightly scratching her fingernails up and down his back.

"What did Owen want to talk to you about?" Zoe's voice was low and slightly slurred like she was half asleep.

"Just saying goodbye and wanted to make sure I took care of you." He had no

intention of ever telling Zoe about Trapper or that Owen's people now had him.

“Who was the woman with you at the grocery store last night?”

“Her name is Zitkala. Honestly, I don't know much about her and it doesn't sound like she's sticking around for long.”

Zoe's fingers trailed lazily through his hair. “Tell me about Penny.”

Carlos's sigh was much more exasperated than his last. “I don't have a reason to give you, Zoe. She claims that she was only trying to scare you, that she saw you and took advantage of your distraction. But there's evidence of premeditation. One could argue that she was trying to separate us when she volunteered me to help Mrs. Guthrie out to her car, as well as lying about needing to go back to her apartment...” Carlos shrugged. “She claims if she proved you were a bad mom then I would lose interest in you and you would go home.”

“I am home.”

Carlos picked his head up, resting his chin on her breastplate. The conviction in her voice brought serenity to his soul. She dipped her chin down to look at him. There was no hesitation, no uncertainty in her gaze.

Carlos raised himself up onto his hands and knees, crawling the rest of the way over her until he hovered above her face. “You are utterly amazing, Zoe. Even after everything you've been through, you still found your way to trusting me. I can't tell you what that means to me. I swear to you, I will do better. We can argue all day long as to who is at fault for Kyle's disappearance, though the fault solely belongs to Penny, but it won't change the fact that I left you. I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought I was going after him. I followed a bad lead and it wasted a lot of time. I hope you know how sorry I am for that. I should have been here for you

instead of off chasing imaginary boogeymen.”

Zoe lifted a hand to his face. He hadn't shaved that day so he had a bit heavier scruff than his usual five o'clock shadow by this time of night. “And if that bounty hunter had taken him? Carlos, I don't see you leaving me as a failure. I see it as you doing your job . You had reason to believe that the bounty hunter had taken Kyle. We had no reason to believe that Kyle was hiding in the store that entire time and every reason to believe that he'd been taken out of the store. It honestly is a more plausible reason than Penny's random desire to portray me as a bad mom.”

Carlos flinched slightly. “She thought I had feelings for her.”

“Do you?” Zoe's expression looked more confused than worried, which took away any bite from her question.

He shook his head. “Never had. She literally was just the waitress who served me pizza once or twice a week.”

“That's what I thought.” Carlos raised an amused eyebrow and Zoe's eyes narrowed at him. “You aren't the type of man to do what you did for me and Kyle while secretly harboring feelings for another woman.”

Carlos lowered his face to brush their lips together. “Your faith in me is astounding. I will never understand it. I am in sheer awe of you.”

Zoe brought her hand from his cheek up through his hair and then linked her arms around his neck. “I don't fully understand it myself, Carlos. From the moment we met, there was this little voice in the back of my head that told me to trust you. That's only ever happened once before.”

“With Conner,” he added for her.

She nodded sadly. “Conner became important to me at a very vulnerable time my life. I was beyond alone and frightened. I trusted him completely... but ,” she added sternly, seeing the conflict on Carlos’s face, “I never loved him. In his last letter to me, he told me he was not in love with me either.”

“It’s so odd,” Carlos confessed. “I barely knew Conner. He was around, prospecting for the club, but I never really paid attention to him.” He dipped his head down to rub their noses together. “Yet, I owe him so much. And I’ll never be able to repay it.”

Zoe stretched up to press her lips against his. “Conner told me once that living my life was repayment enough. That seeing Kyle and me happy and safe was all the thanks he needed.”

“Then I will strive to repay him by making you the happiest woman on the planet.”

Zoe widened her thighs to make a larger cradle for him between them. “Make love to me, Carlos. Remind me just how safe I am in your arms.”

Carlos spent the remainder of the night and into the early hours of the morning doing just that.

CHAPTER 7

It took some time for things to go back to normal. Carlos was thrust back into work after the Black Pythons MC finally made an appearance in Mount Grove. That was followed by a very stressful two weeks when Carlos had temporarily moved Zoe, Kyle, and Louisa to club property for their protection.

