



# STORMY

CERBERUS MC BOOK 29

MARIE JAMES

# Table of Contents

[Stormy.](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Cerberus MC](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Other Books in the Same World](#)

[Social Media Links](#)

[OTHER BOOKS FROM MARIE JAMES](#)

# Stormy

Cerberus MC Book 29

Marie James

# Copyright

Stormy: Cerberus MC Book 29

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# Cerberus MC

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[Kincaid: Cerberus MC Book 1](#)

[Kid: Cerberus MC Book 2](#)

[Shadow: Cerberus MC Book 3](#)

[Dominic: Cerberus MC Book 4](#)

[Snatch: Cerberus MC Book 5](#)

[Lawson: Cerberus MC Book 6](#)

[Hound: Cerberus MC Book 7](#)

[Griffin: Cerberus MC Book 8](#)

[Samson: Cerberus MC Book 9](#)

[Tug: Cerberus MC Book 10](#)

[Scooter: Cerberus MC Book 11](#)

[Cannon: Cerberus MC Book 12](#)

[Rocker: Cerberus MC Book 13](#)

[Colton: Cerberus MC Book 14](#)

[Drew: Cerberus MC Book 15](#)

[Jinx: Cerberus MC Book 16](#)

[Thumper: Cerberus MC Book 17](#)

[Apollo: Cerberus MC Book 18](#)

[Legend: Cerberus MC Book 19](#)

[Grinch: Cerberus MC Book 20](#)

[Harley: Cerberus MC Book 21](#)

[Landon: Cerberus MC Book 22](#)

[Spade: Cerberus MC Book 23](#)

[Aro: Cerberus MC Book 24](#)

[Boomer: Cerberus MC Book 25](#)

[Ugly: Cerberus MC Book 26](#)

[Bishop: Cerberus MC Book 27](#)

[Legacy: Cerberus MC Book 28](#)

[Stormy: Cerberus MC Book 29](#)

[Oracle: Cerberus MC Book 30](#)

Newton: Cerberus MC Book 31

Hemlock: Cerberus MC Book 32

[A Very Cerberus Christmas](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 1](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 2](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 3](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 4](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 5](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 6](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 7](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set8](#)

# Chapter 1

## Stormy

“I’m not saying it’s a bad idea,” Boomer responds to Hound. “I’m just saying, in New Mexico, it won’t be as simple as throwing some seeds out and expecting it to grow.”

Hound frowns at the man.

“I’ll help,” I offer. “I imagine the water bill is going to shoot up. How much water does corn need?”

“Some types are pretty drought resistant,” Boomer says. “But if you’re wanting to do a full maze for the kids, then you’ll need a lot of it.”

“I’ll chip in on expenses,” Bishop offers. “I think Ryder would love it.”

“All the kids would have a good time,” Hound adds.

“So a corn maze,” Boomer says. “We’ll probably need to work out the logistics soon so we can get seeds into the ground. Any idea where it will go?”

Silence fills the room. There aren’t any of the bosses around right now. Even though Hound is a team leader, I don’t think he has the authority to decide something like this, even though Hound’s children are the grandchildren of the Cerberus MC president, Kincaid.

He pulls out his phone and taps out a text message.

“What the hell happened to you?” Aro asks, pulling our attention from Hound and redirecting it on Oracle as he walks into the living room with his hand wrapped completely in gauze and medical tape.

“Ran the sewing machine needle straight through his fucking thumbnail,” Legacy says as he follows closely behind him. “But he’s acting like he lost a limb.”

“Although I don’t recommend that,” Aro says. “The thought of a needle going through my finger makes me want to puke.”

A couple of the guys chuckle at Aro's response. He lost part of one leg on a mission with Cerberus over a year ago, but, despite the setbacks it caused, he's getting very close to being able to go back out with his team.

"I didn't wrap it this way," Oracle grumbles. "Devyn isn't the best nurse."

"Watch it," Legacy all but growls, incapable of taking any sort of criticism of his soon-to-be bride.

"How am I supposed to use this?" Oracle says, holding up the hand that resembles more of a club than anything else.

"Learn to stroke with your left hand," Legacy responds.

Another round of chuckles fills the room.

These guys are amazing. They're all laid back, although Hemlock, one of the newest set of guys that joined, is more intense than anyone I've ever met. They're ready to lend a helping hand, no matter what's asked of them. They're family, a brotherhood I thought I'd never find outside of the Marine Corps. Maybe that's why Kincaid requires service in the Corps in order to join. As a former Marine himself, he knows how important that bond is, how so many of us have found family more often than blood relatives. My parents have retired to North Carolina, of all places, and I don't get to see them as often as I'd like to. They are incredibly busy for people who are fully retired.

My phone rings, and I stand before even looking at the screen. I've been waiting for a phone call from a woman I met a week ago at *Jake's*, the local bar in town. I did something I normally don't do and gave her my number when she was getting ready to leave. She still hasn't called, which is a hit to my ego, honestly.

I frown when I look down at the phone, the 557 area code familiar and somehow not, all at the same time.

"Hello?" I answer just as I step out of the clubhouse, pulling the door closed behind me.

"Vincent Chilton?"

“This is he,” I say, an eeriness I can’t explain already settling inside of me.

Something is wrong. I can feel it scratching at my skin before the man speaks for a second time.

“This is Edward Dobbs of Dobbs, Franklin, and Franklin.”

“How can I help you today, Mr. Dobbs?”

A wave of silence—the kind that only comes before someone has to deliver tragic news—fills the line.

“I’m calling in regard to Carlen and Janet Clarke.”

Guilt swims inside of me at the mention of my childhood best friend and his wife. I haven’t seen Carlen in going on three years, and I haven’t spoken with him for over a year.

“Yes, sir,” I say, trying to prepare myself for the worst.

“I regret to inform you that Mr. and Mrs. Clarke have been found deceased.”

Even having a gut feeling it was coming, nothing could prepare me for the wave of pain and regret that hits me square in the chest.

My ass drops to the front steps of the porch, my head held low between my shoulders.

I’m not a man who cries, and loss isn’t something I’m new to. It rarely is for someone who spent ten years in the military, but I feel the burn behind my eyes, the threat of tears I don’t know that I’ll be able to hold back.

I stand and walk around to the far side of the clubhouse, keeping my back to the building because I don’t want anyone in their rooms down here to look out and think I’m spying. I’d go to the garage, but I know several of the guys are in there working on a couple of bikes. I don’t need witnesses to my grief.

“Found?” I manage, having to clear my throat twice before I’m capable of squeaking out my next question.

“Murder/suicide?”

It doesn't make sense. Carlen and Janet adored each other. They've been together since high school, if not junior high. They have two adorable little boys. My heart threatens to break, thinking about their kids.

“The boys?”

“The boys are fine, Mr. Chilton. Janet and Carlen were found shot in their car near Benton Park West.”

“Impossible,” I argue.

The Clarkes live in an upper middle-class neighborhood and would never risk their safety in one of the worst neighborhoods St. Louis has to offer.

I don't know when I started pacing, but my feet have carried me past the end of the building, the glistening pool now in my line of sight. Just past the pool are Kincaid's and Shadow's, the club vice president, houses. To the far left of those is the field I imagine Kincaid will tell the others they can plant their corn field. It's also where preparations have begun for Devyn and Legacy's wedding, which will happen in the next week.

“You were listed as Carlen's next of kin, Mr. Chilton. I just wanted to call and inform you of what's happened. The funeral will be...”

At some point, I stop hearing him, wave after wave of guilt and regret taking precedence inside of me.

The call ends, but it happens long before I pull the thing from the side of my face. I feel numb.

I don't know that I could've prevented what happened to them. I don't know exactly what I could've done to keep them safe, but I know not seeing them for three years and not speaking to Carlen for a year hasn't helped. I was busy. They were busy. Everyone could argue using this excuse, but the man listed me as his next of kin. He deserved better than what he got from me.

“What's wrong?”

I jerk my head up, seeing Kincaid standing a few feet away.

I know I don't explain very well, but somehow Kincaid translates the information I tell him accurately enough.

"I'll have Max make travel arrangements," he says. "You'll need to pack. I'll let you know when your plane leaves."

He doesn't grill me about how a mother and father of two end up dead in a terrible neighborhood. Although his mind might have gone straight to them getting tangled up in something they shouldn't have like mine did, he doesn't voice that opinion. There aren't many people on the earth, despite their bad choices, who deserve to end up the way my friends have.

I nod, pausing when he claps me on the back as I turn to walk away. I'm seconds away from losing my shit.

"You got this, Stormy. Go get packed. I'll handle the rest."

## Chapter 2

Mila

I press my back to the door, keeping my eyes squeezed closed. I've cried enough tears to drown a dolphin, but there's always more to be shed.

I don't want to be here. I don't want to be standing in the entryway of my sister's home. I haven't wanted to be here for more than a year, but it isn't a silly argument this time that's making me want to turn around and run.

It's weird being in this house without them, knowing they'll never walk through the front door again.

Dead.

Murdered.

The cop who delivered that tragic news seemed annoyed that they had to tell anyone at all. What's two more dead people in the wrong neighborhood? It was a patrol officer, assuring me that a detective would be reaching out soon, but I hadn't heard from anyone. Calling the police department didn't yield much info either, other than the detective assigned to the case letting me know he was going to want to go through the house to look for clues about what could've possibly led a middle-class couple to Benton Park West. The tone of his voice suggested that he believed Carlen and Janet weren't the most law-abiding people, but he rushed me off the phone before I could assure him that they were.

I haven't spoken to my sister in over a year, and now I can't even recall the reason for the fight that kept us apart for so long. Had we known that today would happen, that three days ago she and her husband would be dead, I doubt I would've let a day go by where I didn't reach out to her.

I open my eyes, tears swelling on my bottom lashes for the briefest of moments before they make a well-traveled trail down my cheeks.

The house is more than just lived in. Clothes are in piles on the stairs as if waiting and forgotten numerous times to be carried upstairs and put away. The living room is scattered with toys, and several empty drink bottles cover the top of the coffee table. It doesn't exactly look like a bomb went off in here, but it also isn't like my sister to have a mess in her house either. She always prided herself on her home and took her job as a stay-at-home parent very seriously. She was the type to have dinner on the table when Carlen got home. Luca and Jace always had the correct amount of protein, starch, and vegetable combination in every meal. She was the class parent in Jace's kindergarten class, although she lost her bid for PTO president to the same woman who has been doing it for the last ten years.

The mess makes no sense, but the evidence of how much things have changed for my sister and her family in the last year is right in front of my eyes. I didn't see the disarray when I was here several days ago, grabbing things for the boys. I couldn't focus on anything other than getting what they'd need and getting the hell out. The air is heavier now than it was then, and it feels like sadness and lost opportunities are pouring out of the walls.

The millions of questions the detective didn't have answers to only doubles as I climb the stairs, noticing a hole along the wall. I don't know if it was put there by accident, or if someone was angry and threw something. What I do know is that Carlen was always quick to fix anything and everything around the house without hesitation. I press my finger to the edge of the damage, but I don't have the skills to determine whether it happened last week or months ago.

Emotion clogs my throat. I wanted to think that their deaths were a wrong place/wrong time situation, but what I do know about their murders is that they weren't mugged. Carlen still had his watch on. His wallet was still in his pocket. Janet's purse didn't appear to be rifled through. They both had their cell phones on them.

As much as I don't want to think that they were on drugs, the condition of the house isn't helping, despite my own

mental insistence that I wait for toxicology reports to come back.

I take a deep breath before pushing open their bedroom door. I didn't come in here the last time I came to grab stuff for the boys. I had no need. But today, my mission is different.

I never imagined that I'd be the one tasked with being responsible for picking out the clothes my sister and her husband would be buried in. I've planned a double funeral, knowing that the Carlen and Janet I knew would want exactly that. I don't know what the last year has been like, but I know they always considered themselves soulmates. They never wanted to do anything alone. What I saw as sweet and comforting now looks like co-dependency.

It's easy to pick out Carlen's clothes. As I pull the only suit the man owns from the closet, I can only hope he's still the same size as he was when he wore these very clothes to his own father's funeral several years ago.

I lay the clothes out on the unmade bed, refusing to think about the aftermath of that funeral and a certain Marine that came into town.

Opening my sister's closet door is harder, making me realize I'm already shifting blame on Carlen for Janet's demise. The man was like an older brother to me, always helping me when I needed it, without one complaint on his lips. How quickly I've turned on him.

Fresh tears spring from my eyes when I flip the closet light switch and nothing happens.

Did Carlen know the bulb was blown in here? Why would he not change it for her?

The man I knew changed a taillight in my car late at night once, despite the fact that I didn't have to go to work until late the next afternoon. He was a see-the-problem, fix-it type of guy. Why put off tomorrow what can be done today, through and through.

My chest is heaving as I reach to the far side of the closet where Janet has always hung her nicer clothes. She

wasn't a designer type of woman. She was the type to brag about grabbing a great deal at an outlet store. She was quick to say anyone can look great spending a lot of money but it took skill to look good buying on discount. She took pride in her ability to find the best sales.

Her closet looks thinner than I remember it ever being. As much as she liked to get bargains, she did like to shop, and her wardrobe always reflected her frequent trips to department stores.

I grip the small handful of hangers from the closet and carry them to the bed, so I can see better.

I've never done this before. I've never picked clothes that were so important. I'm not married, so I've never donned a wedding dress, arguably what most women would consider the most important outfit a woman will ever wear.

Those people obviously haven't stood before a layer of clothes, wondering if they should go dark because of the somberness of the event or go brighter because no one wants to be sad forever. As if this task isn't stressful enough, it makes me wonder who will do this for me. If I were to die, who would sort through clothes for my burial? Who would take care of the kids?

I shake my head, shoving those thoughts away, just like I've done with the horrific thoughts of how hard it's going to be to be responsible for two little boys who didn't even recognize me a few days ago.

I know I'll have to grab the boys something to wear to the funeral, and the idea of that hurts even more. I figured they'd have a ton of questions, but they didn't even recognize me when I got the call and had to pick them up from school. It was frustrating at the time because the school wanted a million forms of identification that they only deemed enough when the caseworker from children's service was called. I guess it's a good thing they won't let just anyone pick the kids up. The craziest thing about that situation, and the first hint that things hadn't been right for a while, was that the boys were no longer

in their private charter school but at the public school—Luca in kindergarten and Jace in first grade.

Come to think of it, Janet's car wasn't in the driveway either, making me think they were down to one car.

Had he lost his job? Was money so tight they had to start selling things off, including her clothes?

She never called me. She told me when I walked out that night over a year ago that I was being petty, and not to bother coming back around if I was so quick to get mad when I wasn't getting my way. How do I remember that part but not the actual subject of the argument?

I decide to grab the royal blue dress, knowing it was always one of her favorites, and then grab the hanger with Carlen's suit on it.

I know I'll have to come back here eventually. I know it would be best for the boys to be in their own home, or maybe I'm wrong, and this is the last place they should be. It's one more damn question I'll have to ask the therapist the caseworker promised me the boys would start seeing to deal with their grief. I know I can't afford the mortgage payment on this place, so deep down, I'm hoping to be told starting fresh is best for everyone.

At any rate, I'll have to clean the house up before any of us can think about moving in here.

I don't make any detours. I cleared out the dressers in the boys' room the first time I came, although I realized many of the clothes they had didn't fit them very well.

I keep my eyes straight ahead, laser focused on just getting out of the house. There are no answers to be found here, and the longer I stay, the more questions arise.

Guilt is thick and heavy inside of me when I step out onto the porch, shifting the clothes in my hands so I can lock the door.

Maybe tomorrow I'll wake up and all of this will have just been a horrible nightmare.

## Chapter 3

### Stormy

The funeral home is somber when I walk inside. The mood is thick in the atmosphere, but that still doesn't stop people from chatting and gossiping in the corners.

As I look around the room, it makes me wonder who is here because they genuinely cared for Janet and Carlen, and who is here to try and get more information than the two-sentence story the local paper provided about their deaths.

I nod at people I don't know as I walk deeper into the room, but I'm carrying a serious air of don't fuck with me right now.

The guilt I felt for not speaking with Carlen for the last year or so and the miles between us for the last three have transitioned into anger, becoming a rage inside of me that wouldn't take much to draw to the surface.

I lost my friend, but more tragically so, two little boys lost their parents.

I run my eyes around the room. I don't see any children, but it's not uncommon for the immediate family to stay sequestered in a different room until right before the funeral begins.

I do spot someone I know, and oddly enough, she's standing off to the side alone.

"Mrs. Taylor," I say, walking up to Janet's mother.

She offers me both hands when I reach out to her, a sadness in her eyes I can't even fathom.

"I'm so sorry for your loss."

"Sweet Roger," she says with a soft smile and a gentle pat to my hands. "You were always such a kind boy."

I give her a weak smile, but I don't correct her mistake. The woman just lost her daughter. Now is not the time to remind her of who I actually am.

“Mom, there you are. We’re about to get started.”

I turn in the direction of the voice that should be more familiar than it actually is, but Mila doesn’t even look my way as she grabs Mrs. Taylor’s hand and begins to pull her across the room.

“Don’t be rude, dear,” the older Taylor chastises. “Tell Roger hello.”

“Hello, Roger,” Mila mutters before walking away.

I narrow my eyes at the woman’s back.

I consider that maybe she’s just as upset, overwhelmed, and so lost in her grief like her mom, that she’s just going through the motions. I’ve met Mrs. Taylor several times when I was younger. Carlen was always with Janet, and since he was my best friend, which meant I was also always with Janet. A lot of times that included hanging out at her house as teens because Mrs. Taylor, as a mom to girls, was stricter than mine and Carlen’s parents were.

Mila was always a part of that little group whenever she got a chance, but it wasn’t the time spent sitting in front of the television or the trips to the rec center swimming pool Mila should remember. The last time I was in town visiting Carlen and Janet, I was on leave from the Corps. His father had just passed away from a long battle with cancer, and I was in town for the funeral.

That night ended with Mila knocking on the door to the above-garage apartment Carlen had set me up in for the night. The sun was well into the sky by the time she left that room, so the “Hello, Roger” stings a little. It doesn’t take much effort to recall the taste of the beer she drank on her lips.

A man steps up to the podium at the front of the room, a silent command for all of us still standing and lingering around to take our seats.

I drop into one of the pews, my eyes darting toward Mila and her mom sitting off to the side. The boys are sitting there, but Luca and Jace look nothing like I remember. Kids grow so incredibly fast. Luca was still in diapers the last time I

saw them. Jace looks desolate and glum, his eyes locked on his hands folded into his lap. Luca, the younger of the two boys, is looking around, seemingly bored and probably still too young to fully understand what all of this means and how it will change his life forever.

Mrs. Taylor sits between the two of them, her eyes locked straight ahead. Mila, with her red-rimmed eyes, sits on the other side, her chest heaving up and down as if she's having a hard time keeping herself together. Four people. That's all the family these two people have left. It's possibly one of the saddest things I've ever seen.

The man at the front of the room begins to speak, his words mostly impersonal other than the sprinkle of information he's been given by the family. Even the music that plays seems indifferent. I consider that there's a possibility that my own bias and anger with this entire situation is making everything seem like it's not enough because they deserved better. We shouldn't be here right now with two caskets in the front of the room. There shouldn't be two little boys off to the side saying goodbye to both of their parents. It's tragic and sad and unfair.

My jaw clenches, my hands tightening into fists.

I've been to too many funerals in my lifetime. I've lost too many people I care about, but this is so much worse. In war, loss of life is expected. Not many make it through their time in the service without having to say goodbye to someone.

This is more atrocious, but not because Carlen was my oldest friend. I met many others in the Corps that I was just as close to. There's just something about the danger that comes along with being in the military that has the power to force you to make unbreakable bonds with others.

This funeral is heinous because shit like this shouldn't happen to anyone. Murdered while sitting in a car? The minimal details I know make it sound like a hit, like something you'd expect at a red light in Mexico or South America.

I pull my eyes from the man speaking in the front and run them back in the family's direction. Mila is watching me, and the second we lock eyes, her lips twitch as if she's annoyed that I'm even sharing space with her in the same room.

We didn't leave things on a bad note. She knew before I touched her that I wasn't the type of man to call the next day. Sex with her didn't mean I was going to fall head over heels or even want to date her. She said she was fine with that, and as misogynistic as it sounds, of course she wasn't. It's clear by the hatred in her eyes that she has regrets, even though she left that tiny above-garage apartment the next morning with a smile on her face and cheeks flushed from the handful of orgasms she demanded from me. She instigated the entire thing. She came to me, not the other way around.

I pull my eyes from her, not wanting to cause any more stress than she must already be feeling.

Luca begins to fiddle with the button on his little suit jacket, picking at the thread enough that the button comes off in his hands. Mila pulls the thing from his fingers, but the boy jerks his hand away from her, leaning closer to Mrs. Taylor in an effort to get away from his aunt.

When Mila leans over to speak quietly to Luca, he buries his face into Mrs. Taylor's clothes, ignoring her words. It's clear this entire situation has been hard on all of them.

The funeral is too short for being the final goodbye for two people.

I debate what I should do as it's my row's turn to stand and issue my condolences to the family. Trying to be the bigger person, I step into the line, shaking Mrs. Taylor's hand wordlessly. Mila pretends I don't exist, but now isn't the time to force the issue.

She's hurting, and I'd never be so egotistical to worry about myself in a time like this. I know there are degrees of grief, and losing a man that I was close to for years doesn't even come close to her losing her sister.

My throat threatens to close as I walk past the caskets.

As good as a lot of funeral homes are, they're never able to get the people quite right. The skin coloring is always off by a few shades. The makeup isn't how the person in the casket would've done it, and today is no exception.

Janet doesn't look peaceful despite her pretty blue dress. I press my hand to the side of her casket. I take a few more steps forward, my throat working on a swallow as I see my friend, knowing it will be the last time. The couple will be cremated so there's no graveside service. This service is it.

I pause, uncaring if I hold the line up for a minute or so, refusing to be rushed in this moment.

My goodbyes are a whisper in my head, his belief in the afterlife controlling how I handle this situation rather than the blankness of my own beliefs.

My position in Cerberus makes me want to seek vengeance for the both of them, but I'm standing in a funeral home in St. Louis, not outside of some compound in South America. I feel impotent and helpless as I walk away.

## Chapter 4

Mila

Funerals are always exhausting, and what a shitty way to feel. Like I have any right to feel tired when two people I loved are now gone forever.

I drained every penny of my very meager savings paying for the service and cremation, and knowing how long it took me to get even that small nest egg saved up makes me feel a little bitter.

The stack of mail in my lap outside of my sister's house isn't helping any.

The sun is starting to set on what I'd consider the second worst day of my life. The first being the day last week when I got the call about Janet and Carlen being shot in their car.

I refuse to cry at what I'm seeing as I flip through the envelopes, the words *FINAL NOTICE* and *TERMINATION* stamped in red on several of them.

I no longer have to wonder about the trouble they were in. The proof of their financial demise is staring me in the face.

I came to the house because I was numb from the funeral and figured it would be easier to deal with some of the shit here, but I didn't make it past the front end of my car before I decided to climb right back behind the wheel. This is too much for anyone to handle, and the hits just keep coming.

To make matters worse, I'm responsible for two little boys, and Jace told me earlier after the service that he hated me. I'd expect that from Luca, the younger boy, but it was a slap in the face coming from the one who has been more mature so far. He's helpful with his little brother, making me wonder more than once why his nurturing seems like something he's been doing for a while and not something he's doing since his parents died. From everything else that's lining

up, I wouldn't be surprised to find that the house isn't the only thing that's been neglected recently.

I don't bother opening any of the envelopes. What does it matter if the electricity or water is cut off? After paying for the funerals, I don't have the money to keep them on. Plus, it would be pointless to even worry about it. I have no doubt the house payments are just as behind.

A pain I don't anticipate wedges its way past the anger I'm feeling, but I don't know if it's my brain's way of trying to make sense of it all.

It's clear Carlen and Janet were in some form of trouble, but what would be the cause? More importantly, why would either of them let the hole get so deep they couldn't dig their way out without asking for help?

Could the money I used for today's services been enough to get their heads back above water? Are the police suspicions right about the possible reasons they were in that horrible part of town?

My head swims with so many questions, and I know a frighteningly large number of them won't ever be answered. Sudden death is messed up like that, causing more confusion than it should.

I force my eyes away from the mail I'm holding, knowing the tremble in my hands would make it nearly impossible to drive safely. I have too many responsibilities to put myself in danger. The kids need me more now than they ever did before.

My gaze lands on the small window above the garage, and I hate that in a moment like this, my mind chooses to think of *him*.

He's been a nonissue for the last three years. In fact, I've spent time refusing to let memories of him infiltrate my life. Seeing him today was another slap in the face. Where has he been this last year? Did he know of the trouble they were in? Did he try to help?

I know Carlen has always been a very stubborn man, but despite the evidence I have, I'd like to think he'd reach out to someone for help before he did something that would compromise the lives of his family.

Mom called Vincent, Roger earlier, so I went with that, praying he'd think I didn't recognize him or that the night we spent together didn't matter. He can't know that night changed everything for me. Having that information would give him too much power, and I've spent too much of the last three years trying to get my life under control.

I can't deny how good he looked. He didn't have the same shadows in his eyes he had three years ago despite the grief in them being visible. Maybe it means he's no longer in the military. He argued that the Marine Corps was the best decision he ever made for the trajectory he wanted in his life, but I saw even years ago how much it was costing him. His smile was different three years ago from the one I remembered when I had such a huge crush on him when I was in junior high, catching glimpses of him when he and Carlen would come to the house to see Janet.

I could've easily leaned on him today, but pride wouldn't allow it. He wouldn't have rejected me. He was always a kind man as far as I can remember.

With a huff, I sling the pile of unpaid bills into the passenger seat and climb out of my car. I'm too raw to let my mind wander to him. His comfort isn't something I need to long for. Him even being in St. Louis is dangerous for me. With any luck, he'll have already left town and I'll never have to see him again.

I pace the width of the driveway, wondering how I thought even for a minute that I could come here and start clearing out the house.

The yip of a small dog draws my attention toward the sidewalk, but before I can disappear around the corner of the house, an older woman, someone I recognize as a neighbor, is making her way toward me.

I plaster on the same smile I did my best to attempt earlier in the day, but it still feels just as awkward as it did then.

“Hi there,” she says, her voice chipper and welcoming.

She has less control of the dog at the end of her leash than she should have because the damn thing is sniffing around my feet.

“Will you be having a garage sale?”

I stare at her in disbelief.

“Excuse me?” I ask, because surely I hadn’t heard her correctly.

“A garage sale. Janice has that lovely Christmas tree in her window every year. Well, not this past year, but every one prior since she moved in, and I was hoping to snag it if she still had it.”

“Janet.”

“I’m sorry, dear?”

“Her name was fucking Janet,” I seethe.

This woman has the audacity to press her hand flat against her throat as if I’ve offended her.

“You’re not getting her fucking Christmas tree.” The words are a growl from my lips. I think this is the first time I’ve considered violence against an elderly person.

Without a word, she huffs and tugs on the dog’s leash, looking over her shoulder back at me as if she’s appalled, before making her way back down the sidewalk.

The anger I was trying to walk off multiplies, and if it weren’t for my responsibilities, I’d burn the world down right where I stand.

Unable to go inside, but not wanting to run into another vulture neighbor, I make my way around the side of the house, only pausing for a second at the bottom of the stairs before climbing them. I wish I could say that I haven’t been back up to this little above-garage apartment that Carlen thought he

could make money off of renting it out. Maybe that was a hint that they were in trouble then and I wasn't mature enough to understand.

I've been up here a handful of times since that night I spent with Vincent. I've used this single room as a landing space when I needed to make some pretty big decisions in my life.

I'm hit with the worst smell as I make it to the landing at the top of the stairs. It's a mix of chemicals I'm unable to recognize, but it's strong enough that my stomach starts to turn before I even reach for the doorhandle.

A million thoughts race through my mind as I step inside. The first being that the door wasn't locked. The bed is no longer where it always was. Now the mattress is on its side, leaning against the far wall. The rest of the furniture, including the cute matching side table Janet spent an ungodly amount of time attempting to restore before painting them all to match the décor in here, are stacked on top of each other in the corner. All of these changes were made to make room for the apparent drug manufacturing equipment. There are empty bulk containers of hydrogen peroxide and drain cleaner tossed into a pile. Glass cookware and other pans litter nearly every available surface.

I press my nose into the crook of my arm, taking a step back toward the door.

This should make everything make more sense, but it doesn't. If anything, it only makes things worse.

Our father battled addiction for many years of my childhood before losing that battle when I was about Jace's age. My memories of him are more from stories I was told rather than things I recalled experiencing myself. Janet was always adamant about not doing drugs or anything that could harm you. I thought she was going to resort to violence the time she caught me smoking a cigarette outside of Mom's house when I was a teen. Her concern was so heartfelt that I never touched another after that.

This makes no sense.

Were they doing this to make money or did they need money because they were doing drugs and thought making them for themselves would be more beneficial? Were they drug dealers? Did they die buying drugs or attempting to sell them? Did their lives end because they encroached on someone else's turf?

I back out of the apartment, making sure to turn the lock on the doorknob before closing it behind me. The very last thing I need is for that nosy old lady to come over here or for a neighborhood kid to find all this shit.

My mind is racing as I go back down to my car, questioning my own morals. I know I should disclose exactly what I found when it gets to the stage where I have to sell the house, but at the same time, I know how hard that would make the sale.

My struggle continues across the driveway, my attention not where it should be when I run into a brick wall.

"Fuck," I hiss when I notice the scent of him first.

I'm not one to really believe in core memories having much control over a person, but the familiar spice on his skin threatens to take me right back to that night.

"Don't fucking touch me," I growl, taking a few steps back. My first instinct when I look up at him is to run into his arms and let my tears soak into his shirt, but I learned long ago that my first instincts are always wrong.

He doesn't hesitate to drop his hands from my upper arms where he placed them to steady me.

"Don't ever touch me again," I snap, getting close enough to shove both of my hands into his chest.

His jaw twitches but he does nothing to make me think he'll retaliate.

"Is something wrong?" His voice is full of gravel yet somehow smooth.

I scoff. Every fucking thing is wrong. Nothing is right.

"That's a stupid question. You need to leave."

He's still standing in the driveway as I get my purse from the car, digging around inside it until my fingers brush my keys.

He doesn't try to stop me, nor does he follow me to the front door as I unlock it and step inside.

I wasn't in the apartment for long, but I'd never risk going to pick up the kids with anything dangerous on my skin.

I do my best not to think about what I'm doing as I grab some lounge clothes from Janet's dresser and head to the bathroom down the hall.

He's no longer in the driveway when I peer down from the window. I'm mad he didn't bother to attempt to stick around, and also grateful he left. Both emotions piss me off. He's as irrelevant to me now as he was three years ago.

I need him out of town, not snooping around, trying to insert himself into my business.

## Chapter 5

### Stormy

“You mean more private time?” Legacy asks, his lip twitching with mirth as he watches his new wife’s mouth hang open in shock. Her cheeks start to turn pink, making it very clear how easily she gets embarrassed.

Although many of us know why they disappeared for a while after they said their vows, no one would actually bring it up to them.

I can’t help but laugh when Devyn fans at her face with her hand, trying to clear the redness from her cheeks. She glares at her husband, but there’s more than just irritation in her eyes. I have no doubt they’re going to end up excusing themselves for a second time if Legacy keeps teasing her.

I smile at the two of them, knowing just how easily this day could’ve never happened. A couple of months ago, several of us, including the happy couple, attended another wedding in Texas. Jinx’s younger brother got married, and a handful of us tagged along because the small town of Lindell, Texas had seen some recent criminal activity from a group of traffickers, and they just wanted to make sure everyone was going to be safe.

We failed that town. Four gunmen showed up to the wedding that took place in the town’s square. Several people were shot and two of the town’s citizens were killed. We were able to take out two of the gunmen and wound a third, but the fourth gunman dragged Devyn away from the event. We spent hours searching for her, and if the gunman who was taken to the hospital didn’t give up his rendezvous location, there would’ve been more devastation where Devyn was concerned.

I take a deep breath, feeling like even more of a failure with recent events. The logical side of me knows that what happened to Janet and Carlen isn’t my fault. I know how easy it is to slip into that part of your head that turns over and over

a litany of questions and what-ifs, but I still can't seem to stop it from bouncing around in my head.

A knock at the front door is like a record scratch, echoing through the room and pulling every ounce of attention in that direction.

Kincaid heads in that direction, every man in the room repositioning themselves to protect the ones they love if it comes to that. Kincaid doesn't seem nervous when he pulls his head back after checking the peephole, but he also isn't relaxed either.

Cold chills race up my arms when I see who it is that enters the clubhouse.

Edward Dobbs, the attorney who called me about Carlen's death, is standing in the Cerberus clubhouse. I met with him briefly last week when I was in town. The fact that the man is so far from home tells me something is incredibly wrong.

"This is about Janet and Carlen," I mutter, but before I can walk in their direction, Kincaid escorts the man toward me.

The palms of my hands grow slick as they approach.

"Fuck. What now?" I mumble, praying I'm not going to get another dose of horrific news.

"Mr. Chilton," he says as he steps in front of me.

"Mr. Dobbs." I can't begin to control the irritation in my voice. I'm beginning to get upset, and I don't even know why he's here yet.

"You missed the reading of the will."

My jaw clenches. Carlen wasn't a wealthy man. He managed to take care of his family, but the fact that he was always trying to find new ways to make money made me believe he hustled so much because he had to in order to make ends meet.

"They didn't have much to their name. I'm surprised they had a will."

“They did have one. It was older. It was done seven years ago, right after their oldest son was born. It’s the only one they had, so it’s valid.”

“Okay,” I say, unsure how that has anything to do with me.

“They named you the godfather, making you responsible for both kids.”

I can literally feel the blood drain from my face. My heart feels like it skips several beats before starting back up with a jolt.

“I’m no one’s father,” I say, the only thing I can think of in the moment.

I don’t have an issue with children, but taking on that role in this lifetime was never my plan.

Mr. Dobbs doesn’t react, telling me he expected this response from me. “There’s someone else willing to take the children, Mr. Chilton, but the kids will have to go into care long enough for the courts to make sure the relative is safe and can provide for them.”

“They only have two relatives,” I say, knowing Carlen’s father’s death three years ago left my friend with no other family than his boys.

“Correct,” he quickly agrees. “But Ms. Taylor is more than willing to assume the responsibility.”

I narrow my eyes at the man. “The grandmother or the aunt?”

The second he swallows before responding lets me know exactly who he’s going to name. “The aunt.”

I shake my head, recalling how she lost her shit on me in Carlen’s driveway three days ago. Unprovoked, she ran into me and then shoved me in the chest. I know she’s grieving. I know she has probably more than she can handle on her plate. If she could act that way with me, how would she respond to overstimulation with the boys? I’m not saying I think the

woman is capable of hurting a child, but I don't know her well enough to say with absolute certainty that she wouldn't.

"Like hell," I growl, considering the danger the kids may be in. "That woman is clinically insane."

Okay, she's probably not insane, but am I willing to take the chance? Don't I owe it to Carlen and Janet to make sure their boys are safe?

"Let's discuss this in the conference room," Kincaid urges.

My fists clench open and closed as Kincaid leads us in that direction. It feels like my life is spiraling out of control, but then that makes me feel petty and insensitive to others.

What those boys lost is a million times what I lost. Letting them end up in foster care while the courts decide if Mila is fit seems like a shitty thing to let happen when it's something I can prevent. The trauma those boys will have to deal with in the years to come is bad enough.

Mila lost a sister and then was slung into parenthood. Maybe those two things combined are what caused her to act out the other day.

"Tell me what I have to do," I say to Mr. Dobbs the second the conference room door closes.

"You have to be in custody of the boys. Just saying you'll go won't work."

"How long?"

Mr. Dobbs shifts his weight from one foot to the next. "The court systems are always backed up. We could get an order in place possibly in the next couple of weeks."

"An order?"

"A temporary guardianship order," he explains. "It'll allow you to move them here, put them in school. Well, the older boy is in first grade. Luca doesn't start kindergarten until the fall."

"But how long before the courts let Mila have custody?"

He shifts back and forth one more time, and I know the answer isn't going to be anything I want to hear.

"I've spoken with Ms. Taylor, and as willing as she is to take the boys, she's not exactly in a position to financially care for them."

