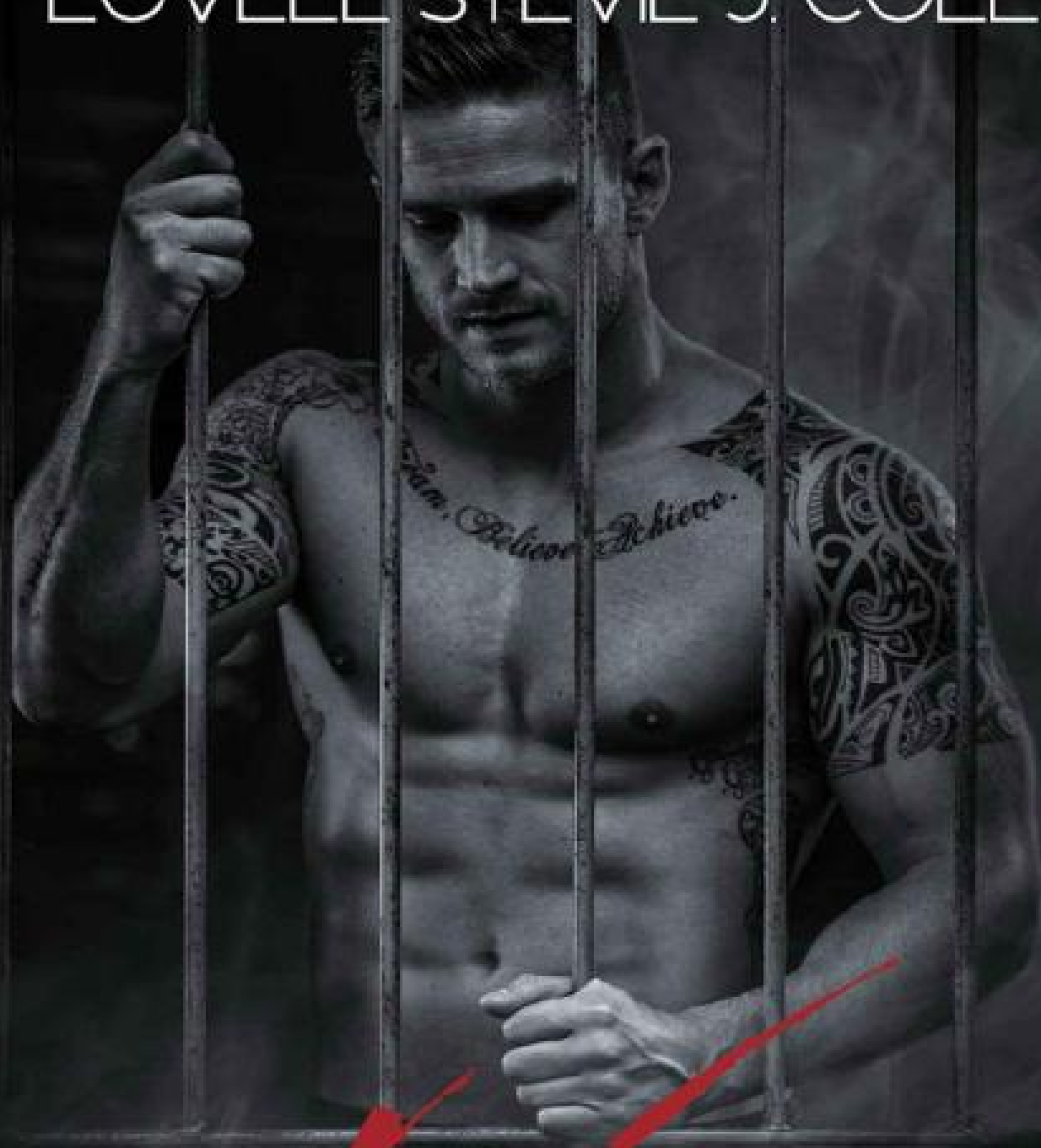


LP LOVELL STEVIE J. COLE



**Wire**

# **WIRE**

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WRONG SERIES BOOK THREE

STEVIE J. COLE  
LP LOVELL

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Acknowledgments

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## **Wire**

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ONE

*Contract*

LP LOVELL &  
STEVIE J. COLE



**JUDE**

I stand at the edge of the porch, staring at the man's body sprawled across the ground. A metal fence post is rammed through the middle of his chest and blood is spilling out onto the white sand. All I can do is shake my fucking head. "What the fuck, Gabriel?" I glance up at him. There's blood splattered on his tan face and his white shirt is drenched in it.

He shrugs. "What would you like me to do, gringo? Just stand there and let him gut me?" He rolls his eyes and lets out an exasperated breath.

I pull a cigarette from my pocket and light it. "Fucking hell. Don't bring your shit to my island, how about?" I blow a stream of smoke from my lips still staring at the poor bastard bleeding out in the sand.

"I did not *bring* him. He came by himself. You think I want him here? I'm pretty sure I pulled a muscle putting the fucker down." He raises his arm, working it in circles.

I walk over and grab the post, yanking it out of the guy's rib cage and tossing it into the shrubbery. "Tore my fucking fence up." I point at him. "I'm taking that off your next bill, Gabe. Tor likes that damn fence," I mumble.

"Would you like me to kill him with my bare hands like a savage?" he asks, folding his arms over his bloodstained

shirt.

"You're a cartel boss, Gabriel, don't act like you're all refined or some shit." I shake my head before I toss my half-smoked cigarette to the ground.

He glances at his cuff. "Put a merida. This shirt was new." He shakes his head.

"Help me get this shit outta here before Tor sees it. Jesus fucking Christ, you ain't seen shit until you've seen that woman pissed..."

He grins. "Tor likes me."

"Yeah, sure she does until she sees the dead fucking—" I glance up at him, "what is he? A fucking cartel member?"

"Eh, he's one of Lopez's guys."

"A motherfucking *Sinaloa* cartel member? Damn it, Gabriel." I drag my hands through my hair, half tempted to knock his teeth down his fucking throat. My jaw ticks as I stare at him.

Gabriel's been my business partner since I moved to the island. And even though he's somehow ended up being my friend, I swear to god, if he wasn't the leader of the Juárez cartel, I'd slit his throat for some of the stupid stunts he pulls.

Gabriel rolls his eyes. "I already made a call. He'll be dead by tomorrow. You worry too much."

"Who will be dead? Fucking Lopez?" I groan. "Please, can we leave my name out of this shit? It's not enough you rammed my fucking fence post through his heart." I walk over and grab the dead man's arms. "Get your Colombian ass over here and help me."

He slaps me on the shoulder. "You need a drink, mi amigo." He picks up the guy's ankles and a look of disgust crosses his face.

I hear the back door open and shut, and my eyes go wide. "Fuck, Gabriel," I whisper. "See...you motherfuck—"

"Jude?" Tor shouts from the back deck.

"Help me," I whisper in a panic. Gabriel helps me lift the guy, but I can hear Tor coming down the steps. *Shit*. I glance at Gabriel and we nod. "Ready?" I say. "One." We swing his limp body. "Two....Three." We let go and he lands in the bushes a few feet away, the toe of his shiny dress shoe sticking out from the leaves of the hydrangea.

Tor rounds the corner, her eyes shifting from me to Gabriel then narrowing.

"Tor," Gabriel says. "Looking beautiful as always." He flashes her a blinding smile and she glances accusingly at me.

"What's going on?" she asks. "Why are you lurking in the garden with Gabriel?"

"Just talking."

"Really?" she says, lifting an eyebrow.

"Yeah, about ponies," I say, and Gabriel stifles a laugh.

Her gaze slowly drifts to him and his bloody shirt.

"Killing ponies?"

"Uh..." I start.

She places her hands on her hips. "You have blood all over you!" she says, glaring at Gabriel. "Both of you! What did you do?" She looks around. "And where is my fence post?"

I scowl at Gabriel out of the corner of my eye. That bastard's going pay for this shit. She steps to where the missing post is, right next to the damn bush. Her shoulders tense and she gasps.

"Fuck," I mumble, dragging my hand over my face.

"Jude," she says calmly before spinning around to face me. "Why is there a dead man in my bushes?"

"There just...fucking is, Tor."

"Jesus..." she sighs. "You!" She points at Gabriel, and I swear he fucking flinches. "Don't you be bringing your shit to my house."

He sighs. "I didn't *bring* him." I shake my head at him because she's going to lose her shit.

"Well then who did? Bloody Santa Claus?" *Damn, I love that woman.* "I swear, I will kill you, Gabriel. My daughter is in that house!" She steps toward him and he takes a step back, glancing down at her tiny frame. "You owe me a fence post." She turns around and walks back to the house. "And get rid of that fucking body, Jude! You've got thirty minutes before dinner is ready."

Gabriel turns to me, a smirk on his face as he adjusts himself. I glare at him. "I can't help it," he shrugs. "That's a woman."

"That she fucking is."

**TOR**

"Here's the potatoes," Marney says, placing the bowl in the middle of the table before he takes a seat. Cayla wiggles on my hip as I unlock the tray to her high chair.

"Thanks, Marney."

He winks and grabs Cayla's foot, tickling it as I place her in her seat. She jumps when the back door bangs open. Jude and Gabriel come waltzing through thick as thieves. I glare at them and shake my head. "No bloody clothes at the table." And I point them toward the hall. This is what it is to be with Jude, to love him. As long as he cleans up his mess and doesn't bring it into the house, I don't care. I can't.

Marney chuckles to himself as he grabs a napkin and places it over his lap. A few moments later, the guys come back to the dining room in clean shirts and take a seat.

"It smells delicioso," Gabriel says, grinning. Always the charmer, that one.

Gabriel is Colombian, complete with the tan, the dark hair and exotic jade-green eyes. And with his expensive suits and the air of authority he wears so well...he screams of money. Dirty money, granted, but I know better than most the draw of a bad boy. He has a house on the island and comes to visit—or escape Juárez City—once every couple of months. I know he's into some dodgy shit with the

cartel, and Jude launders his money, which I'm not all too pleased with, but this is the first time Gabriel's *job* has ever followed him to the island. Regardless, it's hard not to like Gabe—when he's not killing random men in my garden.

I sit next to Cayla and cut up her steak. "So, did you get rid of your *little friend*?" I ask.

Jude grabs a roll from the middle of the table and grins as he takes a bite. "Yep."

"Just cut it up and threw it in the ocean for the fish," Gabriel says. "Not my choice, but Jude was in a hurry."

"Lovely." I clear my throat, placing the steak and potatoes on Cayla's tray. She grabs a handful and shoves it in her face, making a complete mess. "How long are you staying on the island this time, Gabe?"

"Eh," he shrugs, "I don't know."

"And will any more of your *friends* be paying a visit to my front garden? You know, just in case I need to stock up on fence posts."

Laughing, he unfolds his napkin. "I hope not." He closes his eyes and holds his hands out, attempting to take one of Jude's. Jude glares at him and Gabriel shrugs, taking Cayla's hand instead. *Here we go...* "Let us pray."

I stare at him. "Do *not* make me throw something at you, Gabriel," I say.

"I do not eat food that has not been blessed," he says and arches a brow at me.

"Oh fuck me," Jude grumbles, wiping a hand over his face before he stares at me.

Leaning forward, I narrow my eyes at Gabriel. "So, you can't eat food without praying, but you can kill a guy and all is good? I think you and the Big Man might need to have a word."

He shrugs. "I don't make the rules."

"Clearly," Jude says, lifting a bottle of beer to his lips.

We all sit, watching as Gabriel says a prayer in Spanish. When he opens his eyes, he shakes his head. "Your soul is not mine to worry for," he says, then shovels a forkful of meat into his mouth, his eyes rolling back in his head as he chews. "So good. Is your sister still married?" He winks.

*Bloody Gabriel.*

"I'll fix your fence, doll," Jude says, flashing me a small smile that makes my heart stutter. *Damn, these two.*

I roll my eyes. "Shit like this only happens when you're around, Gabriel," I say.