Carlos told Zoe again and again that there was no pressure for her to return to work so soon. He reminded her that the deputies were taking turns at the reception desk, but Zoe felt it was time.

The bonus about living and sleeping with her boss was that she could bat her eyes at him and pretty much get her way. Which was how Zoe had not only gotten a new filing system and protocols in place, but she was also able to bring her son to work with her. Jenna had kindly offered to watch Kyle again, but Zoe had declined. As much as she wanted to get back to work and a normal routine, she wasn't ready for Kyle to be out of her sight yet. The conference room behind her reception desk had been turned into a play area of sorts for Kyle—when Carlos wasn't stealing her son away to hang out in his office with him or taking him out for ice cream or treats at the bakery.

Carlos had even purchased a kid-size uniform that was fairly close to his own with a Junior Sheriff badge. Additionally, Kyle had a two-way radio on his belt that connected to the toy radio on Zoe's desk. That way, Zoe could check in with Kyle wherever he was in the station because the boy followed Carlos everywhere.

As logical as she had once found Carlos's statement that he wanted to work on their

relationship before claiming any paternal role, it seemed so silly now. Carlos had stepped so effortlessly into the role that few would ever believe he hadn't been doing it for years. Kyle still referred to Carlos as 'Carlos' or playfully as 'Sheriff' when they were at work. The only indication that Kyle was still thinking about the conversation they'd had with him in his bedroom the day after he'd been found was Kyle's random inquiry of how many days until Christmas.

Before Zoe knew it, Halloween had come and gone. Somehow, she and Kyle were coming up on three months since moving in with Carlos and Louisa. Carlos's mom was a godsend. She never pushed for Kyle to call her 'Grammy' as Bulldog's kids did. Carlos had once referred to her as a live-in babysitter, but Zoe tried not to take advantage. Still, it was nice to have the occasional lazy morning in bed with her sexy as sin Sheriff and know that Louisa would care for Kyle until they were up. They had also worked out a schedule for Louisa to take Kyle to Bulldog's once a week so Carlos could take Zoe out on a child-free date.

With the paperwork Keys had provided Zoe for her and Kyle's new identities, as well as the cover story about Zoe being Jenna's widowed niece, it also made sense for Jenna and Steel to be a steady presence in their lives. Kyle was now hanging out with Ollie, the foster teen Steel and Jenna had taken in, and the other club kids so much that he'd picked up on calling them 'uncle' and 'aunt' along with the other club members. There were enough adults and watchful eyes around the clubhouse and the Pentagon that Zoe found she could relax on the club's property and not feel the need to always have Kyle in her sights.

Generally, when Kyle was out of her line of vision, he could be found with Lila and Scotty, causing mischief and mayhem. Scotty's service dog, Spot, was more often than not their immediate babysitter. Kyle had been hanging so much with Spot that he'd started bugging Carlos and Zoe for a puppy of his own.

Carlos had told Kyle that he could not get a puppy until he was six years old. Zoe had tried to signal to Carlos that that was a bad statement to make and it wasn't until they

were alone in their room later that night that she'd explained why.

"He'll remember," she told him. "Every time he sees Spot now, he'll know that he won't be getting his own puppy until he's six years old. He'll remind you when he turns five that he only has a year left and, when he turns six, he'll expect a puppy."

Carlos just shrugged. "Then I'll get him a puppy."

Zoe's mouth fell open. "Are you serious? You're going to get him a puppy just because you made some silly impulsive promise to him?"

"I've been thinking of getting a police dog and going through the K-9 tactical training. I need to talk to Jumper and figure out if he has any contacts that can help me with that, but sure. When the dog's not working, he'll be a normal family dog. Having a dog trained in protection will make me feel better about the times I leave you, Kyle, and my mom here alone at night."

Zoe had not seen Owen or heard from him since the evening he'd stopped by the Santiago house to say goodbye. She'd texted him a few times just to check in on him but received no replies. On a whim, she'd even invited him to Thanksgiving dinner. In all honesty, though, she had no expectation that he would show. While she did hope that she would see him again, she had a feeling it would not be any time soon.