"You said they had a will. Did they not have anything that would help take care of the kids?"

He shakes his head as he grips the back of his neck. The man's lack of confidence in delivering information makes me wonder if he's ever won a court case before. If I need this custody thing to go the way it should, there's a very real chance I'll need to find someone other than him to fight that battle for me.

"They don't have anything. The family seems to have fallen on some pretty hard times recently."

"What about the grandmother?"

He shrugs. "She hasn't been mentioned."

"Meaning what?" I ask.

"Meaning my conversations with Mila Taylor haven't been about her mother and she wasn't mentioned in the will."

I chew the inside of my cheek, all of this information just a little too much, making me want to slow things down as much as I can so I don't make the wrong decision.

"Mila wasn't listed as their godparent or guardian or whatever?"

He shakes his head.

"Is there something wrong with her?"

Mr. Dobbs's lips form a flat line. "Not that I know of. The will was drawn up right after Jace was born. It named you the godparent and responsible for Jace and all other kids they might have, which now includes Luca. It's very possible that Mila wasn't listed because she was still in high school when they had it drawn up."

That explanation makes a little more sense.

“Like I said, she’s willing, but the chance of the court awarding her custody is slim because she’s just not financially capable.”

I look to Kincaid. The man is my boss, but he’s also a mentor.

“We’ll do whatever it takes,” he offers. “Just let me know how you want to proceed.”

Mr. Dobbs breathes a sigh of relief as if he thinks I’ve already made up my mind.

“I’ll be in touch,” I tell Mr. Dobbs, dismissing him.

The man may suck at delivering unwanted news, but he sure knows when he’s being asked to leave.

Kincaid opens the door for him, nodding at someone standing out there. I know Mr. Dobbs will be escorted to the front door, and someone will watch and makes sure he leaves the property. Everyone who isn’t directly related to Cerberus is considered a direct threat to the club until proven otherwise. There’s even talk of acquiring the land the road that runs to the clubhouse is on and surrounding all the acreage with a fence and entry point a half a mile down the road. The gunman who was injured a few months ago during the attack on Lindell named Cerberus as the reason for a job they did in relation to Raul Cortez. It means that Cerberus isn’t safe no matter where they are.

I drop my ass into one of the chairs surrounding the conference table, my head falling into my hands.

“What do I do?” I mutter into my hands.

“I can’t really give that sort of advice.”

I’d ask what he’d do, but I already know what his answer would be. Kincaid, along with nearly every other person in the club, wouldn’t blink at taking in two young boys to raise. It wouldn’t feel like a burden to them. It would be an honor to be chosen for such a task by their friend.

“It’s a life-altering situation,” he continues. “But those boys are welcome here if that’s what you decide. There’s no

shortage of people here willing to help. It may not be very traditional, but they'll be well-loved and taken care of."

As good as that sounds, I also have to consider Mila. She's their blood relative, and despite the way she acted the other day, I imagine I'll discover after some research that she'd be a great fit for them. It's more likely she was just frustrated with everything. We did say goodbye to her sister and brother-in-law only hours before.

"It also doesn't make you an evil person if you decide it's not something you want to do."

"We never discussed this," I tell him. "I never had a conversation with either of them about being willing to take on this responsibility. If they had asked, I would've told them no. I'm not fit to be a parent."

"I won't argue that point with you right now, Stormy, but I know the kind of man you are, and I think you may be wrong about your abilities on this. What I do think you need to do is go to St. Louis long enough that those boys don't end up in foster care. I think it's important that you at least abide by your friends' wishes long enough for that. They trusted you with this. You need to see it through."

I look up at the man. He has never been secretive about his own life and how he grew up with an abusive father who eventually killed his mother. If he hadn't had an aunt willing to keep him, he would've ended up in foster care as well.

I nod, knowing he's right. He may not realize it, but he gave me the exact advice I needed despite him saying he couldn't.

## Chapter 6

### Mila

I take a deep breath as I pull another box of cereal from the shelf and drop it into the shopping cart. I fight the tears that threaten to fall. I can't lose my shit in the middle of the grocery store, but that doesn't mean I'm going to be able to stop it.

Is this how Carlen and Janet felt? Were they at the end of their rope, left wondering as they bought food for their boys if they were going to have to put some of it back once they saw the total at the register?

I'm completely drained of money. Even the basic funerals were too much. The director of the funeral home suggested just cremation, but it felt wrong to not have some sort of service. I'm left wondering if I made the wrong choice. Those thousands of dollars could really help right now.

Mr. Dobbs, the attorney responsible for the estate, made it clear that I couldn't file for government aid for the boys because I'm not the custodian. It was also hinted at that attempting to could set into motion the removal of the boys. I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place. The rock being the risk of losing those boys to a system I've never trusted, and the hard place being fucking Vincent Chilton because, in all their wisdom, my sister chose that man as the responsible party if something ever happened to them.

I'd thought after our little confrontation in the driveway that I'd be lucky enough never to see him again, but in some fucked-up twist of fate, he's been thrust right back into my damn life.

"Mila?"

I cringe at my name being called, and when I turn around and see Amber Rogers walking toward me, my first instinct is to run away.

I give her a weak smile as she stops in front of me.

“Honey,” she says, her tone dripping that same level of false condescension as it did in high school. “I heard about Janet and Carlen.”

I remain silent. I know she expects me to give her all the details, but that shit isn't happening. We weren't friends in high school, and we aren't friends since graduating. What I have learned in the middle of this tragedy is that people expect information they have no right to. I get that people are curious. Hell, I'm quick to go searching for answers when something piques my interest, but some are just downright disrespectful, and I already anticipate that from this woman.

“Murdered?” she asks, her head pulling back, her lips and nose scrunching as if just saying the word is distasteful.

Once again, I remain quiet, thinking maybe she'd take a hint, but she was never very good at reading a room.

“In Benton Park West?” She shakes her head. “I never would've guessed.”

It's clear she has already made her mind up about what happened and who Carlen and Janet were to their core. I have no doubt it's the same conclusion everyone else has drawn. It's probably why the police still haven't contacted me. I have no doubt they have chalked this up to another drug deal gone bad. I know they're busy. There's no shortage of crime in St. Louis, and murders in certain areas are always higher, usually related to some form of criminal element for both parties involved. I don't doubt the police have other cases they deem more important because what's the point of working hard to solve a case like the one Janet was involved in? I don't doubt they just see it as trash taking the trash out, saving the city money on a criminal case Carlen or Janet no doubt would've been involved in had they not died.

“As always it's a pleasure to see you, Amber,” I say, somehow managing to keep my cool as I grip the handle of the shopping cart a little harder.

Stupidly, she stands in front of the cart so I can't move without making a scene.

I don't have the energy for this woman right now. Hell, I don't have the energy for anything, honestly.

I take a deep breath before speaking. A couple of years ago, my first instinct would've been to lose my shit on her. I wouldn't have cared who saw or if the cops were called because I was in the middle of a disturbance, but my life isn't my own anymore. My responsibilities dictate how I respond to people now.

"I'm not giving you any information about my sister and her husband."

She seems displeased with the lack of information.

"It honestly doesn't surprise me," she says, only moments after declaring she never would've guessed something like this could've happened to them. "Your sister was always a little out in left field."

"Have the day you deserve, Amber."

I jerk the cart toward me, forcing her red-tipped fingernails to release the end of my cart. She's huffing, her indignation an echo in my head as I turn around and head toward the dairy section, praying my bad luck doesn't continue when I get to the register.

It's clear that Amber Rogers doesn't have a problem taking care of herself. Her hair is damn near perfect although a dyed blonde I'd never consider using. Her nails are done, and although I didn't bother to look at her feet, I bet her toes are the same color.

After putting the half gallon of milk into the cart, I take a glance at my own nails. Despite working in a full-service salon, my own hands look trashed. I haven't worked at the place I'm at very long so the bonds I had with the other stylists at my old job haven't been formed yet. At my old job, we'd do each other's hair and nails, making sure we always looked great for our clientele. No one at the new place has offered, and I haven't seen that same level of energy there at all.

My heart races as I start unloading the groceries onto the conveyor belt. I would normally do self-check, but I figure

it would be easier to have a cashier take things off if I need to remove items than it would be to have to call an attendant.

I greet her the same way I normally would, but I can hear the edge of fear in my voice.

Life isn't supposed to be this hard.

I stare at the total, the threat of tears once again a real thing. I could easily take a few things off but I asked the boys this morning if they wanted anything from the store, and each of them gave me a small list. The thought of going home without those things right now breaks my heart.

Instead of pulling out my bank debit card, I pull out my credit card and swipe it. My pulse rages when it takes a few seconds longer than normal for it to be approved. It would be just my luck for this not to work.

The cash register door pops open at the same time I hear the receipt being printed.

I breathe a sigh of relief when the cashier hands me the printed paper.

"Thank you," I tell her, my graciousness having to do with more than just her service today.

After pulling my bags from the rotating rack and placing them in the shopping cart, I head toward the exit, only to see Amber standing to the side having a conversation with Lucy Bennett, another gossip from high school.

Neither one stops talking, nor do they look away from me as I walk toward the exit. I know without a doubt they're talking about Janet. I also don't doubt they will also continue to have such conversations, altering the interaction I had with Amber to fit her narrative. It won't stop until something else worthy of their gossip comes along.

Some days I wish I could just pack everything I own and leave this damn town.

## Chapter 7

### Stormy

“Hello, Mr. Chilton,” the nice woman behind the desk says with a smile as I climb off the elevator. “Mr. Black has been expecting you.”

She hits a few keys on her keyboard before standing.

“I’m Pam.”

“Nice to meet you, Pam.”

“Hey,” a man says, approaching with his hand out. “Deacon Black.”

“Vincent Chilton, but please call me Stormy.”

I’m back in St. Louis, but before I seek out Mila and the boys, I need a little more information. I want to know what I’m facing. I probably should’ve done this while I was in town for the funeral, but it didn’t even cross my mind.

“Wren’s office is this way,” he says, walking deeper into the office. “If there is information to be found, he’s the guy that will be able to do it. I hope you don’t mind but I already forwarded the information Kincaid sent so he could get an early start on it.”

“That’s awesome. I appreciate all your help.”

“Ignacio, Finn, and Gaige,” he says, pointing to the three men sitting on the sofas in what appears to be some sort of breakroom.

They each lift a hand at me, and I do the same. I know Cerberus has worked with these men on more than one occasion, but we haven’t had a mission that has overlapped since I joined. I know there will be time to get to know them better at a later date, but right now, I have one single focus.

Deacon wraps his knuckles on a closed office door before turning the doorknob and pushing it open.

“Is he here to steal my girl!”

I jerk my head in the direction of the voice, a small smile playing on my lips when I see the setup the birds have.

“I’m not yours!” another bird squawks. “Quit spreading rumors!”

The one objecting happens to be standing right beside the other, so I’m not at all convinced that they dislike each other.

“That’s Puff Daddy,” the guy sitting at the desk says. “And Evie. I’m Wren.”

He holds his hand out, and I shake it.

“Looks like you have your hands full,” I say, giving the birds another glance.

“Quit looking at her!” Puff Daddy demands. “Want me to pluck your eyes from their fucking sockets?”

“Puff,” Wren says, a warning in his tone. “Do you want to end up in the cage?”

The bird starts making noises, pacing back and forth. Evie, clearly annoyed with being bumped into every time he spins to pace in the opposite direction, hops up on a different roost.

“Wren,” Deacon snaps. “These fucking birds.”

Wren nods, but the action looks rote, as if his boss warns him daily and it goes in one ear and out the other.

“I have bad news,” Wren says. “Take a seat.”

As much as I feel the need to stand, I decide it would be rude to refuse his offer. He sighs the second my ass is in the seat.

His fingers work over his keyboard, several of the screens flashing like I’ve only seen in the movies.

“Jesus Christ,” Deacon mutters when a face pops up on the screen.

If it weren’t for the sneer on the guy’s face in the image and the height lines behind him making it clear it’s a mugshot,

the guy looks like any other late-twenties to early-thirties dude.

“Who is that?”

“Adrian Larrick,” Deacon says.

“You’ll have to fill me in. I don’t recognize the face or the name.”

“He’s the president of the Keres MC,” Wren says.

“Shit,” I snap. I may not recognize this individual, but Keres is well known around St. Louis. They were around and causing problems when Carlen and I were in high school. We’d never met any of them, but we were warned by teachers and our parents to avoid those in the MC every time their names were brought up in some news report. It’s as if our parents thought the club members were known to go to schools and try to recruit like the street gangs and military recruiters did.

“So, you’re familiar?”

“I’m from here. I don’t know of anyone from here that hasn’t heard of them,” I answer. “What has this got to do with Carlen and Janet?”

“I’ve been able to find connections between the club and Carlen Clarke.”

I shake my head, immediately rejecting what he’s saying. “Carlen was an account manager at ShopSmart.”

The man worked at the local grocery chain in high school and eventually went to college so he could work his way up to an executive position in the company. He never quite made it to the top, but he also never stopped working hard to eventually get there.

“All ShopSmart stores closed two years ago when the company went bankrupt,” Deacon says.

“Carlen’s connections stemmed from his connections through his job. The CEO of that company wasn’t exactly the most law-abiding citizen,” Wren adds.

“Old man Plank?” I ask, shaking my head. “I met him. I find that hard—”

“His grandson took over the company after his grandfather passed. It took the weasel less than a year to run the business into the ground,” Wren says. “Noah Plank had the bad connections, and it didn’t surprise me to find emails sent to Carlen from Noah threatening his job if certain things weren’t done.”

“Carlen wasn’t a criminal,” I growl.

“People will do all sorts of things to protect their families,” Deacon counters. “Carlen was a father. As a father myself, I can tell you there isn’t a single thing, legal or not, that I wouldn’t do to protect my son.”

“So you think Carlen and Janet were killed by the Keres MC?” I ask, unsure of how to proceed if that’s the case.

I’m no longer a scared young man, afraid from being conditioned by my parents to avoid danger, but at the same time, I know the MC is really fucking dangerous. In the past, they always had an uncanny ability to avoid arrest. I wouldn’t doubt they’re able to do that by threatening the lives of those who might make the mistake of thinking of prosecuting them. I’m sure there’s no shortage of bribes and kickbacks from the club to officials in a position to keep their names off of warrants.

“Finn’s woman got tangled up with them a while back. Well, her ex got tangled up with them and they went after her,” Deacon says.

“What can you tell me about them?”

“Not much,” Wren says, the tone of his voice showcasing his irritation. “They’re incredibly low tech. Either that or they’re so high tech that they go undetected. I was asked to help the FBI gather intel on them, and it was impossible. The information I found connecting Carlen to Keres was through Noah Plank, not the club.”

“Are they ruthless enough to go after the Clarke family just because Plank fucked up and sent him some emails?”

Wren shrugs. "I have no way of knowing."

"Do you have any contact information for Plank?"

Wren frowns. "Dead men don't talk."

"Jesus," I mutter, running my hand over the top of my head. "Keres?"

"Very possible," Wren answers.

"And Keres is known for what?"

"All of it. Trafficking drugs, weapons, and women. Theft, robbery, home invasions. At least those have always been the rumors."

"And what was he charged with?" I ask, pointing to the computer monitor.

"Possession of marijuana," Wren says.

"It's legal in Missouri," I argue.

"It wasn't when he was busted with it. He served eight months in jail for it. It cost the prosecutor his life."

"They killed him?"

"That's the rumor."

"Shit." All of this means that Mila and the boys are likely in danger. "How did Finn solve the problem his woman had with them?"

Neither Deacon nor Wren are quick to answer.

"Good men will do what it takes to protect their families," Deacon finally responds, and I know with that information that what Finn had to do wasn't exactly lawful.

I nod, fully understanding, and also a little more accepting of the bad news I've been given about Carlen. His hands had to have been tied for him to end up tangled with Keres.

"I've got to go," I say, standing. "I appreciate all of your help."

I shake Wren's hand then Deacon's.

“Don’t hesitate to reach out if you need more help,” the Blackbridge boss says.

I nod at him, knowing I’ll take him up on it if the need arises.

My boots carry me out of the office quicker than they carried me in. There’s a sense of urgency now in my blood. Although I haven’t gotten another phone call with horrific news from Edward Dobbs, it doesn’t mean something bad hasn’t happened. I don’t know what Carlen was doing for Keres. I have no way of knowing if their deaths were the end of whatever that business might’ve been. I wouldn’t put it past the club to seek vengeance just for sport, including going after Mila and the boys.

Somehow my luck continues when I pull up outside of the Clarke home to see the same car in the lot. Mila’s little blue Honda is parked in a way that prevents me from pulling into the driveway, so I park along the curb.

She doesn’t answer the front door when I knock and ring the bell, and I wouldn’t put it past her to be in there refusing to answer. Instead of leaving, I make my way around the side of the house in the direction she was coming from when I was here last week.

The door to the little apartment is open, a large trash can sitting precariously on the landing. I make my way up the stairs, knowing what the fuck I’m going to find just from the smell.

Wren listed several of the things the MC were involved in and it looks like Carlen and Janet were somehow involved in the drug running side of things, more specifically manufacturing.

I’m still surprised when I step inside and see the evidence, and even more surprised to see Mila wrapped in a painter’s suit with a mask on her face trying to get rid of the evidence of their criminal activity.

## Chapter 8

Mila

My blood runs cold when a shadow crosses in front of the open door. How would I ever explain to some nosy neighbor what the hell is going on up here?

Fear turns into rage when I turn and see none other than Vincent fucking Chilton ten yards from me.

The disappointment in his eyes makes me want to rush to explain, but what would the fucking point be? The man never valued a damn thing I said. I was good enough to entertain him for a couple hours one night, but past that I was irrelevant to him.

He doesn't say a word before turning and walking out. Either he's angrier now with what he saw or I was lost in my own little world, because I don't know how I missed the sound of his stomping up the stairs with how loud they are on his way down.

I should've gotten started earlier in the day, but I couldn't afford to miss my clients at the salon. He doesn't have to be a genius to know what was going on up here. I've barely had the chance to get started on cleaning this place out.

I inch closer to the open door, but I don't hear the start of an engine, telling me he hasn't left. I know why he's here, and if the sight of me cleaning out a drug lab isn't enough for him to get custody of the boys, then the state wouldn't be doing their job at all.

I take the time to pull off the painter's suit I grabbed at the hardware store, making sure not to touch the outside before heading down the stairs. The unfamiliar truck parked at the curb is a clear sign that he's around here somewhere.

"I'm here for the boys," he snaps the second I get in his line of sight.

I hate the way he's standing there with his arms crossed over his chest as if he has any right to demand a damn thing

from me. I hate even more that I've never been able to forget just how talented those clenched hands of his are. The leather vest he's wearing is a huge red flag, but I'm in no position to ask who he's affiliated with.

"I will not have them in a house where drug manufacturing is taking place."

"There aren't any fucking drugs being manufactured at this house," I argue.

"Calling me a fucking idiot right now won't help your damn case, Mila. Where are the kids?"

"Carlen and Janet were doing that shit," I growl under my breath, knowing there's always a good chance some nosy-ass neighbor will come sneaking up at any time. "I'm cleaning up their fucking mess."

My voice cracks, and I hate that I can't approach this whole damn thing with a little more finesse.

"I'm doing the best I can," I insist when he just stands there staring at me like he doesn't give a shit.

His jaw ticks as he runs his eyes over my entire body.

"Want to check my fucking teeth for meth rot?" I growl when I realize he isn't checking me out in a sexual way but looking for evidence that I might be lying about my role in what he saw upstairs.

"Carlen was tangled up with Keres."

I freeze, my muscles not allowing even a single micro-movement.

"Wh-What?"

"Keres," he says. "Ever heard of them?"

I swallow and nod. "Everyone has."

The name is whispered more now than the Mafia crime bosses that are still lurking around the city.

"So you're saying you had no clue what they were up to?"

“He,” I correct. “I doubt Janet would ever allow her kids to be anywhere near what the hell was going on up there.”

I point above our heads to the little apartment that held much different memories before I discovered the drug lab a few days ago.

He takes a deep breath, and I already know he’s going to want to spread the blame to my sister.

“I don’t have much information on how they were connected, but I think we can assume from the little lab up there that drugs were being made for the club.”

“So you think that Keres killed them?”

He shrugs, his eyes scanning the street before looking back at me again. “It’s possible, or they were killed by a rival gang. We have no way of knowing.”

“They had kids,” I say, my emotions starting to bubble up. “They didn’t deserve to die.”

How can he speak of his friend dying in such a calm voice?

“Criminals don’t exactly take family into consideration. They don’t have much regard for their own relatives, so it would be foolish to think they’d care about others.”

I can’t tell if he’s making a jab at Carlen and Janet, lumping them both into the same group as the people who killed them.

“Are you implying—”

“I’m saying we’ve both spent a lot of time with Janet and Carlen. Although I haven’t seen them in a couple of years, I know for a fact they don’t do anything without discussing it with each other. I also know that it was more of a co-dependency thing for both of them and not a positive relationship trait. I know Carlen wasn’t up there cooking meth while Janet, who is always latched to his hip, stayed in the house unaware. If you stop to think for a single fucking second, then you’d know I’m right.”

I open my mouth to argue, but how can I?

He's a hundred percent right. It doesn't matter whose idea it was. They were only doing it because they both agreed to it. I'd had numerous conversations with my sister about being so dependent on Carlen, but at the end of the day, he was just as dependent on her. I have no doubt that since they were together since like the sixth or seventh grade, they never had much room to grow up without each other. All decisions were made together. All appointments were done together. All arguments and disputes they might have had were together. They shopped together. I don't know that Janet left the house much when she wasn't with Carlen. They enjoyed spending time together. They shadowed each other in the unhealthiest ways.

"Carlen lost his job at ShopSmart when the franchise went under."

I know ShopSmart went out of business, but before I stopped speaking with my sister, Carlen had been employed by another business in town. He'd already been there six or seven months before Janet and I had our falling out.

"I know. He was working at Brinson Mechanics as an accounts manager. He hated it but—"

"His connections to Keres were through his old boss at ShopSmart."

"That makes sense," I mutter.

I was present for more than one conversation they'd had about how awful Noah Plank was.

"Oh God," I hiss, covering my mouth with my hand. "Did Keres have Noah killed too?"

"There's a good chance," he says. "It also leads me to believe that you and the boys aren't safe."

"What?" My hands begin to shake.

"Keres is known for leaving no stone unturned, Mila. Anyone connected to them, they'll consider a loose end."

"I have nothing to do with that club," I snap, my fear exhibiting as anger.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“We’re not in danger,” I insist, but just as I finish speaking, the roar of motorcycles fills the air.

“Get inside the house,” he snaps, his eyes scanning the streets.

With the noise bouncing off the surrounding houses, I can’t tell which direction they’re coming from or how close they are.

“Mila! Get in the fucking house.”

“Come with me,” I cry, my feet already carrying me in that direction.

“I’ll be fine,” he says. “Just go.”

Tears leak down my face as I climb the front porch stairs, my hands shaking so much in fear that I drop the house keys twice before I can get the key into the lock.

“Stay away from the windows,” he insists, making me jump because I didn’t know he was going to follow me inside. “Take this.”

He shoves the leather vest he was wearing into my hands before walking back outside.

Silence fills the air a second after he closes the door behind him.

## Chapter 9

### Stormy

Fear is a healthy response for people.

Being fearless is a myth. Fearless means you're either ignorant to consequences or impaired in some way that prevents you from making sound choices.

Many would claim that it's adrenaline that makes your heart kick up when faced with something that could lead to you getting hurt.

It's a lot more basic instinct than that, leaning more toward fight or flight, something that is an integral part of survival.

Fear is what's making my pulse race as Adrian Larrick, president of the Keres MC, and his right-hand man, Brant Jesper, climb off their motorcycles.

Fear is smart with the flash of the handguns tucked away under their cuts. Adrian isn't a dumb man, and the way they take several steps apart, makes me realize he's not only good at dirty business, he's also battle smart. The third guy staying near the bikes makes them ever smarter. Not only am I outnumbered, but there would be no way to pull the gun from my back and shoot all three of them before they put me down.

Knowing this doesn't stop me from standing a few inches taller as they approach.

As fearful as I may be facing this danger, I'm not a coward. These aren't exactly the type of men who will care whether I'm afraid of them or not. They will, however, not take kindly to disrespect, not when they're in a group like this and have something to prove. Insulting Larrick would quite possibly be a deadly mistake.

"Can I help you guys?" I ask when they inch closer.

They stay several feet away, making it impossible to get the jump on them physically if that was the route I decided to take.

I can't decide if they're fearful themselves and just not showing it, or if their numbers make them believe they'll be fine. Worst yet, it's also possible they don't see me as a threat, making me believe I did the right thing by pulling off my cut.

Cerberus is well known and I imagine them taking one of us down would be something they'd celebrate later at their clubhouse.

"I'm looking for Mila Clarke," Adrian says.

"Never heard of anyone by that name," I say, technically not lying because Clarke is Carlen's last name not Mila's.

Adrian hitches his head to the side before speaking. "That's her car."

My jaw flexes, but he speaks again before I can formulate a lie that could get me shot right here in the driveway.

"Money is owed," Larrick says.

"I figure that debt was paid," I argue.

The Clarkes paid with their lives. If they wanted cash, maybe they shouldn't have been so quick to pull those triggers.

Larrick shakes his head. "We didn't collect that debt. Money is owed."

I swallow. I know the man has no reason to lie. If anything, he'd seem more powerful, more capable of instilling fear into people if they did admit to their deaths, but he doesn't claim Keres MC was behind the murders. The news doesn't carry any form of relief. If anything, it makes it worse because now we're dealing with two different criminal organizations, and one of them is unknown.

"There's no one here capable of paying," I say rather than outright telling him it won't get paid.

If Carlen and Janet were cooking dope, this man isn't looking only for the revenue he might've lost that day in the form of product. He's going to be looking for the loss of potential revenue due to them no longer being able to work for

him. The cycle will continue, and he'll never be satisfied. This is the shit that gets people in so deep that they can't dig their way out.

"Ten grand is due," Larrick says.

"Fifteen next month," Jesper adds. "And every month after."

"That bitch better figure something out," Larrick says. "She has until the thirty-first."

Jesper sneers at me, making me wonder if he's on his best behavior because his prez is here. He's not someone I would want to meet in a dark alley any day of the week.

I stand in the same spot in the middle of the driveway as they climb back on their bikes. So sure he's gotten his point across, Larrick doesn't even look back in my direction before cranking his motorcycle and driving off. The other two fall into line behind him, a smile on Jesper's lips as if he's hoping they don't get paid so he can mete out the punishment.

My hands shake with frustration, the fear I feel both for myself and Mila and the boys having a hard time finding an exit out of my body.

The roar of the bikes eventually fades to nothing, and I don't move until several minutes after I can no longer hear them.

I have to bang on the front door before Mila opens it, but instead of relief on her face, she's holding my cut out, rage filling her pretty features.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

I take the thing from her hands and shrug it back on.

"Those guys are fucking dangerous," I mutter.

"And you're not? Seems you're in a different fucking biker gang." She takes a step back when I inch forward, and I hate that she's scared of me. "I was going to ask you for help, but you're just as bad, aren't you? I think I'd rather take my chances with Keres."

“You’d be a fool if you did. When you get a chance, why don’t you do a little research on my *club*.” I emphasize the last word so she can understand there’s a difference in what we stand for versus what Keres is involved in. “They knew that Honda was yours, Mila. You’re already on their fucking radar.”

This information makes her freeze.

“Carlen and Janet owe ten grand.”

Her chin quivers. “I don’t have ten grand. I spent everything on their funerals.”

I reach out to her when it looks like she may fall over, but she steadies herself and jerks out of my reach.

“Don’t fucking touch me.”

“If I thought for a second that ten grand would fix all this shit, I’d give it to them, but Carlen and Janet are in for fifteen a month. I doubt there’s a signed contract that tells when they would’ve been done cooking for Keres.”

She shakes her head as if she can’t believe what I’m saying.

“That doesn’t make sense. Why would they kill them if they wanted to keep making money from them? Maybe Carlen refused, and they were killed?”

“Keres didn’t kill them.” She frowns in my direction. “If someone in Keres murdered them, then Larrick, the president, didn’t order it. I get the vibe that he’s more of a businessman than anything else.”

“This is too much,” she says, a tear running down her cheek.

“We’re wasting time. If they recognize your car then they probably know where you live. The boys aren’t safe.”

“I’m not just going to hand my nephews over to you,” she argues.

“I don’t give a shit if you tag along, Mila, but those boys will be with me.”

Her cheek twitches in irritation.

“Are you really going to let your pride put them in danger?” I challenge.

She continues to glare at me.

I tell her the address and room number of the hotel.

“You have three hours to pack their shit and bring them to me.”

She doesn't say a word when I turn around and walk out of the house. She isn't a stupid woman, and her fight right now is with Keres. I know she can accept me for the ally that I am. Our fight can happen later. The safety of those boys is all that fucking matters right now.

## Chapter 10

Mila

My hands are trembling as I step outside and lock up the house. Keres isn't to be messed with. Anyone paying attention in St. Louis knows that they're the most dangerous group of men, and getting tangled with them is always a bad idea.

Vincent's truck is at the curb, and I hate him a little more for this fake show of chivalry that he's displaying, waiting for me to climb inside my car and back out before pulling away himself. The man is either incredibly brave or insanely stupid for standing his ground and facing off with Adrian Larrick a few moments ago. I recognized the man the second I peeked out of the window. Although brutally violent according to rumors, I can't argue that the president of the Keres MC is also devastatingly handsome. There's a rugged, bad-boy vibe that swarms around him that has led so many women to their clubhouse. They literally have a fandom of horny women who fight each other in order to spend time with them. I had a friend in school who was obsessed with them, yet she was never able to gain access to their clubhouse.

I pull my car past Vincent's truck, watching in my rearview mirror as he slowly pulls out behind me. He gave me instructions and a timeline to get the kids to him, but I'll scream if he follows me home. When he turns right at the third stop sign after I turn left, a strange sense of foreboding fills all the crevices inside of me. I would never get involved with such a dangerous group as the Keres MC, but it looks like I'm a target simply by association.

My chin is quivering, tears threatening to spill from my lashes as I drive around my apartment complex without stopping in an effort to see if anyone is following me. I've never had to be so diligent in my life, and I'm not certain I'd be able to identify the signs of someone trailing me even if I saw it. I accept that Adrian and Keres know exactly where I live, considering they recognized my car even when I hadn't been to my sister's house in over a year.

Instead of immediately climbing out of my car, I park and pull out my phone. My search of Keres brings up all the things I would expect—news articles, trial information for men being picked up for petty crimes but nothing that would keep them incarcerated for very long.

Cerberus MC, the name on the patch of Vincent's leather vest, is a different story. They're touted as angels on earth, saviors in their own right, for the number of men, women, and children they've helped in returning to their families after they'd been kidnapped, trafficked, and sold in the human skin trade. Their president, Diego "Kincaid" Anderson, has won more than a handful of awards for his part in fighting sex traffickers.

As much as I wanted to point fingers and place blame, accusing Vincent of being as bad as the members of the Keres MC, it's clear he's nothing like them. It niggles in the back of my mind that this could be a front for a dirty business, but Vincent was never that type of guy. My crush from all those years ago was based largely on the fact that he wasn't like the other guys who Carlen would bring around when visiting Janet. They'd leer at me, try to get me alone and away from everyone else. They'd talk suggestively even before I was old enough to understand what they were referencing. Vincent was protective, and as much as I hate to admit, he was brotherly. He'd walk between the road and me. He'd open doors for me, checking on me if he got a sense that something wasn't quite right with me.

I think it's those instances that made me, what I thought at the time in my adolescence, fall in love with him. While other girls in school were fawning over movie stars and boy bands, I was equally obsessed with Vincent Chilton. Only the guy I'd fantasize about marrying would come over to our house regularly. He'd let me cut in front of him to make my burger first if we were having a cookout. Granted, he did the same thing with all of Janet's female friends, but in my head, what we had was special.

I keep scrolling, finding more than one article that showcases people who aren't as pleased with Cerberus. They

haven't been able to save every person they've set out to, and as understanding as that is, it's also heartbreaking for the families who weren't able to see their loved ones again.

The sun is so low in the sky, I can no longer see it directly around the apartment building on the opposite side of the parking lot. Being caught in the dark with the kids isn't a smart idea any day of the week around here, much less after discovering we're in real danger.

I climb out of the car and head to my apartment first, packing up what I need before heading to the babysitter's apartment. I use the term babysitter loosely because she has already mentioned that I needed to find someone else.

I want to cry as I lift my hand to knock because I know this could be the very last time the boys will be here. Vincent will not give up on them, and if he digs too much deeper, he'll no doubt form the opinion that I'm not worthy of taking care of them. As hard as it is to admit, I know I'm not financially capable. My last trip to the grocery store was evidence of that. Without some major windfall or winning the lottery, I'm the captain of a very rapidly sinking ship, and I'm not so prideful that I'll drag those innocent boys down with me just because of something as stupid as pride.

If I had any doubt that Sammie was losing patience with me, it's gone the second she opens the door after I knock.

"Hey," I say, hating that I've put such a strain on our friendship.

We aren't exactly close, but she's the only person I've had any sort of meaningful conversation with in the last six months.

"The younger one broke one of my plates at dinner," Sammie mutters.

"His name is Luca, and it was an accident," Jace snarls, his tiny fists clenched at his side.

"I'm still down a plate," she snaps, arguing with the child as she points to the pieces on the top of the trash can.

I recognize the plate pattern because I bought the same set. I pull a five-dollar bill from my pocket and drop it on the small dinette table, knowing it's more than enough to cover the cost.

"Sorry a plate was broken," I tell her.

"I can't keep watching them," she says, walking across the room to gather the things they brought with them this morning. "Not without getting paid more."

"It's fine. I can find someone else," I tell her, unwilling to go into detail about why there's a very good reason I won't even have them in order to drop them off.

"I just need more money," she says, backpedaling when I choose her first option rather than her second, making it clear she wanted a higher rate.

Even if I had the extra money to pay her, after watching her argue with Jace right in front of me, I have my concerns.

I gather the kids up, thank her for her time, and leave her apartment, ignoring her calling me a bitch under her breath as we walk away.

"Mila," Jace growls.

"It's fine," I mutter, not willing to lose my shit in front of the kids.

Sammie isn't worth the trouble. I'm also a huge asshole for abusing that friendship when I needed her help so desperately. I put too much on her plate. My needs didn't give me any right to overwhelm her, despite her agreeing when I offered to pay her for babysitting while I worked and tried to get everything in order in regard to Janet and Carlen.

I hate even thinking about Carlen, knowing now that his connection to ShopSmart is what led to whatever deal he had with Keres which got them both killed.

I check Luca's buckle after Jace helps him into his booster seat, giving the kid a huge smile for being so helpful. As grateful as I am, he's probably been forced into this role because his parents had focused elsewhere. It makes me wish

Janet was around so I could shake some damn sense into her, but I know deep down she never wanted it to become the situation that it was. Her life was all about those boys, and it had to have taken a drastic shift for her to lose sight of that.

“This isn’t the way to the apartment,” Jace says.

“I know,” I tell him. “We’re going to go see a friend of mine.”

I don’t know of any other way to describe Vincent. If the boys have to be around the man, I don’t want them to feel like they’re unsafe.

He sighs as if the detour is a huge inconvenience to him, but I don’t address it. For seven years old, he’s quite aware of his surroundings, and pays a little more attention than I’d guess someone his age would.

I pull up to the hotel and help the kids out of the car. I know what’s about to happen. I know the risk I’m taking. I’m well aware a secret I’ve never wanted to come to light is about to do just that, but I also know the risk I’d be taking if I didn’t show up here like he instructed me to do.

I know he’d never give up looking for the boys if I took off, even if it was only pride and some misplaced sense of right and wrong that kept him looking for us. It’s clear Cerberus MC has the ability to track people down who have disappeared, and I’m no expert at covering my trail. Money is the other huge factor. I’ve barely had enough money to live much less having the cash flow to vanish. Hell, I had to use my credit card at the damn grocery store a few days ago.

“I can carry that,” Jace offers when I reach for the strap of one of the bags.

“Thank you.” I hand the bag over to him.

The walk into the hotel is slower than I could make it on my own, because despite how helpful Jace is, his legs just aren’t as long.

My hand is shaking once we climb onto the elevator.

“What floor?” Luca asks, excited to push the button.