He grins. "I make your life exciting, no?"

"Your idea of excitement and my idea of excitement are very different." I turn to Cayla, wiping her hands and face with a paper towel. She makes a pitiful attempt to fight me off, whining and fussing. "You are a grot," I tell her, cleaning bits of potato from her hair.

"I heard it's your birthday tomorrow, little señorita," Gabriel says to Cayla and she grins at him. God, even *she's* charmed by him. "I have a surprise for you."

"I don't even want to know," I sigh.

\*\*\*break\*\*\*

I kiss Cayla's forehead, smiling at her peaceful little face as she sleeps. Her white-blonde hair is sticking up everywhere and she's sprawled out like a starfish. The front door slams and I flinch from the sudden sound. Cayla wiggles on her bed, but doesn't wake.

I leave her room, pulling the door to just as Jude reaches the top of the stairs. Stumbling a little, he grabs the bottom of his shirt and tugs the material over his head as he approaches me. My eyes can't help but drift down to those sexy V-lines of his that seductively dip below the waist of his jeans.

"Did you have fun?" I ask, keeping my voice down.

His fingers skim along my waist as he leans in and presses a kiss to my throat. "Not as much fun as I'm *about*

to fucking have." His teeth graze my skin and he inhales along my neck. "Fuck, you smell so good," he mumbles.

"And you smell of whisky," I say. *Whisky and cigarettes with the slight metallic twang of blood.* In another lifetime, it would have bothered me, but that girl disappeared a long time ago.

"Hmm," he breathes against my skin and I tilt my head to the side allowing him more access. "You're fucking hot when you're mad."

"Where's Gabriel?" I ask.

Jude's hand runs down the front of my shirt, slowly sinking between my thighs. He grabs between my legs and groans before he slams me against the wall.

"Gabe went to some bar fly's house," he says before kissing me brutally.

Over two years with him and his kisses still make me weak. He claws at my shirt, ripping my shorts down my legs as he backs me toward our room. "You think you can just charm your way into my knickers after that shit you pulled earlier?" I ask between his hard kisses.

His hand winds around my throat, his fingers flinching in both a warning and a promise. "You'll fuck me anywhere. Anyway. Any fucking time, doll."

He pulls on my neck, yanking me toward him before he shoves me into our room and releases my throat. His massive arms wrap around me, hauling me against his body. His hot skin presses against mine when he grips my thighs and picks me up. I hook my legs around his waist and he walks across the room, making me feel small and delicate against his massive body as his kisses burn a trail down the side of my neck.

He throws me down on the bed, standing over me as he strips down. I never get over how beautiful he is. How dark and dangerous. Tattoos wind over his tanned skin, each muscle flexing underneath the dark ink as he moves. Jude



is my twisted version of happily ever after, my bloodstained prince in a sea of violence and revenge.

My body heats as his hungry eyes rake over me, his gaze locking between my legs before he grabs my hips and flips me over onto my stomach. He lifts my ass, pressing down on the small of my back as he leans over me and slams inside me, forcing a moan from my lips.

"Fuck, your pussy always feels so damn good," he says with a groan. His hand glides along my spine creating a perfect bow before he fists my hair and yanks my head to the side to crush his lips over mine in an angry kiss. "Do you know how fucking good you feel?" he breathes against my mouth.

I wind my hand around the back of his neck and push back against him. "Fuck me harder," I beg, pulling his lip between my teeth. Growling, his pace quickens, his fingers digging into my hips as he violently thrusts into me over and over again. With each push, he coaxes a slight twinge of pain and I relish in it, tightening around him. He moves as though he's physically trying to fuck himself into me.

My head drops forward, a string of moans slipping from my throat as he places hot, open-mouthed kisses along the side of my neck. He fucks me until I'm shaking and moaning, begging him for something, anything. One hand snakes around my body and he pinches my clit between his thick, calloused fingers. Then his teeth sink into the soft flesh between my neck and shoulder.

"Jude," I gasp on a strangled breath, pleasure ripping through my body like a tsunami. My vision dots, my breath leaving me in a rush.

"Fuck, Tor," he grinds out, his thrusts becoming stiff and jerky. He exhales a long groan before he stills, wrapping his arms around me as he rests his forehead against the back of my neck. Hot breaths blow over my skin and I drop my head, trying to catch my breath. His lips press gently

against my back and I smile before he shifts away from me, falling onto his back and pulling me down on top of him.

"God, I love fucking you, doll," he says as he trails his fingers along my back.

I roll my eyes. "Such a charmer."

"You'd be bored with anyone else." A small smile pulls at his lips.

"And no one else would put up with your arse. A man's body in my bush..." I grumble.

Jude brushes his hand through my hair. "You fucking like it." He grabs my face, kissing me hard.

"What? You and your bloody Mexican friend ruining my fence?"

"He's Colombian." He smirks.

I roll my eyes. "Even better."

"Come on, doll. You know we've had our best fucks covered in blood. Remember good ole' Mussa..." He kisses my throat, his teeth nipping at me. "Then there was the fuck we crammed in the trunk of my car that time..."

"Don't drag me down to your level." I shove playfully at him and he circles his fingers around my wrist, pinning me to him.

"You've been down to my level since the first time you *begged* me to fuck you." He pulls his face from my neck and laughs. I can't help but want to slap him.

"One minute you're a respectable woman," I say, "the next you're knocked up by a criminal. Then before you know it, you're fucking in blood. You're a terrible influence."

He laughs. "You're no better, you've made me go soft."

"Tell that to the dead man with my fence post in his chest." I hear the faintest sound from down the hallway and tilt my head to the side to listen. *Cayla*. With a sigh, I push away from Jude, crawling to the edge of the bed. He slaps my arse and I yelp.

"I'll go," he says.

I shove his chest and he falls back into the mattress. "No, I'll go." I stand to my feet and lean over him, kissing him quickly. "She'll get drunk off your breath alone." I smirk and go to the door, yanking a robe from the back.

Cayla sure knows how to pick her moments.

**JUDE**

The waves lap against the rotting wood of the pier. And I wait. I pull a smoke from my pocket, light it, and take a deep drag, letting the smoke roll from my lips as I stare out over the turquoise waters. The sound of the approaching motorboat sputters through the air. I take another puff, watching the old Cuban man dab the sweat from his brow as he steers the boat in. It bumps the side of the pier and he stands, tossing a rope to me. I pinch my cigarette between my teeth as I catch the rope and loop it around one of the wooden posts.

"Hola, mi amigo. Tienes un paquete para tu."

I narrow my gaze on him. "Fucking hablo Inglés."

"Package, I have a package for you," he says. He leans over, his heavy gut sitting on the edge of the boat as he pulls out a leather bank bag and hands it to me. I unzip it, counting through the money before I take another puff off my smoke and toss the cigarette into the water. Nodding at him, I untie the rope and throw it inside the boat before I make my way back down the pier.

I cross the hot sand and make my way up the hill toward my bar. The tunes of Bob Marley carry out through the open doors, and I grab onto the wooden handrail as I step

up onto the porch. A nice breeze hits me when I walk inside.

Pepe's short, balding ass is standing behind the bar, wiping the counter down as he sings along to the music. Pulling the bank bag from my waist, I walk straight to the bar and place it on the counter. Pepe looks up and grins as he slides it across the bar. "Bueno tardes, señor," he says as he leans down to unlock the safe underneath the bar. "Gabriel's outside."

"Thanks, Pepe."

I weave between the few tables inside and push open the doors that lead to the patio. Gabriel's sitting at a table right outside the exit, sipping a beer and staring out over the blue water. He hardly looks like a cartel boss right now. He blends in so well with the tourists, the locals. And isn't that all part of it? Blending in. I pull out a chair and take a seat at the metal bistro table across from him. "I like what you've done with the place, amigo," he says, smiling.

"It works well enough for drunks," I laugh. "And it's a good enough front to launder money through." He nods and takes another drink of his beer.

We sit in silence for a moment, both taking in the serene surroundings, but my mind keeps veering back to last night. To Jesús' guy. I didn't want to go into it with Gabe last night. And there's no way in hell I would have brought it up in front of Tor at dinner... "Gabe," I say, leaning back in my chair and pulling a smoke from my pocket. "Did you find out any more about why the fuck that guy was in my garden?" I light the cigarette and stare at him.

"Well, it doesn't take much for Lopez to try and kill me." He folds his hands behind his head and shrugs one shoulder. "You know this."

"Yeah, yeah, I get that, but why the fuck was he at *my* house?" I blow smoke through my lips. "You said he was already there when you got there. What the fuck was he

doing there, Gabe?" A moment of panic rips through me. What if the cartel actually wants me after all this time? Jude Pearson is dead for all intents and purposes. I use an alias with any business shit I handle—anyone I talk to aside from Gabe—but I'm not stupid. I know their reach is long.

"Domingo?" I ask.

He tilts his head to the side. "They'd have sent a lot more than one guy if they knew about Domingo."

I drum my fingers over the table, my nerves firing off like firecrackers. "Then why?"

"Good question, mi amigo. You know how these things work. Killing me serves a temporary purpose. I die and someone else will step into my place, but the money...cut off the money and you do some real damage." He picks up his beer.

"So, they want me dead just because I clean your fucking money?" I drag a hand through my hair. "You've gotta be fucking kidding me."

"Ah," a slight smirk works over his lips, "no one does what you do."

"There's plenty of fucking cleaners."

He laughs. "Not like you. You are untraceable, like a ghost."

"Well, I'm fucking dead."

"Exactly," he says with a smile. "You do not exist and therefore, my money does not exist. The Feds must be shitting on themselves trying to find it." He smirks. "Now, I don't have too much trouble with the Feds, but Lopez...he's in Juárez. They are so far up his hole; he feels them every time he takes a shit."

"Look," I groan, "the sole reason I offered to launder your filthy-ass money was protection since the Feds just hung me out to fucking dry—"

"And look at us now, compadres, amigos." He chuckles and lifts his beer in the air for a toast.

I glare at him, unamused. "But if this shit is going to fucking get me killed, Gabe..."

"I think he was just looking." He waves a hand through the air. "Now he's dead, so he's not reporting shit to Lopez. I'll handle it."

"You better fucking kill him," I say.

"I have a guy." Gabriel takes a cigarette from the pack on the table, places it between his lips, and lights it. "He's good. He'll make it messy to send a clear message."

"I can't be dealing with this shit."

"You worry too much, ese." He smiles, blowing out a long stream of smoke.

"You put my fence post through some cartel fuck and I'm not supposed to worry?"

He rolls his fucking eyes at me. "A nobody. It is inconsequential. Lopez is the problem and I will deal with it."

"Inconsequential..." I shake my head. "Jesus, Gabe!"

A woman in a short dress saunters onto the patio with a drink in hand. Her gaze drifts from me to Gabriel and she grins, biting down on her lip. I glance at my watch and push up from the chair, pointing at Gabe. "I swear to god; I like you but you gotta keep your shitty cartel business outta my house."

He waves me off, his eyes now fixed on the woman's ass. "I'll see you this afternoon," he says as I head to the steps on the side of the patio. "Eh, cholita." I hear him whistle at the woman and I just shake my head.

I have a shit feeling about all this, like the little fence post incident has just set off some chain reaction of utter fuck. Maybe I'm just getting old. Too far removed from all the bloodshed and the gore that once dominated my life. I don't know, but I just can't shake this ominous cloud hanging over my head.

**TOR**

Today is Cayla's birthday. I swear Jude is more excited than she is because my two-year-old child is sitting in her high chair eating chocolate cake for breakfast—at Jude's request.

Jude is shoveling a slice into his mouth as he sits next to her, reading over the morning paper. Cayla already has icing in her hair and a possessed look on her face from all the excitement.

"You can deal with the sugar high from this," I say to Jude as I wipe frosting from her face.

Marney shuffles into the kitchen wearing sleep pants and a t-shirt that stretches over his ever-expanding gut. He grabs his coffee, glances at Cayla, and flops down at the kitchen table.