After Jumper had been released from the hospital following his brain surgery, Carlos had introduced her, officially, to him. By extension, she was also introduced to Sophia and Jasmine. It was interesting to see Carlos interact with his closest friends. The two girls were thrilled Carlos had finally found someone. At first, Zoe had thought Sophia didn't like her, but soon realized that she just had a sassy personality and liked to rile Carlos up.

She had just started to feel better around Sophia when Carlos had confessed to the drunken one-night stand he and Sophia had shared when he'd been visiting Jasmine

and Sophia at college. Carlos had said he only told her because he didn't want any secrets between them but assured her that the night meant nothing to either of them. In fact, they'd both been so grossed out by what they'd done that they had made a pact years ago to never mention it again—or the one who had done the mentioning would have to add itching powder to their underwear for three days.

Carlos had then pleaded with Zoe to never mention to Sophia that she knew. Zoe had played with Carlos a few times, hinting that she'd let it slip, but had never actually broken his confidence. She cared too much for what was in Carlos's underwear to do that to him.

Though Jumper would not say why Owen had been searching for him, he had confessed to Carlos that his moniker while in the military had been 'Cap'.

Carlos surprised Zoe on Thanksgiving with a gift she never thought possible. Rather than stick around for the town's annual Thanksgiving festivities that were hosted at the VDMC clubhouse, Carlos took her and Kyle to Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia. He made reservations at a restaurant in their resort hotel and had warned her to remain in her seat no matter what.

Zoe hadn't understood his warning—until she had seen her parents sitting across the restaurant from them.

It had taken everything in Zoe to not move or run to them. Carlos spent most of the meal with his hand anchored on her leg. They'd had to keep their distance and couldn't talk or risk being seen together in public. It wasn't until later that night that Zoe discovered their rooms were next to each other. In the privacy of their hotel room, Zoe got her reunion.

When later asked how he had pulled it off, Carlos had explained that Keys had discovered her parents traveled to Williamsburg each year for their anniversary, which generally fell the same week as Thanksgiving. Knowing this, he was able to

hack into the resort's booking system and place Carlos's room reservation next to her parents'. To not cause her parents to say or do anything that would give away that the two families knew each other, Carlos had slipped an envelope under their door upon their arrival instructing them to keep their cool. Keys was also able to confirm that there were no active surveillance units on Mr. and Mrs. Ballas. Though the hunt for Zoe was still active, no one in law enforcement seemed to believe that she'd had any contact with her parents since her disappearance—which was true.

Just in case, over the three days of their vacation, Zoe and Carlos 'accidentally' kept bumping into her parents in shops and restaurants. While the weather wasn't the cold they were used to in Pennsylvania, Zoe always made sure to bundle up and wear sunglasses. Carlos continued to check in with Keys to ensure there was no active surveillance or any uptake in Zoe's case.

He told Zoe that it was a risk, but one that he was willing to make so she could see her parents again. He also made sure she understood that this was not going to be a common occurrence and may be the only time they could do something like this.

Zoe understood and made the best of the time she had with her parents—even if it was at a distance. On the day of their departure, she'd hugged her parents in their hotel room and swore to them that she was safe and happy. Carlos had been very specific that she was not to tell her parents she was only five hours away from them in Mount Grove or what name she was currently living under.

Carlos then surprised her again by asking her father for his permission to marry her. "We've already discussed that it won't be anytime soon, but I do have the intention of marrying her. Since this might be the only time I'll ever be able to ask, I figure I should probably do so."

Her father, though shorter than Carlos, stared him down. "Do you love my daughter?"

Zoe opened her mouth to object to the question. Though she had no doubt about

Carlos's devotion for her, they had never actually said 'I love you' to each other. She didn't want him to feel pressured into saying anything now for an old tradition.

Carlos, though, hadn't hesitated. "More than I ever thought possible to love a woman."

Emotion clogged her throat and, for a moment, she had trouble breathing. Carlos leaned over, whispering to her a reminder to take a breath, but never lost eye contact with her father.

Her dad waited another suspenseful moment before saying, "It pains me that I wasn't able to protect her before. That she was ever in that situation to begin with. I'm an old man and my biggest regret will always be how I failed her."