“Fourth.”

Like the young child that he is, he presses every single floor leading up to the one we need. I don't chastise him because it gives me a few more moments to shoot up a little prayer that this doesn't go the way I anticipate, which is being forced out of this hotel empty-handed. As safe as I imagine the kids would be with him, my heart would be completely shattered.

I guide the boys to room 418, taking in a ragged breath before lifting my hand to knock.

He answers in seconds, his eyes darting from me to the boys and back to me, and more specifically to the little girl balanced on my hip.

# Chapter 11

## Stormy

The boys look no different from how they did a few days ago at the funeral, but I imagine it's going to take quite a while before they stop looking sad, withdrawn, and uncertain.

Mila looks like she's aged several years just in the time since I left Janet and Carlen's house.

I'm able to take all three of them in in a matter of seconds, but I get tangled up on the little girl on Mila's hip.

That's part of the equation I get snagged on. That child doesn't make sense. Did Mila mention having a kid? I can't recall a single conversation with Carlen where he mentioned a child either.

She looks nothing like her mother who has straight, dark hair and dark eyes. Her hair is sandy blonde and a mess of curls around her head. Her eyes the brightest blue. My heart kicks up, pounding in my chest.

She looks to be two or so. My teeth grind as I work out the fucking math in my head.

"We saw him. Can we go now?" Jace asks, annoyance in his tone.

I step to the side, realizing I've been blocking their entry into the room.

Mila doesn't make eye contact with me as she enters. Dutifully, Jace and Luca follow her into the hotel suite. The little girl watches me over her mother's shoulder, and my eyes are locked on her as well.

My mouth is dry, and there's an unfamiliar tremble in my hands as I close the door to the hotel room and flip the top lock.

"I've never been in a room like this," Jace says as he spins in place to take it all in.

There's nothing really special about it, other than the fact that it's a suite with a small living room and two bedrooms with en suites on either side of it.

I knew when I booked the room that the boys would be coming, and I wanted there to be ample space for everyone.

Mila sets the little girl down who immediately heads to the remote sitting on the small coffee table. Jace picks it up before she can grab it, pointing it at the screen before looking in my direction.

“What channel are the cartoons on?”

I shrug, but Mila is quick to hand him over a card that has the channels listed, her eyes still avoiding mine.

It only takes Jace a few seconds to find the channel he's looking for, the animated show on the screen drawing the attention of both of the younger kids. His focus is more diligent, his eyes darting back in my direction several times before he takes a seat on the floor between Luca and the little girl.

“Is that all you brought?” I ask, forcing her attention to me as I point to the bag Jace brought in with him.

“It's Sutton's diaper bag,” she says, a quiver in her voice.

I'm not one to suddenly jump to conclusions, but everything, her demeanor, the way she's actively avoiding looking at me, all leads me to believe that little girl is mine.

The sound of her name brings cold chills to my skin and a tremble that skates its way up my spine. I swallow, needing to be the one to look away this time. As much as I'd like to confront her, I know better than to do something like that in front of the kids.

“Is there more in the car?”

Wouldn't it make things so much easier if she was a shit parent and a horrible guardian?

“There's luggage in the car,” she says, her eyes darting between the kids and me more than once.

I can see the indecision in her eyes. She wants to go get their belongings, but she's also wary of leaving them with me. Many would be offended, but it's one sign that she's not as incompetent as I'd hoped she would be. Parents should limit their trust to very few people where their children are concerned. I've seen too many horrible things happen to parents who were either afraid to voice their concerns or who doled out trust long before it was earned.

"Give me the keys," I tell her, holding my hand out. "I'll get them."

She's quick to hand them over, making me wonder if she won't gather them right back up and dart out of a back exit while I'm gone.

I have to shove the keys into my pocket rather than risk dropping them as I leave the room due to the tremble in my hands.

*I'm no one's father.*

I said those words to Mr. Dobbs days ago when he mentioned the Clarkes' will naming me the guardian of their boys in the case of their deaths. I meant it, but this changes things. I'd never put the boys in an unsafe situation, but my plans with this trip back to St. Louis didn't include bringing those boys back with me.

Mr. Dobbs mentioned that Mila wasn't financially sound enough for the responsibility, and I had every intention of making sure she was suitable before funding her enough that they could stay with their aunt and not have to live in poverty.

Walking away now would be impossible.

Instead of leaving Mila's car on the front row where she originally parked it close to the street, I climb behind the wheel, adjust the seat, and move it around back. The woman doesn't seem to have a single ounce of self-preservation in her body. It's not conceited to think that she needs me, especially where Keres and their demands are concerned.

I shudder at the thought of them going after her and the three kids. I know although they claim they weren't involved

in the Clarkes' death, they're more than capable of hurting women and children.

I don't know if she's limited in what she has for all the kids, but she seems to have packed very light, nothing more than a handful of items for each kid if I go by how small the luggage is. The sight of the booster seat in the front passenger seat annoys me as much the second time I look at it as it did when I climbed behind the wheel. I know space in her car is limited, but it's stupidly dangerous for a child of Jace's size to ride in the front seat.

I lean against the side of the car, the two small suitcases resting at my feet as I fire off a text to Wren. Deacon said to let them know if I needed any help, but I never imagined I'd be asking them to do research on Mila Taylor. I need to know everything about her, so I know how to play this situation.

I contemplate calling Kincaid and letting him in on what's going on, but there's this guilt inside of me, as if subconsciously all of this is my fault. Do I have a daughter? If I do, then how have I been existing in the same world as her and didn't know? Shouldn't I have felt some sense of loss, or like something was missing in my life?

What I do know is that I'll never leave St. Louis if she is mine. I could never walk away from a child. Am I the type of guy who would pry a child from their mother's arms? I can't say for sure because I'm so pissed right now at her lies of omission that the thought crosses my mind on the way back inside the hotel.

Maybe I'm overreacting. Maybe the child isn't mine. Maybe that little girl is younger or older than she looks. I know it's a possibility. I'm not the only blond-haired, blue-eyed guy to walk the earth. What I don't understand at all is the sense of dread those thoughts bring me, as if I'd be disappointed somehow to discover that Sutton wasn't mine.

I take the stairs back up to the room, needing a little more time to calm down.

When I let myself back into the room, Jace looks in my direction, but Luca's eyes are locked on the television. Mila is

sitting on the couch, letting Sutton pull what looks to be small wash rags from her hands. The woman has created a game with something I'd never seen as more than utilitarian and used exactly for their original purpose.

Mila looks up at me as the door closes behind me. She looks lost, but there's also a plea in her eyes, one that's begging me to have mercy and to at least not start this conversation in front of the kids.

I give her a quick dip of my head, agreeing to wait, but letting her know that it's coming whether she likes it or not.

I have to respect her for being here. It proves that she's willing to make sacrifices for the well-being of these kids. It's not something a woman concerned for herself would do. She wants to protect them, and I think she should be commended for the bravery it took her to show up here this evening.

"Have you kiddos eaten?" I ask as I take the bags to the bedroom opposite of the one I selected. They're identical, so the choice wasn't all that hard.

Jace looks to Mila as if asking her how he should answer, and it kind of breaks my heart that he isn't quick to tell me independently if he's hungry or not.

"They haven't had dinner," Mila says, more emotion in her voice than should be there when just discussing a simple meal.

"Pizza delivery?" I ask, grinning when both boys perk up and spin their gazes in my direction.

After figuring out what they like and placing the order, I wait in silence, leaning against the counter of the small kitchen the room has until it's close to time for the driver to arrive.

I'm cautious enough to meet him downstairs because it's none of his damn business that there are three small children in this room.

Wren texted back, and I need to figure out what my game plan is. I also need to pay cash and check the parking lot before heading back up.

I have to get everyone out of town. The revelation that Keres wants their money and has a monthly requirement changes everything. Sutton is a huge deciding factor as well. I can't just put a woman, two boys, and a young girl on a plane beside me because the manifest would lead Keres right to Cerberus' doorstep.

There are so many things to consider, but luckily for me, there is more than one group of guys willing to help me.

I hope Kincaid wasn't just placating me when he was talking about the village that is Cerberus, because I'm going to need their help more now than ever. But first, I have to get back to New Mexico with three kids in tow, and I doubt this is something Mila is just going to quickly agree to.

## Chapter 12

Mila

My stomach is in knots, making it impossible to eat. Thankfully, the kids are a handful, and I can focus on getting them fed rather than wondering what happens after they go to bed. I can't discount the chance that Vincent will tell me to get out, despite his grace he's allowed by not asking all the questions I saw raging in his eyes earlier.

She looks so much like him, there's no denying her paternity. Carlen and Janet never put two and two together, and they believed me when I told them I had a drunken one-night stand with a guy from college. When I went further to explain I didn't know the guy and had no way of tracking him down, I received more disappointment than I thought I deserved at the time. I have no doubt they'd disown me again if they found out I got pregnant by Vincent Chilton.

I freeze, the wet washrag in my hand hovering over Sutton's arm when a knock echoes around the room.

My eyes immediately dart toward Vincent, who doesn't look alarmed. He still checks the peephole before opening the door, his right hand at his back, making me think there's a weapon of some kind there. I reposition myself so I'm standing between the three kids at the small dining table and the door.

A woman in the same uniform as the lady was at the front desk earlier when we arrived comes inside, pushing a rollaway crib, handing Vincent a stack of sheets and an extra blanket, before nodding at his thank you and walking out. He closes the door, once again quick to lock the extra lock before pushing the crib into the same room he carried everyone's luggage into earlier.

He hasn't said anything to me since demanding I hand over my keys so he could get the suitcases. It hasn't gone unnoticed that he still hasn't returned them. I haven't been brave enough to ask for them back either.

Somehow, he makes me feel safe in a way that calms me enough to make me aware that I didn't even realize just how unsafe I've felt. For the longest time, there's been this sense of fear that's just beneath my skin. I don't know if it was because of this big secret I've kept from everyone for so long, but even knowing I have to face him eventually, there's also a sense of relief with him where Sutton is concerned.

He hasn't asked me to leave yet, but I know the crib isn't a bid to tell me I can stay either. It only proves that he has no intention of letting Sutton leave. I don't know how much interaction he's had with mothers, but he'd have to kill me before I let him take my child from me.

Seeing him stand across the room, keeping a watchful eye on us, makes me wonder if I'm letting what I read online about Cerberus cloud my judgment. No one is as calm as he's acting, at least not anyone I've ever come in contact with. He doesn't seem to be getting angrier like a man stewing on the limited information he has. The control is more than a little intimidating.

When Luca is done eating, I send him to the bedroom for a bath, quick to leave the living room to make sure he has what he needs. He plays longer than he should, but I don't complain because the longer they take getting ready and going to bed, the longer I can put off having the conversation I never wanted to have with Vincent. I give Sutton a quick bath in the bathroom sink while Luca splashes and plays in the tub.

"Maybe use some soap on your body instead of just letting it float around you," I suggest to Luca before leaving the room only long enough to place Sutton in the rollaway crib.

She fusses a little but calms quickly as I rub her back. It's much later than she normally stays up, and her little life has been chaotic since Luca and Jace came to live with me.

I'm covering Sutton with her favorite tiny blanket when Luca cries out for me, his screech loud enough to draw Vincent to the bedroom door.

“What’s wrong?” he snaps as if he suspects I hurt the little boy.

“Soap in my eyes!” Luca screams.

I find him rubbing soapy hands on his eyes, making things worse.

I quickly turn the water back on and urge him to lean his head back under the flow to clean his eyes. I fully expect Vincent to be standing in the doorway, making a mental tally of how easily I keep fucking up, but he looks more concerned than anything.

“Are you alright?” he once again asks Luca because I’m not worthy of his attention being directed at me.

“Y-yeah,” the little one says, finally able to blink his eyes open without wincing.

With that news, Vincent leaves the doorway. I help Luca out of the tub, refusing to complain as I grab an extra towel and dry up the mess he’s made.

“Pajamas and then bed,” I tell him.

He nods dutifully. The child isn’t very trusting of others, but we’ve come a very long way from his hiding behind his brother to at least not screaming when he realizes he’s alone in a room with me.

“I’ll make sure we get the tear-free stuff. I’m sorry I forgot to grab it from the apartment.”

He gives me a weak smile before lifting the towel and haphazardly attempts to dry his hair.

When he realizes it’s still dripping wet, he allows me to dry it with the blow dryer before he dashes out of the room to tell Jace it’s his turn to get clean.

Jace is next, opting for a shower because heaven forbid the child actually acts like a kid. It’s one of many things I’m mad at my sister for. He’s had to be too responsible too soon in his little life, and there’s no telling what issues that will cause him later on in life.

“Be careful,” I warn before heading out of the bathroom. “It’s not tear-free.”

He scoffs as if he’s more than capable of using soap and not getting it in his eyes.

It’s a credit to Janet that Luca still needs tear-free shampoo. If she were a hundred percent neglectful, he’d know how to wash his own hair without getting soap in his eyes, and if he did, then he’d be less likely to freakout the way he just did. The woman I knew was such a good mom, I frequently made fun of her for her dedication to her family. She never wanted an escape. In the first year after I had Sutton, she just frowned at me if I complained about being tired or needing a little time to myself. She took her role as a mother and wife very seriously. I still can’t fathom why she’d risk their safety by getting involved with Keres.

I freeze before leaving the room, realizing that maybe she was involved to protect them. Vincent told me that they expected the payments for the manufactured drugs even though they were dead. I have no doubt that Adrian Larrick threatened the lives of those boys in order to get what they wanted. It makes much more sense that they were forced into doing what they were doing rather than starting it and then somehow getting tangled up in the middle of that sort of stuff.

“Goodnight,” Luca says from the bed, his little body already buried under the comforter. “Thank you for the pizza. I love gooey cheese.”

“Of course, buddy. Sleep well.”

I turn out the light but leave the door open. I’ll wait to close it until Jace is out of the shower. As self-sufficient as he is, he’s still a child. I want him to know I care for him and will make sure all his needs are met to the best of my ability, but the gratefulness in Luca’s voice about something as simple as a cheese pizza makes my heart ache.

I could get angry that it’s possible his parents couldn’t afford pizza, but it’s also a slap in the face to know I wouldn’t have been able to afford it either. Being at your rope’s end makes it so much more understandable how people end up in

certain situations. I know my sister would've done anything to take care of her kids, including manufacturing drugs in an effort to drag themselves out of whatever hole was created when Carlen lost his job.

Vincent isn't in the living room when I head back out there, and before long, I hear Jace leave the bathroom.

I make sure he's tucked into bed before grabbing the extra blanket and pillow from the closet and head back out to the living room. I freeze in the open doorway, finding Vincent sitting on the couch, the very place I had planned to sleep tonight.

"Close the bedroom door," he says. "We need to talk."

## Chapter 13

### Stormy

Mila looks resigned as she reaches behind her to tug the door closed.

I've had a couple of hours to work this conversation through my head, but it doesn't make it any less difficult to initiate.

The fact of how I want her to answer my questions surprises me the most because I don't think I'll feel relieved if she told me I wasn't Sutton's father, and that scares the absolute shit out of me. I know literally nothing about kids other than they're tiny people who have a lot of the same requirements as grown people, only they don't have the ability to meet those needs on their own.

They have to eat, bathe, be given instructions on how to do things. It was very clear watching Sutton eat that she can't be trusted to do that on her own. I'd have been paying for stain removal had Mila not been right there beside her, refocusing her to make sure the pizza only went into her mouth rather than all over the place. I never would've thought to put a towel under the chair she sat Sutton in, but I know the person who designed this suite is an idiot for putting carpet under the small dining table.

"She's my daughter," I say when she takes a seat in the armchair rather than beside me on the sofa.

I expected nothing less from her.

"Yes."

My skin grows clammy, my palms sweating. I'm filled with more emotions than I can count or even explain, however fear takes up most of the space in my chest.

I'm a father, a literal father, not just some guy that has been tasked with the welfare of two young boys. It changes a lot of things, including something visceral inside of me.

"Why didn't you tell me you were pregnant?"

She shakes her head. “I don’t know.”

But she does. She has to. It was a decision she had to make.

“Did Carlen know?”

She’s quick to answer this time.

“Neither Janet nor Carlen knew you were the father. They never found out about that night.”

“You said you were on birth control,” I remind her.

“I was.” Her eyes dart away. “I just wasn’t very good at taking it like I should. I want you to know I didn’t get pregnant on purpose.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

She stiffens, her jaw muscles flexing as she grinds her teeth.

“You really think I wanted to be a single mother at the age of twenty-two?”

“Obviously, because that’s what you did. I never received a phone call or even a summons to court for child support.”

“I didn’t want your help,” she snaps. “I didn’t need it.”

“You’re so prideful, so self-involved, that you didn’t consider that maybe I had a right to know that I had a daughter?”

She looks away from me now, guilt swimming in her dark eyes.

“I was afraid you’d make me—”

“I’ve never been the type of guy to force a woman to do anything,” I growl, interrupting her before she could argue her reasoning. “You know me better than that.”

“I don’t know you at all, but you’ve forced me to come here.”

“I instructed you to bring the boys, per Janet and Carlen’s request.”

“And if I plan to leave tomorrow?”

“The kids stay,” I answer without hesitation. “All of them.”

“So, you’re forcing me to stay here? Right after saying you don’t force anything on a woman?” She scoffs.

“I’m not letting you take off with my kid.”

“And I’d never leave her so long as there’s breath in my lungs.”

I take a deep breath. There’s a part of me that’s relieved she’s so fiercely dedicated to our daughter, although I know her stubborn streak will most definitely cause some strife in the days to come.

I take a deep breath, needing to switch gears. As annoyed and angry as I am, there’s not a single thing that can be done about decisions made in the past.

“I know you were too young to be listed as the boys’ guardian, but I’m curious why your mother wasn’t.”

She swallows, her eyes filling with unshed tears.

“You remember her calling you Roger at the funeral?”

I nod, unease threatening inside of me.

“She has dementia.”

My gut clenches.

“She’s in a nursing home.” A silent sob escapes past her lips. “She didn’t even know it was her daughter, Janet’s, funeral we attended.”

“That sucks,” I say, wishing I could’ve found something a little more eloquent, but the sentiment is still the same.

“Janet and Carlen had her living with them for a while, but she kept leaving the house and wandering the street. Welfare services were called, and they were strongly urged to put her somewhere she could be monitored twenty-four-seven. It broke Janet’s heart to realize it was just too much for her to handle.”

I want to reach out for her, but I maintain my distance.

“Carlen never called and told me they were struggling so much,” I say, but it feels shitty to put any level of blame on the dead.

“I had a falling out with Janet a year ago. It was so petty that I can’t even remember what started the argument, but we hadn’t spoken in so long, I had no idea what they were doing,” she explains. “I don’t know if they alienated me on purpose so I wouldn’t butt into their business or what. I don’t know if it was Carlen losing his job or the cost of Mom’s healthcare that put them so far in the hole that they have so many disconnect notices going to their house. I don’t know if they started making drugs to catch up financially or if they were forced to make drugs by Keres. I know nothing, and it kills me that they were struggling so hard and didn’t call me either.”

I remain silent because I don’t know that there’s much more to say at this point.

“We can’t stay in St. Louis,” I say eventually.

“I don’t expect you to be involved—”

I hold my hand up, grinding my teeth so hard my jaw starts to ache.

“I will not walk away from my child,” I assure her, trying to hedge any arguments before they can even start.

“I didn’t figure you would,” she whispers, her eyes locked on her hands.

I want to rage and yell. If she didn’t figure I would walk away, then why the hell did I have to find out this way rather than the day she found out she was pregnant.

On the other hand, I’m in a different place in my life than I was two years ago. I was still in the Corps then, not in any position to physically be there for a kid.

“I can’t leave those boys either.”

“It seems we’re at an impasse.”

I immediately shake my head.

“We’re not. We’re all going to New Mexico.”

“I can’t leave St. Louis,” she snaps.

“You won’t have a choice. The kids are coming with me.”

“So you’ll just take them from me?”

“Taking them would imply that you’re not welcome to come along. I’m not taking them from you, but it’s not safe to stay in town. We have to figure out how to rid ourselves of the issue with Keres, and they aren’t exactly known for backing down. They want money and are demanding monthly payments. They will from now until eternity. The only way to get out of that is death. I don’t plan on dying nor do I plan on letting you or those three innocent kids end up that way.”

“Won’t they follow us?”

I’d like to assure her she’s a hundred percent safe, but there’s no way to guarantee any of it. Not being able to do so makes me feel like a failure before we can even attempt the trip.

“I’ll use every resource I have to get you there safely.”

“And what happens in New Mexico?”

“We’ll stay in the clubhouse. We can—”

“With a bunch of bikers? That’s where you want your daughter to be?”

I take a fortifying breath. It astounds me the preconceived notions people have about bikers. Some may be true for clubs like Keres, but there are more good clubs than bad.

When I don’t answer, she continues, “I won’t have any of those children around drugs, crime, and women with loose morals.”

I can’t help the huff of laughter that escapes, feeling a little prideful of the way she grows angry, her eyes narrowing to slits as I laugh at her words.

“Let any of the guys there hear you call their women that, and you might regret it,” I warn. “There are no drugs, no crime, and other than the occasional gal one of the guys might bring home for the night, there are no loose women.”

She sure does have a strong opinion about other women considering the way she knocked on that damn above-garage apartment door not wearing any panties, but I wasn't complaining then and I sure as hell won't complain now.

She doesn't seem convinced.

“The overnight guests are instructed to leave before any of the kids can see them,” I explain further.

“There are other kids?”

I nod. “More than I can count some days. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised at what you find there. I'm not even going to bother telling you to hold judgment until we get there. Feel free to think all you want. Everything you think will be proven wrong. Cerberus is a group of people who love and care for each other. They'll give you the shirt off their backs without hesitation. You'll see.”

She doesn't seem at all convinced, but there isn't much I can do with the scowl that seems to be tainting her pretty face any time I'm around.

“What about my mom?”

She just told me about her mother, but that's less of an issue than the logistics of getting Mila and three kids to a different state.

“There's an amazing nursing facility there. After we get settled, we can send for her or even come back to St. Louis to bring her back.”

She seems a little calmer than she was when I first told her of my intentions, but it doesn't help to calm me down any.

“What will your girlfriend think?”

I watch her for a long moment, wondering what her intention is for asking this question.

“Girlfriend?”

She gestures toward my hand. “Or wife. Maybe you’re just not wearing a ring.”

“There’s no wife or girlfriend, Mila. I never wanted to be tied down.”

She flinches at my honesty.

I came back to St. Louis to make sure she could handle raising two boys, and somehow I’m heading back home with three kids and a reluctant woman who is only coming along because she has no other choice.

It isn’t exactly the stuff fairy tales are made of.

## Chapter 14

Mila

“You just need to leave it,” he says when I ask for the keys to my car.

“Leave it? I can’t do that.” Not only is it my only means of transportation, but I also can’t depend on him that much. I’m already giving up everything else.

“I have no doubt they’ve tagged your car, Mila. Driving it isn’t safe any longer. We need to leave,” he says, motioning toward an SUV.

“Weren’t you in a truck yesterday?” I mutter, shifting the direction of the suitcase. I can’t really argue about our safety. “My car will get towed if we just leave it here.”

“Stop worrying about your car,” he says, helping Luca with hands on the child’s waist to climb up in the big vehicle. “We wouldn’t be comfortable in the truck, plus it’s a rental.”

That explanation doesn’t make sense. He didn’t have enough time to get his own vehicle here. Besides, I doubt the man drives a huge SUV.

“This thing has TVs,” Jace says, awe in his voice.

Vincent is going to win that kid over quicker than I ever could just with sheer extravagance.

“Satellite also,” Vincent assures him. “But we won’t be in it long.”

I keep Sutton on my hip as I precariously lift the car seat into the vehicle.

“Let me,” Vincent says, forcing me to take a step back because of the size of his body when he steps in to help.

“Have you ever put a car seat in?” I ask.

“How hard could it be?”

I stand back, watching him look at the pictures on the side of the seat.

“Should it really be this complicated?” he mumbles before taking a step back looking irritated.

Is this the moment his demeanor changes and his true colors come out?

“Let me hold her and then you can show me how to do it.”

Instinctively, I take a step back. I know the man isn't going to run away with my child, but it still seems too soon to trust him with her.

He waits, his emotions under control, until I lift Sutton from my hip and hand her over.

He positions her on his hip the same way I had her on mine, but she looks tinier than she ever has. I want to laugh when her brows scrunch up in confusion. She stares at him, and he looks so far out of his comfort zone it's comical.

I make quick work of the car seat before making sure the buckles are correct on both boys' booster seats.

Sutton is still staring at her father, and I have to wonder what kind of relationship they'd have if I hadn't deprived him of the first two years of her life. I know what I did was wrong. I knew it was wrong when I did it, but you couldn't have told my stubborn ass anything different when I found out I was pregnant. Vincent had declared that very night at Carlen's house, long before I climbed those stairs to his room, that he never wanted to be a father. I held on to that tightly, knowing I couldn't risk him trying to force me to have an abortion.

I didn't get pregnant on purpose, but I wasn't exactly upset when I found out I was. I'd had such a deep-rooted obsession with Vincent Chilton for so long, it seemed kismet to have his child.

It proves just how immature and unprepared I was because being a single parent is beyond difficult. There have been times I've wanted to reach out to him, but I knew I couldn't. That confession would come with the disappointment I keep seeing in his eyes.

It's more than time to get over whatever crush that may still linger. Getting my hopes up about how this transition to New Mexico will go will only end in more disappointment. Vincent and I were never meant to end up together.

I take Sutton from Vincent, laughing when he breathes a sigh of relief, like just holding her was biting off more than he could chew.

"I have to go back to my apartment."

"That's not advisable."

"There are things we'll need before we can leave town," I say, standing my ground.

He's going to be in control of every damn aspect of our lives very soon. I need to hold on to some of my independence for just a little while longer.

Instead of going to the address I've given him, he heads deeper into downtown, pulling the SUV into an undercover parking garage and using a code to make the gate lift for us to enter.

My jaw hangs open at the sight of the men standing in a small group as we approach.

I recognize more than one of them from some viral stories on social media a few years back. Deacon Black, the man standing a little ahead of the group, is the owner of Blackbridge Security. His team has to be the hottest group of guys I've ever seen despite them being in casual clothing rather than the business suits they wear in their online portfolios.

"Why are we meeting with Blackbridge Security?" I ask.

As the SUV coasts to a stop, I feel Vincent's eyes on the side of my head, but I keep my eyes locked on the men outside.

"We can talk about how you know these guys later, but I told you that I'd use everything in my power to keep you and the kids safe."

I swear I hear a hint of jealousy in his tone.

“We’re in danger?” Jace asks from the third-row seat, the fear in his voice making me think that he’s been wondering about this for a while.

I don’t know how I would’ve handled telling the boys what happened to their parents, but the staff at the awful school Jace was going to didn’t whisper while discussing the incident in his presence.

He knows that bad people hurt his parents, but other than that, I’m hoping he doesn’t ever find out the full truth. Children don’t need that kind of stuff in their heads.

“These guys are here to make sure we make it to New Mexico safely,” Vincent says to him, turning in his seat to face the older boy.

He wasn’t exactly thrilled to be moving, but he was happy when he found out he didn’t have to go back to his old school after spring break was over.

Vincent rolls down his window when Deacon Black approaches.

I swear the man is better looking than he was in the online stories.

“She needs to go back to her apartment,” Vincent says in a way that makes me think he’s hoping Deacon will refuse.

“That’s fine,” the man says, looking past Vincent at me with a gentle smile on his face. “We’re prepared for just about anything.”

Vincent nods, rolling the window back up when Deacon walks away. We wait while six men file into three SUVs very similar to the one we’re in now. We follow them from the underground parking garage.

For some reason, I trust these guys with the kids. So, when we get back to the apartment complex, I run up the stairs to my second-story apartment, using the keys Vincent finally returned after we left the hotel to get inside. I don’t know why

I thought I'd come home to the entire place ransacked, but it's just as I left it yesterday before meeting Vincent.

I gather up as many things as I can fit in the last large suitcase I have and end up having to shove more things into a couple of trash bags. I know I'm leaving this place, and more than likely will not make it back, so I try to grab all the things I'd consider sentimental while also balancing grabbing the things we'll need.

I hate how many of Sutton's toys I'm leaving behind, but I don't have all day to pack and sort through things.

I make sure to grab the tear-free shampoo because I made a promise to a little boy that has seen his fair share of disappointment. The last thing I want to do is to be added to the long list of adults who have let him down.

I stand in the small living room of the apartment and look around. I know this apartment will be cleaned out and rented to another person before I can make it back. If Keres wants payments every month for the money they feel they're owed by Carlen and Janet, I imagine it will be a very long time, if ever, before they give up on trying to collect that debt.

Due to my stubbornness, I worked hard and all alone to buy every single thing in this apartment. It's mine. I own it all. I had to prove to myself that I could be a mother and give my little girl everything she needed. To my own detriment, I'm exhausted.

I'm having to rely on the man I never thought I'd see again to keep me safe, and all of it feels so very unfair. It feels as if I would've always ended up here regardless of the pains I took to keep from having to reach out to him.

I'm not a superstitious person, but the idea that so many things might have tested fate and set all of this in motion eats at pieces of me. If I had told Vincent when I found out I got pregnant, would his role in her life somehow have kept my sister and brother-in-law safe?

"May I help you with those?"

I spin around at the accent I can't exactly place. The big redheaded guy who has been standing guard outside the apartment has his head poked through the open doorway.

"I don't think I'll be able to take all of this on a plane," I mutter, motioning to the suitcase and bags at my feet. "It'll be fine," he assures me, stepping inside and grabbing everything before pausing at the door and waiting for me to follow him.

"Mila?" Sammie says from her own doorway when we walk past. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," I answer and keep going.

I owe her no explanation. Honestly, telling her anything could be dangerous for not only us but also for her.

"That one," the accented guy says, somehow managing to point at a different vehicle despite his hands being full.

I walk closer to the SUV, realizing we've gone from a Tahoe to a Suburban, the switch making me feel less bad about the things I've packed.

"Is that it?" Vincent asks as the suitcase and bags are loaded into the back of the vehicle.

"Is there room for more?"

He scoffs as we watch the guy push the middle of one of the bags so he can close the hatch.

"I think I'm going to need more suitcases."

"The bags will be fine."

"It's been a long time since I've been on a plane, but I don't think you can travel with trash bags." I turn my eyes from him, already embarrassed for how I had to pack in the first place, but it never occurred to me that I'd have to travel with three children all at once.

"We aren't flying. We have to drive."

I spin around to face him, blinking in his direction.

"Impossible."

“It’s what we’re doing,” he argues.

“It will take a damn week to get to New Mexico.”

“It’s less than eighteen hours to Farmington.”

I stare at him like he’s grown an extra head.

“Have you ever traveled with a toddler?”

He shrugs. “It’ll be fine.”

“Famous last words,” I say.

If anything will make his true colors clear, it’s going to be this damn trip.

Eighteen hours in a car? There’s no way any of them will tolerate that very well. Even Jace, who is wise and mature beyond his years, will struggle with such a long trip. Thinking they’ll make it without complaint or issues is foolish.

“I’ve got to check the seatbelts,” I mutter, stepping away from him.

“You can if you like,” Deacon says as he approaches. “But I put them in myself. I have a son, so I know how important car seat safety is. This vehicle has a latch system. Do you need me to show you how it works?”

I shake my head. “No, thank you. My car had the same.”

“Stormy mentioned you wanting it to be sold. I’m sure that’s something Wren can take care of by the end of the week. We’ll make sure to get a great price for it and will send the money to you at Cerberus.”

I feel silly going behind him and checking the latches, but I won’t let a little embarrassment keep me from making sure these children are as safe in this vehicle as they can be.

I climb into the passenger seat of the Suburban, waiting while Vincent discusses a few more things with Deacon and his team before they all pile back into their vehicles.

“This one doesn’t have TVs,” Jace grumbles, but he doesn’t say much else.

I watch as Vincent looks up into the rearview mirror.

The tiny complaint is just the beginning, and this man doesn't have a clue what's ahead of him.

## Chapter 15

Stormy

“I don’t think it will be too bad,” I grumble into the phone, but I’m thinking Mila was right.

I’m assured she was when Kincaid chuckles.

“Eighteen hours in a vehicle with three kids? That’s not going to happen.”

I pull the nozzle out of the gas tank and replace it back on the machine before closing the fuel door.

“Mila said the very same thing.”

“She sounds smart,” Kincaid says, his tone playful. “How does she feel about the move?”

“I have no doubt she thinks it’ll all blow over in a week or so.”

“You’ll need to tell her the truth.”

“It’s not like she’s been very quick to tell me the truth.”

I know I sound like a petulant child, but we’ve only been on the road for a few hours and the kids already seem to be losing their shit.

“I know it’s a shock to find out you had a kid you knew nothing about. Shadow went through the same thing. I don’t know if Deacon’s guy, Ignacio, is there with you, but he didn’t meet his son until he was thirteen.”

I keep my eyes locked on Mila through the gas station window. I’d be in there with her if three of the BBS guys weren’t inside as well.

She declined going back to her sister and Carlen’s house. I don’t know if it was out of fear or what, but she had no interest in going back to the house. I’m thinking I may need to see if Deacon or one of the BBS guys can go grab some of the sentimental stuff for the boys. They may not understand

having some of that stuff now, but they will when they get older.

“You’re sure you don’t want us to go further?” Deacon asks after he’s done fueling up the Tahoe he’s driving.

“Wren said there’s no sign of us being followed.”

Deacon shakes his head. “All the major players are still at the clubhouse. I have no doubt that Adrian would take care of something like this personally, especially after the little confrontation you told us about in the driveway when you got back to town. His pride wouldn’t allow him to let someone else come after you.”

I hold my hand out to him.

“I want to thank you for all your help.”

We shake hands, Deacon assuring me that they’re available at any time. All it would take is a simple phone call.

He bids us a safe trip before climbing into his SUV and driving off.

“They didn’t have regular Coke so I grabbed you a diet,” Mila says as she comes back into the vehicle.

I do my best to keep my nose from scrunching up, but the thought of drinking a diet soda makes my stomach turn.

“Thanks,” I tell her instead. Making a big deal out of something so petty would be pointless.

I help the boys into their seats, Jace being big enough to buckle his own belt, while she gets Sutton settled into her car seat.

The little girl arches her back, already losing her shit for being placed back into her car seat after having spent several hours in it already.

Mila looks up at me, and *I told you so* flashes in her eyes. I was hoping both she and Kincaid were wrong, but it’s not looking that way.

I argued with Kincaid about this not being a damn vacation. We aren’t taking a leisurely stroll across the United

States, but I can already tell after getting back on the road that it's going to take much longer than eighteen hours to get to New Mexico. Sutton's crying only ebbed for a few minutes, and although she isn't full on wailing, it's clear she isn't happy with being stuck in the car.

Thankfully, Mila doesn't seem to be the type of person who's going to complain in front of the kids which would only agitate them further.

She pulls something out of her purse, handing it back to Sutton who is strapped into her car seat directly behind me, but she moves too fast for me to tell what it is. It calms the little girl, her babbling having a happier edge to it.

"What did you give her?" I ask.

"A little stuffed toy," Mila says as if it's completely normal to carry something like that on you all the time.

I have so much to learn about kids.

The road stretches out in front of us. We aren't taking the scenic route. We aren't spending any time taking in the sights or detours to visit any special places. There's an urge inside of me that drives me to get them to safety as quickly as possible, yet I don't press my foot down on the gas as hard as I can. Their safety not only includes protection from Keres, but it also includes making this trip in one piece. That means paying attention and trying to predict what the other idiots on the road are going to do.

"Not much out here," I tell her, gaining no response.

I glance over at her, wondering if her eyes are closed. I can only imagine how tired she is from parenting three kids, not to mention the exhaustion that comes from worrying about her future and not only how she'll be able to take care of them but also how she'll manage to protect them.

I want to tell her that she'll never have to do anything alone ever again, but in my head that sounds like I'm trying to control her. Maybe in a way I am. I won't let her make decisions that will in any way harm these children, and although I don't think she'll do something like that

intentionally, I've discovered that she has a prideful streak to her.

I pray she understands that I have one as well, and I'm doing my best not to command her life more than I have to. But at the end of the day, I've already put my foot down and demanded that she go to New Mexico, not considering anything else in her life. I know she wouldn't be in the passenger seat if her life wasn't in danger. It's extremely shitty that I'm sort of glad it is because there's less of a fight to get her to comply right now.