"Mommy's mean, isn't she, Cayla?" Jude says, tickling the bottom of her foot. "Doesn't want our little princess eating cake on her birthday." Cayla squeals, looks at me, and sticks her tongue out. Jude laughs. "See, Tor," he says pointing at Cayla, "she knows you're in a mood on her special day."

My jaw drops. "You..." I say to her. "Do not side with your daddy. And you..." I point at Jude, "can tell her why she has awful teeth when she's older. Plus, the sedentary



lifestyle and cake for breakfast..." I flick my eyes down to his hard stomach. "Careful there, Dad Bod." I smirk.

Jude grins as he shoves another bite of cake in his mouth and lifts his shirt up to reveal his ridiculous abs. "These ain't going nowhere, doll. And as for the teeth," he takes another large bite, frosting smudging his nose, "that's what dentists are for." He wipes his hand on a napkin and pushes up from his seat, bending down next to Cayla's high chair. "I think mommy needs some cake, don't you, little doll?" His gaze darts over to me.

She claps and grins, nodding at Jude. "Momma needs cake," she says.

"I'm civilized. I don't eat cake for breakfast, baby," I tell Cayla while eyeing Jude.

"Oh," Jude snorts, "real civilized." He steps toward me, cake in hand as he leans in by my ear. "'Fuck me like you paid for me, Jude'," he whispers with a laugh. I gasp. "So civilized, doll." He circles around me, tracing his finger over my neck.

"You did not..." I hiss.

"You saying that little phrase has been permanently etched into my mind. Fucking hot as shit." He faces me so Cayla can't see him adjust himself. "Makes my cock hard just thinking about it," he whispers. "But, about that cake..."

I can feel my face heating as my pulse quickens. It takes me a moment to respond to him. "What about the cake?"

Before I realize what's going on Jude has one of his arms around me, my arms pinned to my side. I can't move. "Jude..." I say with a growl.

Cayla claps, laughing. "Mommy's silly," she says and Jude nods.

"Yep, mommy is *really* silly." He leans in close to my neck, his warm breath washing over my skin. "Want some

cake, *doll?*" He holds a piece of cake dripping with icing inches from my face.

I lift an eyebrow. "If you assault me with a piece of cake, Jude..."

"Now, why on earth would you think I'd do that?"

"Because you're an arse," I say under my breath, smiling as sweetly as I can.

"Well, that's not nice." The next thing I know, cake is all over my face. He smears it across my cheek and up into my hair and Cayla goes into a fit of laughter.

I swipe at my fingers over my face and my fingers come away coated in chocolate icing. "Oh, you..." I manage to wipe the icing over Jude's cheek before he ducks away. He runs over to the island, grabbing a handful of cake with his bare hands like a Neanderthal and chucking it at me. I move out of the way and hear Marney groan.

"Shit, boy!"

I glance over and laugh at the huge blob of cake stuck to the side of Marney's thick neck. He sighs, pushing up from the table. Cayla is laughing so hard her little face is red.

"I want down, Dada. Down," she whines, holding her hands up.

Jude walks over and takes her out of her high chair. She immediately scoops a handful of cake from the floor and runs straight at Jude, slamming her hand over the leg of his jeans and smooshing the rich icing into the fabric.

Laughing, I bend over and brace my hands on my knees. Cayla toddles over to me, holding up her cake-covered arms. "Aw, are you defending my honour, baby?" I lift her up and she nods.

"Jesus, I'm outnumbered here," Jude says, wiping the chocolate from his jeans. "Gabe's gonna be here in a few hours. Said he has a surprise for Cayla." Jude smiles as he heads out of the kitchen, flashing that sexy smirk of his.

"I'm going to take a shower. You should *definitely* wash that chocolate off you, doll."

I roll my eyes. "Pervert."

---

A puffy white cloud rolls across the sun, blocking the unforgiving heat. Jude steps onto the porch and Cayla runs through the garden toward the steps with a daisy in hand. She squeals excitedly as Jude picks her up, holding her in his heavily tattooed arms. I think he's probably her favourite person in the world. She looks over his shoulder, a wide smile on her face as her hazel eyes meet mine.

"You ready for your present, little doll?" Jude asks her.

He steps onto the beach and rounds the side of the house. I follow them. When I come to the front yard I see Gabriel standing with a tiny white pony, it's mane braided with pink ribbons.

"What the hell is he doing here and why does he have a pony?" I ask dryly.

Gabriel flashes that charming smile of his and I glare. I'm sure he melts the knickers off most women with his model-good-looks and his silver tongue, but I am not most women. "A gift, from me to Cayla," he purrs.

Cayla shrieks and reaches towards the little thing. Smiling, Jude holds her around her waist, popping her on its back. "All little girls want a pony, Tor."

And now we're accepting livestock from Gabriel of all people. *Brilliant*. I worry that there may be a bag of cocaine shoved up the pony's arse. "Um-hmm, and where is it going to live?" I cross my arms over my chest.

"In the garden. I got it a house." Jude points across the yard, and sure enough, a little shelter is nestled against the side of the house.

"I'm not picking up its shit," I say.

Marney trudges over to the pony. "Aw, hell. Don't she look like a little princess on that midget horse?"

"Marney will do it, won't you, Marney?" Jude winks at me.

"Do what?"

"Pick up its shit," Jude says.

Marney quickly covers Cayla's ears with his wrinkled hands. "Hell nah, I won't."

"Oh, come on, you old fuck." Jude laughs. "Not even for Cayla?"

Marney narrows his eyes and shakes his head, mumbling about shoveling shit. The poor guy is wrapped around Cayla's little finger worse than Jude is. Marney takes over holding Cayla on the pony and Jude steps beside me, placing his arms around me. He smells so good, that clean scent of linens mixed with his cigarettes.

I roll my eyes. "Most guys buy a stuffed animal, maybe a puppy at a push."

"And when have I ever fit into the category of 'most guys'?" he rumbles against my neck, trailing his lips along my jaw.

"Nice try," I say, wiggling out of his intoxicating hold. "Don't let her fall off!" I throw over my shoulder as I make my way back to the house.

"Who's got a pony, huh?" I hear Marney singing. "Little Cayla's got a pony and Uncle Marney's gonna shovel it's shit because he loves you. Yes, he does..."

Dear god, she is going to be so bloody spoilt with these men around.

**JUDE**

The crickets chirp in the bushes as the full moon disappears behind the clouds. I sit on the step with my feet in the sand, watching the stream of smoke swirl up from my cigarette. And then, I feel the air change. The crickets silence and my senses heighten because I know I'm not alone. I glance around in the dark just as a silhouette steps out from the side of the house. I slowly reach for the gun tucked in my waist, the metal cool under my palm as I undo the safety. *Click.*

There's a low chuckle and then the snap of a flint catches before a small flame dances in the darkness. I attempt to make out a face, but the flame cuts out and is quickly replaced by the cherry-red glow of a cigar. "Jude Pearson," he says in a thick Russian accent. The man steps out from the bushes and into the dim glow of the porch light. A thin line of smoke drifts from his lips before a wolfish grin works over his face.

Puffing my cigarette, I stare at him in his tailored suit. *Who the fuck wears a suit when it's damn near one-hundred degrees outside?* I set my pistol on my lap as I blow a stray stream of smoke from my lips. "And who the

fuck are you?" I lift the gun and aim just as four men step out of the shadows with rifles pointed at my fucking head.

The man doesn't blink. "I heard you have no respect. I like that about you." His cigar glows red as he takes another slow puff, his eyes narrowing through the white wisps drifting in front of his face.

"There is no such thing as respect in this world. Kill or be killed." I say, glaring at him down the barrel of my gun.

He tosses his cigar on the ground, smoothing a hand down the front of his fitted jacket. "Fear and respect, so very close together," he says on a smirk. "I, for example, feed on the fear of my enemies. And fear is powerful. Empires are built on it, alliances forged in blood. And of course, there are always those who seek to topple me." He shrugs one shoulder.

"Are you going to tell me who the fuck you are?"

He waves his hand through the air as he takes a small bow. "Ronan Cole."

*Fuck.* I hold the gun steady even though my heart's slamming against my chest. I've heard Gabe talk about this crazy fucker. Head of the Russian mafia, a tainted politician—something to that effect. The question is, why the hell is he at *my* house? "Would you tell your men to get their guns off me?" I say.

He spreads his arms wide and glances over his shoulder at the nearest guy. "They're a little protective. They don't like it when people point guns at me."

"Yeah, well, understandably I don't like it when sneaky fucking Russians show up at my house in the middle of the goddamn night."

He grins and presses his palm to his chest. "You wound me."

I clench my jaw, my teeth grating together as my finger itches over this fucking trigger.

"You can drop your gun." Laughing, Ronan tosses his head back. "I am not here to kill you. If I wanted you dead, I would not trouble myself to witness it, eh?"

I don't move. Ronan rolls his eyes, curses under his breath, and barks an order in Russian. All four guys lower their weapons and he raises an eyebrow at me, waving his hand through the air with a flourish. I glance at the men surrounding me, all pale and expressionless, and slowly, I place the gun on my lap.

"Now, I need to speak with your friend, Gabriel." He glances over his shoulder and his men wordlessly melt into the shadows.

"I don't know who the fuck you're talking about." I shrug.

He inhales a deep breath, exhaling slowly. "I suggest you do not lie to me, *bookie*. Or you may end up like Lopez's sicario, eh?" He lifts one brow.

I swipe my hand over my face and groan. "I'm gonna kill fucking Gabriel..."

"Tsk, tsk." He shakes his head and pulls a small metal tin from his pocket. He opens it and pops another cigar between his lips. "I would like to speak to him first. If he does not prove useful then you may do with him as you please." He dismissively waves his hand through the air. *What a week. The fucking cartel, now the motherfucking Russian mob lord.* "I only wish to present him with a business opportunity," Ronan says.

I want to tell him to go fuck himself, but I'm not about to crucify myself for Gabriel. Groaning, I shake my head and pull my phone from my pocket, glaring at the pale fucks in the shadows. I dial Gabriel's number and wait.

"Si, amigo?" he answers.

"Ronan fucking Cole's in my backyard." I glance up and Ronan smirks.

"That's unfortunate."

"He's here looking for you, you fucking asshole."

A string of Spanish curse words fly over the line before Gabriel clears his throat. "Tell the Russian puta to suck my dick."

A smirk works over my lips as I eye Ronan who's brushing an invisible piece of lint from his suit. "You sure about that, Gabe?"

"What the fuck does he want? Is he sweating his balls off in that suit of his?" He laughs.

"So you know him?" I sigh. "God, you are a fucking idiot. Where are you so I can send the Russian fucking devil to you and get him out of my fucking yard?"

"Fine. Fine. Send him to the bar."

"My fucking bar?" I hear people yelling in Spanish in the background.

"Si."

"Who the hell is that? Are those your guys? I swear to god, if you—"

Ronan snaps his fingers and my blood pressure shoots through the motherfucking roof. "Tell him to get rid of his men," Ronan says, "or I kill them all."

"He just snapped his fingers at me, Gabriel..." I drag in a breath. "Get your fucking men out of there." I glance up at Ronan and point. "And I swear to god, you two have a cartel slash mafia shooting in my bar..." I shake my head.

Ronan holds his hands up, smiling. "Never." He crosses himself. "Cross my heart."

"Well, good fucking luck with this shit," I say before I hang up and look at Ronan. "He's at my bar. And let me guess, you already know where that is?"

"Of course." He smirks. "And I know Gabriel has a house on the island, but I wanted to meet you as introductions are so *very* important." I narrow my gaze at him, imagining what it would look like to put a bullet right through his fucking skull. "I will leave you to your evening with Victoria



and Cayla," he says as a dangerous smile graces his lips, causing my heart to stutter.