Tears streamed down Zoe's face. She had been a miracle, later-in-life baby. Her parents were in their seventies. It had been one of the reasons she had never gone to her parents about Davis's abuse; she hadn't wanted to put them in danger. If they'd tried to put themselves between her and Davis... She flinched at the old fear. There had been no telling what Davis might have done.

Her father continued speaking. "I've watched you over these few days. You're respectful and you're great with Kyle." He indicated his head to where Kyle and her mom were sitting on the bed. Her mom was helping to keep Kyle distracted by counting the number of flower petals in the bouquet Carlos had bought for her. "Beyond that, I've seen how you look at her and how she looks at you. So long as you can promise me that you'll treat my girl right, you have my blessing."

He held out his hand to Carlos.

Carlos took it tightly. "I swear to you, sir, I'll treat her with the love, kindness, and respect she deserves."

On Christmas morning, Carlos and Zoe were woken up by an over-enthusiastic, bouncing four-year-old boy. Kyle was dressed in the matching red plaid onesie pajamas Zoe had purchased for the three of them. His had a butt-flap, which of course her son thought was hilarious. Carlos, being a kid at heart, had complained that his adult ones didn't have a butt-flap. Anticipating being interrupted in the morning by Kyle, Carlos and Zoe had specifically re-dressed after making love the night before.

Their lovemaking had gotten quite adventurous over the past four months. Not only had they been exploring a hidden exhibitionist side, but they had also been exploring bondage. Zoe, who never thought she would be okay being tied up, was absolutely loving the additional ecstasy brought on by Carlos taking full control of her body. More than her arms being bound, she particularly enjoyed the new spreader bar and ankle cuffs they had purchased only a few weeks before.

Their sex toy collection had also grown. In addition to the orange dildo Carlos had had originally, they now had a supply of different size butt plugs, anal and vaginal beads, ball-gags, and vibrators. Zoe had also purchased a strap-on harness with her very first paycheck from her job. Though bondage had been introduced into their sex life, no amount of erotic flagellation had been. Zoe had no desire to hit or be hit, regardless of the pleasure others swore they received from flogging, caning, or spanking. Carlos, in turn, refused to raise any hand against Zoe, sexual or otherwise. Given her history, they both had agreed that it was not something either of them was interested in exploring.

However, Zoe had recently learned just how erotic a simple feather could be.

They were always careful of what they were doing and who was in the house while they were doing it. Their toys had also been moved to a locked chest in their closet after Kyle had gone into their nightstand one morning and asked about their rocket ship collection.

Cage had also been over to their house to examine their bathroom situation. The local

architect, Ed Beaumont, whom the club's construction company contracted with had also come over. They had figured out that by taking out the closets in Kyle's room and Carlos and Zoe's room, they could fit a full bath and turn their room into the house's new master. It would still be smaller than Louisa's as far as square footage was concerned, but they would have their own bathroom. Zoe and Carlos were currently searching for alternative furniture pieces once they lost their closet space. With Cage's current work schedule, construction wouldn't start for another couple of months, so there was no rush.

For now, the three adults just had to be careful of each other's bathroom needs and work it out accordingly. Carlos and Zoe had also taken to sharing a shower in the morning before Kyle woke up to 'save on hot water' as well as time.

Kyle continued to bounce on them as if needing to insure that they were actually awake. "It's Christmas! It's Christmas!"

Though they slept with their door closed, it was always unlocked unless they were having some private time. Kyle knew he could come into their room at any time but was only allowed under the covers if invited.

They had had Bulldog, Abby, and their four kids over for Christmas Eve dinner as the Santiago family. Louisa had gone back with Bulldog to his house to spend the night, wanting to be on property Christmas morning to help with the club's festivities. Carlos and Zoe had declined their invitation to the club's Christmas feast, opting to have a more intimate and personal Christmas at home with Kyle. They had a simple meal of appetizers and turkey stuffed hoagies planned, along with a day in their jammies and lots of movies. Maybe next year they would venture over to the clubhouse, but they had both agreed that they wanted a relaxing, stress-free holiday.

Carlos rolled onto his back to catch Kyle and keep him from trampling his mother, but this left his family jewels exposed. After narrowly missing a knee to the groin, he scooped Kyle up and seated him on his chest with Kyle's legs straddling his sides.