"The guys are growing a corn field so the kids can have a little maze during the fall festival," I say when the silence grows too thick between us.

"Creeps hang out in places like that," she mumbles. "It's like those weird old men that a lot of people think are just so cute because they're watching young kids play at the park when, in fact, there's a very real chance they're perverts waiting for some little girl's dress to fly up while she's playing. It's fu—freaking disgusting."

I nod in agreement. Perverts do like to hang out in places like that. Those little mall playgrounds are the absolute worst.

"They're doing it on Cerberus property, and I guarantee the children are a hundred percent safe."

She doesn't make a sound of relief when I explain it further, and I don't know if I have a right to get a little annoyed with the implication that she thinks someone in the club is capable of hurting a child in any way.

"There isn't a person connected to the club who would ever hurt a child," I explain. "We spend our lives protecting people. I may not know these kids that well, but even if I didn't know their names, I'd lay down my life to protect them."

I chance a glance at her, finding her eyes pointed in my direction.

“That’s an easy thing to claim for anyone, but when push comes to shove, their actions are a little different.”

I wonder if she’s thinking of Janet and Carlen and how their lives started to look so very different from how they did a few years ago. We could argue that the people we knew would never endanger their children yet they were manufacturing drugs in the apartment above the garage. Meaning if the damn thing blew up, which clandestine cook rooms are known to do, the explosion could’ve easily hurt or even killed one of the boys. Was it a case of lesser evils? Were the lives of the boys threatened and they had literally no other choice?

I doubt they kept any kind of journal, which means there’s a very slim chance we’ll ever know the truth. What we do know is that there’s a trail of bodies behind Keres MC, and I’ll be damned if anyone in this vehicle becomes a part of that number.

“I can’t prevent a skinned knee, Mila, but I can guarantee that all three kids will be safe at the clubhouse. Everyone there will treat each one of them like their own.”

By the time I get another chance to look over at her again, she has turned her face away from me. I wish I knew what was in her head. If only there was some way to dive inside of there and help her calm down.

When my head starts to think of a litany of ways I could get her to relax, I shut them down as quickly as I can. Our night together was beyond explosive. The chemistry was some of the strongest I ever felt with a woman, but letting something physical tangle up what we’re doing could very possibly ruin everything else. I’m not exactly the type of man to commit, and Mila made it clear where she wanted me in her life when she kept silent about her pregnancy. Getting physical would only complicate things and that would cause problems for the kids. I don’t know about Sutton, but the boys have been through a lifetime of chaos, and they’re due for some calmer days.

“What happens with school?” Jace asks from the third-row seat.

I look to Mila to see if she has answers, but she remains silent, looking back at me as if she doesn't know the answer.

This is a conversation she and I should've had before now, but there's only one answer to his question.

"We have a school at the clubhouse," I tell him, smiling in the rearview mirror.

The kid is a tough nut to crack, and I know the awe he's directed toward me because he's been impressed with the things he has seen me provide is weak at best and can change at any time.

"Homeschool?" Mila asks, her voice purposely low, telling me that she's a little skeptical.

I nod. "They use an accredited program, and it follows the testing requirements set forth by the state."

"It sounds like a cult," she mutters, her opinion of Cerberus only getting worse with every conversation we have.

My jaw clenches, my annoyance growing, but I have to try and see things from her perspective. It's not unusual for people to see what Cerberus is doing and not consider it strange.

"There were over fifty school shootings last year that resulted in injury or death," I say, my voice low.

The last thing I want to do is scare the kids. Every child at Cerberus is younger, but I have no doubt the reasoning as to why they are in a protected homeschool program will be explained when they're old enough.

"Some of the parents were stressing out every morning while getting their kids ready for school. They wondered if when they dropped them off if that would be the last time they saw them." I swallow, my own emotions threatening to take over. I know it has a lot to do with the three little ones in the car with us. I saw things differently then than I do now. "The kids are socialized. Cerberus isn't a cult, but safety is always a priority. We do a dangerous job protecting others, and that comes at a price. No one that we come up against is happy that we're shutting down their businesses. Kidnappers and

traffickers hate us, but we can't let fear control us either, so we protect the people we care about."

She doesn't argue with me. If anything, her shoulders relax a little. Maybe she's finally understanding what Cerberus is all about.

I don't mention the shooting in Lindell a few months back and how we were unable to protect that community.

Silence fills the inside of the vehicle, but it only lasts for another hour or so before Sutton is wailing, completely over the entire trip and wanting to be released from the restrictive car seat.

Mila, instead of complaining, turns the radio down and starts to sing a lullaby.

I hate that her voice is so damned perfect and hate it even more that it's exactly what my little girl needs to calm down.

## Chapter 16

Mila

“What was that?” I ask, sighing with relief when he takes an exit off the highway and pulls into the parking lot of a hotel.

“Kincaid was right about traveling with small children.”

“I mentioned the issues first,” I say, just so he doesn’t forget that I was right about something.

He’s explained so many things to me today, that I’m starting to get the feeling that he thinks I’m a complete idiot and incapable of raising children.

It started with the corn maze conversation, and then it went into the kids in New Mexico being homeschooled. I could’ve dug my feet in about Jace going to public school, but I’ve always felt like there were better options. I wonder how many parents would pull their kids from public school if they had a chance. I tried not to think about it much because that never would’ve been an option for me with Sutton. I have to work to pay bills, and I’d never be able to afford a private academy where she might’ve been marginally safer. Homeschooling was never an option for me.

He nods instead of arguing with me about my declaration.

When he parks and gets out, he steps back to the rear door, unbuckling a sleepy Sutton. I watch, noticing how unnatural the movements are. I doubt he’s ever dated a woman with kids before. Not that we’re dating, but he has insisted on being a part of her life. I want to climb out and rush over there, but he’s going to have to learn how to do these things.

Instead, I open the door behind me and help Luca out of the car. Jace follows quickly behind, capable of unfastening his own safety belt. The child stretches with his arms over his head as if he’s a seventy-year-old man.

“This is New Mexico?” he asks, his little nose scrunched up in distaste.

“We’re still in Missouri,” I explain, having seen the Kansas City city limit sign not long ago.

I don’t know how Vincent thought we’d make it eighteen hours today, but I figured we’d make it a little further than we did. His tolerance for chatty and unhappy kids must be phenomenally low because the sun is barely starting to set. We got a late start today, but at this rate, we’ll end up taking a damn week like I argued we would earlier.

“Just the big one,” I tell him when he goes around to the back of the vehicle.

As unnatural as he looked pulling Sutton from the vehicle, he doesn’t seem uncomfortable at all now with her on his hip.

I don’t know if she feels comfortable with him or if she’s just too tired to notice that I’m not the one holding her, but it’s cute the way her little head is resting on his shoulder.

Vincent pulls the suitcase from the back, dropping it to the ground with ease. He presses his palm to Sutton’s back before grabbing the handle and walking toward the front door of the hotel. The boys stick close, Luca yawning with his mouth wide open.

When headlights flash through the parking lot, I grab one of each of the boys’ hands.

“Can you grab the keys to lock the vehicle?” Vincent asks, and I have to stare at him like he’s grown a second head when he cants his hip in my direction.

I look down, seeing the bulge the keys make in his pocket, but I’ll be damned if there isn’t another bulge not far from it.

“Here, Jace,” I say instead, holding Luca’s hand out for him while keeping a hold of Jace’s hand.

Vincent looks less than impressed when I take the handle of the suitcase rather than reaching into his pocket for

the keys but he doesn't say anything as he pulls the keys out and clicks the button on the fob.

The kids are starting to come back to life after the long day of travel while Vincent is at the counter getting us rooms. The hotel he chose isn't a bad one, but I doubt it's going to have a suite like the one we stayed at last night.

"They only have one room," he says as he approaches.

"Of course they only have one room," I mutter. "Let me guess, only one bed as well?"

"No," he says quickly. "It has two queens."

I'm not in any position to be picky right now, but that doesn't stop me from being annoyed.

I'm not irritated with him exactly. He's here to protect us even if it feels like I'm relinquishing all of my power in order for that to happen.

"I'll get that," he offers when I reach for the handle of the suitcase after readjusting the strap to his own duffel bag on his shoulder.

The boys run ahead to the elevator as I scoop Sutton up and carry her in my arms.

The next two hours are spent feeding the kids after having fast food Door Dashed to the hotel, and then baths.

Luca was gracious enough to thank me for remembering the tearless shampoo. Maybe I'm just being too hopeful, but Jace looked impressed that I kept my word.

As I settle them all in one bed, Sutton between the two boys because this hotel doesn't have a rollaway crib like the last one did, I take a deep fortifying breath.

"Your turn," Vincent says, coming from his own shower.

I nearly choke on my own tongue when I turn toward his voice.

He's shirtless, wearing nothing but low-slung sweats. There's just something about the sight of him that threatens to

awaken a dormant part of me that I haven't considered in a very long time.

How is it possible he has more muscles now than he did three years ago?

I know he's caught me staring when his eyes drop to my mouth just as I lick my dry lips.

"My turn?" I ask stupidly, a little self-conscious that the kids are mere feet behind me.

"Shower," he says, his tone full of gravel.

Holy hell. What have I gotten myself into?

"R-Right," I stammer, giving the kids a cursory look over my shoulder before grabbing my prepared pile of things from the top of the suitcase we brought up. "I won't be long."

"Take your time, Mila."

I rush inside the bathroom, the steam from his shower coating my skin as I close and lock the door behind me.

I feel like a fool, a horny girl who can't control herself. I know it doesn't help the situation. If the man wanted more time with me, he never would've left after that first night, or he would've returned to St. Louis and sought me out. I'm letting my emotions and wants control how I think he should react to me, and that's dangerous for everyone involved.

I do as he told me to, taking my time in the shower. I wash and condition my hair and shave my legs. I can't recall much if any time I've had to myself lately without worrying if the kids were okay. Before Carlen and Janet's death and the boys came to live with me, I was always so tired after a long day of work and then taking care of Sutton to do anything other than get clean and go to bed.

Whispering once the shower is turned off forces me to speed up the towel as I drag it over my skin. My clothes cling to me in places when I tug them on.

I step back out into the room unsure of what I'll find, only to stop dead in my tracks.

Vincent isn't on the phone, he's crouched down at the end of the bed, holding his phone so Sutton, who has crawled out from under the blankets and is sitting close to the end of the bed, can see it.

*"Sheep said, Baa!"* Vincent reads, his voice low. I realize when I look over at the boys that they're paying attention to him too. *"Cow said, Moo!"*

Sutton smiles when Vincent looks over and smiles at her, and it makes me consider all the wrong choices I've made in life. It doesn't take much for me to admit that maybe keeping her a secret might be one of the bigger ones. I know I'm going to have to have some very serious conversations with this man, because he's not happy with the decisions I made without including him. It makes me wonder if he's going to hold a grudge and hate me for the time I robbed him of with his daughter. I know there's a very real chance he's placating me right now because he's mature enough not to lose his shit in front of the kids. But the time will come where he'll be able to voice his opinion without the risk of little ears hearing it. I'm not looking forward to the confrontation because while he was calm last night, that won't always be the case.

I wish I could take a deep breath and just live in this moment, watching Sutton yawn and rub at her little eyes before curling up on the bed, trying so very hard to pay attention to the book Vincent is reading to her.

But there are a million and one things racing through my head.

We're nearly four hours from St. Louis, but it's still not far enough away for me to feel completely safe. I don't know that I will when we get to New Mexico either.

I still have to figure out the logistics of getting my mother out of Missouri and the worry that Keres will get to her before I can. I know I'll have to use Vincent's resources once again to make that happen and that scratches at my skin like thorns on a vine, irritating and damaging parts of me because I'm unable to do these things on my own.

I know I can't stay with him forever, but I also have no clue how my life will look in the upcoming weeks, much less months and years down the road. Will I have to look over my shoulder for the rest of my life? Will Keres give up and leave us alone, or will I wake up one day with a gun pressed to my head and a demand of money I have no way of paying?

"Get in the bed, Mila," Vincent whispers. "You look exhausted."

I want to argue that I didn't do much today other than ride in the car, but my exhaustion goes deeper than that. It feels like it's been years in the making.

I let my eyes flutter closed as I listen to him read about little blue trucks and happy farm animals. I'm dozing off when I hear him whispering to Sutton, calling her a sweet girl, and urging her to sleep well.

When the bed shifts, I'm suddenly wide awake, feeling the cool air whoosh between the sheets when he lifts them and climbs inside. The bed is a queen, which is a very intimate size for two adults. He doesn't apologize when his arm brushes mine, and I'm wondering if lying down facing the center of the bed was the best idea. I keep my eyes closed, not even opening them when the table lamp is clicked off.

I don't know why I didn't consider we'd end up like this, but it leaves me nervous and suddenly unable to relax enough to fall back asleep.

I don't say anything. I don't attempt to climb out like I probably should. Instead, my mind starts right back up, shuffling through the litany of things I can't solve. It leaves me feeling helpless and, worse yet, hopeless.

I've wanted nothing more than my independence. I fought for it as a teen after Janet married Carlen and moved out of my mother's home. Being the only child there made my mom double her focus on me. She became stricter, harder to tolerate. She was smothering me. That's why I went to Louisville, Kentucky for college. I needed to get away from the power and control my mother had over me.

Then Carlen's dad died, which brought me back to St. Louis and just happened to coincide with Vincent's visit with his oldest friend. The rest has been a combination of miracles—Sutton—and heartbreaks—the falling out with Janet and her and Carlen's deaths.

I hate feeling hopeless. I hate knowing I have to depend on others.

I can't fight the tears that track down my face, disappearing into the pillowcase under my head. Before long, the heartache turns to tiny sobs, and I begin to feel like I'm shattering from the inside out.

Warm fingers encompass mine, but he doesn't say a word.

I don't pull my hand back. He feels like a lifeline I probably never would've asked for on my own but needed, nonetheless.

His unsolicited comfort when he has every right to hate me makes me cry even harder.

There has been what I consider a lot of unfairness in my life. Things that have happened that I feel I don't deserve. I'm not exactly the type of person to feel weird when things go my way, but him here with me right now seems double-edged. He's being kind and gentle, and I know that won't last, but at the same time, I know it's going to make losing him even harder.

## Chapter 17

### Stormy

I press my finger to my lips a second time when Luca opens his mouth to speak.

He smiles, liking the game we're playing. I'd gamble and say the kid just likes the fact that someone other than his older brother is paying attention to him. He seems starved for affection. He acted up yesterday in the car, especially after Sutton got upset and he noticed Mila paying attention to her.

Sutton squeals in delight when I approach the bed to pick her up.

"Shh!" Jace snaps as if he's scared that I'll go against my word if they simply act like children.

"Ready?" I ask all three of them.

"She's going to be mad," Jace says, climbing off the bed and looking over at the lump in the bed.

"I left a note," I tell him, pointing to the hotel stationary on the bedside table. "She'll join us when she's ready."

We're only going downstairs for breakfast.

Mila hasn't budged in over an hour and a half, and I can tell she's actually asleep this time unlike she was when I climbed into the bed last night after reading Sutton a bedtime story.

Sutton seems less leery of me than she was yesterday the first time I held her, and that fact lights up a corner that has always been dark inside of me.

Luca acts like he's won the lottery when he gets to press the button on the elevator.

"Jace gets to do it on the way up," I tell him, earning a scowl from the youngest boy. Jace smiles, not arguing about it the way I thought he would. Letting Luca press the buttons has been yet one more sacrifice the kid has made.

“Want us to find a seat,” Jace asks, his eyes darting around the crowded little dining area.

“Nope. I’m going to need everyone’s help,” I say instead of explaining just how fast a child can be scooped up and carried away. “Are there any food allergies?”

“Bug bites make my legs itch,” Luca supplies helpfully.

“Luca isn’t inhaler dependent, but he has mild asthma. It usually only flares up when he gets too hot. Plates.” I hand each child a paper plate from the stack, urging a man that looks like he’s in desperate need of a caffeine fix ahead because I know we aren’t going to be the fastest moving group.

He nods his gratitude and heads right past us to the coffee pot like I predicted.

Sutton waves her plate in the air, hitting me in the face with it more than once. When I don’t react, she stops. I bet Mila would want to strangle me if I voiced the thought that raising kids is a lot like training a dog. Not paying attention to bad behavior will often times stop the bad behavior.

“Fruit?” I ask, handing a banana to Luca at his request and grabbing one for Sutton when she grunts and points.

“Nana,” she squeals, making me smile.

“Toast? Waffles? Eggs, sausage?”

Jace’s eyes grow wide at the selection.

“A little bit of everything?” I ask, ecstatic when he shakes his head.

As the waffles are cooking, I grab a strawberry yogurt for Sutton. Mila was giving her freeze-dried strawberries yesterday, another thing she pulled from her purse, so I’m guessing the yogurt is okay. I really need to find out if they’re allergic to anything. Eventually, we’re able to make our way to an empty table.

I tuck a napkin into the collar of Sutton’s pajama top and hand her a spoon, holding the yogurt on the table in front of her so she can scoop into it.

Jace does a little happy dance in his seat with every bite he takes of his food. I know the kid picked more food than he could eat, but it makes him happy, and, right now, that's all we're working on. I can't wait to see the way he reacts when he sees the daily spread we have at the clubhouse. There are so many different people and preferences it's akin to a major feast every time a meal is prepared.

“Jesus!”

I snap my eyes up to see Mila walking toward the table. Her hand is on her chest as if she's concerned for the speed at which her heart is racing. She looks frantic, her hair a mess of dark hair on the top of her head.

There's a sexiness about the way her wild eyes dart all over the place, checking to make sure the kids are okay and haven't lost a limb or something.

Instead of fussing at me, she drops to the seat on the other side of Sutton's highchair, running her hand over the child's back.

I stand and head over to the food, piling a plate up high much like Jace did with his before bringing it and setting it in front of her. I turn back around and do the same for myself.

“Thank you,” she says when I take a seat across from her with my food.

“Welcome,” I tell her, looking away because the sight of her red-rimmed eyes makes me wish I could fix everything wrong in her world.

She cried for hours last night, tiny sobs escaping her lips in a way that told me she hasn't had many opportunities to deal with her own loss because these three kids depended so much on her. Regardless of the situation that got them dead or the canyon between her and Janet over the last year, she lost two people she loved in a horrific way. It takes a toll on a person.

“They're still in their pajamas,” she says, looking over the kids before taking another bite.

I shrug. “We were hungry.”

“And I get to push the button on the elevator on the way up!” Jace says excitedly.

“Did you change Sutton’s diaper?”

I freeze, my plastic fork halfway to my mouth. The scrambled eggs I scooped up fall back to the plate as I shake my head.

“We didn’t discuss—”

“I’d prefer to do it,” she rushes out.

“Of course,” I answer.

Jace nudges me. “You got lucky.”

Everyone at the table laughs, even Sutton who I’m certain has no real idea what everyone is laughing about.

We head back upstairs after everyone eats, Jace of course taking his time to press the button as if he’s trying to savor the moment. Packing is quick, and it’s just after nine when we head back out to the vehicle to get back on the road.

Instead of heading to the interstate, I make a detour to the park I looked up on my phone this morning. The kids were fit to be tied being trapped in the car yesterday, and I figure if they get tired running around and playing, it may make this next leg of the trip a little more tolerable for them.

If it takes us a lot longer to get back to New Mexico, then so be it. I don’t want everyone to be miserable.

“I don’t know that I’ve heard him laugh in a very long time,” Mila says, watching Jace run around in the pea gravel with his brother and cousin.

“He’s taken a lot of responsibility on himself. I don’t know if he was forced to do that or if he saw something missing and tried to make up for it.”

“Sad either way. Makes me curious about the toxicology results. I’ve been wondering if they were just manufacturing or if they were using, too.”

I take a deep breath before delivering the news. “It’ll be in their system just from cooking it. They’d have to have

clinical-grade lab equipment to have been able to keep it out. I worry about the boys.”

“Janet would never use drugs around her kids.”

“Carlen wouldn’t either,” I say, making sure she knows that her brother-in-law was just as good a parent as Janet was. “I’m not saying they used around them, but it gets on their skin. It gets into the walls. I don’t know what was on the other side of that garage wall, but—”

“Luca’s bedroom,” she whispers, her eyes darting to the younger boy as if she’ll be able to see the things that damage could’ve caused.

“He should be fine, but we can get him looked at when we get back to New Mexico.”

Her lips form a flat line as she watches the kids. I have no doubt she’s feeling just as guilty for not knowing what they were up to as I have been.

## Chapter 18

Mila

“Do you think they’re going to be a problem?” I ask when I see him dart his eyes to the other set of parents that showed up five minutes ago.

“They’re not paying enough attention to their own kids much less ours,” he mutters, annoyance lacing his words.

*Ours.*

As if we’re a family.

He has kept a vigilant eye on the kids and our surroundings the entire time we’ve been here. He’s capable of carrying on a conversation and watching for dangers. His vigilance is making me nervous, but maybe it’s been years of not really being concerned with my surroundings that I should feel uneasy about. How many times have I put myself and Sutton in dangerous situations just because I haven’t considered the dangers?

I haven’t been completely unsafe. There are certain places I don’t stop at if we need the restroom. I notice the creepy guy walking around the little kids clothing section in department stores. I always notice the men I mentioned yesterday that have no children with them yet they’re sitting, smiling, and watching other peoples’ kids play.

Vincent, on the other hand, has been well aware of our surroundings every single second. He homed in on a conversation at breakfast and was even quick to grab Luca’s hand when we stepped out of the hotel on our way back to the Suburban to leave. The man doesn’t miss a thing, not even the glances I’ve been unable to keep from pointing in his direction.

“So they aren’t dangerous?” I ask, clarifying.

He shakes his head. “Never say never, but they seem distracted with their own lives. There are always dangers though.”

I nod, knowing there are. A lot more crime happens than what is sensationalized on the news. There isn't enough time in the day for every incidence of tragedy to be covered. It's part of the reason I think Carlen and Janet's deaths were mostly overlooked. Two people dying in a bad neighborhood isn't newsworthy. It happens all the time.

If they had died in a home invasion in their neighborhood, maybe things would be different. Maybe the cops would have time to work on the case and arrest those responsible.

"How safe are we?"

He turns his head to look at me for the briefest of seconds before looking back in the direction of the kids. "What do you mean?"

"With Keres," I specify.

"It'll be a long time before Adrian Larrick gives up on the money he feels he's owed."

I swallow, wishing he gave me a different answer.

"Leaving could complicate things. He could take it as a hit to his pride which will make things worse."

"Are you saying we should've stayed?"

"Do you have ten thousand to give them this month and fifteen every month after?"

I frown because he knows I don't.

"I have no doubt that Keres will be looking for you. It's why I had BBS help us get out of town. We're not using credit cards or anything that can give them a hint of where we're heading."

I freeze. "I used my credit card at the gas station yesterday."

His jaw flexes as he stands. "When we stopped before BBS peeled off and headed back home?"

I nod, hating the look that I read as disappointment in his eyes.

“You didn’t tell me not to use it,” I say. “I didn’t know.”

“It’s fine,” he says, but it doesn’t feel fine when he pulls his phone from his pocket. “Let’s get the kids back in the car.”

I don’t argue with him as I stand and call out to the kids.

He presses his phone to his ear and walks away, keeping us in his line of sight the entire time.

My hands are shaking as I have to run after Sutton who doesn’t want to leave the park.

“Let’s go have some strawberries,” I barter, as she tries to squirm out of my grasp when I finally catch her. “Come on boys. It’s time to go.”

The SUV beeps, unlocking for us when we step closer, and I look over my shoulder to see Vincent on the phone, the key fob in his hand. He urges me forward with a flip of his wrist.

Jace helps with Luca while I get Sutton strapped in. Vincent is walking our way by the time I’m climbing into the passenger seat.

He doesn’t say anything as he climbs behind the wheel, so I busy myself with pulling the promised snacks from my purse.

“Any fruit snacks, Aunt Mila?” Luca asks with hope in his voice.

I move stuff around my purse until I see blue, and luckily enough, there are two packs of gummy fruits, one for each of the boys.

“Hand one back to Jace,” I urge as I pass both bags back.

“He got to press the elevator button,” Luca whines.

“And you got to press it on the way down,” Vincent reminds him. “Jace needs a snack too.”

Huffing like only an irritated child can, Luca hands the treat over his head to his brother.

“Are we good?” I ask when Vincent’s backing out of the parking spot.

“It’s looking that way, but we’re going to have to do a little zigging and zagging today to make sure.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, feeling horrible for possibly putting us in more danger.

“Wren said there hasn’t been any movement from the clubhouse, and it’s been seventeen hours since we left town, so that’s a good sign.”

I nod, accepting him at his word as I watch out the window. I wish I had more to offer.

“Will we make it to New Mexico today?” Jace asks from his seat in the back.

“Not today, bud,” Vincent says. “Tomorrow though.”

Jace doesn’t argue or get huffy.

Vincent’s hands tighten on the steering wheel, drawing nearly every ounce of my attention there.

He didn’t say a word while I cried last night. He simply took my hand in his and held it while I did my best to work through those emotions. I got sleep, but I’m still tired. My mind is as tired as my body, and I hate the way it makes me feel. I’m drained, incapable of just sitting down and relaxing because there’s always just so much to do. I can’t turn my mind off, and with everything since my sister and Carlen died, I now have a million other things to worry about. Add on top of it realizing that I haven’t been as safe as I thought I was being, and I’m a nervous damn wreck.

I attempt to clear my mind of all the things I can’t control at the moment, but that leaves room for the things I wish I had.

His hand shifts, the right one releasing the steering wheel to make a slight adjustment to the air conditioner vent.

I can easily recall how those fingers felt on me three years ago. They never stuttered or stammered. His touch was sure, just as needy as mine was. We were both all-in in the

hours we spent together. Maybe it's something he does often, but it was an eye-opening experience for me. There hasn't been a man who's compared since. I haven't even gotten past the first kiss with anyone since that night. I went on one blind date that Janet encouraged me to go on with a single dad from Jace's kindergarten class before Sutton even turned one, but it was a disaster. I don't think the guy was a jerk, but he was overly eager, and it left me feeling a little turned off. I never attempted to date again after that.

"Unless you're not," Vincent says, pulling my attention back to him.

"I'm sorry. What?"

"Lunch? Are you hungry?"

"I love chicken nuggets," Luca says, never afraid to express his needs the way his older brother is.

"I like chicken nuggets, too," I add with a smile.

"We're going to drive to the next town, which is half an hour away, and then we'll find lunch," he explains to the kids.

I don't bother pulling my eyes from him when he darts a look my way. Maybe I should. I have no business thinking anything about this man. I shouldn't let in thoughts and ideas of what a future would look like with him involved, and I sure as hell shouldn't let my mind wander back to the night we spent together.

The man hasn't made any type of overture, not that I'd expect him to with three kids with us. Hell, I can't even think that way because my mind will quickly try and create a situation where we're completely alone and it's exactly what he's been waiting for to pounce on me.

I settle back into that familiar voice that tells me he hates me, but he's a nice guy so he's tolerating me. It's the same voice that infiltrated my head in my dreams last night where he was getting us all on his turf before kicking me to the curb. He carried us to New Mexico just so he had a group of people supporting him before he made me leave.

That dream is why I was so out of sorts when I woke up and found the kids gone. I was in a full-blown panic before I found the note. The voice in my head told me it was just a distraction, a way for him to get me to let my guard down so he could get away easier. If the vehicle keys weren't on the little desk in the room, I would've been in tears by the time I made it back down to the lobby.

I knew I had trust issues, but until that monologue started in my head, I didn't know how much.

A part of my mind tells me I'm crazy because he hasn't done a damn thing to make me think he's going to take the kids from me, but there's another part that says there's still a chance he'll try.

## Chapter 19

### Stormy

“It’s fancy,” Jace says, looking around the restaurant.

“Let’s hope the food is good,” I say, picking up the red crayon and doodling on the edge of the paper menu that was provided to one of the kids.

After fast food for lunch, I demanded real food for dinner. It’s how we ended up here—in a restaurant where it’s very clear we’re underdressed for. I’m used to getting stares from people, but normally they would come from my leather vest. I haven’t put it back on since right after Keres showed up outside of the Clarke home. I didn’t want to risk anyone discovering where I’m from.

The waitress immediately took our order when she brought our drinks, Jace ordering a cheeseburger and Luca a grilled cheese.

“And for this little cutie?” she asks, pointing the end of her pen toward Sutton.

“She’ll eat off my plate. I’d like the—”

“Get Sutton her own meal,” I say.

“I’d like the baked chicken quarter with a side salad and the home-style green beans, please,” Mila tells her with a smile, refusing to look in my direction despite the pink heating her cheeks.

I order a steak and a couple of sides, feeling like an asshole. The waitress doesn’t say a word, but she also doesn’t miss the look Mila gives me before ordering her food.

“Anything else?” she asks, looking like the only thing she wants to do is run away from this awkward-as-hell situation.

“Can we add an order of the steamed veggies and a side of the carrots?” I ask. I’m not trying to control what the woman eats herself, but the kids haven’t been provided a

vegetable in the two days they've been with me. I won't force them to eat it, but they at least need the option.

The waitress jots that down and promises that she'll get the food out to us as quickly as possible.

"I wasn't trying to be a dick," I mutter when she walks away. "I just want you to know that she doesn't have to share your meal."

She swallows several times before she speaks, and I feel even worse.

"I overreacted. I'm just tired."

"Don't do that," I say, leaning closer when the boys refocus on the kids' menus in front of them. "I want you to let me know if I'm overstepping. This won't work if you keep all that stuff bottled up inside. I'm not trying to control you."

"Don't cuss in front of the kids."

I tilt my head in confusion.

"You said you weren't trying to be a—" She leaves the last word off, making it clear which one she meant.

"What's a dick?" Luca asks, smart enough to have been paying attention earlier.

"See?" she says, waving her hand at the boy. "Explain that one to him."

I feel my own cheeks turn pink as I look over at the boys. Even Jace has stilled his crayon on the menu and is giving me his full attention.

"It's a bad word that I shouldn't have ever used. I better not hear you boys using it either." The explanation seems to appease both of them enough that they can go back to coloring.

Mila pulls the dried strawberries from her purse and sprinkles a little on the table in front of Sutton. She gobbles them up, reaching for the container when her mom is slow to give her more.

“Restaurants aren’t the best thing for toddlers,” she says. “She’s hungry now and would throw a fit if I didn’t give her snacks. She doesn’t understand waiting until the food comes. All she knows is that she’s hungry. She’s going to be close to full before they bring our plates out. I didn’t want an entire meal to be wasted.”

She didn’t have to explain herself to me, but I’m glad she did.

“When was the last time you had time to yourself?”

She blinks in my direction as if she can’t believe I had the nerve to ask about her well-being. It becomes very clear, very quickly, that she isn’t impressed with the way I’m crossing her boundaries.

I hold my hands up near my ears in mock surrender.

“I don’t get much time alone. Being a single parent isn’t easy.”

My jaw flexes in annoyance, but I do my best to control those emotions. I told myself I wasn’t going to keep rubbing her face into something neither one of us can change, but it feels like a jab, like it’s my fault she’s been doing everything alone.

“I spent a little time at Carlen and Janet’s after the funeral,” she says instead of biting my head off. “You ran into me there, twice.”

I look over my shoulder at the boys, conscious that they could possibly be listening despite their attention seeming to be on their coloring.

“That wasn’t exactly leisure activities,” I say, cognizant not to mention what she was actually doing there.

She shrugs. “I work six days a week.”

My frown deepens.

“Where have you been?” Jace asks.

We both look at the boy.

“Hmm?” she asks, but her nephew’s attention isn’t on her. It’s on me.

“You’re Sutton’s dad, right?”

I look at Mila before looking back at the kid and responding. “I am.”

“Where have you been?”

Instead of letting me flounder on what I feel I should say, she explains first. “I never told Vincent that he was Sutton’s dad.”

“What?” Jace says. “You hid her from him? You shouldn’t have done that.”

“You’re right, Jace,” she tells him. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

I look back at her but she seems reluctant to meet my eyes.

*Had things been different...*

I don’t know how many times I’ve thought that very same thing since she showed up at the hotel with a little girl that has my eyes.

Had things been different, I probably never would’ve joined Cerberus. I might still be in the military because of the job security it provides had I been responsible for Mila and Sutton. I know technically Sutton would be my responsibility, but making sure her mother was safe and happy, caring for my child, I never would’ve been able to walk away from either of them.

When the food arrives, the boys don’t argue when I split the two vegetable sides between their plates. They continue to play tic-tac-toe in the margins of the menus and alternate between veggies and their other food.

Mila smiles at Sutton as she places bites of her food on the empty plate the dinner rolls came on. Just as she predicted, Sutton plays with her food more than eats it.

I send Mila a glance when our child reaches for one of the mushrooms sitting on top of my plate. I hand it over to the little girl, watching her pull it from the tines of my fork with her hand after Mila nods, telling me it's okay to give it to her.

Mila is a good mom. She's attentive. Despite her exhaustion, I haven't heard her raise her voice once to the kids. She made Luca a promise about tearless shampoo, and she kept it. I witnessed that entire conversation between the two of them, and I even forgot about the shampoo until it was mentioned again last night at bath time.

Dinner continues with no more conversation about right and wrong choices. The trip to the hotel is uneventful, a text from Wren coming in just as we pull up outside letting me know that Adrian Larrick and all of his other men are accounted for in St. Louis.

Mila runs through another bath routine for all three kids, and I step out to call Kincaid and give him updates. He doesn't brag about being right with traveling with kids, and for that I'm grateful. There's a huge learning curve when it comes to kids, and as willing as I am to learn, I also appreciate the grace provided when I end up in a situation where I get it wrong.

Mila is standing in the middle of the room when I reenter.

"Do you mind keeping an eye on them while I shower?"

"Sure," I tell her. "But I'm here to help. Please never hesitate to ask."

She doesn't look very impressed with my offer, but since I made it because I mean it, I let it go. I'm not the type to say call me if you need me then ignore the call when someone's name pops up on my screen.

"Can you read us another story?" Luca asks from his spot on the bed.

I smile, surprised they want to be read to from my phone rather than watch something on television until it's lights out time.

“I can,” I say, kicking off my boots. “But you’ll have to scoot over.”

I pick Sutton up out of the crib, giving the boys time to make room by squeezing in closer, before dropping down to sit with my back against the headboard.

Sutton ends up sitting near my hip, forcing the boys even closer together to give her room.

“Any requests?”

“I liked the one from last night,” Jace says, his brother quickly agreeing with him.

I pull up the books app on the phone and start reading.

## Chapter 20

### Mila

There hasn't been much in life these days that has had the ability to make me smile, but I couldn't pull the grin from my face at the sight of Vincent and the kids if I tried.

My shower was slow. I spent much of it with my head against the wall, allowing the water to pound down my back. I'd never complain to him because I'm not the one driving, but my back is killing me from these long hours in the vehicle. I'm used to being on my feet all day at the salon which comes with a different set of aches and pains.

As quietly as I can, I pull my cell phone from my purse and snap a few pictures. The kids are asleep in the bed with Vincent, the boys to the left of him, and Sutton is curled up on his chest. Vincent's hand is on her back, protecting her from falling if she tries to move.

The man is passed out, no doubt exhausted not only from driving but wrangling kids. Being a parent is both rewarding and one of the toughest jobs I can imagine, and he's been thrust into it. Even as willing as he says he is, it still takes a toll.

Our daughter has never had what he's capable of providing, and although I never stood up and reached out to him, I know I've deprived her of something special. I have to wonder how she'll feel about what I did when she's older. Will her not being able to remember the time she lost make it easier? Will she hate me? Will her opinion be based solely on his opinion?

I set my phone on the bedside table, trying my best not to get lost in my own emotions, and reach for her.

His hand snaps out immediately, grabbing my arm before I can pull her from his chest. He loosens his grip in less than a second, but instead of pulling his hand away completely, he uses his deft fingers to brush a damp strand of

hair from my cheek. My throat works on a swallow, because it feels incredibly intimate with me bending down close to him.

“Sorry,” he whispers.

“For what?” I manage, confused because my brain is having a hard time staying online right now.

“Grabbing you.”

I chew the inside of my cheek for the briefest of seconds before I respond.

“You’ve held my wrists harder than that before.”