Ronan steps back into the shadows. Moments later I hear car doors close and headlights bounce over the gravel road. How the fuck do I manage to get dragged into shit like this? I pull another cigarette from my pocket and light it, watching, waiting.

My phone rings. I don't even check the number before I pull it to my ear. "Yeah?"

"My friend," Ronan says, "how rude of me, I forgot to thank you for your help. I like you American. I do..." And then the line goes dead.

*How the hell did he get my number?* I stand at the foot of the stairs, my mind going ninety-to-fucking-nothing. Sweat collects in my palm and on my neck, dripping down the collar of my shirt. This is fucking bad and I'm not sticking around to put my family in danger. Fuck this. Gabe can deal with his shit on his own.

**TOR**

The bedroom door opens, slamming against the wall. I peer around the doorway of the bathroom as Jude barrels into the room, his eyes landing on me. "Pack your shit, now."

I frown and walk into the bedroom. "What? Why?"

He stops midstride, his jaw clenching. "Because I fucking said so."

I place my hands on my hips. "*Why?*" I repeat through clenched teeth. "What did you do now? Who was that dead guy?"

"I haven't done shit and that dead guy has nothing to do with it." He groans. "Now, pack your stuff, woman."

"Jude, it's nearly eleven o' clock at night. Cayla is sleeping. Why does everything have to be so cloak and dagger with you?"

He steps toward me. "I know what fucking time it is, and I don't have the patience for this shit." He yanks a drawer open and grabs some of my clothes, throwing them to the floor.

"You're impossible." I know Jude well enough to know that if he's spooked it's for good reason, but shit, the last time we ran it was because of Joe. My stomach knots just

thinking about what it would take to make Jude move us again.

He bursts out of the room and I hear him open the door to Cayla's bedroom. Sighing, I crouch down on the floor, dragging a suitcase out from under the bed. I put clothes in it before going to the chest of drawers and grabbing clothes for Jude.

Jude comes back in the room with Cayla crying and clinging to him. "Shhh," he whispers brushing her hair from her face. "It's okay. It's okay." He hands Cayla to me and walks back out of the room yelling for Marney. Cayla grips my shirt in her tiny fist and I wipe the tears from below her eyes. Part of me wants to kill him for putting us in whatever situation he's put us in.

"What in the shit, Jude?" I hear Marney shouting from the hallway. "The Russian mafia?"

My lungs falter for a second. I clutch Cayla to my chest, pressing my palm over her ear as I storm from the room. "Did you just say *Russian* mafia?" I shout.

Jude and Marney both look at me. "Not the fucking time, Tor," Jude says, glaring at me.

I walk over to Marney, my temper at boiling point as I hand Cayla to him. I turn to face Jude. "Bedroom. Now!" I snap.

"Jesus, *what?*" he growls as he heads into the bedroom. I follow him and close the door, and he immediately turns to face me. "Yes, Tor, I said fucking Russian mafia, because that is who just showed up at our house looking for motherfucking Gabriel." He drags his hands down his face. "So we are leaving."

I fold my arms over my chest. "Was that so bloody hard? Jesus. Words, Jude. Use your words."

"Don't talk to me like I'm a two-year-old."

"Don't insult Cayla. She doesn't grunt half as much as you do," I say calmly.

He doesn't say a word to me, just snatches another drawer open swearing under his breath. I walk out of the room and go into Cayla's room. Jude has half attempted to pack a bag, but it's all wrong. I empty it and start again. A few minutes later, a throat clears and I glance over my shoulder to find Jude standing in the doorway. "It's just a precaution," he says.

I whirl to face him, a humorless laugh slipping from my lips. "Of course it is. I can't even be mad though, can I? This is all par for the course with you." I go back to shoving things in the bag. "I mean, I got a peaceful two years. I should be grateful, right?"

He exhales a hard breath before stepping toward me and taking both my arms in his large hands. "Don't be pissed." He swipes a finger over my cheek. "It's just to make sure we're safe. I promise, this had nothing to do with me."

Sighing heavily, I meet his gaze. "Promise?"

He nods. "Promise."

"You're lucky I love you," I grumble.

He cups my face and tilts my head back. "I don't care if you hate me, doll. As long as you're both safe." He kisses me gently, his thumbs swiping over my jaw.

Part of me hates this life because there was a time when I was a doctor, when I had a future. I was willing to sacrifice love and passion for a good career, a stable life. And then I was thrust into Jude's world and I ended up losing everything to gain a love that burns so bright it blinds me. Jude gives me a passion the likes of which I never even imagined, and he gave me Cayla. I was wrong. Love is all there is in this world, the only thing that matters. If I leave this world having never accomplished anything more than loving him and our daughter, I'll die happy. That is my reality but his love—*this* love—comes at a

price. There is always a cost to loving a man like Jude Pearson.

I meet his gaze and slowly nod. He'll protect us no matter what. I must trust that.

"I love you," he breathes against my lips. I stroke over his jaw, my nails scratching across his stubble. He checks his watch. "Ten minutes and then we're leaving."

\*\*\*\*break\*\*\*\*

Jude's gripping the steering wheel so hard his muscles strain with the effort. The dim light from the dashboard plays over his face that's set in a hard mask. I glance back at Cayla fast asleep in her car seat, her lips parted as she breathes heavily. Sighing, I turn my gaze back to Jude who is anxiously looking at the mirrors, his brows pulled together in a frown. It's not the first time we've run, not the first time we've had a potential threat looming over us, but it is the first time we've run with Cayla. And that makes it completely different.

The tension rolls off Jude in waves so I place my hand on his thigh, rubbing my thumb in circles over the material of his jeans. I stare out the window, watching the darkness outside rush by the window. Jude's hand slides over mine, our fingers threading together before he lifts my hand and brushes his lips over my knuckles. We sit in silence as we fly over the bumpy track, Marney following behind us in my Range Rover.

After nearly an hour, the bars to a large metal gate cut through the beams of the headlights. The gates glide open and Jude drives the car along a driveway that snakes up a steep incline. We follow the curve of the drive and a white villa comes into view. The two lights on either side of the wooden door are on, but other than that the house lies in darkness. Jude cuts the engine and gets out without a

word. He opens the back door and unbuckles Cayla just as Marney parks beside us.

"Where are we?" I ask as I climb out. Gravel crunches beneath my feet as I round the front of the car.

"A house," Jude says, already halfway up the porch with Cayla asleep in his arms.

"I can see that Jude. Whose house is it?" I roll my eyes and sigh, following Jude to the front door. It's going to be one of those nights.

"Our house." He pulls a key from his pocket and shoves it into the lock.

"What the fuck?" I hiss, trying not to wake Cayla. He looks at me and I shake my head. "Put her down and then we are talking about this."

The door swings open into a foyer and Jude immediately makes his way up the stairwell. Marney stumbles inside, dropping bags to the floor before he wanders off to another part of the house.

I follow Jude through an already decorated and fully furnished house—*of course it is*. He disappears inside a room that has a little white bed and dressing table, just like the one at our *other* house. He gives Cayla a quick kiss, sweeps his hand over her head, then turns and walks right past me and into the hall.

I step out of Cayla's room. "Jude, come back here!" He keeps walking. "I swear to god..." I growl.

He disappears into another room and I follow, ready to bloody hurt him at this point. It's a bedroom, and again, the bed, the furniture—it all matches our home. He flops back on the bed, placing one hand behind his head as he turns on the massive flat screen hung on the wall, flipping through channels. "Jude!"

"Tor!" he says and keeps flipping channels.

"Why do we have an entire house just ready and waiting that I had no fucking idea about?" He glances at me. "And

do not say; 'we just fucking do'."

"You never know when you may need one." He smirks.

It's a simple statement. One I should expect. One I know to be true, but it bothers me. Maybe two years of bliss have made me soft, or perhaps it was just easy to forget the world that Jude came from before all this...until right now. If Jude feels threatened, it means I'm threatened. *Cayla* is threatened. I've always accepted Jude's transgressions, but this is the first time any kind of danger has come near my child. And this is a horrible feeling. This very real fear continues to wrap around me, growing tighter and tighter until I feel like I can't breathe.

"You coming to bed?" he asks.

I turn and storm out of the room straight into *Cayla's*. My gaze scours the room, landing on the dressing table by the window. I slide my hand along the underside, and just like at home, my fingers bump against a gun tapped to the wood. I yank it away and tuck it into the back of my jeans before I go to *Cayla's* bed and brush my fingers over her soft cheek. I swallow the lump in my throat and take a seat in the chair in the corner, resting the gun on my lap as I watching *Cayla* sleep.

I wish I could protect her from all the enemies that would wish to hurt her. These enemies though, they aren't hers or mine, they're Jude's. Two years. We had two years of reprieve. The calm before the storm. And as corrupt and illegal as Jude is this feels different. This is dangerous enough that Jude moved us to a house I didn't even know existed. I chew on the inside of my cheek as thoughts swirl through my mind so fast I can barely grasp onto them. I love Jude, but what kind of mother does this make me?

A shadow on the wall outside *Cayla's* door catches my attention. "Tor," Jude groans before stepping into the room. His eyes fall to the gun in my lap. "What are you doing?"

I focus my attention back to *Cayla*. "I'm thinking."

He swipes a hand down his face before walking toward me and holding out his palm. "Give me the gun."

Glaring at him, I flick the safety off, wrap my fingers around the hilt, and allow my finger to linger over the trigger. "No."

"We're fine." He shakes his head, "*You* didn't even know about this fucking house, Tor. Ronan Cole sure as shit doesn't."

I didn't know about this house because Jude didn't tell me. My guess is a mob boss can find anything he wants if he's looking. I wasn't looking. Or maybe I'm just a stupid woman and would never have found out regardless. I shake my head, glancing at Cayla again. She's so innocent—too innocent for this shit, just like I once was. I wanted Jude though. I wanted his brand of corruption. She's just a baby. "Just go to bed, Jude," I whisper.

"Tor..." I can hear the agitation in his voice.

I drag my free hand through my hair, leaning my head against the back of the chair as I sigh. The exhaustion is making my head pound and I close my eyes for a moment. I don't want to talk to him about this right now. I don't want to hear his bullshit about how he's protecting me. I can cope with most things, and I will deal with the shit as it comes...*if* he tells me. But the second he stops talking to me is the moment I start to doubt him. Jude and I have been through hell and back together and come out the other side. If he's not telling me things, then I have to expect the worst.

"I'm fucking going to bed," he says. And with that he walks to Cayla's bed, leans down, kisses her head, and leaves the room.

Two days. I'm going to give him two days to make me feel safe, to make me feel like my daughter is safe. And if can't do that then I'm leaving. I can't have Cayla in danger. I won't.



**JUDE**

Tor glares at me as she walks into the bathroom and slams the door. She won't say shit to me. She's been pissed all morning. I push open the door to the bathroom, catching sight of her long legs and ass as she steps into the shower and closes the glass door. Without a word, I pull my shirt over my head and drop my pants, stepping out of my boxers and fisting my cock as I grab the door and yank it open.

"Jude..." she starts. I step into the warm stream of water, grabbing her hips and spinning her around to face me. "You can fucking put that away," she says, eyeing my cock.

I nuzzle her neck and playfully nip at her. "Oh, I'll *put* it away." I press her against the tile wall, my hands roaming over her body.

"You don't get to fuck your way out of this, Jude Pearson!" She shoves against my chest.

"And you don't get to tell me what I can do." I sink my hand between her legs and smirk because, of course, she's fucking wet.

Her hand slides over my chest. Her fingers wrap around my throat and her nails dig into my skin. I clench my jaw on a groan and press my body harder against hers, the perfect feel of her tits sliding against my slick skin as her fingers

tighten on my throat. "Sure you want to try that?" I arch a brow, burying my fingers deep and fast inside her.

"I hate you," she moans.

"I bet you do." I slam my lips over hers, grabbing her hair and fisting it. Her nails rake over my neck, the pain making my dick swell. I hiss out a breath and bite her bottom lip.