Kyle beamed down at him. “You have to ask me!” he proclaimed. “It’s Christmas!”

Carlos blinked up at him, feigning ignorance. “Ask you what?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Zoe sit up and grab for her phone. After nearly three years of not being able to take pictures or have mementos of Kyle’s toddlerhood, Zoe was a bit obsessed about recording every piece of their lives that she could. Carlos didn’t mind in the least—though he was grateful for the hidden section in their shared family album that required a passcode to see. Some of their pictures were not child friendly.

Kyle let out a frustrated groan. “You promised! You said on Christmas that you would ask me!”

Carlos scratched his head as if needing to think about this question. “Is it, what do you want for breakfast?”

“No!” Kyle giggled.

“Is it, why is the sky blue?”

“No!”

Carlos shrugged. “That’s all the questions I can remember. Can you help me out?”

Kyle pointed a finger at Carlos’s nose. “That’s a question but not the question.”

Carlos laughed, because that one had been unintentional. “Fair point.” He turned to Zoe. “Do you remember the question?”

She handed her phone to Kyle, who pointed the camera down at Carlos’s prone body. Leaning over, she cupped her mouth to Carlos’s ear and whispered, “I love you. Stop

torturing him or you won't get your Christmas blowjob.”

“Oh!” Carlos exclaimed as if Zoe had just given him a hint. “I remember now.”

Kyle handed his mom back her phone and then bounced excitedly on Carlos's chest. “ Yes? ” he asked, drawing the word out.

“Kyle, if you want, I would be honored to be your daddy.”

Kyle raised his arms in the air and shouted, “Wa-hoo!!!” at the top of his lungs. Then he toppled over and clung to Carlos around the neck. “Yes! Yes! Yes! Please be my daddy!”

Carlos laughed and clutched the boy close to his chest.

Zoe was extremely nervous. She stood before their new bathroom mirror in a short, velvet, long-sleeve maroon dress with black stockings and ankle boots. Her hands shook as she placed the white box with a red ribbon in her purse. Carlos had reservations for them to celebrate Valentine's Day, even though they were two days early. As an appreciation gift to his deputies, he'd offered to cover the overnight Valentine's Day shift at the station. Since Zoe didn't care if they celebrated on the fourteenth, she had not taken offense when he'd proposed they go out on the twelfth for Valentine's. In truth, she much preferred not going out on the actual holiday and being subjected to all the Hallmark hubbub.

Not only were they celebrating Valentine's, but also their six-month anniversary. Looking back, it was hard to believe she'd been hiding away inside Jenna and Steel's house a year ago and going by the name Clara Everwood.

Carlos had been her savior in so many ways. She hadn't realized how lost in her grief and fear she'd been before she had met him. She recalled a night over two years ago when Conner had visited her at the mountain cabin and she had lain restlessly awake,

unable to get the pipedream of a loving man and a father for Kyle out of her head. She'd told herself it wasn't realistic.

Yet here she was. About to go out for Valentine's Day with the man she loved.

The same man who had signed the adoption papers for her son only a few weeks before. Keys had been so sure of Zoe's identity that they had actually gone in front of a judge to sign real paperwork instead of having Keys forge the documents. Carlos was officially Kyle's father.

Carlos had gone out to warm up the car. He was beyond considerate like that.

Since Carlos had gotten his promotion to Deputy Sheriff years ago, he hadn't had a personal vehicle. It didn't make sense when he had full use of a department cruiser. After winning the sheriff's election uncontested, he had swapped for the SUV and given Jeff his old cruiser. Additionally, Carlos had taken Zoe car shopping at George's Auto just outside of town. She was now the proud owner of a white Ford Everest. They had to be careful with expenses, but with both working full-time and his promotion, they did not see any immediate issues with purchasing Zoe a vehicle and putting the house under construction. They still had a year before Kyle started school to rebuild the savings Carlos had used for both.

As Zoe walked into the living room, she stopped short when she saw Carlos was waiting for her at the front door. He was wearing a black suit, white shirt, and black tie. Her heart skipped a beat at the sight of him.

Looking around, Zoe didn't see Louisa or Kyle. "What's going on?"

"Slight change of plans," he informed her. "My brother came by and took Momma and Kyle for a sleepover at his house."