My declaration makes his eyes drop to my mouth. In a different world, one that didn’t include three kids in the same room, I could see this evening going much differently than I know it will. There was a shift in the way Vincent saw me that crazy night three years ago.

I saw the flash of attraction the second he walked into Carlen’s house after Mr. Clarke’s funeral. I could tell he fought against it, had a hard time believing the woman in front of him was Janet’s kid sister, the same one who tried to interject herself into everything she could. I was relentless, and in my mind, I was subtle in my flirting. Looking back, I know I was far from it, but he always handled those situations with grace and respect.

After the change, after the way he cut his eyes at me when no one else was paying attention, the very last thing I wanted from him was respect. I needed his hands on me, his mouth tasting my skin. I needed to know what his tongue felt like against mine, how it felt licking at my racing pulse point.

I got my wish, and I got Sutton out of that night. Even if the sex was bad, I wouldn’t have changed a thing. As hard as being a single mother has been, she’s worth every bump and bruise along the way. I’d do anything for that little girl. It’s why my argument was minimal when he demanded I leave Missouri and go with him to New Mexico.

“I was going to put her in the crib,” I say, trying my best not to lean into the thumb he’s moving gently back and forth on my cheek.

There's a reverence to it that makes me uncomfortable. It's not that he's touching me. It's simply that I'm not normally a receiver of kindness and comfort. I'm the one who always needs to be strong. I'm the one who's depended on, not the other way around. I don't know how to be that person, and I sure as hell don't want to get used to something that will be taken away eventually.

I clear my throat and pick Sutton up from his chest, taking a step back.

He swings his feet over the edge of the bed, wordlessly standing and walking to the bathroom.

Sutton fusses a little when I bend to place her in the crib, but the second I pull the small travel blanket over her back, she calms. Honestly, the kids have been doing great during this trip. I fully expected bigger meltdowns and more attitude, but I'm glad Vincent hasn't pressed our luck by making us travel incredibly long hours the last two days.

On the other hand, if he had, we'd be in New Mexico already and I wouldn't be climbing into the second bed, wondering just how the damn night is going to go after I ran my mouth about his grip on my wrists.

If there was a way to curb my attraction to the man, I'd do it in a second. It will do nothing but complicate things and get in the way. His being in Sutton's life isn't an invite for him to be in mine in any other form than being her dad. Any notions I might have of being one happy family with three kids needs to be shut down. Even allowing myself to fantasize about something like that will only lead to disappointment.

Knowing I shouldn't have any expectations and keeping them at bay are two very different things. I realize just how much I can't control my emotions when Vincent gets out of the bathroom and does nothing but walk to the other side of the bed, pull the sheets back, and climbs inside.

He doesn't reach for me. Hell, he doesn't even bump into me on accident like he did last night. It means he's being extra cautious about not touching me. It's his answer to a

question I didn't even ask, and for some reason, it stings when it shouldn't.

Although my eyes are closed, I can't turn off my brain. I do my best to stay still, knowing my discomfort is more internal than the actual quality of the bed we're on. It feels like hours go by, and I still can't quiet my head enough to fall asleep. It's going to make for a very miserable day tomorrow.

"I can practically smell your brain working."

His voice places him closer to me than I realized he was, and it startles me.

"I can't sleep," I whisper, not wanting to wake the kids.

"You're safe," he promises. "I'm going to be here no matter what."

I nod, unsure if he can sense the movement in the darkness.

I want to open my mouth and blurt all my fears, confess all my mistakes. I want to beg forgiveness. I want to bitch about all the things in life that aren't fair.

Those wants make me realize just how long it's been since I've had someone I could vent to, an adult who might be able to chime in with advice or, at minimum, is willing to complain about the stuff going on in their lives. Janet was that person for me. Even though it had been a year before her death that I was given the opportunity for that, I always thought we'd have a chance to make up. I didn't see my entire life being spent alone. I never imagined there was a chance I'd lose my sister.

"Can I hold you?"

A tear streaks down my cheek, the soft pillowcase under my head catching it.

"Please," I say, revealing more than I probably should about my need for him.

The smart thing to do would be to turn him down. My head has already half claimed this man just by our connection

through Sutton. It's a very dangerous position to put myself in, but I just need some connection.

When he scoots closer, his warm arm wrapping around my middle, I try to convince myself that it's just the physical comfort that I need. It has nothing to do with him specifically. He could literally be anyone and it would feel the same.

"Quiet your mind," he says, his words shooting the warmth of his breath over my neck and shoulder.

"I'm trying," I promise, but then he presses his lips against the nape of my neck, and sleep is the absolute last thing on my mind.

## Chapter 21

### Stormy

I'm both relieved and annoyed to wake up and see Mila walking around the hotel room. I know if she were still in bed with me, I wouldn't be capable of keeping my hips from pressing forward against her back. I was able to maintain a few inches of distance last night, but my brain isn't fully online first thing in the morning, and my morning erection usually controls a little more of my body than I like to admit.

Morning sex has always been a favorite of mine. It's always been a difficult choice of mine, whether I urge a woman out of my space before sleep or keep her there. For me, there's just something about that time right after waking up when you're still half asleep and just giving into what your body is demanding. For the woman, it's an open door for them to want more, to think that you're willing to give them more than what you promised the night before, which has always been a great night of sex and no expectations. There's something about waking up with women that makes them think a man has changed his mind. So as much as I like morning sex, I don't get it very often. Not that I'd get it this morning considering the three kids in the room with us.

I feel like I missed out on that part with her the night we spent together because she left the room before we fell asleep together. I don't know if I'll ever get it again. Hell, is that even a line I want to cross?

I can easily say she's hot as hell. Physically, I'm incredibly attracted to her, and that attraction hasn't declined in the time we've spent together. It's honestly possible that it's grown while watching her tend to the kids.

"Do they have the same kind of waffles we ate yesterday?" Jace asked, his voice loud in the room.

"Shh," she urges, her eyes darting in my direction.

I smile at her when she notices my eyes are open.

“Sorry,” she mutters as she pulls Sutton from the rollaway crib. “I didn’t mean to wake you. I’m not super stealthy like you are. I have a hard time being quiet.”

I roll my lips between my teeth to keep from smiling. I’m very aware of just how loud she can be.

She looks away, telling me I wasn’t as quick to hide my response as I’d hoped I was.

It’s only fair after the way she mentioned how tight I’ve held her wrists last night. I still feel guilty for the things I did in the bathroom last night because of how close the kids were, despite them all being asleep.

“I just keep sticking my foot in it,” she mutters before urging the boys out of the bed to use the bathroom and wash their faces.

“My face is fine,” Luca grumbles.

“Take your clothes with you so you can change out of your pajamas,” she says rather than arguing with the child.

I roll over, my back toward the bathroom so I can face more in her direction. Despite knowing I’m awake, she doesn’t bother turning on the light. The room is cast in a haze of filtered light coming in around the edges of the curtains. I swear hotels purposely make it impossible to block out all light because they want everyone who stays to be up with the sun and out of the room soon after.

“Can I turn the TV on, Aunt Mila?”

She whips her head in Jace’s direction, and I know the significance of what he just asked. Luca is quick to add the aunt when speaking to her, but Jace hasn’t. I’ve only been around the kids for a little over two days, but Jace has always addressed her by her first name only.

“Of course you can,” she says, bending from her spot on the bed and scooping up the remote from the bedside table to hand to him.

I smile when she shoots her eyes back to me, knowing that little interaction means so much to her. She may not know

it, but she's doing an incredible job with these kids. Her lack of finances after having to pay for her sister and brother-in-law's funeral and suddenly becoming responsible for two additional kids doesn't make her a bad person. There aren't many people who would be able to be thrust into that situation and come out unscathed. I hate that there's an unspoken but very loud part of society that deem poor people unfit to be parents. Parenting is more about love and nurturing than anything else, and most people are doing the very best they can.

I close my eyes, trying to urge my erection to go away, grateful that the bed closest to the door, the one I'll always choose when I have someone in the room to protect, is also the bed closest to the bathroom.

My deep breaths mix with the sound of Luca coming out of the bathroom and Sutton getting annoyed while Mila changes her diaper.

Jace urges his brother not to change the channel when it's his turn to wash his face and get ready for the day.

I realize I've dozed once again when the door to the room is pulled open.

"What are you doing?" I say, sitting up in bed when I see Mila at the door with Sutton on her hip and the boys right behind her.

"Going down for breakfast."

"No," I say before my brain can process a way to not make it sound so authoritative. "Let me get dressed."

"I'm capable of handling breakfast," she says in that stubborn tone that makes me wonder how long she's had this independent streak.

The girl who always tagged along with Carlen, Janet, and I when we were teens always seemed a little helpless. She always wanted me to open a jar for her or help her carry groceries from the car. She called once when she and some friends were at a movie and they thought some creepy guys were paying a little too much attention to them. Carlen and I

didn't hesitate to go get them, but by the time we showed up, the guys had lost interest and disappeared.

"Things are different now," I tell her as I shove the blankets back and sit on the edge of the bed.

She must be incredibly irritated because her eyes don't spend as much time sweeping down my body as they did that first night when I was done with my shower.

She bends, letting Sutton off her hip, and the boys don't seem the slightest inconvenienced as they rush back to the other bed, the sound of a cartoon playing a second later.

I grab a change of clothes from my duffel before heading into the bathroom. I'd like another shower just to help me wake up, but Mila would probably end up leaving the room the second I turned the shower on.

I can't blame her irritation. There aren't many people who can imagine all the terrible things that happen in the world, and unfortunately, I've heard *I never thought it could happen to me* too many times to count. Even people with a healthy sense of self-preservation, who take precautions, are sometimes victimized because very few people are actually trained on how to react when those things arise. They spend a lot of time trying to avoid the situations altogether, which isn't bad, but it only covers half of the problem.

Breakfast is a little disappointing for everyone. The waffle machine is broken, which breaks Jace's heart. The yogurt is of no interest to Sutton. Luca is annoyed, probably more than he should be, that there's apple juice but no orange juice. The kid chose apple juice yesterday. This is why kids are so damn difficult. Their wants change in the blink of an eye, so fast, it's impossible for anyone to keep up with them.

Mila only picks at her food, but I can't force the woman to eat.

I know everyone is tired, and we're all in desperate need of a little normalcy.

After heading back to the room to pack up, we head to the vehicle. I help the boys, making sure they're properly

buckled in, while Mila situates Sutton before putting the luggage into the back.

“Do you want me to drive?” Mila asks, standing by the driver’s side door after putting Sutton inside.

I stare at her in confusion.

“Really?” She scoffs. “Are you going to give me some line about women being horrible drivers?”

“Have I ever said anything insulting about women?”

Her eyes flutter in that way that says she’s thinking back to that night again. So help me, if she mentions the things I said during sex, I don’t know how I’ll react.

I step in closer to her, praying the kids are distracted somehow inside the vehicle.

“Calling you a good little whore while you’re choking on my cock and thinking you’re one outside of the bedroom are two very different things.”

Jesus, why do I think one thing and say something differently. Bringing up that night over the last several days has seemed like some slow bid at foreplay. As much as I like the idea of getting her back under me, actually doing it would make things insanely messy.

She shifts her weight on her feet.

“Get in the passenger seat, Mila. You’re too distracted to drive.”

## Chapter 22

Mila

As quick as I am to actively not judge people too quickly, I realize I was doing exactly that in my head when Vincent announced that we made the final turn toward Cerberus property a few minutes ago.

When he turns into the parking lot, I literally gasp at the sight.

I noticed the super cute houses on the left-hand side of the road first because of the curve in the road, but this building, what he called the clubhouse, is nothing like I expected. In fact, none of this is what I pictured when he tried to explain the Cerberus motorcycle club.

The parking lot is pristine. Hell, it almost looks like a car dealership with the way all the dark colored SUVs are lined up perfectly. The row of shiny bikes is an ode to their dedication and care because I discovered not long after we crossed the New Mexico state line that this place is mostly dust.

There aren't a pile of broken-down cars. There aren't any vicious barking dogs running up to the car, threatening to take a leg off if we dare to step outside.

The front porch of the building is welcoming, several little pots of flowers on either side of the steps. The awning isn't damaged.

"Is that part new?" I ask, pointing to the part to the left that is a slightly different shade.

"Yeah. It was finished not long ago. Em is having kittens waiting for the entire thing to be painted."

"Em?" I ask, keeping my eyes on the building and trying not to let the wave of jealousy I'm struck with show at just the mention of another woman's name.

"Yeah. Let's go. You can meet her."

“The houses behind this building look a lot like the ones across the street.”

“Those are owned by people connected to Cerberus. I’m sure Em wanted them to look similar as well.”

“Sounds controlling,” I mutter.

“People aren’t too quick to argue when the house is included in the benefit package.”

My hand freezes on the door handle. “You have a house here?”

“I’ve only been with Cerberus for a little over a year,” he says. “And I never had a need for my own house.”

He doesn’t say it, but I notice the way his eyes dart to the rearview mirror.

*Until now*, remains unspoken. If this man gets a house capable of handling these children, I’d have no chance of fighting him for custody if I had to. That voice in my head, the one I’ve been trying to silence because he’s given me no indication that’s his plan, pops back up. Here we are on his turf, in his space, and it makes me more vulnerable than I’ve ever been.

“Let’s get out before those inside think there’s something wrong. They won’t be patient much longer to meet everyone.”

I climb out of the vehicle, wishing I could gather up all the kids in my arms. It makes the most sense for him to grab Sutton. She’s on his side of the SUV, after all, but I keep my eyes on him as he unbuckles her, my heart breaking a little when she smiles and reaches her arms up so it’s easier for him to pull her out.

“Do we have to stay in the car?” Jace asks, drawing my attention and making me realize I’m just standing in Luca’s open door and not making any attempt to get him out.

“Something wrong?” Vincent asks through the vehicle.

I shake my head, the first of many lies I feel like I’m going to have to tell the man because being truthful with him

will only be used against me later. I hate feeling that way. I don't have the best of luck with anything in life, and even if he isn't planning on taking the kids from me right now, I'm sure he'll start counting my flaws eventually.

I meet him at the back of the vehicle as he opens it to grab some luggage.

"We could probably build if we wanted to," he says, making my head spin. "A lot of members have had a home built."

I don't know if he has any idea what effect his words have on me. I don't know if he's just casually using the word *we* as if us being one big happy family is predestined or if he's saying it because he wants me to drop my guard in an effort to gain more control of this entire situation.

I stare at him, my brain trying to decide what his intentions are.

"I doubt a five-bedroom house is what your boss had in mind when he added it to the benefit package," I say.

"Four," he says, making me stare at him harder.

"The boys will get to an age where they won't want to share a bedroom," I argue.

"They'll have their own rooms."

His eyes lock on mine, and once again I can't decide if he's telling me I'm not welcome or if he's hinting that we'll share a room.

Sutton, never one to be happy with not being the center of attention, pats the side of his face.

The man smiles at her with such love an outsider would never guess he just found out about her less than a handful of days ago.

I can't help but wonder what the stubble on his cheek would feel like against my fingers. All of this back-and-forth and the battle going on inside of my mind make me consider my desperate need to speak to a professional about my lack of decision-making abilities.

“Incoming,” Vincent says, looking around the side of the vehicle.

“Wow,” Jace says as he watches a very large, heavily tattooed man approach. “Did those hurt?”

My nephew rubs his hand up his own arm, indicating what he’s asking about.

“Every one of them hurt,” the man confesses, his full attention on Jace. “But the pain was worth it in the end.”

“Mila, this is Kincaid,” Vincent says as he steps closer to me, the warmth of his body at my back.

“You can call me that or Diego,” the man says, holding his hand out.

He catches me staring at the leather vest he’s wearing, my eyes getting trapped on *PRESIDENT* under his name.

“He’s my boss,” Vincent adds.

“Do you guys always wear the vests?” I stupidly ask.

Kincaid smiles. “Not usually when we’re at home, but we know how hard it is for new folks to remember who everyone is.”

“Let us help with the luggage,” another guy says as he approaches. His hand is covered in a big bandage. As curious as I am to ask what happened, I’d never do it. “Name’s Oracle.”

I nod, feeling a little overwhelmed.

“This is my wife, Em,” Kincaid says when a woman walks up to stand beside him.

I look back at Vincent, the gleam in his eyes telling me that he read my hint of jealousy earlier. I must seem like a psycho to him.

“Nice to meet you,” I say, shaking her hand when she offers it.

Several others come around the vehicle, and before long, it’s empty. Even the car seats are pulled from inside of it.

“What are they doing with those?” I ask, alarmed when they start carrying them to a different building.

“We’ve replaced them,” Em says. “Did you want to keep Sutton’s?”

It takes me back that this stranger knows my daughter’s name, but I imagine Vincent has been in communication with them the entire time. It’s not like he’d just show up with a woman and three kids in tow and not mention us beforehand.

“Wait!” I screech, feeling like I’m losing my mind.

The lack of power and control could very easily tip me over the edge.

Jace’s hand is trembling when he clasps mine, and I take a deep breath when I look down at him. He’s scared, and it makes me wonder just how many situations Carlen and Janet put the boys in.

I take a deep breath, trying to gain a little control of myself.

Em steps forward, her hands out, palms up.

“I know you met a few of the Blackbridge guys before you left St. Louis, but I don’t know if you met Wren. He was probably inside. He’s the team’s IT guy,” she says, her voice calm without a hint of irritation for my little freakout.

The guy carrying the car seats away has paused, finding something interesting to look at while we have this discussion. I can’t decide if him pretending to not pay attention is worse than him staring directly at me.

“Wren found some information,” she continues, her eyes darting down to Jace for a quick second. “There might have been some damage to the car prior to—”

I hold my hand up to stop her. As much as she hasn’t attempted to make me feel like a giant asshole, it doesn’t stop that very thing from washing over me.

“Even a small fender bender can damage a car seat,” I mutter.

“It wasn’t bad,” Jace whispers in that way kids do where it really isn’t a whisper. “And my shoulders only hurt for a few days.”

“Jesus,” I mutter, my eyes starting to burn with tears.

“That is great news,” Em says, her attention fully on Jace who still has his palm locked against mine. “I slipped on some water near the pool a few years back and I think I hurt for a month.”

Jace’s grip loosens in mine, telling me his nervousness is subsiding.

“There’s a pool?” Luca asks, a thrill in his voice that makes me happy.

“I’m so sorry,” I say to Em who just waves it off.

“We’re probably being overly cautious, but we figure better safe than sorry.”

She’s using we, and she was introduced as the president’s wife, but I have no doubt this woman runs this entire organization.

“We have two pools,” Em clarifies. “Let’s get you guys settled inside and we can beg Aunt Mila to let us go for a swim.”

“Momma!”

I turn back to Vincent, finding Sutton in his arms but reaching out in my direction.

He doesn’t hesitate to hand her to me the second I’m close enough, leaning in close like he has a secret to tell.

“I’ll grab the diaper bag. I think she needs to be changed.”

I want to cringe when he points down to the wet spot on the side of his shirt.

“Sorry,” I tell him.

“Don’t worry about it.” He doesn’t seem grossed out, which to his credit is better than I would’ve thought. As a new

parent, I gagged the first time I got peed on.

“We were able to do some rearranging in order to get all three rooms together,” Em says as she climbs the stairs to the front door. “We have one for the boys and one for the girls.”

It goes unsaid that the third room she mentioned is Vincent’s. I feel a lot better knowing he’ll be close by, if not a little disappointed they weren’t going to ask us to share a room.

The first room Em shows us to has a crib in it along with a queen-sized bed. It’s spotless and smells of fresh linens. “The bathroom is through there,” she says before pointing to another door. “And the closet. The boys’ room is much the same, minus the crib.”

I take a quick minute to use the changing table next to the crib to clean Sutton up and then I follow her back into the hallway, the boys eager to get to their room. I’m sure they have nothing but that promised pool on their minds.

“We’ve put the boys’ room in between yours and Stormy’s,” Em says as she opens that door.

There are two full-sized beds, and this room looks completely different despite what she said. One bed has a Spiderman blanket on it and the other has a Batman blanket, each with matching pillowcases.

“Oh, wow!” Jace says as he picks the Spiderman bed.

“This is mine?” Luca asks, running toward the Batman bed.

“How did you know?” I ask Em, watching the delight in the boys’ eyes to have their favorite cartoon characters on their beds.

“Stormy mentioned it to Kincaid.”

I look over my shoulder at Vincent, attempting to swallow the emotion that’s clogging my throat.

I mouth a *thank you*, knowing I have to be tired if a couple of blankets are making me weepy. Deep down I know it’s more than that. I know the boys have had a hard time even

before their parents died. They've been sharing the bed in my apartment for more than a week while I sleep on the couch. Having something of their own means so much to them.

"I haven't been able to pin down what Sutton wants though," he says, bopping her nose with the tip of his finger.

The little girl in my arms grins up at him.

"You've all done too much already," I say.

"No such thing," Em assures me. "I'll leave you guys to it."

"Wait!" Luca yells from his bed, waving his arms as if he's afraid he won't be seen. "Thank you, lady!"

I huff a laugh. "Her name is Mrs..."

She shakes her head. "Em is fine."

"Thanks, Em. I just love Batman!"

"You two young men are very welcome. I'll see you at the pool."

As much as I want to cool off in the pool, the thought of getting three kids ready makes me want to sink to the floor.

Vincent, always one to read my mood, steps forward.

"I've sorted what I could of the luggage, so this," he says, holding up the handle to a suitcase, "should be the boys'. The others have been put in your and Sutton's room. I'll get the boys ready while you and Sutton get ready."

"I don't think they have swimsuits," I say.

"Damn it!" Jace says, making me snap my head in his direction.

"Jace Eugene!"

"Middle name," Vincent mutters. "Harsh."

"Sorry," Jace mutters. "I just wanted to swim in the pool."

"Come here," Vincent says, making Jace's eyes dart to mine before deciding what he should do.

I'd never let Vincent be too harsh, but we also need to be a united front.

Jace drags himself off the bed in Vincent's direction, his eyes downcast.

"We don't cuss in front of ladies," Vincent says. "We respect them too much to do that, understand?"

Jace swallows as he looks up at the man. "Okay."

"Now that that is settled, I know for a fact that they keep a wide variety of spare bathing suits in the pool house. Give me a few minutes to get changed into my suit, and we'll go look for your sizes."

"There's no TV in here," Luca whines from his bed.

"There wasn't a TV in your room back home either," I explain.

Two nights in hotels and these kids are already a little spoiled.

At Vincent's insistence, I leave the room with Sutton.

"They'll be fine. They'll probably flush things they shouldn't and pee all over the bathroom floor, but they're safe. We can put a bell on their door that rings when it's opened if it makes you feel better."

"I don't think they'll cause too many problems. They're very well-behaved. I think they would get into trouble at home if they caused too many problems. A lot of it is learned behavior."

"I noticed Jace's maturity level," Vincent says with a frown, also knowing that it has come at a price to his childhood.

"Are you really going to let him cuss around you?"

He shrugs. "Better than cussing around you. I've found that sometimes people do things because they aren't supposed to. Taking away the shock value of it almost always deters the behavior. Get ready for the pool. I've been dying to see you in a swimsuit."

The man freaking winks at me like a frat boy before walking in the opposite direction of my room. Em has situated us in rooms that puts his closer to the mouth of the hallway. I have no doubt that's as purposeful as how he picks the bed closest to the door in the hotel rooms.

## Chapter 23

### Stormy

“Close your eyes,” I tell Jace as he walks up.

It's his turn to be sprayed with sunscreen.

His little nose squishes as he angles his face up to me.

“Keep them tight for just a few more seconds,” I urge, tugging his arm a little to indicate that he can turn around so I can get the back of his neck.

The available swimsuits came with matching long sleeve swim shirts which are a very good idea considering New Mexico only seems a half a block away from the damn sun.

A sheen of sweat is already covering my skin, and I have a new respect for anyone responsible for others. Normally, I'd be able to walk out of the clubhouse and dive straight into the pool, but I now have two little boys to watch out for.

“I told you I know how to swim,” Jace says, annoyed when he opens his eyes to see me holding a life jacket.

“You also said you wanted to swim in the deep end. The rules are you have to be twenty-one not to wear a lifejacket where you can't reach.”

I don't know that there is such a rule, but it sounds really good.

“Look,” I say, pointing to Kincaid who is in the pool, relaxing as he floats on the top. I know the man is wearing a lifejacket because it means he doesn't have to use much energy just to float and chill, but Jace doesn't have to know that.

“He can't swim?” Jace asks, more awe in his voice than there should be if the child actually knows how to swim.

I know he wants to appear bigger and older than he is. I hate that Carlen and Janet put him in the position that life is

already a competition rather than just letting him be a damn kid.

Jace doesn't complain further when I crouch in front of him to snap the buckles on his life vest.

Luca's squeal of delight when Oracle picks him up and tosses him a foot or so in front of him fades for the briefest second as he dips below the surface of the water.

I step forward, ready to light into his ass when Luca comes up sputtering with a huge smile on his face, begging to be tossed again.

"I bet," Hound says to Jace as he approaches, "if you ask nicely, Oracle will toss you around too."

Jace doesn't even look back at me in his urgency to get into the pool.

"You looked like you were ready to kill him," Hound says.

"I mean, shouldn't he ask me first?"

"You didn't seem concerned last year when it was my kids getting thrown around in the pool," Hound says.

I frown.

"Life is different when the kids are your responsibility, isn't it?"

"I don't know how to be a dad," I mutter to Hound.

"You put sunblock on them and life vests. I'd say you're doing just fine."

"I didn't consider that issue with the damn car seats," I complain. "What would've happened if we'd gotten into an accident? It was really irresponsible."

"Parenting is a series of hits and misses. Sometimes you get it right and sometimes you get it wrong. No one was hurt, so there's no sense in beating yourself up about it."

I nod. The man has like five kids of his own with Kincaid's daughter, Gigi. He has to know a thing or two by

now.

“I just think—”

My words stop suddenly at the squeal from the other side of the yard.

Sutton is squirming at the sight of the pool and the other kids playing.

My eyes, however, are locked on her mother. Jesus, the woman is absolutely stunning with her long dark hair piled on her head. She has changed her clothes but isn't wearing a bathing suit. She has on a tank top and shorts that make me wish I had a couple hours alone with her.

St. Louis was still too chilly for her to wear anything but pants, but New Mexico is always warmer during the day. I have no doubt the pool is still a little too cold for anyone with a lick of sense, but it won't stop me from climbing in just to try and get control of what this woman makes me feel.

I watch as Mila looks around the pool area. I have no doubt that she's looking for me since I'm the only person she really knows, but I hate the way her gaze gets snagged on many of the guys out here.

I look around the pool, trying to see what she sees. It's no secret that all of us are fit. It's a requirement of our job. It's hard to stay safe in the field if you get winded or if you aren't able to prevent things from falling on you. One of the benefits is getting looked at the way she's looking, only she's not being exactly subtle.

“She looks like she's in shock,” Hound says. “May want to mark that territory.”

“She's the mother of my little girl,” I say, not attempting to hide the disdain in my voice.

“Make sure Oracle knows that,” he says, nodding toward the pool.

The man who was tossing the kids for fun now has his eyes locked on Mila.

Hound laughs when a territorial rumble bubbles out of my chest as I start to walk toward her.

I watch relief fill her eyes when she notices me.

“It’s a lot to look at,” she says, making my heart clench. “I bet Em is so very proud of those hydrangeas.”

“What?”

She points past me to the very far side of the pool. “Especially those purple ones. Flowers have such a short life back home with the shorter growing season. I had a hard time keeping some alive last year.”

I blink at her.

“Really?”

“What?” she asks, handing Sutton over when the little girl practically dives out of her arms in my direction. “I only had a small pot of them. It’s not like I killed them on purpose, but our apartment was so dreary.”

“I mean, I thought you were looking at all the guys.”

“There are other guys here?” she asks in a tone that I know means she did notice them, but it’s not my business to call her out on it.

“Smooth,” I tell her. “Where is your suit?”

“I looked at the weather app. It got down into the forties here last night. That pool isn’t warm enough for me to get into.”

“I was really hoping Sutton would be able to get in.”

“Sutton can get in with her daddy. I’m going to go sit in the sun and try to get my pasty legs to turn any color other than cream.”

“Does she need anything special to get into the pool other than sunblock?”

“Em thought of everything and included swim diapers in the bathroom in our room, so she’s good to go. I rubbed sunblock on her before we left the room.”

“Okay, baby girl. Let’s go freeze our tushes off.”

If you would’ve asked me three weeks ago if I’d ever say something like that in my lifetime, I would’ve said no, but a lot has changed.

It isn’t until Sutton squeals again that I realize I’ve been watching Mila walk toward one of the poolside loungers. A quick look in Oracle’s direction tells me that he’s distracted enough by the kids rushing him to be tossed that I may not have to kill him today after all.

The kids are smiling yet exhausted two hours later. Kincaid made hot dogs and burgers on the grill, and Jace got a little taste of the same joy he had when he ate a little of everything at breakfast the other morning.

With stuffed bellies, I urge them into their room to grab showers, letting Jace grab his clothes and head to my room so they can bathe at the same time.

I don’t think Mila thought I was being serious earlier about the house, but I’m still left thinking about how many bathrooms we’d need as if it’s a foregone conclusion that we’ll live together.

There’s unease with Mila when we tuck the boys into their beds, and she’s even reluctant to ask me to keep an eye on Sutton so she can wash the day off her.

“I’ll stay in here until you’re done,” I explain, watching her eyes as I sit down on her bed.

Sutton falls asleep in my arms quickly, but I can’t get past that look in Mila’s eyes. As gently as I can, I place Sutton in her crib and get to work. The woman has dealt with enough stress. If the boys not being in her room freaks her out, then that’s something I can remedy.

She seems shocked and a little relieved when she opens the bathroom door to see that I’ve moved one of the full-sized beds into her room. Thankfully, the rooms are big enough that it’s possible.

“It’s cozy,” I tell her when her eyes dart from each bed.

“And we get to bring our blankets,” Luca says, his voice soft because of how tired he is from the day’s activities.

I pull back the corner of the blanket, a nonverbal demand for her to join me. If I’m being honest, I was feeling just as unsure of being away from the kids as she was.

She doesn’t hesitate to crawl into the bed, and I don’t hesitate to wrap my arms around her like I did the night before, after switching off the bedside lamp.

“I know I shouldn’t get used to this,” she whispers. “Everyone was so nice to me tonight.”

“Everyone will continue being nice to you because that’s who they are. They aren’t being fake just because you’re new around here.”

I want to promise her the world, but I know it’s not my place. Despite Sutton and the boys, I don’t exactly have the best track record for anything long term.

“You should hate me for what I did,” she says, pain marking her voice.

“Part of me does,” I say honestly, understanding why she stiffens in my embrace. “I can’t say it’s fine because it’s not. I lost two years with her.”

I’m not trying to hurt her, but I can’t lie either.

I hold her a little tighter when she starts to cry. Just like she did that first night, she does her best to do so silently. She’s been suffering much longer than since her sister and Carlen were killed. My heart breaks for her.

I might understand that she felt it was the best thing to do, but it was also a very selfish move on her part. I deserved to know my daughter from birth as much as Sutton deserved to know her dad.

“I’m sorry,” she manages.

“And I forgive you,” I tell her with utter honesty.

What I won’t do is punish her forever for the choice she made. She thought it was what was best, and I don’t think she

did it with any malice. Anyone being hurt by it was the byproduct not her intent, and I think that makes all the difference.

I press my lips to the back of her neck, praying she finds a little peace tonight so she can rest. We're safer now than we've been since we left St. Louis. We're all together, and the kids are happy and healthy. We could be doing far worse, honestly.

## Chapter 24

Mila

It's been a long time since my world felt utterly perfect, but I slept well last night for the first time in as long as I can remember.

The warmth of Vincent's chest urges me to roll over and snuggle into him. His arms leave my body only long enough for me to get situated, and then his palm is warm on my lower back where my shirt has ridden up.

Hesitantly, but unable to resist, I lift my leg and hitch it up on his hip. The rumble of his groan is trapped between my neck and his lips.

The roll of his hips is almost everything I need. When his hand travels over my butt and down my thigh, his grip locking me in place so he can press against me, his erection teasing where I ache, I know I've found perfection.

I bite my lips to stifle a moan, but he feels so damn good.

"Ple—"

"Momma!"

His chuckle when I freeze at the sound of our daughter calling from the other side of the room tickles my neck.

"That's a first," he whispers, reluctant to pull his lips from my skin.

His comment could mean a variety of things, but I refuse to consider any of them. What I do know is that it's proof that what this is isn't something he's used to, and I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing. Maybe new experiences are exactly what he needs, but maybe so much new will wear him out and force him to realize the way his life looks right now isn't something he's going to want long term. That outcome makes me leery about the kids getting attached to him at the risk of losing him later.

I know I should give him the benefit of the doubt, but at the same time, turning a blind eye to all the possibilities seems immature.

He doesn't try to hold me against him when I pull back. As ready as I was to just pull my pajama bottoms down for this man a minute ago, I still feel a little disappointed in the way his eyes lock on my nipples pressing against my sleep shirt instead of looking me in the eye.

Maybe my expectations are too high. Maybe I want some type of fairytale that doesn't exist. Him staring at my breasts doesn't make him a bad guy. Maybe I should find it flattering. I imagine a lot of women would.

I frown as I sit on the edge of the bed and look at Sutton for a quick second before scrubbing my hands over my face.

He makes me feel like I'm losing my mind. Only minutes ago, I was completely lost in him. There's a very real chance he'd be inside of me right now if Sutton hadn't woken up. With her and the boys in this same room, that's a problem. He makes me forget the important things, and losing focus right now isn't something I should do.

"We should shower," he whispers as he positions himself closer, his lips once again on my neck.

I have no hope of controlling the wave of cold chills that cover my body.

I lick at my dry lips as I stand, needing a little distance.

When I look back over my shoulder, I see his eyes locked on my ass.

If I don't get my libido under control, I know we're going to end up naked together. I want that as much as he clearly does, but I'm not the same girl who knocked on his door that night. A quick roll between the sheets isn't all I'm after. I need more than just physical relief right now. If the other things aren't part of the consideration, then I'd much rather keep a few degrees of separation between us.

"I showered last night," I tell him as I scoop Sutton up from her crib before carrying her into the bathroom with me.

When I was a girl, I went to summer camp once. One of the women at Mom's church talked her into letting us go. Janet was in a different part of the camp because she was older, and it was my very first taste of freedom.

The kitchen this morning in the Cerberus clubhouse is very reminiscent of that experience. People are bustling all over the place, each with a different task, all with smiles on their faces.

The coffee machine on the counter is an industrial size and the very first thing most people head to when they enter the room.

"You got too much, didn't you?" I ask Jace as he stares down at his plate of food.

He shakes his head. "I just don't know where to start."

Several of the guys sitting at a nearby table chuckle.

"You'll have to work out with us in the gym later," one of the guys says. I understand now why Kincaid mentioned them wearing those vests with their names on them yesterday because I have no clue what his name is now that he's in the kitchen in nothing but sweats and a thin t-shirt. "Can't have you getting soggy in the middle."

"You'll have to work these off too," Oracle, one of the guys I do recognize, says as he drops off another plate in front of each boy.

"What's that?" Luca asks, pointing to the design on the pancake.

"It's a smiley face," Oracle answers, tilting his head a little.

Luca tilts his head too but the child still looks confused.

"Now that you mention it," Oracle says. "Let's call it a constellation."

"I don't know what that is but it tastes delicious," Luca says, jamming a bite of chocolate chip pancakes into his mouth.

Jace pulls his napkin from the table and wipes at Luca's cheek, whispering something so softly to him that I can't hear it over the din in the room.

Anger at my sister flares inside of me at the sight. It isn't Jace's job to look after Luca the way he's been doing. I don't know if it was Janet's expectation or if it's learned behavior.

It hits me that maybe she taught Jace to act this way so Luca always had someone, in case, for some reason, she couldn't be there for her children.

Sadness washes over me.

It doesn't matter now how they got involved with Keres and the drugs. I know it was done either out of necessity, because they saw no other way, or they were forced into it. Neither Janet nor Carlen were the types of people who would ever endanger their children if they could help it. I need to stop being mad at them for just trying to survive. Something they failed at. What I won't do is fail their children.

"Does Sutton have any allergies?"

I look up and smile at a woman I was introduced to as Misty while at the pool yesterday. She's married to Shadow, who if I'm not mistaken is the Cerberus vice president.