"So much," she breathes. Her back bows and she rolls her hips, grinding her pussy over my fingers.

"You fucking like it," I whisper against her ear before pulling my fingers out and slipping them between my lips. The way that woman tastes...*fuck*. I grab her leg, hook it over my arm, and ram my cock inside her wet and waiting pussy.

Her eyes shut and she throws her head back against the tile, my name falling from her lips like a fucking prayer. Her fingers dig into my biceps. Her nails scratch over my skin as she moans and begs with every thrust.

I grab her by the throat and drag her face toward me, pressing her body hard against mine as I brutally thrust into her. She moans. I press my thumb along her jaw watching as she gasps and pants, as her brow wrinkles with each moan, each thrust. I lean down, gently kissing over her neck before I sink my teeth into her flesh.

"Shit," she breathes, struggling against me.

"I don't know why you fucking fight it, Tor," I say in a groan as I pound into her.

A long moan falls from her lips, the sound of it echoing around the shower and nearly driving me to the fucking edge. Her pussy clenches around my cock, squeezing and gripping. Her fingers tug at my hair and every fucking one of my muscles draws tight.

"Jude..." she pants, desperate and helpless. I love watching her fall apart for me and she does. Every fucking time. She's trying to pull away from me, but I hold her to

me, burying myself deeper inside of her. All the tension that's been building inside me uncoils and unwinds in an explosive heat, and when I come down, I press her against the shower wall, both of us breathing heavily underneath the warm spray of the shower.

Tor places her hand against my chest in an attempt to shove me away. "I'm still pissed at you," she says. "Just so you know, the fact that you cornered me in the shower changes nothing."

I laugh as I step under the water and run my hand through my hair. "Like you tried to fight it?"

"You're a cunt." She shoves past me, opens the shower door, and steps out.

"Not even gonna wash my come off?" I smirk

"Fuck you, Jude!" she calls as she leaves the bathroom.

"You just did."

I finish my shower and get dressed. When I go downstairs, Tor's in the kitchen making Cayla breakfast. She turns and glares at me as she sets Cayla's plate in front of her, and I can't help but laugh. I walk over, lean down, and give Cayla a quick kiss on the head. "Be sweet for Mommy. She's having a rough day." I turn to Tor and wink.

Marney snickers at the breakfast bar. Tor sits next to Cayla and props her elbows on the table, clasping a mug of coffee. "Every day is a rough day when we have to put up with Daddy," she says through gritted teeth.

Cayla squeals, smiling as she slams her hands down over her tray and knocks her juice over. "Dada. Dada."

"Daddy will be back later," I say. "Love you."

She grins and I blow her a kiss. Tor just glares at me. "Love you too, doll," I say before walking out to the car.

It takes me an hour longer to get to the bar from the new house. I park in front of the bar, cutting the engine and glancing around the empty parking lot. The only car here is Pepe's run-down Toyota, but something doesn't feel right.

I walk in with my hand on my gun. The safety off. I hate this fucking feeling. Out here on this island, I'd almost forgotten what it was like to worry about shit. Being a figurative dead man has had its perks—until now. Pepe glances up from behind the bar. When he smiles his gold front tooth glints in the sunlight.

"Hola, boss." He reaches under the counter and my grip on my gun tightens. I don't trust a fucking soul right now, for all I know everyone works for the cartel. Pepe lays a bank bag on the counter and pats it. "All the money is in here." Reaching behind him, he grabs a bottle of whisky and pours a shot, sliding it across the bar to me.

"Thanks, Pepe." I gulp the whisky back just as the door bangs open and fucking Gabriel comes wandering in. "Pepe, give me another," I say. He nods, pours one out, and hands it to me.

"Sorry about the other night," Gabriel says, stepping up to the bar, "the Russian is crazy."

I cock a brow. "You don't say?"

"He's Russian, they're all crazy."

"You gonna tell me what the fuck he wanted and why the hell I had to get involved in that shit show?"

Gabriel shrugs as he takes a seat on the barstool.

"Cerveza?" Pepe asks and Gabriel nods.

"Some bullshit about wanting my cocaine. I told him no." He snorts. "Everyone wants my cocaine. It is, after all, the best."

"Right," I say over my glass. "For some reason, I don't see that going over well."

Gabriel shrugs as he takes the beer from Pepe. "What the fuck is he going to do, ese? Russians are not welcome in Mexico. If the pale lord of Narnia steps foot on Mexican soil," Gabriel uses his finger to slice across his neck, "his throat will be slit and we'll hang him up by his intestines." He takes a sip of beer.

The thing is, Gabriel isn't exaggerating. He'll do it, but still, I've heard enough about Ronan to know you don't say no to him. "The pale lord of Narnia..." I cock a brow and Gabriel glares at me.

"What? Narnia...isn't that some place in fucking Russia with snow and shit?" He lifts his beer, gulping it back.

I drum my fingers over the counter. I can't do this. Not with Cayla. Not with Tor. I can take no risks. "I'm fucking out," I say and set the shot glass on the bar top. "Pepe," I shout, "the fucking bar's all yours, mi amigo." A blank stare falls over Pepe's face.

"You're just going to run?" Gabriel rolls his eyes, mumbling in Spanish under his breath. "So dramatic. You catch sight of the Russian and you're ready to abandon paradise? The Russian is nothing. I shit on him."

"You don't fucking get it. This is not about me, Gabe. It's about Cayla and Tor." I sigh. "I don't need this shit in my life, I had enough of that to last a goddamn lifetime."

"This is your life, *bookie*." His lips curl in a wry smile. "You can't run from it any more than I can."

Turning, I point my finger in his face. "Don't fucking call me that!"

He shrugs one shoulder. "Why not? Tor knows what you are. I know what you are. It is you who have forgotten, *ese*."

"I'm nothing anymore." I back toward the door. "I'm a fucking ghost, remember?"

"Not to the Russian," he says in a mocking tone.

"Gabe," I push the door open, "look, it's been fucking great. You take care of yourself and forget you ever knew me." And with that, I turn and walk outside. I'm not stupid enough to think I'm free of this shit. Chances are, I'm not. But at least I can tell Tor I tried...

\*\*\*break\*\*\*

I still can't fucking sleep.

There's this dark shadow falling over me. I can feel shit's about to hit the fan. I lie awake, listening to the waves crash outside the open balcony doors. The warm light from the early morning sun creeps through the doorway. Groaning, I roll over and wrap my arm around Tor's tiny waist. I trail my hand over the dip of her hip as I kiss down her bare back and think about how hard I'm about to fuck her. Just as I slip my hand beneath the waist of her shorts, the phone buzzes over the wooden nightstand. I let it keep ringing. I have better things to tend to. Tor rolls onto her back, still half asleep as she grabs at my face.

"I want you," I whisper against her neck. The phone buzzes again and again. "Fuck," I mumble as I flip onto my side and feel around on the table until my hand grazes the phone. My brow wrinkles as I bring it to my ear and quickly slip out of bed. "Yeah?" I say and stumble onto the balcony, leaving the door slightly cracked. Silence. *"Hello?"*

"Hello, American," Ronan's distinct voice comes over the line. I scrub my hand down over my jaw before I lean against the railing. "Your friend didn't want to play nice. Pity for you." He laughs.

"Gabriel's shit is Gabriel's shit."

"But I am making it your shit. You'll be meeting my friend, Boris Chavekvez, at the Albatross Café today at noon."

"Go fuck yourself." I go to hang up, but I hear him shouting and bring the phone back to my ear.

"Pearson, you do not want to fuck with me. I do hate to kill a woman and her child for no good reason." I freeze, my pulse clanging in my ears. "At noon," he says. "All you have to do is meet with Boris, after that, I leave you alone. You have my word."

My grip on the phone tightens, I feel my nostrils flaring as my blood pressure skyrockets. What the fuck am I supposed to do here? I grit my teeth just as the balcony

door pushes all the way open. "Dada." Cayla rubs her eyes, smiling as she comes tottering out.

"Ah, I hear the little one..." Ronan says and there's a long pause. "Boris will see you at noon, no?"

"Fucking fine."

"Thank you," he chuckles with an air of arrogance before the line goes dead.

White-hot rage travels through my veins. My jaw ticks, and as much as I want to shout and punch something, I can't. I must control this anger because Cayla is right here. I clench my fist around the phone with such force the screen cracks in my hand. Cayla tugs at the bottom of my shirt before she holds her hands up. "Holt me. Holt me."

I reach down and pick her up and she lays her head on my chest, her tiny hand reaching for my face. "And just who invited you into our room?" I laugh.

She sighs. "I wuv you."

"I love you, too, little doll. I love you, too."

I sweep my hand over her tiny head, staring at the reflection in the window. She's all curled up on me, so small in my arms. She loves me with a love so honest it makes me weak. And I would give my fucking life—the life of ten-thousand men—to keep her safe. I carry her back into our bedroom and lay her down between me and Tor, gently brushing my hand through her downy hair. Within minutes, Cayla's out like a light on my chest and my mind's reeling because I know this is not fucking good. I don't need to get involved in this shit, but what choice do I have? How did I become the middle man between a fucking Mexican cartel and the Russian mafia? And then Jesús' guy showing up at my house—that can't be coincidence, can it? *Fuck!* Cayla shifts in her sleep and I lay my hand over her small back, quieting her. We'll leave the island. Tonight...but what if there's more to this than I'm aware of? My heart races, my muscles grow tense and as much as I

fucking hate it, I think it may be best to see what the hell is going on before I just up and leave. I need to take a minute and weigh my options. Shit like this—I can't afford to make rash decisions.

My phone buzzes in my hand, Gabriel's number flashing on the cracked screen. For the past two years, my life has been perfect. Flawless. But monsters rarely ever get a fucking fairy tale...and I know that.



**TOR**

The sound of Jude's phone ringing wakes me.

"What the fuck?" he whispers. "I swear." He shifts in the bed before he climbs out. I keep my eyes closed, listening to him. "I'm gonna fucking slit your jugular..." his voice drifts down the hallway and I sit up to find Cayla curled up on Jude's side of the bed, her little lamb tucked underneath her arm. "Fucking bullshit," Jude shouts, his deep voice echoing down the hall. "And you *are* fucking going with me!"

What the hell is going on? He moves us across the island, has the Russian mafia after him, and now this shit. I hop out of bed and walk down the hallway to the top of the stairs.

"...and what the fuck am I supposed to tell Tor?" He pauses and I hear an agitated groan float up the stairwell. "Just—fuck, just let me see what the plan is." There's another pause. "We're supposed to meet him at noon."

*Jude, I swear to all that is holy.* I storm down the stairwell, my hands clenched into fists.

Jude's sitting on the floor in his boxers with his back against the wall and the phone pressed to his ear. The early morning sunlight streams through the windows, casting a warm golden haze over his broad chest. He glances up at

me. "Fucking Boris Chachvaka or some shit." Another brief pause. "I don't fucking know. You figure that shit out yourself." And he hangs up. I watch his chin fall to his chest and he slowly inhales.

I step around the corner of the stairwell. "What was that about?" I ask, placing my hands on my hips.

"Don't fucking worry about it."

"Don't give me that shit, Jude!"

He pushes to his feet, glaring at me with his murky green eyes. I'm not scared of him, but every so often he still gives me a look that sends adrenaline jolting through my system. "I'm going to take a shower," he says.

"I asked you a question."

He waves me off. *Oh, he did not just dismiss me like I'm some trophy wife who doesn't need to worry her pretty, little head.* I pick up the nearest available object—which just so happens to be a Beanie Baby lamb—and I throw it at the back of his head.

He freezes on the step, slowly turning to face me. His eyes drift to the stuffed animal by his bare foot before they slowly rise to meet my stare. "The fuck, Tor?"

I point at him. "Do *not* fucking ignore me," I whisper-shout, trying to keep my voice down so as not to wake Cayla.

"I wasn't." There's a slight gleam in his eye as one corner of his mouth lifts into a dangerous smirk. "I told you I was going to take a shower," he says as he steps back down the stairs toward me. "And don't fucking throw shit at me."