Zoe felt her blood heat. "You mean we have the house all to ourselves?"

He nodded, a mischievous smile appearing on his face. “Rather than taking you out dancing and to a nice meal, I thought you’d prefer dancing here,” he indicated to the living room and she noticed the furniture moved aside to provide a dance floor, “and a home cooked meal.” A peek into the kitchen showed a covered meal lit by candlelight.

Zoe smiled widely. He knew her so well. “I love that idea.”

Approaching her, he held out his arm to escort her into the kitchen. Zoe held up a finger, silently asking him to wait. Then she hurried back into their bedroom, slipped off her boots, and put on a pair of fuzzy pink slippers.

Ah, she thought, much better...

Carlos’s lips twitched when he saw her change her footwear but the man smartly kept his mouth closed.

Dinner was a simple spaghetti and meatballs with garlic bread and a garden salad. Since Zoe had confessed to Carlos how strict Davis had been about her meals following Kyle’s birth, Carlos had made it his mission in life to provide her with full-calorie, full-carb meals—and lots and lots of desserts. Zoe feared putting on weight, but Carlos countered that by worshiping her body with devotion and zeal.

As a result, Zoe had actually started getting a little belly pooch and her face had filled out more. Carlos had even commented that her boobs and ass were looking bigger. Of course, he’d informed her of this discovery while she’d been tied to their bed and his face had been buried in her pussy.

Following dinner, Carlos had put on some slow music and they danced in the low-lit living room to a countless number of songs. Zoe sighed in contentment as they swayed back and forth, leaning against his chest, their clasped hands held tightly between them.

When they'd finally journeyed back to the bedroom, there had been no rush, no desire for games or toys. There had been nothing more than the feel of each other and the warmth of their shared bodies and passion. Zoe could not have imagined a better way to spend Valentine's Day.

Not wanting to change or interrupt the mood, Zoe decided to wait until the morning to tell him she was pregnant.

Tears streamed down Zoe's face as she waved at Kyle. Today was his first day of kindergarten. She wasn't sure where the time had gone, but somehow she was standing at the edge of her property waving her son off on his first bus ride.

Carlos's steady arms came around her enlarged middle. He couldn't seem to keep his hands to himself, reveling in her pregnant form. They had had to get inventive with some of their positions as she entered her third trimester and had practically doubled in size overnight. Her massive belly had not perturbed him in the slightest. Carlos was ecstatic about the baby, though he had seemed a little nauseated when they'd discovered they were having twins. Both boys and they shared a placenta, meaning they would be identical.

Following her pregnancy announcement in February, the club had moved up their plan to fake Zoe and Kyle's death to the authorities. She had no idea how it had happened or where they had gotten the bodies from and, frankly, she did not want to know. In April, a car had been pulled from a lake in New York and multiple news outlets had announced the discovery of Zoe and Davey Rutterson's bodies. With the death announcement, the warrant for Zoe's arrest was dismissed. As far as anyone outside of the Via Daemonia, Carlos, and Louisa knew, it was over.

Carlos pressed a kiss to her wet cheek. They had both taken the morning off work to see Kyle off to school. Their son had on a green Jurassic Park backpack that looked far too big for his lean body. He also had a silicone wristband on his left wrist with his name, Zoe's, and Carlos's phone numbers. His backpack and shoes had tracking

devices in them. Zoe had voiced no objections when Carlos had suggested the security measure, which had surprised him given Zoe's history. She could recognize the difference between putting a tracking device on a spouse to control them and putting one on a child to ensure their safety.

"Look how excited he is," Carlos murmured into her ear. "The day will be over before you know it and he'll be back home."

Zoe sniffled as the bus's doors closed. Kyle was kneeling on his seat, waving frantically at them. "He's headed off to kindergarten today. Tomorrow he'll be graduating high school."

Carlos snorted. "I don't think his education will be over that quickly."

"He was only born yesterday," she insisted with a touch of melancholy.

"Love, I think you've got a touch of pregnancy brain."

Zoe leaned back against him, needing Carlos's unwavering support as the yellow school bus pulled away. "Don't let go," she pleaded. "No matter how crazy I get, don't let go."

His arms tightened around her. "Never."