"No," I tell her. "As far as I know, none of the kids have food allergies."

She hands me a bowl of sliced fruit, the cartoon princesses on the edges feeling a little out of place in a room filled with so many muscles.

"I can make her breakfast," I say, frowning down at the fruit despite Sutton's excitement to begin shoveling it into her mouth.

"We don't mind."

"I want to be able to help."

In all the talk of coming to New Mexico, nothing has been mentioned about me working or helping pay bills. I can't stay here and not contribute something.

“We’ll find you something to do,” Misty says with an easy smile. “What did you do back in St. Louis?”

I swallow as I watch her. I’m proud of what I do, and I worked hard for my certifications, but some people have negative opinions about people who work trade jobs. Those opinions grow even less complimentary when they discover I quit college because I got pregnant before my senior year and needed to get a job that paid a little more than minimum wage.

“I’m a cosmetologist.”

Misty jerks her head over her shoulder to look at Em. “Did you hear that?”

A sense of foreboding coats my skin.

“Hair and nails?” Khloe, another woman I met yesterday, asks as she steps closer.

“Here we go,” Kincaid grumbles from across the room.

The apprehension starts to fade when they all walk closer with wide smiles on their faces.

“We all go to a salon in town, but it’s such a hassle because the guys have to tag along,” Em says.

“We’ve had the conversation more than once about wishing we had someone here that could do it,” Misty adds.

“Would you be interested?” Khloe asks.

“In cutting your hair?” All three women nod. “I’d love to.”

Em gives an excited yip, clapping her hands like she’s a teen who just got invited to prom by the high school heartthrob. She looks over her shoulder at her husband.

“What’s going on?” Shadow, Misty’s husband, asks when he enters the kitchen.

“Looks like we’re going to be making a trip to Albuquerque,” Kincaid tells him, but there’s a smile in his voice. It doesn’t take a fool to see just how smitten that man is with his wife. I get the very distinct feeling that all the men

here would give their partners the world. All they have to do is request it.

“That won’t be necessary,” I rush to say. “I just need a few products. I can grab them from Amazon.”

Kincaid shakes his head. “It’s not going to be that simple.”

My happiness at being able to help fades quickly. Until this moment, I didn’t think about the supplies I left at my job. I didn’t have the top-end stuff, but the things I did have aren’t something I can easily replace. Vincent freaked out when I used my credit card at the gas station. I doubt contacting my job and requesting they send me my things would be allowed. I’d never risk Keres finding out where we went anyway.

“I can’t—”

Em holds her hand up. “We’ll get everything you’d need at a normal salon, and we can use one of the unfilled rooms.”

“That’s a great idea,” Misty adds, making a noise as she reaches her hands up into her hair. “There’s nothing better than having your hair washed.”

“Quit making those noises,” Shadow says with a hint of humor in his tone before he lifts a cup of coffee to his mouth.

An echo of chuckles fills the room, and much to my surprise, Misty doesn’t look the least bit embarrassed despite the heat on my cheeks on her behalf.

“The plumbing for one of those special hair washing chairs would be easy enough,” someone says from the other table.

“You’re overwhelming her,” a female says, and I look to her for rescue. “I’m Devyn.”

I shake her hand when it’s offered. She looks closer to my age than the other women here. As calming as that fact should be, it isn’t. I don’t have very good luck with women my age, especially the ones who are in a different place in life. Being a single mom has narrowed my social life a lot.

“They go all out,” she says throwing her thumb back over her shoulder. “I wanted to buy a specialty sewing machine to get some work done and ended up with an entire business.”

I take a deep breath.

“A salon on the property would look a little different,” Em says, stepping forward. “It would only be for the ones directly connected to the club.”

“We don’t allow many outsiders on the property,” Misty adds. “It’s for everyone’s safety.”

“But we’re a big enough group that we’ll keep you busy. Promise,” Khloe says.

“And we all tip well,” Devyn provides.

“Please say yes,” Em begs, her hands clasped in front of her.

Say yes? These women are offering me something I could never afford. As good as it all sounds, there’s no way I can do any of this.

I frown at them, the threat of tears burning the backs of my eyes.

“I don’t have the ability to do any—”

“The club will front the money,” Em says quickly. “If that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I can’t—”

“We’ll charge a booth rental fee or something. Babe?” Em says, looking over at Kincaid. “What’s a good monthly fee?”

Kincaid shrugs. “Twenty bucks?”

“Absolutely not,” I rush to say.

“Fifteen?” he counters, smiling when I narrow my eyes at him.

“This is ridiculous,” I mutter.

“It’s easier to just let it happen,” Devyn whispers.

I shake my head. Where in the world is Vincent? I need him right now.

## Chapter 25

### Stormy

“I don’t think it’s crazy,” Newton says with a quick shrug.

He’s one of the newest guys. He’s not as outgoing and in your face as Oracle, but also nowhere close to as unapproachable as Hemlock is.

“I didn’t say *it* was crazy,” Ugly responds. “I said the people in town are going to think we’re crazy.”

“They already think we have a bomb shelter and years and years of supplies hidden away on the property,” Oracle interjects.

Ugly, Bishop, and I stare back at him.

“We do,” Bishop finally adds.

Raucous laughter fills the air as I watch Hemlock back one of the SUVs up with skilled precision to the trailer. As antisocial as he seems most days, he’s actually very involved with all that we do.

“I have no doubt there will be a damn miniseries about Cerberus eventually,” Oracle says, but there’s a smile on his face.

I shake my head. “Kincaid would never allow it. I think being self-sufficient is a great thing.”

“Me too,” Oracle says. “But a salon on the property? That may be going just a little too far.”

“Em loves the idea which means Kincaid loves the idea,” Bishop says. “And that only seems weird to those of you who don’t have a woman you’d walk through fire for.”

“Is this the only trailer you need?” Hemlock asks after climbing out of the SUV and walking toward our little group. “Or will you be taking two to Albuquerque?”

“Just the one,” I tell him. “Thanks, man.”

Today's plan is to head to town to get all the things Mila will need to transform one of the bedrooms into a clubhouse salon. Since she's going to need a wash sink and one of those chairs with the big dome-looking hairdryer, the trailer is needed to get it all back in one trip.

Hemlock nods once before walking off. We all watch him go, silence growing between us. I'm sure we all have a lot to say about the man, most of it questions because there's a lot about him shrouded in darkness, but everyone is also reluctant to speak up first.

"He kind of scares me," Oracle whispers, but his statement isn't met with laughter.

"Me too," I confess.

I have the utmost confidence in Kincaid. If he thinks Hemlock is the right fit for Cerberus, then I have faith in that. Our boss wouldn't let someone dangerous around his grandchildren, and the man would never put anyone else's kid in danger.

"I'll go round everyone up," I tell them before heading back inside.

Last night was no different from the nights before. Well, that's not true. We all slept in the same room again, Mila and myself sharing a bed, only there was no cuddling. There were no opportunities to roll my hips against her warm body. There were no chances to press my lips to her skin.

Hell, we haven't even spoken about what happened between us the night before last. It's like by some mutual, nonverbal agreement, we aren't discussing those things. It leaves me in a weird place because I'm not normally the type of man that wants to talk about feelings, but the silence is driving me insane at the same time.

Not once in my entire adult life have I wanted to use the words *what are we?* I've never looked at a woman and stood there confused as to how to proceed. Never have I wanted to blurt feelings, or even felt emotionally involved at all. For the longest time, I thought I was broken, that part of me, the one

that craved another person in any way non-sexual, wasn't something I've experienced... until her.

Instead of going to the room, I head right where I know she's going to be. Em suggested the kids stay in the nursery while we make our trip to Albuquerque. Although Mila agreed, I knew it was going to stress her out. She tossed and turned so much last night, I have no doubt she was freaking out about today.

I stand at the Dutch door, watching through the open top half. Luca and Jace are sitting at a child-sized table, sorting through a massive stack of Legos. After hearing Mila speak to them about their belongings and things being too small for Sutton to get her hands on, I now understand the reasoning behind having different areas in here separated by dividers for the different age groups.

The younger kids, including Sutton, are playing with a set of very large blocks. My daughter—it still feels weird to even think that word—is grinning, unaware of the stress her mother is feeling.

Mila stands to the side, watching Sutton while Misty speaks with her. She nods at what the older woman is saying. Misty spots me standing at the door, and somehow guides Mila closer to the front of the room.

“You're more than welcome to come inside,” Misty offers.

I keep my feet rooted in place. Before today, coming into this room wasn't even a consideration. I didn't have children the last time I stood in this spot. Hell, I've only been here once before, and that was because Kid sent me to find Khloe.

“I was just telling Mila about the app we have for the cameras,” Misty says when she realizes I'm not quite ready to step inside.

“I don't know why this is so hard,” Mila mutters, her eyes still planted on Sutton as she waves a bright red block in

her hand, squealing with excitement. “I had to leave her with a sitter nearly every day since she was two months old.”

“It’s just a new place,” Misty says with a kind smile. She’s always so patient and kind, so much so that I’d think it was an act if I didn’t know her better. “And like I said, you can check in on them at any time. We’ll call if there are any concerns, but I don’t anticipate any. We’re having spaghetti for lunch. Naptime is right after and then we have water coloring planned afterward.”

“Look,” I say, holding my phone out.

Every one of us is required to have the app on our phones in case something happens and we need to see what is going on inside the clubhouse. Kincaid has always been adamant about keeping every one of us in the know. It prevents us from feeling alienated. We’re legitimately part of the team, and there’s very limited need-to-know-basis stuff going on.

I swipe through the different camera angles, including shots that show each of the kids.

“I think that’s a spaceship,” I say, zooming in on the Legos in Luca’s hands. “But I could be wrong.”

Mila chuckles, a depreciating sound that tells me she thinks she’s being silly for having trouble walking away.

“The SUVs are ready,” I tell her. “But if you want to just send us with a list, that would be okay too.”

She scoffs. “I’d end up with all highlights and no lowlights.”

I give her a tight-lipped smile because I have no idea what that even means.

“We better get going then.”

Mila gives our daughter one last look before opening the Dutch door and exiting the room. I feel my chest tighten when I give the boys and Sutton a quick glance.

“They’ll be fine with us,” Misty says, her voice low as if she knows I need the reassurance, too.

I wish I had a few minutes alone with Mila, and that longing only grows when she walks straight for the front door instead of needing to make a detour back to the bedroom. It's torture being so close to her but knowing there's a chasm of space between us.

Kincaid is waiting outside when we make our way out the front door. He hands me the keys to an SUV. Everyone else is already loaded up. It doesn't surprise me when Kincaid climbs into the passenger seat of a vehicle driven by Shadow.

I clench my jaw when Mila walks around to the far side of the vehicle, pulling the passenger side door open on her own before I can reach for the handle to open it for her.

When I glance back at the SUV with Kincaid and Shadow, they're both grinning like fools, having read my irritation from twenty yards away.

"Three vehicles?" Mila asks, as we pull out of the parking lot. "That's a bit excessive, isn't it?"

"Not really," I tell her, rather than going into detail about safety protocol and how we might need to leave one vehicle and still have room for everyone who's coming on this trip if shit goes down. She's already freaked out about leaving the kids at the clubhouse. I don't want to stress her out even more.

I'm more cautious than normal as we begin our trip. It's not unusual to travel this way, and as much as we were joking earlier about Cerberus being like Fort Knox, it's really not something to joke about. We bring so much danger to our own doorstep. It's almost enough to make me consider how it might be best to shelter Mila and the kids far from all of it. We bring this trouble to us, and then pride ourselves in protecting those we care about. It seems all of our problems would be solved if we just didn't care at all.

## Chapter 26

Mila

I really thought he'd be the first to speak, that maybe we could have a conversation, but silence only grew with the miles he drove. I couldn't bring myself to speak either, and as intimate as things have been between us before, it was a stilted silence. I have a million questions, but doubt and the risk of how he might answer has kept my mouth closed.

The building we finally pull up to is massive. It's not surprising that it's in a mostly industrial setting. The supply warehouse was much the same in St. Louis, although I'd only been to that one once.

I take a deep breath as he parks the SUV, but I stay inside when he doesn't turn the ignition off.

I watch as Oracle and another guy climb out of the SUV pulling a trailer. Kincaid and Misty's husband, Shadow, climb out of the one they're in.

"Ready?" he asks, the sound of his voice somehow startling me.

I climb out of the SUV and wait for him to meet me on my side.

The other guys are already walking inside. Em made a comprehensive list yesterday afternoon after sitting down with me and asking what it would take to run a full business. We had to discuss the types of services that people would want. The list was extensive and expensive.

"Just being here stresses me out," I confess, my voice low so Vincent can hear.

"You're safe," he assures me, misunderstanding my reservations.

I turn to look at him. "I never thought I was in danger."

He gives me a tight-lipped smile, as if there's more to say but he's just not ready.

“Some of the women mentioned an online scheduling system,” I say as we walk through the front door. “Apparently it’s something that Max can set up.”

“That seems like a great idea,” he says, a little distracted as he looks around.

“They mentioned adding my prices to it, insisting that they pay even though I’m not capable of buying any of this stuff today.”

Vincent gently grips my arm to pull me to the side so we aren’t blocking the entrance when another woman walks up behind us.

“If they want to pay, let them pay.”

His simple reasoning makes the simmering anger inside of me start to bubble faster.

“If you didn’t want to do this, then you could’ve said no.”

That statement rankles even more. I didn’t want to say no. In a perfect world, in the world I created in my head when I allowed those thoughts to come up, I’d have my own salon where I made all the rules. Where there was no booth fee or commission percentages split with others. I’d have the final say in every decision. It looked a lot like what I was being offered, only these things don’t happen. People don’t go from barely scraping by one minute to having their wildest dreams come true the next. At some point, the other shoe has to drop. The deeper I let myself sink into this fantasy, the more it’s going to crush me when it all comes crumbling down.

“They aren’t trying to set you up only to pull the rug out from under your feet, Mila,” he says in that infuriating way that tells me he’s almost an expert at reading my mind. “The women at the clubhouse have a need, and with you, they have the ability to fill it.”

“Some of the guys mentioned wanting haircuts too,” I tell him, not wanting to exclude anyone.

His jaw ticks with the news, and I just have to add his reaction to the growing list of shit I don’t understand.

“Oracle asked last night if he could get on my schedule immediately.”

He licks his lips before speaking. “Don’t sleep in my bed if you’re planning on trying to get something started with one of the other guys.”

I swear my heart literally stops in my chest. How did we go from him trying to assure me what I’m being offered is real to him sounding like a jealous psychopath?

“What is this, Vincent?” I snap. “It’s my bed you’ve been sleeping in if you want to get technical.”

His eyes dart over my head. I know this isn’t exactly the best place to have this conversation, but here we are.

“One night you hold me and the next you don’t,” I say. “It’s clear you don’t want me, but now you’re saying don’t bother trying to find someone else.”

It never even crossed my mind to look, but it annoys me to no end at him thinking he can dictate what I do.

“I don’t know. Shit.” He runs his hand over the top of his head, clearly frustrated. “I don’t know what this is or what it could be. I’ve never had to navigate a situation like this before.”

“And you think I have?” I growl, refusing to let the subject just drop. “You’re not obligated to me or the boys. I can manage just fine without you.”

The lack of confidence in his eyes when he looks at me makes me want to cry, and that pisses me off even more. The anger, however, is misplaced. I know just how much I was struggling when he showed up in St. Louis. Being willing to do anything for those kids, even if it meant shoving my pride to the side, was why I didn’t argue much at all when his plan to bring us all to New Mexico came rolling out of his mouth.

He doesn’t verbally clap back at me. He doesn’t bring up how much I struggled when two mouths to feed turned into four. He could easily throw all of that in my face, but for some reason, he doesn’t. I don’t know if he’s waiting, keeping this

ammunition to himself so it can all come out at the exact perfect moment in order to wound me the most.

“I’m attracted to you,” he snaps, irritation coating the declaration as if it annoys him that he is.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” I snap. “I think our daughter proves it.”

“I’m also angry that you lied to me.”

He said as much the other night, even going so far as to admit that part of him hates me for what I did. I don’t have a leg to stand on where that’s concerned.

I’d like nothing more than to just walk away from him, but this is a conversation we’ve been needing to have for a very long time.

I take a deep breath. “And how long do you plan to punish me for it?”

His eyes dart between mine. “I don’t know if I would’ve been ready to be a father when you got pregnant.”

His confession sinks inside of me.

“I’m pissed at myself for who I was back then. I’m pissed for being angry at you, even knowing that about myself. I’m pissed for being a hypocrite because I know I’ve made selfish decisions before, too.”

I want to jump in his shit for the implication that I was being selfish, but honestly, I was back then. I wanted Sutton from the very beginning. I didn’t exactly get pregnant on purpose, but I also knew that night how careless I was with remembering to take my birth control. I knew it was always a possibility.

“Do you wish we’d never hooked up that night?” It’s an indirect way of asking if he wished Sutton wasn’t around. As much as I’d like to be sure about his answer, honestly, I’m not. So much hinges on his response.

His head immediately shakes. “Never. I don’t know how it’s even possible to love someone so quickly, but I’d do anything for Sutton and the boys. Somehow it’s as if they

filled a void inside of me that I didn't even know was missing."

Sutton. The boys.

I haven't been included in that declaration. It doesn't go unnoticed.

"What now?" I whisper, trying my best to keep my pain at bay.

Him loving the kids needs to be enough. If they're loved, then they're protected, and I have to be okay with that.

"I have Cerberus, and they're the most supportive group of people. Parenting isn't easy, but there's an entire team of people who want those kids to grow up to be happy, healthy adults. That makes it easier."

"You're talking like I'm not going to be around."

His eyes widen. "No. What? Fuck no, Mila."

That big hand of his runs back over the top of his head. "Is that what you're thinking?"

I shrug, my nose burning, the threat of tears becoming more real.

I swear if I start crying in the middle of a place that should be heaven for me, I may never forgive myself. I'm regretting keeping my mouth shut on the drive here. We had hours of time to fill it with all of this shit and we squandered it.

"You mention the kids, which is great, but you don't even mention where I fit into any of it." I take a deep, fortifying breath before making the next confession, hoping that it isn't playing my hand too early. "A part of me worries that you're gearing up to try and take them away from me."

He steps in closer, his finger curling under my chin when I attempt to look away from him.

"You're a package deal," he says, his voice soft and sure. "You're a great mother. The thought never even crossed my mind. I think I want that package deal."

I swallow, unwilling to read anything more into what he's telling me. Assumptions tend to get me into trouble.

"But I'm not the only one involved here," he continues when I don't speak.

"Everything has happened so fast," I whisper.

I don't just mean him showing up and starting to make decisions in my life. Losing my sister, becoming responsible for two little boys, the threat of Keres MC—all of it is just too much. I'm surprised I've made it this long without breaking down.

"Struggling just for the sake of struggling is foolish. I say we give it a try."

I lock eyes with him, wondering exactly what he's offering me.

"Give what a try?"

"Us." His answer is simple, but it encompasses so much.

"And if we don't work out?" Sexual attraction isn't all that goes into a relationship. Staying together because the sex is great is a recipe for something so toxic it has the ability to burn down everything else.

"We have Cerberus. They'll stand with us no matter what we decide. I know it may be hard to comprehend or even accept, but we're a part of that family now. No matter what you decide, I have to be in Sutton's life, and I won't give up the boys either. The club is full of men who will show those boys what true role models look like. Sutton will have more mothers than anyone has the right to ask for. Everyone there will love and protect them as if they're their own, and they will have that no matter what you decide."

"I like the sound of that," I say, wanting the best for Sutton and the boys. It's something every child deserves but so few actually get.

I've heard the *it takes a village* saying too often. It's rare to actually have a village willing to help. Cerberus has created

this almost utopian place where the bad things in the outside world aren't able to infiltrate. And if something tries, they'll be annihilated by all the warriors standing at the gate, willing to die to protect the ones they care for that are inside.

“I want to be a part of all of it.”

He gives me a smile, cupping my cheek in a way that makes me feel more loved than I ever have before in my life.

“You ready to get started?” Kincaid asks as he walks up to us.

It's clear our time to discuss things is over.

“Yes, sir,” I tell him, pulling away from Vincent.

## Chapter 27

### Stormy

Kincaid and Mila begin discussing the requirements for the main pieces she'll need. She doesn't seem as reluctant to go through with this as she did when discussing it with Em yesterday.

Maybe the conversation we had just now helped her some. Maybe she's as unwilling to go against what Kincaid says as the rest of us are.

After a short conversation about which chair and sink she'll need, Kincaid hands her over to Shadow before he walks back in my direction.

I could easily trail along behind her like the lost puppy I feel like when I'm in her orbit, but I need her to gain some confidence as well.

Newton and Oracle are wandering around separate of each other, making sure there are no threats. For the first time, I realize that they're doing this for me as much as they are for Mila. Her safety means my sanity, and it doesn't hit me until right in this very moment that I'd do anything for her. I could easily say that before, feeling like I'd be willing to lay my life down to protect any woman, but only now do I realize that she is so incredibly important to me, and not just as the mother to my child.

"Jesus," I mutter.

"Yeah," Kincaid says, his eyes locked across the building on her. "Let's go make sure they get the right stuff."

Reluctantly, I follow him from the room.

"That pull in your gut that tells you to keep her in your line of sight only grows," he says conversationally.

I force myself to put one foot in front of the other and increase the distance between her and me.

“I think we’re going to give it a try,” I say, knowing he’ll know what I’m talking about since he seems to be inside my head right now anyway.

He nods. “Kids are happy when the adults in their lives are happy, but just make sure you aren’t trying to force it for the wrong reasons. Some people aren’t meant to be together even though they share a child.”

His words make me think back to Jinx, Simone, and Rocker. Those three all hooked up one night, and she ended up pregnant. She and Rocker fell in love, but the baby was Jinx’s. They didn’t let the paternity rip them apart. Jinx is still a father to that child even though Simone and his best friend are together.

The thought of her putting her arms around someone else makes my skin crawl.

I also know all about what many call the honeymoon phase when people are on their best behavior from the very beginning, but I don’t feel like that pertains to us at all. She all but hated me when I arrived in St. Louis. I know now that it was a defense mechanism, that she was fearful I’d take Sutton and the boys away from her. Hopefully, letting her know I don’t have any intention of doing that will settle some of the things piled between us. I know we both have walls up, and trust is a vulnerable thing, especially after lies have been told and secrets have been kept.

So if there are masks up, maybe they will fall quickly and we can see if we’re as compatible as I’m hoping we are.

“I want to pay for everything today,” I say after confirming with the warehouse manager the things they plan to start loading up on the trailer.

“They’re club purchases,” Kincaid says, rejecting my offer with no further explanation. “How do you feel about work?”

“What do you mean?” I ask as we walk back into the store part of the building.

“From my own experience, I know that working while single and working when you have a family at home waiting for you are two very different beasts.”

“I have no doubt,” I tell him.

I haven’t thought about work in so long, but it’s only been a few weeks since we went out.

The itch covering my skin begins to fade when I lock eyes on her once again.

“When will I know?” I ask, a vulnerability in my tone I can’t seem to help.

“Know what?”

“When it’s real.”

“You’ll just know.”

“I can’t stop thinking about her,” I say. “I want to see her all the time, even when we’ve only been apart for a brief time. I would burn the world down for her and the kids.”

“Sounds like you may already know.”

“It’s too soon,” I argue, the same words that I’ve heard in my head on repeat for the last couple of days.

“It isn’t,” he argues. “Sometimes it just happens like that. I was gone for Em in a matter of days. Now it took us a little longer to meet in the middle, but we eventually got there. Now, we’ve been together for over thirty years, and that love we felt in the beginning is stronger than it’s ever been.”

I nod, taking it all in as I watch her smile. Her eyes wander, looking through the store until they land on mine. I swear my heart beats just a little faster with her attention on me.

“I urge you not to listen to what others might say or what opinions they may have. How they would handle this situation and how you handle it don’t have to be the same. They aren’t living your life. You have to follow your heart. If your heart is no longer angry about the time you lost with

Sutton and you want to spend more time with Mila, then you should focus on that.”

I take a deep breath, the air rushing from my lungs with relief. Until now, I didn't realize how much I was holding onto because I was worried about other people. It makes it clear now why Mila thought I might have had a plan to take the kids away from her. But I knew early on that I could either stay bitter and fight with the woman my daughter loves so much, or I could accept that I lost two years of Sutton's life. Staying bitter would only make me lose even more time, and that wasn't something I was willing to do.

“Thank you,” I tell him, earning a clap on the back.

“You'll be fine, and all of this will work out exactly how it was always supposed to.”

I stay in the same spot, watching her when he walks away.

Shadow listens intently as she speaks, no doubt explaining with too much detail about what she needs and why. I know her enough to know that she isn't happy about all of these things being paid for by someone else. She also isn't foolish enough to refuse it either. I'm fairly certain she's already trying to formulate a plan to pay it all back, just as I'm certain that Kincaid would never let it happen.

## Chapter 28

Mila

The atmosphere in the vehicle feels different from how it did on the drive in. The air isn't clouded with a million questions. I don't have the answers to everything, but I'm in a better position of understanding after speaking with him earlier.

Vincent clasps my hand in his when I go to pull it back after adjusting the air conditioner.

It probably shouldn't thrill me the way it does. I feel like a schoolgirl holding her crush's hand which is ridiculous considering the things I've done with this man.

I want to sink inside of him when he rubs his thumb back and forth over the top of my hand. It has to be the most non-sexual touch, but my body doesn't understand the difference between this and his hands on my naked skin.

He chuckles when I swallow, telling me he's well aware of the way my body reacts to his. I'd feel embarrassed if two seconds later he didn't shift in his own seat.

"I think we can give Jace the rest of this week to get acclimated, but then he'll need to get started back to school," he says.

I turn my head and blink in his direction. That was the very last thing I thought he'd say right now.

I figured we were seconds away from him unzipping his pants and asking for road head.

"Okay," I say stupidly, trying my best to get on the same wavelength as him.

"And Luca will start kindergarten in the fall."

I nod. "I was wondering how all that would work."

"They'll go to the nursery on a regular schedule. Next week, Luca will do what the non-school kids do, and Jace will be with the school-aged kids."

“No, I mean how do we get them registered?”

Vincent only takes his eyes off the road for a second to look over at me. He shrugs. “I don’t know. That’s a question for Em and Misty. I’ve never had to sign a kid up for school before.”

“Me either,” I confess.

We both chuckle.

“Something we get to do together,” he says, lifting our combined hands so he can press his lips to the back of mine. “The kids are going to love the Fourth of July celebration. It was open to the community last year, but I overheard Kincaid talking about making it club exclusive.”

“I know my opinion doesn’t matter, but I’d prefer that. I don’t know a lot of people connected to the club, but I’d feel better if people who weren’t connected weren’t allowed there.”

He nods as if he feels the same way.

“People will be disappointed, but their feelings aren’t really important to me. I need my family safe.”

*My family.*

Two little words that somehow make me feel wanted, needed, cherished.

It all feels like a fairytale, the impossibility of things making a shift in the blink of an eye. One day, I’m struggling to buy groceries and the next, I’m leaving a cosmetology superstore with thousands of dollars in supplies that Kincaid didn’t blink an eye at when he swiped his card earlier.

“I feel like I should warn you because you’ve only been in New Mexico for a couple of days.”

“That sounds ominous,” I mutter.

“It’s nothing bad, but as you can tell by today, the club is really protective. It’s not a bid to control you, but we always travel in packs. If you decide you want to go shopping, you

won't do so alone. There's no running to town to get a coffee with a wave and saying you'll be back in an hour."

"Like right now while we figure out what's going to happen with Keres or—"

"Like ever," he's quick to say. "Our jobs are dangerous, and there's no shortage of people that we upset. We take down trafficking rings, and that shuts down not only money but people's connections to the sex trade. It angers a lot of people. Retaliation is very real and could happen at any moment." His jaw clenches as if he's thinking of something very specific right now.

"We need everyone safe, and that means always being vigilant and protective. For some it might seem smothering. There are people in town who think we're some sort of cult."

"I imagine people don't have a lot of folks that care about them, and they find it hard to fathom what that would look like."

"Maybe, but I just wanted you to know in case you felt like you were getting weird stares if we go out in town together."

I take a deep breath, grateful that he's letting me know but also a little apprehensive.

"Tell me about this corn field," I say rather than getting lost focusing on something that hasn't come to pass yet.

I haven't been around long, but I haven't gotten a bad vibe off of anyone I've met at the clubhouse either. It might be jealousy or simple misunderstanding that would make a group of people dislike Cerberus, but I doubt anyone who knows them would think that way.

Vincent chuckles. "The guys seem to think they're going to be able to grow this massive patch of corn."

"And they're planning to make it a maze for the kids?"

"They've already planted it, and in their wisdom, they did so in a maze pattern. That way they don't have to go in and

cut anything down. Forward thinking.” That’s what Boomer called it.

“And while they were doing all this thinking, did they consider what they were going to do with the actual corn?”

His smile is quick. “Em mentioned giving it to the local shelters, but she also mentioned adding it to our food storages.”

“Storages?”

His cheeks go pink.

“My explanation isn’t going to make us sound less cultish.”

I chuckle, reading between the lines that Cerberus probably has a lot of food in storage.

“I’d like to spend some time together when we get back. I think it would benefit us if we got to know each other better.”

I nod in agreement, licking my lips with just how we can get to know each other.

“That might be hard to do considering the three responsibilities we have back at the clubhouse.”

“That’s where our village comes in that we talked about. They know that alone time is just as important as time with the kids is.” His eyes kick over to mine quickly. “It’s healthy to spend time doing adult things.”

My cheeks instantly blush, the heat rising up from my neck.

It’s my turn to shift in my seat, but then he does it too. I feel so much better knowing that I’m not alone in my attraction.

When we get back to the clubhouse, I feel like we’ve been set up.

First, Kincaid tells Vincent that he and the other guys can handle all the unloading. We took measurements with Em yesterday under the supervision of Kincaid so we knew what

would work in the space I'm being provided. Kincaid knows exactly where everything needs to go.

Secondly, Vincent shows me the app on his phone connected to the nursery. Sutton is fast asleep, her little fist holding the hand of a baby doll.

"I'm just going to put these in my bedroom," I tell him, holding the handle of the bag I carried out of the store earlier.

He nods, holding the front door of the clubhouse open for me. I feel the heat of his eyes on my back, but the distance between us doesn't grow. He's slowly following behind me, and I know exactly what will happen if we end up someplace alone.

I wouldn't be able to resist him if I tried.

I step inside my bedroom, the bed straightened because he was the last one in it this morning. Had I been the last one to get out, I'm sure it would have stayed in a tangled mess all day.

At the same time that I drop the bag containing the clippers I need to oil, I hear the bedroom door close. The lock being flipped into place echoes around the room like a gunshot.

"Mila," he whispers a second before I feel the warmth of him at my back.

His lips fall to my neck, and I tilt my head, giving him all the access he could ever want.

His hand splays on my lower abdomen, and I cover it with my own, our fingers intertwining.

This is very reminiscent of the other morning, only now there isn't a toddler in a crib nor two little boys with us in the room.

And for that I'm glad, because as much as I was relieved for Sutton to call out to me the other morning, there's nothing I want more than to spend a little time getting lost in this man.

## Chapter 29

### Stormy

Her skin has to be the softest thing I've ever brushed my fingers over. I almost want to apologize because my own skin is rough and more than likely abrasive on her flesh. Then I remember how rough she liked it the last time we were given an opportunity like this.

Somehow this feels different. I want to disrespect her body but also only in the most respectful way.

I run my nose up the line of her throat, taking in her scent and doing my best to commit it to memory. I feel like a feral animal, wanting to rip at her clothes and rut into her. It takes everything in me not to do just that because I also want it to last.

I told her I wanted to give us a try, but I meant more than just this. As much as I want her body, I also don't think I'll be satisfied until I have her heart as well. Not knowing exactly what she wants makes me nervous. If I treat her one way when she expects or wants something different, I could damage what I'm trying to build here.

I turn her in my arms, pressing my fingers to her lips when she lifts up on her toes to press her mouth to mine.

"We need to talk first," I whisper, my hips rolling against hers. I'm trying to maintain control that is quickly slipping out of my grasp.

Her face falls.

"What's that look for?"

She swallows, shaking her head in a bid to refuse to answer.

"Don't do that, Mila. Don't pull away from me."

"Are you about to tell me that this is just sex, that you won't call me tomorrow no matter how good it is?"

I open my mouth to argue, but she's only repeating verbatim what I told her three years ago.

"That's not us any longer."

"Then why the hesitation?" Her eyes search mine, and I can tell just how tentative her hope is.

"I don't know if you want me to fuck you hard or soft."

A slow smile spreads across her face.

"Yes."

I huff a laugh, my right hand urging her head back so I can nip at her neck.

"A little of both?"

"If they're both on the menu," she whispers, her voice sounding strained.

I take a step back, my thick cock straining in my jeans when I break all contact with her.

"Condoms?" I ask, swallowing the insistency to step back into her.

"I'm on birth control."

I huff a laugh, but she doesn't find anything comical.

"I'll fuck you bare again, Mila. I don't give a shit."

She shakes her head. "I had an IUD put in after Sutton was born."

"So you can't get pregnant?"

She shakes her head. "No matter how much you come inside of me."

I groan with need. She's the only woman I've ever gone bare with, and just the memory of what it felt like to slide into a tight pussy without a barrier covering my dick threatens to end things before I even get my cock out of my pants.

"Jesus," I mutter, ripping at her clothes. "I fucking love the sound of that."

I pull her shirt over her head, not wasting a second to lift the cup of her bra out of the way and suck her peaked nipple into my mouth.

“This will complicate things,” she says, her fingers fumbling with my zipper.

“Sex always complicates things,” I quickly agree. “Want to stop?”

She pulls back, her eyes searching mine for the briefest of moments before she shakes her head. “Aren’t things already complicated between us?”

I huff a laugh. “A little.”

“Do you want to stop?”

“Not a chance,” I assure her, leaning in closer and brushing my lips over hers. “And I promise to call you tomorrow and the next day and the next.”

It’s her turn to laugh, her hands going back to work and finally lowering my zipper. The relief I feel is immediate, but then her hand slides behind the fabric of my boxer briefs and it brings with it a whole other kind of need.

“Mila,” I groan, letting my hands drop to my sides so she can work her hands over my length.

“How did I forget about this?” She encircles my cock in her palm, running her hand gently up and down. “So big. I remember now how it stretched me.”

“Swear to God, woman,” I warn, seconds away from painting her skin with cum.

She has a mischievous look in her eyes, making me take a step back. I’m all for handing over a little control, but I draw the line at being tortured. Maybe I’ll be more amenable after she comes, but not a second sooner.

Mila has other plans, however, and who am I to argue when her hands trail down my thighs as she drops lower, her mouth tracing my abs.

Her eyes cast upward as her tongue sneaks out to taste the bead of precum at the tip of my cock is nearly my undoing. I clench my fists at my sides, open and closed, open and closed, the rhythm is what I try to focus on in an effort to gain a little control.

My jaw drops when she wraps her lips around me, her cheeks hollowing with suction. I whimper, the noise a little less masculine that I'd like. Head tilted back, she traces the underside of my cock with the very tip of her tongue, my dick kicking against it, rewarding her with a burst of pre-ejaculate.

She makes a sound of appreciation in her throat when she starts to suck at me again.

My legs shake, my pleasure threatening to take over all control. I'm afraid it will leave me in a crumpled mess on the floor.

"Mila," I plead, my head spinning with need.

I could easily grip the back of her head and let her suck me off. I doubt she'd argue, but I've imagined her pussy clenching at my cock in orgasm too much lately for me to just throw the idea out.

My nuts grow heavier, and I have to stop her. In a bid to keep from coming, I snap my hand out and grab a handful of her hair. The apology is on my lips but never comes to fruition when I see the fire in her eyes.

"So fucking filthy," I tell her.

I want to fuck her senseless.

I want to cherish her.

I want her pussy to ache when we're done.

I want to worship every inch of her body.

"Take your pants off," I command, my fingers still tangled in her hair.

She's quick to push her leggings down, and I allow her to dip down to get them free of her legs.

I have a million options right now.

I could throw her on her back.

Hell, she's small enough, I could simply pick her up, force her legs around my hips and slide her down my cock.