"Don't worry about it is not an answer, you asshole."

"Oh, excuse me." He grins. "How about: none of your fucking concern..." he pauses and that grin deepens, "*woman.*"

*He thinks this is funny?* I pick up the next available object, a butt-naked Barbie, and launch that at him. He

catches the doll midair. "You, shady fuck!" I say. "If you think I'm going to put up with your shit, you've forgotten who you're dealing with. I will slit your throat in your sleep."

On a smirk, he throws the doll to the floor then comes stomping across the foyer toward me, all hard, dominant male.

"Fuck me," he says on a groan when he stops in front of me. He grabs a handful of my hair and yanks my head back as his mouth inches toward my throat. My heart hammers against my ribs. "Tell me you'll slit my fucking throat again." He tugs my hair and smirks as his large hand leisurely makes its way to my throat. His fingers slowly wind around my neck and he grips the side of my jaw with his outspread fingers. "I like it when you threaten me, doll. You know it's a turn-on." His lips brush mine.

That adrenaline rush hits me with such force my vision blurs for a second and I feel lightheaded. "Tell me what you're getting us into, Jude," I breathe against his lips.

My fingers twitch, desperate to touch him, but I don't. This man can own me with a look, and I'm not about to help his cause, even if it is tempting. This is how Jude works: I get mad and he seduces me until I can't even remember what I was angry about. And I fall for it every time. It's not even a choice, I can't resist him.

"Trust me when I say, it is nothing to worry about. I'll handle it." His lips brush over mine as his hold on my throat releases. His hand drifts down my stomach, slipping with practiced ease beneath my thong. "Sometimes," he says, "I don't tell you things to protect you." His finger slides over me and my knees threaten to give way. I throw my hand out, resting my palm against the warm skin of his chest.

*Damn him.* "I don't need protecting," I whisper. "I'm not a child."

"Oh, trust me. I know that." His fingers sink farther into me and I bite back a moan as I wrap my fingers around his wrist, halting him. Our eyes lock in a silent standoff. He lifts a brow and forces his fingers deeper inside me. "Fuck, I like you angry." He kisses down my throat, biting every few inches.

"Stop," I gasp.

"Don't do this to me, doll," he pleads against my neck.

My resolve wavers for a beat. "You can't just fuck me into silence," I whisper.

"Wanna bet?" His fingers flex and I whimper. He slams his mouth over mine, biting down on my lower lip. That's all it takes for my resolve to dissolve into nothing. I'm always so weak for him. He pulls his fingers from me, his hands landing on my waist and he lifts me. The wall hits my back, his massive chest pinning me. Before I can protest, his boxers are shoved down over his thighs and he shoves his cock deep inside me. I can't fight this. He feels like home. He makes me feel whole. Moaning, I close my eyes and throw my head against the wall. "God, your fucking pussy," he groans as he drives into me.

"Jude," I breathe. His teeth pinch my jaw and I turn my head to the side, allowing him more access.

"Take it, Tor."

I'll always take everything he has to give. I fist his hair and yank his head back, coaxing a guttural growl from him as I press my lips over his. Anger and lust mix together until I'm caught somewhere between wanting to fuck him and hurt him. "I fucking hate that you do this," I say on a gasp and he thrusts harder inside me. I rake my nails down his chest and he hisses as thin lines of blood well on his skin.

"I know you do."

"Fuck you, Jude," I cry, tightening around him as pleasure fires through me.

Without warning, he grabs my throat and one by one his thick fingers close around it as he presses me to the wall. This feeling—the way he completely dominates me, takes me, owns me—nothing will ever compare to this. It's primitive and raw and so very Jude. So very wrong.

"Fuck, Tor." His fingers twitch over my throat and I find myself falling over the edge, heat spiraling through me. I moan, I claw at his arm, I writhe and buck as the bliss crashes down on me like a rogue wave, and then he's right there, falling with me. I open my eyes just in time to see him throw his head back on a deep growl, his brow wrinkling, muscles flexing. Another deep groan rumbles through his lips and he stills inside me as he looks up, his green eyes locking with mine.

He drops my feet to the floor and we stand staring at each other, our chests heaving. A light sheen of sweat glistens on his skin. The claw marks on his chest stand out a bright crimson against his tanned skin. Never has a man made sex feel so much like a war.

He still hasn't told me anything and I realize he's not going to. I walked right into that because he wanted me to. With a heavy sigh, I turn and walk up the stairs. Cayla's still sleeping in the middle of our enormous bed. The sight of her bursts my sex induced bubble. I love Jude. He sets me on fire, he loves me, he understands me...he's my soul mate, and Cayla is my cold dose of reality. Jude may be part of my soul, but Cayla is my heart. My everything. I would love nothing more than to stay, to be loved by Jude for the rest of my life, but I know now I can't. He's never going to tell me what's going on and if I don't know then I'm not risking her. He will always believe that we are safest with him, but what if we're not? After all, the Russian mob isn't after me or Cayla, just Jude.

I climb onto the bed and curl on my side, wrapping my arm around her small body. She blinks her eyes open, the shadow from her long lashes fanning over her plump

cheeks. She clutches at a piece of my hair and I kiss her cheek, inhaling the sweet smell of baby lotion.

"Hey baby," I say, smiling.

She stretches her little arms and legs out and turns to face me. "Dada?" One word and it brings tears to my eyes. I fight them away and plaster a smile on my face for her sake.

"Daddy's downstairs," I whisper hoarsely.

"I'm right here, little doll."

I glance over my shoulder to find Jude crossing the bedroom. He leans over me, pressing a kiss to my shoulder as he scoops Cayla up off the mattress. She smiles, squealing as he lifts her in the air. His eyes meet mine and he pulls her tight to his chest. I look away before he sees the tears in my eyes. He's such a good dad. He loves her and she adores him. Can I really take her away from that?

I roll onto my side, facing away from him. I have to be sure. I know what's happening is bad and dangerous. I know that without a shadow of a doubt. But I need more than just his cryptic phone calls and his shady behavior. I need to know whether he can get us out of this.

I have to know what's going on before I tear my family apart.

**JUDE**

The gravel crunches beneath the tires as I pull into the parking lot of the Albatross Café. I park under the shade of a palm tree, cut the engine, and open the door. The sticky Caribbean heat wafts inside, along with the cliché sound of the steel drums off in the distance. This is fucked up. So fucked up.

I slip my keys into my pocket as I skirt around a group of chickens darting across the dirt road. The front of the café is littered with rusted bistro tables. Palm trees sprout up everywhere. Mosquitoes buzz in the humid air. Paradise. Fucking paradise...

"Jude," Gabriel steps off the deck, a cigarette in hand. "The fucking Russians." He grabs his nuts. "They can suck these."

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I exhale, annoyed as all fuck at this. "Sometimes, Gabe, you need to just learn when to shut the fuck up. This isn't Lopez. He's smart and calculated and those are the ones you need to worry about. He somehow has shit on me and he's threatened my family. I swear to god, if I could get away with it, I would fucking hurt you."

I make my way to the patio of the rundown, beachfront café. My gaze drifts over the tables filled with locals and it

stops on the single man in a suit. His pale skin gleams in the sun, making him stick out like a sore thumb.

Gabriel leans in close to me. "Look at him, ese, in his fucking suit. I want to slit his throat."

I clench my jaw as I watch Boris' thinning blond hair flutter in the breeze. He slicks it back down. "I swear to god," I say, glancing at Gabriel, "you get me out of this shit, you hear me?"

"No problemo. I'm sure the fucking Russians are reasonable." He laughs.

I'm sure he finds all this entertaining, hell, he strings fuckers up by their entrails on a daily basis, but this is too much for me. "Cartel wars are not my forte, okay? This is your shit. You handle it."

"Shit, ese, you need a drink." He wrinkles his brow. "You're always so angry."

"Let's get this over with so I can get back to Tor before she loses her shit."

Gabriel nods before he walks up the rickety stairs. With each step I take, my fingers draw into fists, my short nails clipping into my skin. We stop at the edge of the table and Boris glances up, his steel-blue eyes locking on Gabriel. "Boris?" I ask and he simply fucking nods.

"Sit, my friends."

I shake my head and pull out one of the metal chairs. Gabriel sits next to me, his leg bouncing with agitation. "The fuck you want, Russian?" he says.

"My name is Boris. Not Russian." He glares at Gabriel and Gabriel chuckles.

"What does Ronan want?" I ask.

"An alliance," Boris says as he folds his hands on the table.

"I don't work with fucking *Russians*," Gabriel basically spits the word.



Boris glances at me. "He wants you to launder his money." He glances at Gabriel. "And you, you dirty fucking Spic, to supply his cocaine."

"I'm Columbian." Gabriel rolls his eyes.

I slouch down in my chair. "I'm not trying to get any more involved in this shit than I already am."

Boris points at me. "You clean his money. And until your friend," he glances at Gabe, "is allied with my friend, you are considered an enemy." He grins. "It's not good to be enemies with Ronan Cole."

Gabriel drums his long fingers over the table. "I'm not fucking working with him." He spits on the ground. "Let him step foot in Mexico, I'll have his testicles hanging from my door as a welcome trinket."

Boris stretches his neck.

"Fine," I say. "I'll fucking clean his money. I take twenty-five percent though."

A horn blares and a car door slams. "Oh shit, ese." Gabriel's staring at the parking lot. "Your woman's here and she looks pissed."

"Fuck." I push to my feet and shove my hands in my pocket as I make my way down the steps and walk right into fucking Tor. My muscles tense. I close my eyes on a frustrated groan.

She smiles a smartass grin. "Care to tell me what *this* is?" She points at Gabriel and Boris and the empty chair I was just occupying.

Grabbing her arm, I spin her around and lead her back to the car. "What are you doing here?" I say in a low growl.

"*It's fine Tor...*" She snorts. "Sure looks like it."

"Jesus-fucking-Christ, woman. I'm at a café. Am I not allowed to fucking eat outside of the damn house?"

She peers angrily over my shoulder as I push her toward the Range Rover. "Who's that man with Gabriel?"

"A guy."

She glares at me. I open the car door and shove her into the driver's seat and shut the door before circling around the hood and getting into the passenger side.

"You're up to something," she says, her fingers clutching the steering wheel.

"No." I slam the door closed with such force the entire car rocks. "I'm not. Now why the fuck are you following me?"

"Why the fuck do you think?"

"Well, let's see, Tor. I *don't* fucking know, hence why I just fucking asked you!"

"I'm following you because you're a shady shit, killing cartel members in my garden...Russian mafia..." She glares at me.

Dragging my hands down my face, I groan. This woman is unfuckingbelievable. "Don't do that shit. This is shit you don't need to get involved in. I told you that!"

She leans forward, pressing her forehead against the steering wheel and inhaling. "Don't do this, Jude. I didn't walk through hell and back with you just so you could start lying to me now."

I shake my head, because what the fuck else can I do? "I haven't *lied* to you," I say through clenched teeth. "Now, go home, Tor." I reach over, start the car, then go to open the door.

"I'm not your bitch, Jude. Now get the fuck out of the car."

I have one leg out of the car already, but freeze. I slowly turn to face her. "Two and a half years and you haven't figured out telling me to do something is a trigger?" I glare at her, biting down on my lower lip. "I told you to go home. Now," I place the other foot on the ground, "go home." I close the door and start around the front of the car still glaring at her through the windshield. She glares right back, and then the engine revs, the V8 growling at me like

an angry cat. *Oh, she fucking did not.* I stop, placing my palms flat against the smooth paint of the hood. Arching a single brow, I lift one hand and point my finger at her. "Don't fucking test me," I mouth.

The engine revs again, the car inching forward and kicking gravel everywhere as the wheels spin. There's a flutter from behind the car as a couple of chickens run off. People on the café deck are turning in their chairs, looking at the crazy woman in the noisy Range Rover trying to fucking run me over. I meet her gaze through the windshield and a smile pulls at her lips. She delicately places her wrist on the top of the steering wheel, her lips widening to one of those smartass grins she's so good at as she slowly raises her middle finger.