Sweaty and exhausted from giving birth to her twin boys, Zoe didn't even feel Carlos slip the engagement ring onto her left hand. She could only blame the excitement and the hormones flooding her body as to why it took her over half the day before she realized it was there. When she did, Carlos had gone down on one knee and asked her to marry him.

"I'm too tired to say no," had been her grumbled answer. Carlos had laughed and kissed her. "But don't think you're getting lucky any time soon," she warned him.

“My hoo-ha is off-limits for the foreseeable future.”

“There are plenty of other things I can do to your body without going anywhere near your hoo-ha.”

When visiting hours had opened up, Kyle was the first through the door, followed closely by Louisa and her new boyfriend. The entire sheriff’s department also filed in, along with most of the MC, including Bulldog and Abby. Zoe smiled up at her sister-in-law. The two of them had been spending a lot of time together since Zoe and Carlos had gotten together the year before. Though quiet, Abby was sweet and she looked at Bulldog like he was the only man in the world. Townsfolk stopped by with treats and well wishes for their new sheriff’s new baby boys.

Carlos made sure that Kyle got a lot of attention too and helped to arrange Kyle on a chair so he could hold his brothers in his arms.

When it was time for Zoe to try pumping and feeding the babies, Carlos had kicked everyone out of the room. Louisa took Kyle with her to give Zoe some privacy and space. The other parents were taking the club kids out for a day at the park, as it was a Saturday and none of them had school, and Kyle was going with them. He wasn’t a ‘club kid’ but still treated as one of the cousins.

Taking a moment to breathe in the silence, Zoe laid her head back as the nurse got Baby A ready.

Carlos slid onto the hospital bed with her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “We still have to come up with names.”

Zoe had wanted Conner, for obvious reasons, and Andrew. However, Conner had already been honored in the club by Harper and Lucky’s son and Andrew was Jenna’s grandson’s name, though he went by Drew. Since discovering that, Zoe had been undecided on baby names.

Carlos helped get her robe loose enough to reveal her boobs. She had been glad the nurse had told her it was time to start nursing, because she'd been feeling uncomfortably full for nearly the last half hour of their company.

As Baby A latched on, Carlos pulled out his phone to the baby names app he'd been obsessed with for the last couple of months. "We've both held them and seen their faces now. Does a name stick out for you?"

Zoe looked down at her son. He'd been born six minutes before his brother. "Nothing that rhymes or is too similar. I don't want them to be 'Jerry' and 'Terry' or 'Don' and 'Dom'."

Carlos nodded in agreement. "What about Seth and Lewis?"

Zoe shook her head, her nose scrunching up adorably. The nurse brought over Baby B. Zoe adjusted herself slightly and Carlos moved the nursing pillow into place. Baby B took a little more coaxing than his brother had to latch on, but finally did.

Carlos had never seen anything so magnificent as his woman feeding his sons. The female body truly was a marvel. "Cody and Shawn?"

Zoe's head perked up. "I like Cody."

"But not Shawn?"

She thought for a moment before saying. "What else you got?"

"Are you settling on Cody?"

Zoe looked back down at her boys. "Yeah, I think I am. Cody," she tipped her head to the right at Baby A.

“You do realize then you’ll have Cody and Kyle?” Carlos asked her with a slight grimace, because his statement might just put her back at Square One.

Zoe’s face fell. “Well, shit.”

The nurse chuckled, though quickly covered it with her hand. “I’ll be right outside if you need anything.”

“Thank you,” they both said to her as she walked out.

“I don’t like Cody and Kyle together,” Zoe said, getting back to their conversation. “Keep going.”

Carlos looked back at the app in his hand. “Axel and Ryan?”

Zoe’s eyes perked up. “Oh, Ryan!”

“Ryan and Axel, Ryan and Shawn, Ryan and Evan, Ryan and Emmett...?” Carlos prompted.

Zoe studied their sons for a long moment. “Ryan and Eric,” she finally decided. “Keep all three boys with four letter names. Kyle, Ryan, and Eric.”

Carlos leaned over and kissed her temple. He draped an arm protectively around his sons, resting his head against her shoulder. “Congratulations, Mama. You happy?” he prompted.

Zoe leaned her cheek down on top of his head. “The happiest.”