I could urge her to her stomach and fuck her from behind, but if I did that I couldn't kiss her, and I'm aching for her lips on mine as much as I'm in need of her pussy around my cock.

Maybe looking back, I'll regret not bothering to pull my pants from around my calves, but I just can't worry about it right now.

"I respect you," I tell her as I lower the two of us to the bed.

She chuckles. "Okay."

"I need you to know that because I'm not taking my jeans and boots off before—"

She screams when I press into her fully.

Jesus, I probably should've warned her or primed her first.

"Fuck, sorry," I groan, pulling back, but her legs lock as best they can around my waist.

"Don't."

Our mouths join but it's more just sharing breath than actual kissing.

"Am I hurting you?" I ask when I press forward once again.

"In the best way possible," she answers, her knees dropping open a little wider to give me better access.

I find the end of her with every surge forward, and I was wrong about remembering how that first night was. Either my memory is shit or this is even better. I'd swear on a stack of Bibles that I've never felt anything like this before.

"You're perfect," I tell her, one hand on her cheek, the other near her head to keep from crushing her.

“You feel so g-good,” she stammers before licking her lips.

Jealous of her tongue, I swipe at hers with mine, needing to taste every inch of her.

With our mouths locked, I curl over her body, my hips speeding up.

I swallow each one of her moans much the same way she does mine.

“Baby,” I whisper.

“Me too,” she answers, but her body is already giving me what I need. Her pussy pulses, each one of the tiny muscles inside of her rippling down my length. It’s absolute heaven. Nothing has ever been better.

We had that quick conversation about sex making things complicated, but I think we were both wrong. There’s nothing at all complicated about this. Experiencing this together is the most natural feeling in the world. It’s like being lost for a thousand years only to find home when you least expect it.

When my cock kicks inside of her, my cum filling her, I only have one regret, and that’s not calling her the next day three years ago. As my body shakes from my own orgasm, I try not to think about the regret I’m feeling for missing the last three years of her life. I think I might’ve wanted that as much as I wanted the last two years with Sutton.

## Chapter 30

Mila

“You don’t have to cut it with a fork,” Vincent tells Luca as the child struggles with using a butter knife to cut a sausage link. “Look.”

Vincent picks up a link from his own plate and shoves the thing in his mouth.

“Maybe don’t try and eat the entire thing in one go,” I suggest to Luca.

“My hands will get dirty,” Luca says, dropping the knife to his plate but not instantly picking up the sausage.

“Don’t worry,” Vincent says. “It’s our week to shower.”

Luca’s eyes snap from him back to me.

“He’s joking,” I tell him.

“It’s not our week?” Vincent teases, and Luca looks even more confused.

“All children struggle to understand sarcasm and teasing,” Misty says, and I know she does this because she’s reading my face.

I’ve been concerned about deficits with Luca, especially after realizing that his bedroom shared a wall with the drug lab Janet and Carlen had in their above-garage apartment. We had him evaluated last week at the hospital and they didn’t find anything clinically wrong, but we were told to watch him closely and to call with any concerns.

“We get to use water every day,” I tell Luca. “Vincent was just joking.”

The boy looks over at Vincent as if he has to make sure. Vincent smiles, and that seems to be enough to ease the boy’s mind. He tentatively picks up the sausage and takes a bite off the end, accepting a napkin when I pass one across the table to him.

I sit in silence, watching him and the boys interact.

We've been here a little over a week, and the man hasn't once faltered with the kids. He's never huffed in irritation when they ask the same question a million times in a row. He didn't get annoyed when we all lost sleep over the new teeth Sutton is cutting. He's strong and resilient, smiling during the times I want to cry.

He has held me every night. He has felt one hundred percent present since the day we came back from Albuquerque. I haven't caught him slipping. I know it's toxic to have one foot in and one foot out of a situation, but for the life of me I just can't seem to jump in with both feet.

I've made so many wrong decisions. There have been so many missteps in my life that I can't help but wonder if this is one of them. I've felt sure about other situations in my life. I was positive that keeping Sutton a secret from Vincent was the right thing to do, and now I know I was so wrong in that choice.

I don't want this to end up like that. I tried to keep my heart out of it, but I think I knew before we even made it to the clubhouse that it was impossible to do.

I feel cocooned and safe, protected, not just by him but by everyone here. Em, Misty, and Khloe provide me with reassurance that being here is the right choice.

"The boys will be helping me in the garage today," Vincent says, earning a yippee of joy from both kids.

I don't know what they get up to in that massive garage, but he says he's been teaching them manly things. What I do know is that they haven't asked to watch television once since we got here.

"The plumbing is finally done in your salon," Em says. "So Sutton will come with me while you get to work on getting it all together."

Before coming here, I'd argue with anyone who told me what they were going to be doing with my child rather than

asking, but I don't feel defensive when it comes to her for some reason.

I give her a quick nod before making sure that all the kids have eaten their breakfast.

"No," Jace says when I stand and pick my plate up. "You cooked. We do dishes." He looks over at Vincent who winks at the kids in approval.

"Well, thank you," I say, handing over my plate to him.

Vincent presses a quick kiss to my cheek. "Tomorrow morning after breakfast, you're mine for a couple hours."

His words are more than a promise. We've learned, as I'm sure many parents have, that a lot can be done in twenty minutes alone. But I know we're also both itching for a little longer time together than that.

My cheeks heat as I look away, afraid someone else might've heard him.

"Come on, sweet girl," Em says as she approaches.

Seeing Sutton reach her arms up to Em makes my heart clench, wishing my own mom were here and healthy.

I'm glad Sutton has someone she can see as a grandmotherly figure, but it also stings a little that she'll never really have that from my mom.

I take a deep breath and stand as Vincent pulls out the bottom drawer below the sink. There's a step stool built in, making it easier for Jace to reach the water faucet so he can wash dishes.

"We'll see you in a few hours," Em says. "Tell Momma later alligator."

Sutton attempts to repeat the goodbye, but it's a mashup of vowels and consonants that don't make much sense.

I wave at the smiling girl before they disappear around the corner.

The last week and a half since we got here has gone by fast, but at the same time, each day since Albuquerque has

been effortless. It's as if the stress I felt every second of every day has just faded away. I no longer have to worry about bills or groceries or getting up and getting the kids ready so I can go to a job I hate.

I'm sleeping better, and I know a lot of that has to do with everything that Vincent has offered me, and it's not just the safety and security.

He's been generous with his time, helping any time he sees a need, and without asking. He's even gotten the boys to be more cognizant of others' needs.

He mentioned last night that they're going to be leaving for work soon, and although I know it will be out of the country, he didn't give me much more information than that. I'm left wondering if I've somehow managed to jinx everyone, that maybe my bad luck has ended but has shifted to someone else just because I've entered their orbit.

"Are we ready to get started?" Misty asks as she walks into the kitchen. "I brought my picture hanging kit."

She holds up a drill of some kind and a clear box that has a ton of different screws and brackets in it.

"Are you trying to put me out of a job?" Oracle asks as he walks in with his own drill and supplies, his looking much more professional than Misty's.

"I would never," she says, laying her tools and kit on the table, a hint of relief in her eyes.

She told me once last week that the quickest way to get a man to fix something is by saying you'll do it yourself.

I huff a laugh at her when she winks because she just proved herself right.

"I figured you'd be in the garage with the guys," I tease.

He shakes his head. "I can ride a bike, but I'm better at handyman stuff than mechanics. I don't think my skills would leave any bike safe to ride. So hanging shelves is the plan for today."

“Don’t let him lie to you,” Devyn says as she walks up with a wide grin on her face.

She offered to make curtains for the little salon we’re working on getting up and running and offered it in trade for a haircut.

“He fixed one of my sewing machines the other day,” she adds.

“He broke that sewing machine first,” Legacy says, walking up and wrapping his arms around his wife.

Oracle scrunches his nose, making a mocking face at his friend.

Legacy and Devyn recently got married, and they can’t seem to keep their hands off each other. No one bats an eye at them, but I’m a little more reserved than that. The kids haven’t asked questions about Vincent and me yet, but I see Jace watching us every time we get close to each other. It makes me wonder how much Jace remembers from more than a year ago. Does he remember me being single when Sutton was born or all the times I came over to his parents’ house alone with her? Does he still think we’ve been together this whole time?

“You boys ready to learn about brake pads?” Bishop asks as he approaches. Ryder, his fiancée’s son, who is about Jace’s age, is right behind him. He and Jace formed a very quick friendship.

“We’re ready!” Luca declares animatedly.

Vincent stays behind as the boys are led out of the kitchen by Bishop.

“Can I speak with you for a moment?” he asks, nodding at Misty as he approaches.

She tries her best to hide a grin but she’s a few seconds too late.

Heat washes over my face, embarrassment eating away at me.

“This feels like a setup,” I say as I let him lead me toward the hallway.

We don't make it to our room. He presses me against the wall in the hallway, his lips hovering over mine. I feel like he has read me like a book when I lift my mouth up to his, making him smile.

"Thank you for breakfast," he whispers, pressing his lips to mine for the briefest of seconds.

I whimper with need and irritation when he pulls back before I can solidify the kiss.

"It was only eggs, toast, and sausage."

"It was delicious," he says. "I like having someone cook for me."

"Someone cooks for you every day," I remind him.

"Then I like it when you cook for me. It makes me feel loved and taken care of."

Loved.

I clear my throat.

"I like cooking for you," I assure him, wishing I had the courage to say so many more things.

He presses his lips to mine, kissing me earnestly this time.

His tongue is warm, covered in hints of citrus from the juice he drank with his breakfast.

He doesn't hesitate to press his hips against mine, and it makes me wonder if this is going to be one of those fifteen-minute segments we're going to be able to steal from the day, but the kiss ends too soon.

He laughs when I refuse to let him back away.

"I didn't bring you down here to get you naked," he says, his fingers brushing hair off my cheek.

"Just roll with it," I urge, my hand skating over the front of his jeans.

He's as ready for me as I am for him, but he has better control over his body than I do mine.

“Keep that thought,” he urges as he pulls back. “I promised the boys we’d learn brakes today.”

“You seem like an expert with the way you’re pumping them right now.”

His laughter fills the hallway.

“It makes me insanely happy with how much you want me,” he says, leaning forward enough to press a quick kiss to my forehead. “Have fun putting your shop together, and don’t fall for Oracle’s flirtiness.”

“I won’t,” I promise. “Come find me if you have a hard time getting that under control.”

I point to the front of his jeans before walking past him toward the mouth of the hallway. Our bedrooms are in what Cerberus members call the older part of the clubhouse, whereas the salon is in one of the newer rooms. Kincaid insisted on it being over there because of the separate septic system and something about it being able to handle the things I’ll have to rinse down the drain better. It wasn’t until a few days ago that I realized that in order for Vincent to have a room close to mine and the boys, he had to relinquish his room in the newer section. He claims it wasn’t such a hardship because all the rooms are pretty great.

“Oh,” Misty says when I walk into the room designated as my salon. “I thought you’d take a little longer.”

“He just wanted to thank me for breakfast,” I rush to say, not wanting them to think Vincent is a two-pump chump.

“Oh, I know, dear,” she says.

“I mean, we didn’t—”

She holds her hand up to silence me. “You don’t have to explain it to me.”

My cheeks heat which they seem to be doing a lot of these days.

“I put that together last night,” Oracle says, pointing to the shelving unit I need for supplies. “Next on the list are these shelves. Any idea where they need to go?”

We set to work and I do my best to keep my mind in the right place. But knowing Vincent is right outside in the garage makes it hard to concentrate. I now know why so many of the couples around here are in a rush to get their daily tasks over with, so they can be back in the arms of the one they can't resist.

## Chapter 31

### Stormy

“We’re not going to be out here long enough for that,” I tell Jace when he asks if he can jump into the pool. “Plus, you’re not in your swim trunks.”

The older boy frowns, disappointed, but isn’t going to argue. I can see Luca’s little mind working as he tries to figure out a way to get around the rules. I grin because that one is going to be a handful when he really comes into himself.

“There’s a washing machine here, right?”

My smile grows wider. “Yes, but we aren’t swimming in our clothes, Luca.”

He frowns, his eyes narrowing because I had the audacity to predict what his arguing point was going to be.

It’s been two weeks since Mila and I reconnected after Albuquerque. Although she gets in her head on occasion, it’s been two of the best weeks of my life. I never pictured myself in this scenario, one where I set an alarm on my phone so I can be outside with the boys while they’re on recess. Well, Jace is on recess because he’s started back to school.

We spend a lot of time outside. The boys love the freedom of getting to run around and play. Much to Mila’s disdain, Sutton likes to dig in the dirt. I will say that Em made it very enticing with her little mud pie kitchen that’s fully stocked with pots and pans, silicone molds and every kitchen utensil imaginable.

“Okay,” Luca counters. “What if we—”

His words drop away when my phone rings.

“Give me just a minute, bud,” I tell him as I pull it from my pocket and glance at Hound.

“I’ll keep an eye on them,” he says without me having to ask.

“He’ll jump into the pool,” I warn.

He waves me away. “I know how to watch kids. Take your call.”

The call goes to voicemail before I can answer it, but I recognize the number.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Dobbs,” I say when he answers, my gut clenching.

I haven’t heard from him since the last time we spoke in St. Louis. I didn’t even tell him of my plans to bring Mila and the kids back to New Mexico. The fewer people who know the better, and it’s honestly none of his business.

“I have bad news.” He sighs as if what he has to say has any bearing on him. “Well, sort of bad news. No, it’s bad news.”

“If you could just say it, then I can begin to work on a resolution.”

“The Clarkes’ house was set on fire last night. It’s a total loss.”

“When you say set on fire—”

“Arson,” he clarifies. “Accelerant was used and the fire investigator found evidence of Molotov cocktails inside.”

My jaw clenches. Keres is a hundred percent responsible for this. There isn’t a doubt in my mind.

“You said sort of bad news. What makes a family’s home burning to the ground sort of bad news?”

“Surprisingly, the insurance was still valid, although it will take some time to sort through it all since the house is technically a crime scene.”

“What does Mila need to do?”

“Mila? Oh, the sister? Nothing. I mean, she’s not the executor of the estate, but they took out a second mortgage. At this point, I’m just hoping the insurance covers both loans.”

I know Mila would understand that when Carlen and Janet made all these decisions that she was still in school and

much too young for the responsibility. But I also know that it hurts her that she wasn't a consideration later on. They never went back and changed anything, not even after Luca was born.

"Is there anything I need to do?"

"Not until all the dust settles."

I'm a second away from ending the call when I remember another issue.

"I need to see about getting the power of attorney changed on Mrs. Taylor's care."

"Janet's mother?"

"Yes. I made calls last week about getting her moved to a different facility, but since the POA is in Janet's name, I didn't have much luck." Then I got distracted by something going on with the kids, and I never got back to making that happen.

"I'm fairly certain I can easily get that changed to you."

"To Mila," I correct. It's honestly weird to be responsible for the woman when her daughter is just as capable.

"That will take much longer," he says. "You're already the executor of everything else, so it's not that much of a shift. If you want her moved quicker, I suggest moving her under the power you'll be given, and then we can work through the steps to change it to Ms. Taylor."

I clench my jaw, hating to be put in that situation, but I know we've waited too long to get Mrs. Taylor to New Mexico. I've waited on pushing the issue because I didn't know if Mila was going to fight me on staying here in case she wanted to return to St. Louis, despite it not being safe.

"Let's do that then," I tell him.

By the time I hang up the phone, the kids are heading back inside, their faces pink from the exertion of playing for the last hour.

“Maybe we can swim this evening?” Luca asks as he stops in front of me, his eyes filled with hope.

“Of course, bud. We’ll swim later, before dinner.”

His smile is wide. I haven’t shifted our schedules once. I haven’t told him that we’ll do something and then not do it. These kids have had enough disappointment in their lives. The last thing I want is them having the expectation that I’m going to fail them too. I know there will come a time when something comes up and we’ll have to alter our plans, but I’m working on building that trust with them first.

“Have a great rest of the school day,” I tell Jace when he walks by with his hand up for a high five.

“Everything okay?” Hound asks, his daughter’s tiny hand lost in his giant palm.

“Just another bump in the road,” I tell him, unwilling to go into detail around the kids.

Adult problems shouldn’t ever touch the kids if it can be helped. I need Jace worrying about basic math and getting his reading points, not the fact that his family home was burned down by a psychotic motorcycle gang.

“Too many bumps make for a hell of a ride,” he says in understanding. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“Will do,” I tell him.

Hound is my team leader, but even if he wasn’t, I think the man would offer to help me. That’s the great thing about Cerberus—the fact that everyone is so willing to lend a helping hand. I’m no different. If someone needed something, then I’d do what I could to make their life easier. There’s a balance to the give and take.

I wait for all the other kids to file inside, bopping Sutton on her messy nose as she toddles by me with a wide grin.

“I think she might’ve tasted one of the pies she made,” I tell Misty with a grin when she walks by holding the hand of one of the younger kids.

“I think you may be right. We’ll get her cleaned up, and we won’t even count her taste testing as lunch this time.”

I chuckle at her teasing, loving just how much everyone cares for these children.

I wasn’t lying when I told Mila that the kids would be well-loved and well-taken care of. I honestly think we’re some of the luckiest people to be blessed to be a part of Cerberus.

I take three deep breaths with my closed eyes pointed toward the sun. I have to go inside and tell Mila about the phone call I just received, and I hate that I’m once again bringing her bad news. It’s been a calm couple of weeks, but I knew it could only last so long. There has been a sort of unspoken agreement that we just don’t talk about all the bad stuff. We both needed a breather from all of it, but I knew we couldn’t ignore the outside world forever.

I make my way inside the clubhouse, across the living room, and into the hallway of the newer section of the clubhouse. Even with the newer ventilation added in her salon, the scent of hair products meets me before I get to the door.

I tap my knuckles on it, waiting for the okay to enter. Mila offers a full-service salon, so the last thing I want is to walk in on someone getting something waxed.

“This is work?” I ask teasingly at the sight of both Gigi and Mila sitting and reading magazines. “Sign me up.”

Gigi rolls her eyes and continues to read. Her head is under the massive blow dryer thing and covered in shiny metal. Foils is what Mila called them. The whole process is rather technical and something I could probably never do.

“Hey,” Mila says, walking up to me and pressing her lips to mine in a quick kiss. “I’m going to have to pull her foils in five minutes.”

It’s a warning that we don’t have much time, and the heat in her eyes is almost enough to distract me like it always does.

Her grin is contagious despite what I have to say.

“What’s up?” she asks when I say nothing.

I could just watch this woman all damn day and not say a word.

“Nothing,” I say, knowing I’ll have to tell her eventually. I look over her shoulder at Gigi. “Mind if I hang out?”

Gigi shakes her head as she waves her arm to indicate one of the empty chairs along the wall.

I press another quick kiss to Mila’s lips before sitting down.

I spend the next hour watching her work and learning more about my team leader than I ever wanted to know. Gigi is married to Hound, and she has no filter. She doesn’t curb her conversations ever. By the time she’s done in Mila’s chair, she looks fabulous, but my girl looks scandalized.

Her eyes are wide when Gigi leaves the room.

“I can’t believe she told us all of that,” she whispers as she begins to sweep the floor, pausing when the floor vacuum is activated in the corner. “Pierced? That’s insane.”

“Not a chance,” I tell her when her eyes drop to my crotch.

Her laughter is the stuff dreams are made of.

“We have forty minutes until the kids are done for the day,” I say as I stand and cross the room to her. “Was Gigi your last appointment?”

“She was,” she answers, her teeth digging into her lower lip.

I all but drag her from the salon, pulling her through the living room and back down the other hallway.

In the last two weeks, we’ve made the transition from everyone sleeping in Mila’s room to the boys being back in theirs and Sutton in Mila’s room. Mila has been in my bed with me, which has given us plenty of time together. Although, it never feels like enough.

Somehow, I forget what I need to tell her the second our bedroom door closes at our backs.

We spend the next hour working up a sweat, and then ten minutes after that, apologizing for being late to pick up the kids.

Hound must've really liked Gigi's hair because she's late as well.

## Chapter 32

Mila

Vincent squeezes my hand. As comforting as it is, it's not quite enough to keep my sadness at bay.

I nod my head, trying to convince my mom that I understand why she's feeling the way she is, but it's hard.

Watching the woman who was strong while I was growing up deteriorate is gut wrenching.

"I don't know what I did wrong," she says, her gaze cast out over the patio. "To have raised two ungrateful children."

Another squeeze of my hand. Another fight with tears burning the backs of my eyes and nose.

"Neither one of them have been to see me in years. I could have grandchildren I don't even know about," she continues.

The advice given by the nursing staff at the facility is to let her live in whatever world she's currently inhabiting. Trying to convince her of who we are and what has happened to her is too stressful, and it could also lead to uncontrollable outbursts.

Maybe where she's at in her head is better than reality. In her head, Janet is an ungrateful child, but she's still alive. I'm the wild child that took off with a man and never looked back. It didn't take long to understand her mind is thinking of the time I snuck out of the house to meet a high school boyfriend, something Vincent warned we'd talk about later as he tried to keep from smiling.

His jealousy, the way he looks at me as if I'm the only woman he'll ever look at that way, means more to me than he'll ever know. The man hasn't faltered once.

We were in New Mexico for a little over a month before this trip back to St. Louis to move Mom. Vincent explained how it would be easier to keep the power of attorney with him until after the move because trying to transfer it to my name

would cause delays. It was the first conversation that we had that didn't leave me wondering if he was trying to manipulate me. I don't know when I decided that I was going to trust him until he gave me a reason not to, but that confidence in him has made my life so much easier.

I've already begun to think of Farmington as home. It's no longer the place we'll be until it's safe to come back to St. Louis. If it weren't for Mom, I wouldn't be here today.

To once again stay under the radar from Keres MC after they burned Janet and Carlen's house down in retaliation for leaving town and not paying them what they felt was owed, we drove in two days ago and turned right back around almost immediately to drive back. It has been a grueling couple of days, but we were able to make the full trip to St. Louis in one go without the kids.

Because of Mom's condition, we have stopped for the night at the midway point.

"Eugenia, did you want dessert?" the nurse asks, distracting my mom who looks down at her plate.

"No, dear. I think I'm ready for bed."

I mouth a *thank you* when the nurse helps Mom stand before turning her toward the restaurant exit. We're in a hotel nicer than any one I've been in. Vincent suggested it because of the ease it provides with the restaurant right here. He said it would be best if Mom didn't have to be loaded back up into the vehicle more than was necessary.

Mary, the nurse, has been a lifesaver, but I know she comes at a cost. Vincent hasn't told me what the expense of this trip has been, and I have no plans of asking. I convinced myself at some point over the last month that the best way to pay the people back who have helped me is to offer help to them when I see a need for it. That seems to be the Cerberus way, even though those helping expect nothing in return. I'd never met so many selfless people until them.

"You going to be okay?" Vincent asks.

"I'll be fine, Roger," I tell him with a quick grin.

He chuckles. “Who is Roger anyway? She called me that the last time too.”

I shrug. “I have no idea.”

“Let’s go take a shower and get into bed. We have a long damn day tomorrow.”

He holds my hand out of the restaurant, in the elevator, and all the way back to the room. I soak up all the comfort he’s offering.

I know my mom’s illness is hard on her, and I feel utterly selfish for being upset with how hard it is on me too. I’m not feeling that way in an effort to discount what she’s going through but illness is hard on everyone. Watching her suffer hurts me and feeling like I’m not important enough in her life to be remembered claws at me like an angry tiger. She had no problem talking about my deadbeat dad. She can remember all sorts of things about him. At least this time she remembered she had two daughters but didn’t recognize me sitting right across the table with her.

Vincent urges me into the bathroom before pulling at the hem of my shirt. He undresses me slowly before stripping down himself. The shower is slow and soothing with him washing and conditioning my hair before running his soapy hands all over my body.

The touching isn’t overtly sexual, but he must know that I’m exhausted. Despite his erection, he doesn’t try to push that agenda this evening.

He kisses my shoulders as the water washes away the suds.

He’s quick and efficient with his own shower, stepping out before me to grab a towel.

After we’re dried, we don’t bother to get dressed, instead falling naked into the bed, and curling into each other.

“I’m afraid I’m going to lose you,” I confess into the darkness a few minutes later when my mind refuses to shut off. “I think I come with so much drama that you’re going to get tired of me and bolt.”

“I’d never do that.”

“My dad did,” I whisper into the darkness. “Two kids was too much for him.”

“Your dad was a coward, and I’m not afraid of hard work. You don’t abandon the people you love, and it’s a sorry man who would.”

I hold him a little tighter. He didn’t exactly tell me he loved me, but in a way he did. He wouldn’t have to ever say the words, I realize, because he shows me with his actions each and every day.

As passionate as we get when we have sex, it’s the other stuff that tells me how he feels. He’s great with the kids, some days taking on more than his fair share. He spends recess with them every day when he’s home. The one time he had to leave for work and was gone for five days, he called day and night, doing his best to keep up with everyone’s schedules so he could video call to see and speak with all of us.

“I don’t know how long it’s going to take for you to understand how much you all mean to me, but I’ll fight every day to prove it. Eventually, there will be no doubt.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, hot tears dripping from my eyes. “I’m sorry for punishing you for what other people have done.”

We’ve had more in-depth conversations about why I didn’t call him when I found out I was pregnant. Even married at the time, my father tried to convince my mother to have an abortion, and he left when she refused, the divorce papers showing up in the mail six months later. She found them the day she brought me home from the hospital. Her being so adamant when I was growing up that I was loved and wanted, and everything turned out the way it was meant to be, is what makes it so hard to reconcile with the woman who didn’t even recognize me today.

“Don’t be sorry. We all have our baggage. Get some sleep, baby.” He presses his lips to the top of my head. “Tomorrow is a brand-new day.”

## Chapter 33

### Stormy

“I don’t think that’s accurate,” Mrs. Taylor says from the back seat. “As I recall, it was Carlen who broke that window.”

I smile, lifting my eyes to the rearview mirror.

“I could be remembering it wrong,” I say.

Mrs. Taylor came down for breakfast this morning and wrapped her arms around Mila as if she hadn’t seen her in years. She knew exactly who she was. I don’t think there’s a single shadow in my girl’s life right now.

We’ve been on the road for hours today and Mrs. Taylor has maintained her cognizance the entire time.

The trip has been spent with a lot of laughter, recollection, and only a handful of lies.

We haven’t told her about Janet’s death. Causing the woman grief wouldn’t do anyone any good. As hopeful as we’d like to be that she’ll keep her memories, we all know that she won’t. That isn’t how the disease works. All we can do is enjoy the time we have with her right now.

“Explain to me again why my grandkids are in New Mexico?” Mrs. Taylor asks.

“We’ve moved there,” Mila says, a little concern on her face at being asked for the third time about the boys and Sutton.

“I can’t believe Carlen would ever leave St. Louis. He has always been married to the city. Janet wanted to move south a few years ago, and he refused. Don’t know why. The man doesn’t have any connections left there after his daddy passed.”

My jaw clenches. I don’t know if her mind is recalling things correctly, but it kills me to think they might have had a chance to be free before Keres came knocking, and he didn’t take it.

“The dry air is better for Luca’s asthma,” the nurse says to Mrs. Taylor. “Remember?”

Mrs. Taylor nods. “Janet and Carlen would do anything for those boys.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Mila’s jaw flex. I squeeze her hand a little tighter, although I have to release it a second later when my phone rings, the call flashing on the radio screen with the Bluetooth connected.

“Wren,” I say the second the call connects. “You’re connected to Bluetooth.”

“Hey, man. I have bad news. Where are you?”

“We’re about an hour from home. Got a late start this morning.”

Mary left her cell phone in the hotel room, and she didn’t discover that she had until we were already on the road. It was no big deal to go back and get it, but we’d be home now if it hadn’t have happened.

“Oh good,” he says. “Keres is headed that way. I’ve tracked them as far as Pueblo, putting them about four hours behind you.”

“Any idea how they tracked us?”

“Someone had to have tipped them off. I’ll keep you apprised of the situation, but even on their bikes, they won’t be able to catch up with you.”

The call ends, and my eyes immediately go to Mary in the back seat. We were so very careful with how we handled all of this. If they were tracking us through records or any sort of paper trail, they never would’ve known what we were doing. There wasn’t one to be found. It leaves her, someone from the nursing home who was quick to accept the offer to help get Mrs. Taylor back to New Mexico.

Mary is looking out the window, her face a mask of nerves. When she looks back in my direction, it’s clear that she knows I know. I don’t say a word to her. There’s no sense in upsetting Mila and her mom. Four hours is more than enough

time to make a plan to stop them before they can cause any harm to us or Cerberus.

“We can’t go to the clubhouse,” Mila says. “We can’t bring that kind of trouble to the kids.”

I reach out and once again take her hand, only this time, the tremble in it worries me.

“I brought this on everyone,” she says, her voice close to cracking under the stress this is causing her.

“What’s going on?” Mrs. Taylor demands. “Mila, are you in some kind of trouble?”

“Everything is fine,” Mary assures her.

“Everything will be fine,” I say, glaring at the woman in the back seat through the rearview mirror. “I guarantee it.”

Mary’s chin quivers as she looks away. I know there’s a very good chance they have threatened her in some way, but my priority is Mila, our kids, and her mom. Everything else is secondary.

“The clubhouse is the safest place you can be,” I assure her, my foot getting a little heavier on the gas.

“Shouldn’t we make a plan? Make some calls? Kincaid needs to know what I’ve done.”

I shake my head. “You’ve done nothing wrong. This isn’t on you. Deacon and Wren will make contact with Cerberus. I promise it’s all being taken care of.”

She nods in understanding, but that doesn’t stop her from spending the next hour watching the side mirror as if she thinks Keres will have activated some form of warp speed and caught up with us.

“Is this the best idea?” Mila asks when I pull into the parking lot at the Farmington nursing facility.

“They won’t even make it into town,” I assure her. “Look.”

Mila’s eyes follow the point of my finger so she can see Shadow and Hound standing outside waiting for us.

“Oh, dear,” Mrs. Taylor says. “Why are the police here?”

I don’t answer her question. I wait for Mrs. Taylor to be introduced to the administrative and nursing teams who will take over her care.

Mila hugs her mother and promises to see her soon, but there’s a blankness in Mrs. Taylor’s eyes when Mila takes a step back.

“Such a sweet girl,” she says, patting Mila’s cheek. “Your mother must be so proud.”

Grief washes over my girl’s face and it has the power to break my heart.

“Listen, Mr. Chilton,” Mary says once Mrs. Taylor is safely inside.

“Mary Scott, please come with us,” Colton Matthews says.

“Am I under arrest?” she snaps at the detective.

Colton is a homicide detective, but I know his connection to the club as Kincaid’s niece’s husband is why he’s here today.

“We haven’t decided that yet, but we’re going to need to question you,” he responds.

I wonder just how crazy things are going to get when she jerks her arm out of Colton’s grasp and spins back to face me.

“Don’t you dare hurt him,” she snaps, her voice a little broken. “Rosco only does what his older brother, Adrian, makes him do. He’s not like the rest of them!”

Mila looks even more crestfallen as Mary is pulled away and put in the back seat of a patrol car.

“She told them where we were and what we were doing?”

I nod.

“We have a couple more guys heading this way,” Hound says. “Just in case they manage to get past us. The police will have a hard time making anything stick to Mary, but at least with her in custody, she won’t be able to tip them off. Get Mila home. Kincaid will get you caught up once she’s safe.”

I nod, guiding Mila back to the SUV.

“All of this will be over before long,” I assure her, thinking maybe Keres coming after us is the best possible outcome. They wouldn’t be able to overpower all of us even if they caught us by surprise. Wren keeping close tabs on them makes all the difference. Now we have the upper hand and we can make sure that everyone is safe.

With her shaking hands, she struggles to click her seatbelt into place. I cup her chin, forcing her to look up at me.

“We’re fine,” I tell her. “We’re safe, and after today, there’s a very good chance we’ll never have to worry about the Keres MC ever again. Trust me.”

“I do.”

As quick as she was to tell me she had faith in me, she’s an even bigger ball of nerves by the time we make it to the clubhouse. The guys standing in the parking lot in full tactical gear doesn’t exactly make her any calmer either.

“They look like they’re going to war,” she says, her brow furrowing when she sees the rifle in Oracle’s hands. “And thirsty for blood.”

She’s looking at Hemlock who has a murderous look in his eyes every day. Right now, he looks like he’s one foul word away from snapping. I’m for sure glad the guy is on our team, but I also think it was a fine line that tilted him in our direction rather than one that would make him go rogue and take out a small city for fun.

I climb out quickly, making it around to Mila’s door in time to hold my hand out to her. Just as her feet hit the ground, I pull her into my arms.

“I’m scared,” she whispers into my neck.

“I know, baby, but I promise you it’ll be fine. This is what we do.”

“You could get hurt.”

I pull back, both hands cupping her cheeks. “I’d die to protect you and those kids inside.”

She shakes her head, tears streaming down her face.

“Don’t say stuff like that.”

“I have a lot to say to you, Mila. I’ll do it when I get back.” I pull her into a final hug, pressing my lips to hers.

“Come on inside,” Em says from the front porch. “The kids made you some welcome home gifts. They’ve missed you dearly.”

Mila is reluctant to let go of my hand even though her feet carry her away.

Kincaid hands me a tactical vest the second she takes the first step onto the porch. I give her one final nod of assurance before I switch gears. I have to be Kincaid’s soldier right now. Staying in dad and lover mode would make this situation more dangerous for everyone.

She looks back one last time, her eyes widening as Kincaid hands me my rifle.

## Chapter 34

Mila

“It doesn’t get any easier,” Em says as we walk through the clubhouse toward the nursery. “But you will get better with handling your fear. I’ve been doing this for nearly thirty years. You just have to have faith that they’ll be okay.”

“I’m terrified, and this is all my fault.”

“No,” she says, stopping me with her hand on my arm before I can take another step. “You are not responsible for the choices others make. Not Janet or Carlen’s choices. Not Keres MC’s decisions. Their choices are on them. Now, that doesn’t mean you won’t have to deal with a little of the fallout from their choices as you well know, but this isn’t on you.”

“Why did his gun look different from the others?” I blurt, my mind racing a million miles an hour. I can’t seem to get it to focus.

“Stormy is a sharpshooter, dear. They have to have a different kind. Shadow is also a sharpshooter, but there’s a very good chance they won’t even have to use them today. At any rate, that’s not our concern. As I said, the kids have made you some welcome home gifts.”

I do my best to smile as she guides me into the nursery, and for the most part it’s genuine when Sutton spots me and squeals. I crouch low, letting my little girl jump into my arms and wrap hers around my neck. I stand just as she makes a little grunt, squeezing me with all her might.

“I missed you,” I tell her, letting her sit back in my arms so I can see her face.

“Aunt Mila!” Luca screams from the other side of the room, also running in my direction.

Jace is a little delayed in his excitement, and I can see easily that he was worried that I wasn’t going to come back.

Why would he think differently? His parents dropped him off at school one morning and less than a handful of hours

later, they were dead.

A tear is rolling down his cheek when he approaches me. I don't mention it. I simply wipe it from his face and pull him into my arms.

"I can't believe all these hugs I'm getting," I tell them. "Does this mean you missed me? I know I missed you so much."

"I was good the entire time!" Luca says. "I only went to timeout twice!"

I huff a laugh. I knew he would end up in a timeout. It was two times within the same hour because the child is incredibly stubborn and struggled with the sharing rules yesterday.

"But Mr. Hound let me swim anyway. He didn't send me to my room for the rest of the day and forget to give me dinner."

My heart threatens to break once again.

"How long are your timeouts?" I ask when he takes a step back, already over the hugs we were having.

"Five whole minutes," he says, holding up his hand with all five fingers splayed in exaggeration.

"Exactly. So you don't have to worry about timeouts longer than that, and you're never going to get into trouble and miss a meal." I don't know if it's best to tell him these things, but I hate knowing things got to the point with Janet and Carlen that the boys were such an afterthought. I'd like to think that they were more neglectful in their effort to appease the Keres MC rather than being outwardly abusive and refusing to feed their kids, but that's just one of those things I may never know.

With the house burned down, so many questions will go unanswered. Although I doubt Janet kept a journal listing all her sins and crimes anyway.

"Did you have fun at Mr. Hound's house?" I ask.

They both nod as Sutton gets distracted playing with my hair.

“But I’m ready to sleep in my own bed,” Jace says. “There are a lot of kids over there.”