I'm not dealing with this shit. Shaking my head, I turn and head back toward the table Gabriel and Boris are sitting at. The engine growls again, I hear gravel sling everywhere, a few chickens squawk. There's a loud bang. Metal against metal. I stop dead in my tracks, heat flying all over me. I slowly turn around and see the back of Tor's car smashed into the driver's side of my BMW.

"What the fuck!" I shout.

Tor rolls the window down, smiling from ear to ear. "Oops, sorry, honey."

Gravel crunches under the wheels as she pulls forward. I'm staring at the huge fucking dent in my car when I see her reverse lights gleam against the black paint. "Don't you fucking—" But it's too late because she's just rammed into it again.

"Oh, sorry again. You know, I'm just a helpless woman who needs to stay at home and mind the children. Fucking arsehole!" She flips me the bird again and blows a kiss before she pulls away.

"Goddamn it," I say, turning around.

Everyone on the patio is staring at me and I shrug, brushing dust from my shirt. I ignore them as I head back to the table and take a seat. Boris glances up at me. "Your friend does not want to come to an agreement." I glare at Gabriel. "I'll tell Ronan you are reasonable, American, but as for your friend. I make no promises." He grabs his water, taking a sip as he stands and gives Gabriel one last glance. And then, he walks off.

I look at Gabriel. "Really?"

"I told you. I don't work with Russians. It's no Bueno."

"Just don't drag me into any more of your shit." I pull my keys from my pocket as I head back down the stairs. My blood pulses through my temples, clanging in my ears as I stare at my dented-to-all-fuck car. "God knows what she'll do when she finds out I made a deal with Ronan."



## TOR

As soon as I'm home, I'm inside and throwing Cayla's clothes into a bag, swearing under my breath. I was foolish to think that I could live in this blissful ignorance, that I could trust him not to get wrapped up in anything serious. He was meeting with Gabe and a guy who looked distinctly bloody Russian. He's not getting out. He's getting in.

"Where are you going?" Marney asks.

I turn from the wardrobe to find him in the doorway with Cayla in his arms. She plays with the buttons on his shirt. "I don't know."

Marney drops his chin to his chest and walks up behind me, placing his free hand on my shoulder. "It's a hard life, that's for sure. My old woman couldn't handle it. Took my kids..." a sad smile spreads over his lips. "I hate it for you and Cayla and Jude." I throw Cayla's little stuffed lamb into the bag and close it, turning around and reaching for her. "I know you're upset," he says, "but maybe you should just give it a little think. Have a conversation with him about it before you just up and hightail it outta here?" He hands Cayla to me.

"I have given Jude every opportunity to talk to me, Marney." I take a deep breath. "He hasn't. You can protect

his arse all you like, but we both know this is some deep shit." I lift the bag over my shoulder. "I can't risk Cayla."

"Aw, now. Just calm down for a second and wait on him to get back," he says, rubbing his hand over the back of his head.

The sound of gravel beneath tires sifts through the open window. Marney peers out and laughs. "What the hell happened to his car?"

I shift Cayla on my hip. "I drove into it."

"What the hell'dya do that for? It's a nice car."

I lift a brow at him. "He's a lying sack of shit, that's why. Pick up that bag, will you?" I nod my head toward the suitcase on the floor. My hands are shaking as I clutch Cayla to me and head down the stairs. Truthfully, this may be the hardest thing I will ever do. My heart is breaking with every step I take toward the front door. I reach the entranceway just as the front door flies open and Jude storms in. Marney stops beside me, resting the suitcase next to the wall.

"Nice job, Tor. Fucking ruined my damn car." He shakes his head. "So fucking angry."

"Hey, hey, hey now," Marney says. "Little ears." He points to Cayla with a stern look and Jude glares at him.

"Would you take her for a minute?" I ask quietly as I turn toward Marney.

Marney smiles and takes Cayla from me, singing to her as he walks down the hall.

"You're a fucking psycho. You know it?" Jude says. "Fucking trying to run me over because I wouldn't tell you what I'm doing. Fuck, it's not that serious. You need to go see someone about your temper, woman."

I say nothing as I press my hand to my stomach in an attempt to calm my nerves. He stops and I feel the atmosphere change. I lift my gaze to his and his eyes narrow before they drop to the floor beside me.

He points at the suitcases. "What the fuck are those?"

I inhale sharply. I swear my entire body aches. "I'm leaving, Jude and I'm taking Cayla."

A low growl rumbles from his chest and he snatches the bags from the ground. "The hell you are."

I knew this would be war, but he has to see. He has to *let* us go. I don't want to run from him because he will hunt me to the ends of the earth. I know that. "Jude, you are in over your head."

He storms up the stairs with my bags and I sigh, following after him. He tosses them down on the floor. Crossing his arms over his chest, he glares at me and all I'm reminded of is the first time I met him, that moment I was thrown in front of him, bound and gagged. He seemed so hard then, so brutally unbreakable.

"You are not leaving me, Tor. You fucking hear me?" Anger laced with heartache pours from his voice. "I fucking love you!"

God, this hurts. "I love you more than you know. But, Jude, you have the Russian mob after you—"

"The fucking Russian *mob* is not after me." He tosses his head back and combs his hands through his thick hair. "Shit."

"I don't feel safe. Don't ask me to stay when I feel like Cayla's in danger."

He storms toward me, grabbing me by both arms and staring down at me, his nostrils flaring. "You are no safer away from me than with me."

"Aren't we?" My voice is barely a whisper.

"If that were the case, I'd tell you to go." He takes a deep breath and I can see the pain in his eyes. "Look, I know this is scary, but I promise you, I have it under control. They aren't after me, they just want me to work with them."

I think Jude truly believes he has this under control, but in the space of two weeks I've had a Mexican man killed in



my front yard and now Russians. This is about to blow up in his face. "I don't want you working with them!" I snap. "The mob, Jude. *Really?*"

"And how the fuck is that any different than what I do for Gabe?"

I throw my hands up. "It just is. It's Gabriel. It's not the same."

"It's not any fucking different!" he shouts his face growing beet red before it softens and he steps toward me. "You've always known what I am, doll."

"I knew you were a bookie," I say. "And let's be honest, Jude, it's not like we dated. It's not like I made an informed decision, is it?" I shake my head.

Now his face goes red again, his jaw ticking. "You came back. Don't act like I didn't fucking let you go. And you came back."

I came back because I had nothing and no one and I loved him. I love him... That was before Cayla though. My reasons for staying then are not good enough now.

His phone rings, the shrill sound breaking through the tension. "Fuck." He takes it from his pocket and cuts it off. "Tor..." He steps forward and his phone rings again and again he cuts it off. Jude's eyes become pleading and he strokes my hair from my face. "Please..." he whispers. His phone rings and rings and finally, he snatches it up by his ear. "The fuck is it now?" he shouts into the phone. "What?"

I rest my head on Jude's shoulder so I can hopefully hear. "We have a problem, mi amigo." I'm barely able to hear Gabriel speaking.

"Now is not a good time, Gabe," Jude says through gritted teeth.

"Someone put Pepe's head on a stick outside your bar..."

Jude's body tenses. "What?"

"His head. Your man. Your bar. I'd say that message was for you, ese."

I push away from Jude, shaking my head, my limbs trembling. Jude's eyes shoot up to mine, a deep frown marring his face as he hangs up the phone. "Tor..."

"Don't, Jude. Just let us go" I beg.

He backs me against the wall the way he does when he's trying to intimidate and dominate me. He touches his forehead to mine and the scent I associate with love and safety wraps around me. Jude has always been a safe haven to me, until now. And now I need to walk away from him. My heart aches at the prospect.

"Please," he begs, his fingers brushing over my cheek. There's this desperation stretching between us. "I have to go handle this. *Please* just wait until I get back. You owe me that much, Tor. I love you," he whispers and presses his lips to mine. The kiss is short and sweet and so full of love. "You and Cayla are my fucking world. Don't take that from me." I can feel my heart breaking under his soft touches, his warm kisses.

"I'll wait," I tell him, holding back the tears threatening to spill out. He kisses me once more and then pulls away, walking out of the house without a backward glance.

I go into the kitchen and find Cayla sitting on the worktop, Marney holding her with a wide smile on her face. Part of me wants to leave now while Jude's gone, but he's right, I owe him enough to explain it to him properly, to make him come to terms with it. Though, honestly, how do you ever come to terms with losing your child? I want to believe that Jude could just stop doing this, go straight and live a normal life. God knows, we have enough money to. But he was born into this lifestyle, he's good at it, and it's all he knows. Normal day to day living...Jude wouldn't know what to do with that. I'm sure he'd tell me everything I wanted to hear. Hell, he might even do it for a time, but Jude is a man who lives on the edge. He needs it. He thrives on it.

I glance through the French doors that open out onto the garden. The sun has just dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in streaks of orange and pinks. I walk outside, inhaling the salty air. I will miss the island.

"He's not perfect," Marney says, coming to stand beside me. "But he loves you, little darlin'." Cayla leans away from his arms, reaching for me. I take her and prop her on my hip, stroking my hand over her cheek. She has always had her Uncle Caleb's eyes, but she sometimes gets this mischievous glint that's all Jude.

"I know he does," I whisper. That's what makes this so hard. Cayla yawns, rubbing at her eyes with her small fists. "I'm going to go and put her down."

Marney nods. I walk back through the house and up the stairs. I give Cayla her bath and change her into her pyjamas for bed before I lay her down and read her a story about princesses and unicorns. This is what her life should always be: princesses and unicorns. At least until she's old enough to deal with all the ugliness this life holds. I will shelter her from this big bad world for as long as I possibly can. When I finish the book, she's fast asleep. I smile down at her peaceful face and tuck her in, kissing her head before I leave the room, telling myself I'm doing the right thing by waiting on Jude to come back.



## TOR

I didn't sleep at all last night, and it's now catching up with me, so I lie down for a moment. I'm half drifting to sleep when I hear something. I sit up, listening intently to see if Cayla is crying. Silence. The room is completely dark and I squint, trying to find the bedside lamp.

I hear a floorboard creak in the hallway and I freeze. In the silence of the house it sounds impossibly loud. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end and my heart rate speeds up. When you've lived the life I have, you learn to listen to your instincts and mine are screaming at me that something is wrong.

My stare remains fixed firmly on the door, my breathing unsteady as I reach for the bedside table and silently open the drawer. I close my fingers around the cool metal of a 9mm then I take Jude's Colt 45 in my other hand and click the safeties off. Throwing the duvet back, I slink out of bed, crouch next to it, and aim at the doorway. I breathe in and out. Waiting. And then *bang*—the bedroom door is kicked in. I don't think, I just shoot bullet after bullet until all I can hear is a shrill ringing in my ears. A couple of shots are fired at the wall behind me, the bullet sparking in the dark as it leaves the barrel of the gun. Another shot is fired and a blowing pain rips across my shoulder when the bullet

tears through. Gritting my teeth against the pain, I duck down again and use the bed for shelter as I reload a new clip into Jude's Colt. I hear gunshots further down the hallway. *Cayla*. I have to get to her. I discard the empty gun and clutch the remaining one to my chest. And then I hear footsteps cross the room.

"Sal, sal, donde quiera que estés," someone says, laughing as they walk through the room.

I watch the shadow lurk by the end of the bed. I steel my breath before launching to my feet with my gun aimed. I pull the trigger and his body jerks. He groans. His gun clatters to the floor and then he goes down. I don't even stop to check if he's dead before I'm moving, stepping over the dead bodies scattered in the hallway. There are four of them in total and they're dressed in black military gear. Whoever this is, they're serious.