“The baby cries at night. She’s not a big girl like Sutton,” Luca says with his little nose scrunched up.

“Me!” Sutton says, patting her hand on her chest.

“That’s right, sweetie. You’re a big girl.”

“Where’s Stormy?” Jace asks, his voice back to being unsure.

“He had to go to work for a little while. He did mention getting in the pool later.”

Both boys squeal in delight, and Sutton claps her hands together even though I doubt she fully understands what I just said. She’s a great hype girl, always happy.

I press my lips to her cheek, earning another hug from her, including that adorable little grunt she makes.

“I don’t know if it was a surprise or not, but I was told I was getting gifts.”

Without another word, the boys bolt across the room toward their respective workstations. I follow, letting Sutton down when she wiggles in my arms. The room is completely open right now, letting me know that the entire area is safe for all the kids. It means the smaller things that would cause the little ones trouble are all safely locked away.

“Here you go, sweet girl,” Misty says when Sutton runs up to her clasping her hands open and closed.

Misty hands her a piece of paper, and my little girl rushes back to give it to me.

Jace and Luca, learning manners so quickly with the consistency that they’ve had here, wait while Sutton goes first.

“Momma!” she squeals, holding out the drawing. The messy lines and squiggles cover the words *WELCOME HOME*

*MOMMA AND DADDY*, clearly written there for her by one of the adults.

“This is so pretty,” I tell her, letting her pull it from my hands when she grows reluctant to give it up. “Thank you, Sutton.”

“Me!” she says, the paper fluttering to the floor as she once again presses her palm to her chest. “Me!”

Luca comes over next, handing me a coloring sheet with Batman on it.

“I missed you. I didn’t think you’d come back,” he says.

I thank him for the thoughtful gift and pull him in for another hug. I stop short of promising him I’ll always come home because I wouldn’t want him to feel betrayed if there ever comes a time that I can’t.

“I love you, Luca.”

“Love you, too,” he says, but in the next breath, he’s distracted by a toy another kid is playing with.

“They didn’t have Spiderman,” Jace says, sadness in his voice as he walks up to me. “But this is the other side of Luca’s so it makes a full scene.”

I hold both pages up to each other, side by side. “I love it. Thank you. It was so thoughtful of you to color this for me.”

His cheeks turn a light shade of pink, and it kills me that the child doesn’t know how to be praised for doing something for others. I know it’s something Vincent has been working on. He told me once that Jace looks a little scared when he does anything, probably afraid he’ll get into trouble for doing something wrong. We’ve been cognizant enough to praise him often and to make suggestions on how to change things if he makes a mistake. He’s come a long way in the last month, but he still has a way to go.

“Is it okay if I go back to the toys?”

“Of course,” I tell him, growing surprised when he wraps me in one more hug before running back across the

room.

“Gigi said they didn’t give her any trouble,” Em says when I cross the room to her. “Jace demanded to know where Sutton was sleeping and even made her take him in there so he could approve her accommodations before settling down himself the first night.”

“He’s a little nurturer,” I say, watching all three of them play. Even Luca is waiting patiently, playing with another toy until the other child is done with the one he wants. “I hate thinking about all the things they’ve gone through.”

“Children are resilient, but I would urge you guys to finalize the house plans. It’s a little unorthodox for them to live forever in the clubhouse.”

I blink in her direction. “Finalize?”

She takes a deep breath. “Stormy hasn’t spoken with you about it? Men, I swear.”

“We get distracted easily when we’re alone,” I confess.

She chuckles. “If you’re lucky, that doesn’t go away either.”

She winks at me conspiratorially.

One thing I have noticed about Cerberus men and women is that they love fiercely. I feel it from Vincent every time he’s near. His eyes are on me, and his hands are reaching for me if I’m too far away.

I love him. It hits me like a ton of bricks. I love him with a fierceness that has the ability to crush me under the grief if there ever comes a day when he doesn’t come home to me. I never wanted to be that vulnerable. Honestly, it’s a disservice to the kids if it ever happens.

I know Janet felt the same way. I know if she had to choose between leaving this earth with Carlen or staying behind, she’d choose Carlen without hesitation. Janet loved her kids dearly, but she always loved Carlen more.

I know I couldn’t crumble and give up, and maybe that’s the difference between my older sister and me. It doesn’t scare

me any less, the risk of losing him, considering just how dangerous his job is.

“They’ll be home shortly,” Em says with a comforting pat on my back before she heads off to break up a tiff between two toddlers.

## Chapter 35

### Stormy

“This is the best we could do?” Kincaid snaps, his eyes dead ahead on the farmhouse just over a quarter of a mile away.

The highway patrol officer who’s standing in front of him looks incredibly annoyed but at least he has enough respect for Kincaid that he doesn’t pull rank. Technically, the highway patrol has jurisdiction. It’s a privilege for Cerberus to even be allowed within a mile of the roadblock.

We have it on authority that two of the four Keres MC members are in violation of their parole for leaving Missouri. That’s the reasoning behind the state police getting involved. If they weren’t in violation, the best that could be done was them being followed until they attempted to do something bad.

Today is a huge risk because Adrian Larrick, president of the Keres MC, is not one of the ones in violation. If the two that are in violation are taken into custody, the police have no other recourse than to let him go.

“This is my show,” the patrolman says after Kincaid just glares at him. “Our aim is true. It’s not my fault if you don’t have confidence in your men’s ability to shoot.”

As a highly skilled and trained sniper, I take immediate offense to what he says, but I keep my mouth shut. He could easily ask us to leave, but Keres MC’s reputation precedes them. I know he’s nervous. Even outnumbered with his own officers, I can see that he’s glad to have us here as backup. If he didn’t, he would’ve challenged the fact that we’re all dressed in tactical gear and heavily armed.

“Besides, I think we’ll be able to end amicably,” he says, but there’s a hint of uncertainty in his tone.

“We won’t,” Kincaid snaps. “Larrick’s own father died in a hail of bullets because he didn’t want to go back to prison. His two sons are riding into my town today, and I highly doubt either Larrick man will be willing to be arrested. It’s going to

get bloody, and I need you to know that so you don't get your fucking head shot off trying to talk reason into them."

"Nonetheless," the patrolman growls. "The houses in the distance are safe, and if not, they've been cleared."

Kincaid bristles but he doesn't argue further. We all know that overconfidence can lead to mistakes.

"The younger brother hasn't ever been arrested," another patrolman says.

"Doesn't mean he won't end up there or dead today," I mutter. "They don't have a problem with the first stint because it gives them street cred, but they aren't willing to go down a second time. Just keep that in mind when they start this way. I have a woman and three kids to get back to today, and I won't let the New Mexico Highway Patrol keep me from doing that."

"Keres MC will fall today," he says stupidly.

"Keres MC is more than just four fucking members," I growl. "And it's a cocky attitude like that that'll get someone hurt today. No matter what happens today, Keres MC will still be standing."

The man locks his eyes on me, but the roar of motorcycles in the distance floats on the breeze.

We all crouch, waiting as they approach. If they were smart, they'd turn around and head back home, but a false sense of pride must win out because they stop in the middle of the road, fifty yards away. They'd have to be pretty skilled shooters to hit a target from that far away, but sometimes assholes just get lucky.

I shake my head at the police in the distance who move from the rock quarry and close them in. Keres wouldn't have a chance to retreat even if they wanted to. I don't know how to feel about it. What I said is true. Keres won't fall today even if both Larrick boys are taken out. The best I can hope for is that whoever steps up to take Adrian's place chooses anything but retaliation against Cerberus.

"Brant Jesper and Cody Miles, I have warrants for your arrest," the guy in control of this entire situation says using a

bull horn from the opposite side of the tactical vehicle from the Keres members.

“Warrants?” one of the guys yells. “We’re just out for a ride.”

“You’re under arrest for a parole violation.” The guy’s voice isn’t very sure, and I have no doubt that the dangerous men fifty yards away can hear it just as easily as we can.

I look to Kincaid, but all he can do is shake his head. We aren’t exactly known for waiting in situations like this. We’re usually a shoot-first ask-questions-later kind of group, but we also almost always operate outside of the United States.

“I guess you better come put those cuffs on me then.”

My guess is that it’s Brant Jesper who’s taunting the police. He’s possibly more psychotic than their president.

“Gragg,” Kincaid snaps when the man lowers the bullhorn with one hand, pulling his cuffs from his belt with his other. “That’s not fucking smart.”

“I’ve got this,” the man snaps.

The second he pops his head up over the hood of the tactical vehicle a shot sounds.

The man turns white as a ghost in the blink of an eye, dropping to his ass by the tire of the vehicle.

“I fucking told you, jackass,” Kincaid snaps.

“He shot at me!” the guy says as if he’s fucking surprised.

“Of course he shot at you, idiot. Are you fucking new here? These guys are goddamned deadly,” I hiss.

“That was Jesper,” another patrolman says. “Two more are reaching into their vests. Take co—”

Bullets ping off metal as the echoes of gunfire ring out all around us. It lasts less than a minute, but the fear in every one of the cops’ eyes makes me believe they feel like they’ve been under attack for hours.

“How long are you going to let this shit go on?” Kincaid snaps.

I mean, technically, we’re in danger, but only really if they move closer or suddenly become expert shooters.

“They’re reloading,” the other patrolman says. “Gragg, what do we do?”

Gragg, still looking shaken to his core, looks at Kincaid. My rifle is up and pointing in that direction the second Gragg gives my boss the nod.

“Who first?”

“Jesper,” Gragg says. “He fired first.”

I squeeze the trigger, Jesper falling in one direction, his bike falling in the other.

“Motherfucker!” Adrian Larrick yells, his voice cracking. “Brant.”

“He’s still loading his gun, Kincaid,” I say, Adrian locked in the sight of my rifle. “Miles is lifting his weapon.”

“Do it,” Gragg says, and I pop off a second shot.

“They’re going to fucking kill us!” the younger Larrick growls.

The kid, who can’t be over twenty-one, doesn’t even have a weapon out.

His voice is full of fear, and I wouldn’t put it past Adrian to have forced the kid to tag along.

“Kincaid,” I snap.

I make the decision on my own, putting a bullet right between Adrian’s eyes. I watch through my scope as Adrian Larrick’s eyes go wide, his mouth hanging open as he crumples lifelessly to the asphalt.

The fourth Keres member is sobbing at this point, his hands held over his head in surrender.

“If you so much as twitch,” I yell at the kid. “You’ll end up the same way.”

“Swear to God, man. I won’t.”

The patrolman who was giving feedback is the one to stand, withdraw his sidearm, and walk around to handcuff the kid.

The cuffing is a little rougher than it probably should be, but that’s one of those things that’s hard to control when adrenaline is raging.

“You good?” Kincaid asks as I lower my rifle once the guy is in cuffs.

“I’m good,” I say, but honestly I’m not. “This won’t be the last time we hear from Keres. The president and VP gone? They’ll be out for blood. I doubt that kid will spend much time in jail. He doesn’t have a weapon and didn’t shoot at us.”

“We’ll cross those bridges when we get there,” Kincaid assures me. “You’ll need to debrief.”

Translation—I just killed three people, and he wants to make sure my head is a hundred percent online before I’ll be able to head out for work again.

“Yes, sir,” I tell him.

“Follow up with Hound,” he says before walking toward the other police officers.

Hound doesn’t say a word as he walks up and wraps his arms around me, his heavy hand slapping against my back.

“You’re good?”

“I’m good,” I tell him.

Taking a life is never easy, and it shouldn’t be. But today, knowing I was doing it to protect my family, made it three of the easiest kills I’ve ever been responsible for.

“Clear your weapon. We’ll be heading home soon,” he says as he takes a step back.

## Chapter 36

Mila

The kids wanted to stay and keep playing in the nursery, but Em shooed me out after my fifth lap around the room. I'm not usually one to pace. I'm more of a take-action kind of girl, but this is one situation I have no control over. I can't make it end faster. There's nothing I can do to gain a resolution. It leaves me feeling helpless and scared.

I've stopped pacing, but sitting on the couch and staring out the window probably isn't much better. It's been five hours since Vincent left with the other men. I know three hours of that was some form of waiting or them heading to wherever the confrontation with Keres was to take place. It's the last two hours that concern me. I've got no basis of knowledge for situations like this, but to me it doesn't seem like something that should take that long. It's not like Adrian Larrick will demand a sit-down meeting to air his grievances.

In my head, all the bad things that could possibly happen have occurred, and instead of Vincent coming home, he's going to be hurt or worse, he's—

My heart kicks up at the sight of the first SUV coming down the road. The guys waiting outside, those left here to protect us, walk toward the vehicles as they park.

“We usually meet them outside,” Em says, coming into the room.

She holds her hand out to welcome me, but I feel locked in place.

She leaves the front door open as she heads out to greet Kincaid.

I swallow a sob at the sight of Vincent as he climbs out of the back of the second SUV. His eyes dart to the door, a frown on his face. Realizing he's looking for me, I can wait no longer. I scramble off the sofa and toward the door.

His face lights up at the sight of me on the porch, and as if I'm weightless, I launch myself in his direction, a hundred percent confident that he'll catch me.

His arms are around me a second later, and I feel like a spider monkey climbing up him.

Sobs rack my body, making it hard to breathe as I bury my face in his neck.

"I love how this feels," he says, his words rumbling from his chest more than anything else. "Having someone here waiting for me. Jesus, Mila."

I pull my head back, leaning into his touch when he wipes away the tears trailing down my cheeks.

"You're okay?"

He nods, lowering his head so our lips can meet.

"I want you," he says.

"You have me," I promise.

"I want all of it, baby. I want you waiting here for me when I get home from work. I want updates on the kids about school. I want to help clean up when everyone has a stomach virus. I want to make salt dough ornaments with the kids at Christmas. I want everyone to have my last name." He pinches my chin between his thumb and forefinger. "Including you."

"Vincent," I chide.

As much as I like hearing what he's saying, it's because of the situation. Danger does make you realize how precious the things you love are, but making hasty decisions in the heat of all that is never a good choice.

"It's the adrenaline making you say these things. Ask me again when things have calmed down."

His smile is wide and meant only for me. "Your first mistake is thinking that I'm asking."

I open my mouth to argue, but he palms my ass and starts walking us toward the clubhouse. I know what his intentions are. I can feel his need at the apex of my thighs.

As he carries me inside, I glance over his shoulder, seeing Em with her arms still locked around Kincaid. For as brave as she was when they were gone, it's clear she was just as worried as I was. It's the one bad thing about being involved with a Cerberus member. Their jobs are dangerous, and all we can do is hope and pray that their skill level is higher than the men they go up against.

"What happened with Keres?" I ask as we enter the hallway toward the bedrooms.

"I'm not talking about Keres right now, Mila," he says, his tongue licking at the skin on my neck.

"From the tone of your voice, I get the feeling you'll never tell me everything."

He pauses, his feet frozen in place as he looks down at me.

"I won't let that shit taint your mind. It was taken care of."

"Okay," I whisper, my eyes dropping to his mouth. "It's kind of hot when you go all primal and commanding."

His smile is slow and predatory as we enter our bedroom.

"I'm going to take you hard," he warns as if he thinks I'd have any type of objection.

"Promise?" I tease, knowing it gets him incredibly riled up that I like everything he does to me.

We could make slow love all damn night, and that would be exactly what I need. He could throw me to the floor and press my face into the area rug and fuck me hard until every muscle ached, and it would be exactly what I need. He's the common denominator. *He's* what I need.

I hiss, mostly in pleasure but some in surprise, when he grips a handful of my hair, using his grip to pull my face closer to his.

"You're fucking perfect, you know that, right?"

“Vincent,” I whimper, needing his hands on my skin.

The next couple of minutes are a blur of clothes flying and an occasional laugh when he nearly eats the wall, trying to pull his boots off with his jeans tangled around his calves.

I love every aspect of this—that we can go from serious to joking and back to feral in our need for each other.

As rough as he said he needed me, his mouth slows on my skin once I’m naked and splayed out on the bed. He’s reverent in the way he worships my body. He licks and tastes me as if he’s never done it before. It makes every time with him decadent and pleasing.

I ache for him to be inside of me, but I know from experience that trying to rush him doesn’t get me what I want any faster. It doesn’t stop me from pulling on his hair and attempting to urge him higher up my body.

His breath, the near panting sound of it, is the only indication that he’s starting to lose a little of his own control. By the time he’s close enough for me to capture his mouth with mine, I’m already teetering on the edge of orgasm.

His mouth hangs open, his pleasure sparkling in his eyes when he shifts his hips and the tip of his cock presses into me.

“Open,” he whispers, urging me to spread my legs wide.

He drops his head, his gaze directed at our connection. It’s erotic and somehow one of the sexiest things that he does.

“You take me so well, baby. Look at that pussy swallowing me up.”

A wave of chills inch their way over my skin. The man’s filthy talk could easily bring me to orgasm on its own.

I’d tell him as much, but I’m incapable of words. The utter perfection of the way we fit together without a millimeter of space between us always rocks me to my core.

“Need all of you,” I manage to say when he pulls back before pushing all the way in.

He pulls his eyes from our connection to meet mine. “You have every single part of me, Mila. Always. I’m yours.”

“I love you,” I whisper, my hand cupping his cheek as tears spring to my face.

I don’t know how long I’ll get with this man, but I know I’m going to cherish every single second until the universe realizes it gave me more than my fair share.

“Love you so much,” he says, his hips canting forward.

He gives me all that I ask for and more, the rock of his body into mine nearly silent with how slow he takes me.

We whisper promises, make plans, and vow ourselves to each other until the sun sets behind the clubhouse.

“It’s time,” he finally says, my body drained but waiting for him for that last push toward release. “Come for me, baby.”

My back arches, a final wave of pleasure building until I hit the crescendo. He follows me, the pulse of my body matching the rhythmic beat of his.

## Chapter 37

Stormy

“If you’re not careful, your face is going to stick like that,” Mila says, patting my face like a grandmother would.

“You know why I’m in a mood.”

“And I’ve been telling you for months that you’re crazy.”

“There’s nothing crazy about wanting to marry you, Mila. I’m starting to think you don’t love me at all.”

She snaps her head in my direction. “Vincent Chilton!”

Guilt swims inside of me. It was a low blow, and I told myself that I’d have patience with her. I know she thinks this won’t last, but what she can’t get through her thick head is that what we have isn’t controlled by karma or the universe or whatever other nonsense she thinks. We control our destiny and ours is intertwined. I told her she was mine, and that wasn’t enough. I’ve asked her to marry me and she just chuckles and acts like I’m playing. My seriousness has somehow turned into a game. I usually smile and let her play it off, but it’s really starting to eat away at my confidence.

I shrug when she just continues to glare at me.

“Are you using me for my body?”

Her eyes drop to the front of my jeans, and I can’t help but begin to thicken with her attention there. Thinking for one second I was in control of this situation was a huge mistake. I’m like a puppy on a leash with her, and she figured that out very early on.

“Am I using you for that thick, scrumptious cock of yours that gets me off so often I’ve grown addicted to the way it feels inside of me?”

I swallow, wanting to close my eyes to gather some control but I just can’t stop looking at her when her attention is on me. I thicken further, my need about to pass the point of no

return regardless of where we are and the meeting about to take place.

“It’s been months,” I tell her, well aware of just how whiney my voice sounds.

“And other than when we’re working, we spend every second together. I’m not going anywhere, Vincent.”

She’s the only one who still calls me by my given name. I sort of love it. It’s something I’ve had since birth, but since no one else uses it, it feels like something that is ours.

“What does that have to do with you continuing to refuse to marry me?”

Her smile goes wider.

“You say refuse like you actually spend the time asking. You demand it of me.”

“I thought you liked me in control.” I cock an eyebrow at her, shift my hips on the chair until I draw her attention back to the front of my jeans.

I know she’s just as insatiable as I am.

“I think we need to have this conversation another time,” she says.

“We always have this conversation. Our home is under construction and halfway done.”

“And the answer doesn’t change.”

“Yes, but I thought we established that I’m not crazy, and that it isn’t a bad idea.”

Her eyes narrow. “Not once have I ever said marrying you would be a bad idea.”

“But you also haven’t said yes, either.”

“I think I might, one day,” she says, rolling her lips between her teeth to help fight her smile.

“That’s so unfair,” I say, a little angrier than I should probably feel for a man who fully believes everyone should

have free will. “You’re playing with my emotions. It’s manipulative, and I—”

“I’m so sorry about that,” Mr. Dobbs says as he walks back into the conference room, his hand on his lower belly.

“Are you okay?” I ask the attorney when I notice just how pale his face looks.

It’s easy to shift gears from the conversation Mila and I were having. We have it so often, I’m left feeling like a nagging brat. Thank God she has the patience of a saint because I think any other woman would have already bolted by now.

“I had sushi last night,” he says, his face scrunching up in distaste.

“In New Mexico?” Mila asks, her face a mask of disgust. “We’re in a land locked state.”

“The guy at the gas station said it was fresh,” Mr. Dobbs argues.

“How would that even be possible? Did you say gas station?”

A shiver racks Mr. Dobbs’s body, and I know there’s a really good chance he’s going to be sick again.

“Should we reschedule?” Mila asks.

Mr. Dobbs shakes his head. “Let’s just get through this. Please accept my apologies for not being well.”

“You don’t have to apologize for being sick,” Mila assures him.

“I’ve gathered the proper paperwork,” he begins.

I clear my throat. The man may be sick, but we’ve had a conversation about this.

I don’t know if he’s just a sorry excuse for an actor, but he looks up at me, the dawning realization as clear as day on his face.

“Yes, right. Of course. I have to say, Ms. Taylor, adopting Luca and Jace would be easier if the two of you have the same last name.”

I clench my jaw in irritation at just how damn obvious he’s being right now.

I continue to look at the attorney even when I feel the burn of Mila’s eyes on the side of my head.

“Is that so?” she asks, awareness in her tone.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“How is it easier?” she challenges.

The attorney’s eyes dart to mine before he speaks. “It would make the copy and paste function for the forms easier. I wouldn’t have to type out two different last names as often.”

Betrayal strikes me in the gut like the man just wielded a sword and sliced through me with it.

I think he attempts to look apologetic, but I could be mistaking that look with him trying not to puke on the conference room table.

“I apologize, Mr. Dobbs, but I think you may just have to type it out more. I don’t think my last name will be changing anytime soon.”

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“If you growl one more time, I’m going to call the vet and have you tested for rabies,” Oracle mutters from the other side of the garage. “Maybe if you tell us what your damn problem is instead of throwing shit around, we can help you solve it.”

I spin in his direction. “Solve it? You really think you have any clue about women?”

“I know quite a lot about women,” he says, a salacious grin on his face.

Several of the other guys chuckle.

“She still hasn’t agreed to marry you?” Newton asks.

Another round of chuckles echo through the garage when I just glare at him.

“Have you actually asked her?” Legacy asks.

“Of course,” I snap. “Like a million times.”

“You’ve stood before her and said the words will you marry me?” he challenges. “Or have you grunted commands at her? Told her she was yours like a caveman?”

“She is mine,” I hiss.

“Sorry. I have no idea what I’m talking about,” Legacy says, holding his hands up, the black band on his left hand a slap in the face.

“Some women like to be told instead of asked,” Bishop adds.

“Yes,” Legacy says. “But if Mila hasn’t agreed then it’s clear she isn’t that type.”

“Have you considered a grand gesture?” Boomer interjects.

“You’re going to give me shit about women?” I ask.

Boomer’s smile is wide. “I don’t know much about women, that’s true, but I know a lot about creating the perfect moment that gets a yes.”

The man holds up his hand, a band similar to Legacy’s on his left hand.

“No shit!” Ugly yells. “Drake said yes?”

Boomer nods, his grin wide enough to span the room.

“That’s great, man,” I tell him genuinely.

I’m still working toward the final stages of my happily ever after, but I’d never begrudge anyone else getting theirs.

“When’s the wedding?”

Boomer shakes his head. “I think we’re just going to go before a magistrate or something. There’s no need to make a big deal out of it.”

“Nope,” Oracle snaps. “That’s old life fundamental shit coming out of your mouth.”

“Love is meant to be celebrated,” Tug adds.

“Neither Drake nor I are the plan a wedding type,” he argues.

“Then you hand that shit over to Em, Misty, and Khloe. They’ll go hog wild, and it’ll be the best damn party,” Bishop suggests.

“Maybe,” Boomer says, lifting his beer to his lips.

“Stormy,” Tug says. “I have an idea for your grand gesture.”

I look to the man, willing to take any help anyone offers. I’m one more declined offer away from hog-tying Mila and forcing her before an officiant.

## Chapter 38

Mila

“She’s struggling,” I tell Vincent as we watch Sutton try to pull an apple out of the tub of water with the tongs she’s been provided.

“It’s harder than it looks,” he says before crouching down behind her and guiding her hand. “They require more grip than what she has.”

Our little girl squeals in delight as the apple is pulled from the water with her daddy’s help.

“More!” Sutton yells, letting the apple fall to the ground.

We’ve been in the full swing of fall festivities all day, and exhaustion is beginning to set in. The corn maze was a blast. The kids had a great time weaving in and out of the turns created. Sutton, on the other hand, just barreled right through the walls created by the plant growth, no doubt thinking it was a waste of time to do the twists and turns when you can get to the prizes in the middle by just walking straight ahead.

Sutton releases the tongs but moves Vincent’s hand toward the tub of water with apples floating in it. She wants him to pull another apple out while she reaches into her trick or treat bag for another handful of candy.

“She’s going to make herself sick,” I mutter.

“She’s making me sick with just the smell of it,” he argues. “I can’t believe any child of mine would like candy corn.”

An exaggerated shudder runs through his body, and I laugh despite my tiredness.

“It’s not my favorite, but it’ll do in a pinch,” I say, smiling at Sutton when she offers some to Vincent by pressing the offending candy to his lips.

He opens his mouth, letting her shove the candy inside because that's the type of man he is. He's willing to eat something he despises because it makes his little girl smile.

I know what I have. I know how valuable this man is. I know I'd never find another one like him, not that I'd ever go looking. He's given me and the kids a life here that most can only dream of.

It's been two days since Mr. Dobbs went back to St. Louis. We signed the adoption paperwork and will be given a court date for the final hearing within the next couple of weeks.

He hasn't mentioned marrying me again since. What started out as a playful game of cat and mouse has shifted. I think it's really hurting him that I haven't agreed, but I've also taken it so far, it feels impossible to take it back.

I'm spending the rest of my life with this man. He couldn't rid himself of me if he tried.

I have no reason to keep fighting against it other than it's the very last thing I have control over.

My heart is already his. My future, married or not, will be spent with him.

The boys come running up, Jace in his Spiderman costume and Luca dressed as Batman. They have wide smiles on their sticky faces, but the exhaustion is evident in their eyes.

Cerberus has been forced to isolate themselves more than most people do for safety reasons. At first, I didn't understand it. I couldn't fathom the danger that came with the club, how people were so willing to hurt them because they fought against the evils in the world.

That was until Mary, the nurse from St. Louis. Her loyalty was to Keres, more specifically the younger Larrick son, Rosco. Her lies and how she informed the club where she was and what our plans were could've gotten us killed. She was willing to let that happen. My life, and the lives of every

man, woman, and child connected to Cerberus was worth her devotion to Rosco.

I understand now that Kincaid and the rest of Cerberus are right in the way they have segregated us from the rest of the world. They make strides in ensuring the kids have as normal a life as they can, and today they took great pains to ensure that Halloween for the kids was a good time.

We started with trick or treating around the neighborhood, which includes dozens of homes owned by Cerberus members. Their bags were so full of candy and treats, I ended up having to empty Sutton's twice so it wasn't too heavy for her to carry. We've had carnival-like games and of course the corn maze.

In my opinion, we've provided more than most kids would have.

"You guys look ready for bed," I tell the boys.

"Can we play in the maze a little longer?"

I look to Vincent who stands, grabbing Sutton and placing her on his hip.

"Tomorrow. It's not going anywhere," he says. "Let's get back to the clubhouse and get baths."

The boys only grumble a little, but they're all but dragging their feet as they climb the steps to enter the clubhouse. Per our routine, Jace grabs his pajamas and heads toward the room that Sutton has, my original room, to take a shower. Luca heads into the shower in the room he shares with his brother.

"I'm going to give her a quick bath," Vincent says. "I have something to show you after they get into bed, so don't lie down."

"I'm just going to rest for a minute," I tell him.

"You're going to fall asleep."

"I don't mind being woken up." I wink at him, falling to Jace's bed.

“Aunt Mila?”

I startle, the feel of little hands shaking me.

“You fell asleep,” Jace says. “Are you sleeping in here with me?”

“She is not,” Vincent says, coming into the room.

“Where’s Sutton?”

“In her bed. She was asleep before I even covered her up.”

“I’m not tired,” Jace says, his eyes droopy as he yawns.

“I am,” Luca says, already under the blankets in his bed. “Can we do two stories tomorrow instead of one tonight?”

“Sure thing, bud,” Vincent tells him, holding out a hand to help me from the bed. “Get out of that child’s bed.”

“But I’m sleepy too,” I say.

Vincent chuckles, but he takes a step back as I tuck Jace under his blanket.

“Did you boys have fun today?”

“So much fun!” they both say excitedly, their voices still filled with the tiredness they feel.

“Sleep well,” I tell them as I back out of the room.

“Nope,” Vincent says, clasping my hand when I try to turn toward our bedroom door. “I have something to show you.”

“Can’t you show it to me in our bedroom?” I grumble, but I’m mostly playing.

I’m tired, but I can feel his excitement which eases some of that exhaustion.

“The corn maze?” I ask.

His smile is contagious, and I begin to fill with anticipation. I’ve been through this thing more times than I can count today. I ran through it with the boys. I toddled through it slowly with Sutton. I traveled in and out a hundred times with

Em and the others, hanging decorations in preparation for the kids.

I freeze when I hear whispered voices.

“I’m not the type of person who likes to be scared,” I warn, a wave of chills covering my arms.

I snap out a curse when shadows appear at the opening of the corn maze.

Vincent holds up his phone, the flashlight shining on Max, Tug, and Jasmine as they exit the corn maze.

“Really?” Vincent snaps, and the three of them look a little chastised.

They also look like they had a very good time inside. Jasmine’s hair is filled with debris and vegetation. Tug has hickeys on his neck that I know for a fact weren’t there earlier in the day because he spent an hour in the dunk tank shirtless.

“Have a good night,” Max says, waving at us before the three of them disappear into the darkness.

“I think they had a good night,” I say, slightly embarrassed by proxy because my cheeks would’ve flamed red if it had been us emerging from the darkness and others predicting what we’d done.

“I want you to take my phone and walk inside.”

“Can’t you hold the phone? Why do I have to go alone? I don’t like being scared,” I say for the second time.

“You’re not alone,” he says. “Never alone. Come find me.”

Before I can argue, he drops his phone in my hand and disappears into the darkness.

My hands tremble a little, but I step forward, my fear fading away immediately after the first turn. Small flickering candles mark the path, their flames reflecting off of glass hanging on a stalk of corn. Upon closer inspection, I see that it’s a copy of the picture that I took in the hotel, the one where

the boys are sleeping next to Vincent with Sutton asleep on his chest.

My heart pounds a little harder. We have this same picture on our bedside table.

I force my feet to move me deeper into the maze, the next turn showcasing yet another picture, this one of the three kids in the nursery playing together.

I keep moving, each turn lit with candles and another picture hanging.

When I make it to the center of the maze, I don't find the massive bucket of candy and toys that we put there as a reward for the kids completing the maze. In the center is Vincent, down on one knee, with an open ring box in his hands, the firelight from the hundreds of candles surrounding him glistening off the diamond.

"Mila," he says when I step up to him.

I press my finger to his lips.

"You have to know what you're getting into," I whisper, my throat clogged with emotion.

"I know exactly what I'm doing," he says, his lips working against my finger. "Three kids, and Jace was asking about a dog."

"More than three kids," I correct.

I chuckle when his eyes drop to my stomach.

"Not yet," I assure him. I still have my IUD from after Sutton was born. "But I'm going to want more kids."

"Are we going to start competing with Hound and Gigi?"

"Maybe?"

"Honestly, more kids excites me. I want to be a part of it from the very beginning."

Old pain strikes out at me from the past, but I shove it down as fast as it rises. He's never punished me for the choices

I made in the past, so I do my best not to dwell on it. If he has forgiven me, then it's damn time I forgive myself.

"Mila, will you marry me?"

I hate the uncertainty in his eyes because I know I'm the one that put it there.

"Yes, of course I'll marry you."

He slow blinks at me as if he can't believe my answer. Either that or he thinks I'm going to take it back.

"Do I get to wear the ring or will it just stay in the—"

"Of course," he says, fumbling with the box and nearly dropping it in his rush to get the ring out.

As crazy as it sounds, I feel complete the second he slides the ring on my finger.

"Jesus, baby. You're sure? You're not going to change your mind?" He stands, his hands going to my face so I'm looking up at him.

"I've never been more certain of anything in my life."

His lips are on mine in the next breath. By the time we come up for air, half of our clothes have been tossed to the ground.

"Up," he says, urging me off my feet and I wrap my legs around his waist.

I moan in relief when he slides me down his length, our lips but an inch from each other's.

Our connection is fast and raw and utterly perfect, just how I know the rest of our lives together will be.

We no longer hold anything back.

We have no secrets.

## Chapter 39

### Stormy

“I wouldn’t have you here if I thought you were in danger,” I tell her.

“You say that but your eyes are darting all over the place,” she challenges.

I lift her hand, the one that’s now wearing my ring, and press my lips to her skin.

“I’m always like that.”

“I can feel the tension in your body,” she says, continuing to argue with me.

“Okay,” I cave. “I’m a little nervous about being out in the open, but most of Cerberus as well as all of Blackbridge are here to make sure everyone is safe.”

We decided to let the kids stay back in Farmington while we came to Lindell, Texas to show our support for the community.

Honestly, everyone at Cerberus was shocked to be invited to the memorial they planned. The men who opened fire at a wedding reception blamed their actions on Cerberus and a job we’d done that wiped out their organization. The community could’ve easily blamed us as well, but they were nothing but gracious to us even in the hours right after it happened.

They lost two people that day, and Cerberus returned home whole, yet they haven’t held a grudge.

“Having a good time?” Kalen asks.

I slow blink at the man. A good time probably isn’t something someone should expect at a memorial, but hell, if the groom whose wedding reception was shot up can smile, then I guess we can too.

“It was a lovely memorial,” Mila says, giving him a tight-lipped smile.

“When is your wedding day?” McKenna asks, noticing the ring on Mila’s left hand.

I stand a little taller beside my fiancée.

“We haven’t set a date yet,” she answers. “We just got engaged last week.”

McKenna nods in understanding, her hand going to her rounded stomach. “I had so much fun planning our wedding, and the town offered so much help.”

I keep my eyes moving through the crowds, making sure there’s nothing crazy going to happen. I’d never forgive myself if something happened to Mila.

I see several of the guys talking to Cash, the town’s police chief, and Walker, the guy who owns the bar. Walker looks fine, but the others look like they regret some of the decisions they made last night. Their green faces are reminiscent of Mr. Dobbs’s face when he had food poisoning not long ago.

“Oh hell,” Kalen grouses.

“What is it?” I snap, on high alert.

“Beth Moore,” McKenna says, laughter in her voice. “She and Kalen have history.”

“We don’t have history,” he argues. “And she should be named Beth Too Much because the woman is more than a little crazy.”

“She’s a little eccentric,” McKenna offers.

“A little? We made out once years ago and by the next morning, she had already registered for our wedding.”

Mila huffs a laugh and my eyebrows skyrocket at his explanation.

I look over and see the woman he’s talking about walking toward us, a bright smile on her face. What shocks me the most is the way she has her arm laced through Oracle’s bent arm.

As they step within speaking distance, Oracle grumbles, rubbing his hand over his face.

“What is going on?” I ask, so damn confused as I stare at his hand.

“Hon, aren’t you going to introduce me?” Beth says, her eyes beaming with what can only be described as maniacal joy.

“Hon?” Mila asks, laughter in her tone.

“I’m Beth,” she says, holding her hand out to Mila. “I’m Derrick’s wife.”

My jaw all but unhinges as I stare at my teammate.

“Wife?” I snap, insanely surprised.

Oracle releases a humorless chuckle, holding up the hand that confused me so much just a minute ago.

The gold band on his finger sparkles in the sunlight.

“Seems so,” he says.

THE END

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