I have to get to Cayla. Clutching my wounded shoulder, I stagger down the hallway to her room and nudge the door open with my foot. There's just enough moonlight spilling in from the window that I can make out the figure hovering above her bed. He bends over her and I pull the trigger. Cayla screams and cries, and he falls to the floor with a thud. My heart threatens to pound out of my chest as I rush to her. Blood spatter covers her blanket and panic ripples through me before I realize that it's not her blood. I scoop her up in her blood-stained blanket and tiptoe across the room. The bedroom door opens and closes, and I swing my gun in that direction.

"Hell, don't shoot," Marney says, holding his hands up.

I breathe a sigh of relief. "We have to go," I whisper.

He comes closer. "Take that little girl and you run. Go down the beach for about a mile, you'll find a boat shed. Inside is a car, key's in the exhaust. Go to Billy's hanger. I'll call him and tell him to get the plane ready. He'll know where to take you." I nod frantically.

"What about you?" I ask.

"I'll hold 'em off." He yanks open the balcony door. "Go!"

I step outside and the door closes behind me. The warm night breeze howls around the corner of the house, the waves crash softly on the beach beyond the garden. My pulse hammers in my ears and adrenaline fires through my body. Cayla whimpers and I bounce her on my hip as I try to think of what I need to do. I don't even know how many men may be left in the house, searching, waiting outside... I don't know anything. All I know is that I've been shot and I have to get my daughter to safety.

I spot the trellis buried amongst the Jasmine vines to the side of the balcony, and clutch Cayla to my chest, running my fingers through her hair

"Cayla. Listen. I need you to hug mummy really tight. Can you do that?" Tears pour down her little face and I can feel the droplets falling on my chest. "Cayla, this is important. Hug mummy really tight." She nods and places her arms around my neck. I wrap the blanket around my waist, doing my best to tie her to me. And then I throw my leg over the balcony and grip the first rung of the ladder. I panic when I hear gunshots from Cayla's room. The narrow rungs bite into my bare feet as I speed up my descent. It's not easy, my shoulder is throbbing and I'm terrified of dropping her, but I stay close to the ladder, using the rungs to prop up her weight. As soon as I hit the ground I'm running across the grass. I follow the steps down to the beach and sprint towards the cluster of palms that meet the sand. Once I reach the tree line behind the beach, I pause to catch my breath, placing Cayla on the ground. She clutches the bloodstained blanket.

"Baby, mummy needs some of your blanket, okay?" I grab the blanket, tearing off a clean strip. I tie it under my armpit and over my shoulder, putting pressure on the bullet wound. "Shit," I hiss. I fight back the tears that threaten and pick Cayla up, hugging her to my chest. "It's

okay." It's all I can think to tell her because we're okay, she'll be okay even if I have to die to ensure it. I follow the beach, staying just inside the tree line.

About a mile from the house I find a handful of small barns. I try the doors until I find one with a coded padlock on it. I twirl the numbers to Cayla's birthday. It doesn't budge. I try my birthday and it snaps open. I throw open the doors and, as promised, inside is an old Jeep Wrangler complete with massive off-road tyres and a snorkel. I take the key from the exhaust pipe and open the door. There's a car seat in the back that I pop Cayla into, fastening the seat belt over her.

"Good girl. We're going on a little trip."

"Dada," she says, her voice shaking.

"Daddy...Daddy's fine."

On the passenger seat is a duffle bag with a change of clothes for me, Jude, and Cayla. In the glove compartment is a gun along with a box of ammunition, fake driver's licenses for Jude and myself, passports for all three of us. And lastly, an envelope. I tear it open and inside is an address, a key, and a stack of bills. I have to give it to him, he's organized. I stare at the items now sprawled out on the front seat. This is all I have.

I turn the key and the engine coughs once before spluttering to life. I pull out of the boat shed, crossing the few hundred yards of rugged terrain before I reach a track, and then I put my foot down, sending the car hurtling along the bumpy road. I want as much space as possible between us and the men who want us dead.

I have no phone. No way of contacting Jude. I don't even know if he's alive. That was an organized attack and Jude is the target. It's just me and Cayla now, and I have to do whatever is necessary to keep her safe. I need to get off this island. Now.





## JUDE

I stand next to Gabriel staring at Pepe's head. The fuckers took one of the umbrella posts, used it as a stake, and placed his decapitated head right on it like something you'd see in a fucking *Viking's* episode.

"Shit, ese..." Gabriel mumbles as he paces. "Shit."

I keep staring. I feel bad. Pepe was a good guy. A family man. Gabriel walks up to the post, leaning down and staring at Pepe's glassy eyes. "Oh..." he says as he reaches up and crams his fingers in Pepe's mouth.

"What the fuck, Gabe?"

"Ese...." He pulls out a blood-soaked piece of paper. "Fuck me, Jude. We're fucked." He unrolls the note and shakes his head before handing it to me and pacing. I glance down at the damp paper. In hard black ink, it reads: *Bookie, your family is next. Regards, Domingo Garcia.*

My heart literally stops before pumping full force and sending a dizzying heat all over me. Fucking Domingo Garcia—is in prison. He was one of the guys I supplied information on in exchange for being set free nearly three years ago. I stagger back a few steps, dropping the note to the ground. "Fuck." I take off in a full sprint toward my car and Gabriel is right after me.

"Jude? Jude?"

I don't say a word, just open my door and crank the engine. Gabriel yanks open the passenger door and hops in. "This is fucked up," he says, pulling his gun from his jeans and cocking it.

"I'll fucking kill every single one of them if they hurt either of my girls." I put the car in reverse and spin out of the parking lot, gravel kicking up in my wake and my heart hammering against my ribs. I've never been so scared in my life because this isn't about me. It's about Tor and Cayla. And I'm nearly an hour away from the house.

I speed down the winding road that follows the hillside, panic ripping through me with each passing minute. I try to call Tor and Marney, but neither of them are answering which almost sends me over the edge. Every horrible fucking scenario is running through my head as the car constantly fights to grip the road.

"Miguel," Gabriel shouts into his phone. "¡Matarlos a todos!" A string of Spanish spills from his mouth. I can't make out what he's saying, I'm too upset. Too worried. I press my foot harder over the accelerator. When I take a hard right, Gabriel slams against the door and the car swerves off the road. I can just make out the house from here and it feels like my heart's about to pound out of my fucking chest. I hold the wheel with one hand and pull my gun with the other, cocking it. I turn down the drive and as soon as I fly past the palm tree, the headlights illuminate the metal gate hanging from its hinges, the middle of it dented and scraped with black paint.

"Fuck!" I shout, the gears grinding as I shove the car into park. I open the door and jump out, running at a full sprint through the gates and to the front of the house. I hear Gabriel shouting behind me, but I don't pay any attention to him. My focus is on getting in that house. I nearly trip running up the steps. My heart bangs violently in my chest when I find the front door wide open. Raising my gun, I pause, the only sound the faint crash of the

waves in the distance and my rapid breaths. I step inside and the floorboards creak under my weight. I slink along the hallway and up the stairs. The second I reach the first landing I see blood trickling down the steps, and at the top of the stairs lies a man's body. I grit my teeth, trying to rein in the sheer panic tearing through me like a bullet as I slowly walk around him. I nudge him with my boot. He doesn't move. As I glance down the hall, I see a pile of bodies outside our bedroom door. I can't breathe. I can't focus on anything. I run down the hallway, stopping when I reach Cayla's room. There's a man sprawled out in the floor, the back of his head blown to bits. Her bed is splattered with blood. Rage pummels through me. Fear. Helplessness.

"Tor!" I shout. "Tor, where the fuck are you?" I run to our bedroom door, jumping over the men bleeding out on the floor and nearly pulling the trigger when I see a shadow standing at the foot of the bed.

"Ain't this some shit?" Marney asks, taking a cigarette from his lips and blowing smoke out.

Blood's everywhere. Splattered on the walls, the bed. There's a dark puddle pooling on the floor by Marney's boot. "Where are they?" I ask.

"They're fine. They got out. Sent them to the backup car, told her where the key and all that was." I hear a muffled groan. Marney's eyes drop to the floor as he puffs on his cigarette. I round the corner to find a man lying beside the bed clutching his stomach, crimson blood welling between his fingers.

Marney nods in the direction of the groaning man. "We need to do something with this piece of shit," he says. I raise my gun and aim, but Marney grabs my arm. "Hell, don't kill him. We may as well keep him."

"For what?" I shout.

Marney shrugs. "I don't know...collateral."

There's footsteps down the hall. "Jude?" Gabriel calls before he appears in the doorway. He pauses, looks down at one of the men, and pulls his trigger. Blood splatters Gabriel's shirt. "These are Jesús Lopez's guys." He makes his way into the room, his gaze falling to the man on the floor. "Oh, shit, ese. That's Andrea Garcia, he's fucking Domingo's son."

I stare at Gabriel, blood coursing through my jugular. My heart pounding. Head spinning with silent rage. Everything around him fades away and my finger twitches over the trigger of my gun. "Why are they here? At my motherfucking house *again*, Gabe?" I say through clenched teeth.

He slowly turns to look at me. "Why are they after me?" I repeat.

Gabriel scrubs a hand down his jaw. "There could be a million reasons. Domingo Garcia being number one."

"No," I take a step toward him and he remains still, his gaze narrowing on me. "Two and a half years, Gabriel, I've been gone for two and a half years. No one fucking knows about that except me and you and two people at the motherfucking FBI."

"All cartels have ventanas...moles."

My nostrils flare. "I was under their radar until you..." I place my gun to the middle of his forehead, staring down the barrel at it. "Until you killed Jesús' guy in my motherfucking front yard." All that's swirling around in my head is anger and hate. My life, for fucking once, was perfect. I clench my jaw, imagining blowing his brains out of his head.

"Jude..." Gabriel says too calmly, "Think about this. You kill me, you are in a load of shit. Don't forget who I am. Do you really want *two* cartels hunting you like a dog?" He places his hand on the gun and carefully pushes my hand down.

I want to kill him, but I can't be that fucking stupid. I came to Gabriel for protection from Domingo's guys in case they ever found out I ratted his fucking worthless ass out. I know the power he holds. Inhaling, I drop my chin to my chest and Gabriel places his hand on my shoulder.

"I'm leaving," I turn and point at him. "Do not fucking follow me. You forget you know me, this shit never happened." I'll go get Tor and Cayla and we'll go somewhere else. Start over. Italy. Germany. Fucking Africa for all I care.

"Jesús' guy was outside your house when I came, waiting, now whether it was for me or for you, I do not know. But he was there." Gabriel sighs. "It's an unforgiving world you and I live in, and it's not something you can outrun, Jude. It's not. If the cartel has it out for you, they will hunt you to the ends of the earth." He pauses and I glance up, staring through him. "They are deeply embedded in every thread of society. They will find you. Ese, the only way you outrun the cartel is to kill them."

"Kill the cartel?" I snort. "Yes, Gabriel, let me just," I wave my gun through the air, "take down the motherfucking cartel—" I nod toward him, "Something so easy to do, you've just not gotten around to it, I suppose? Fuck." I shake my head.

"Mean, might could," Marney says, lighting another cigarette. Gabriel and I both turn and glare at him. "What about that Russian guy that's got both you fellas by the balls?" He smirks.

"Marney, what the fuck?"

"Fuck the Russians," Gabriel growls, kicking Andrea in the side. "And fuck your piece of shit father, too!"

Marney shrugs.

"I don't give a fuck about anything right now," I say. "I've got to get to Tor and Cayla."

I stare at the carnage in front of me and everything slowly sinks in. The kind of life I've lived—you can never

cleanse yourself of that. It will always haunt you. There will always be skeletons hiding in your closet, always those seeking their revenge. It's kill or be killed until the day you fucking die, or at least wipe out every enemy you've ever had. It's not Gabe's fault. It's mine. I am the criminal. I am the rat. And I always knew deep down that everything would come to a head eventually. I'm fucking pissed, angry at myself for ever coming for Tor. I should have let her be, let her keep thinking I was dead. As much as that would have destroyed me, I should have let her and Cayla be because then they would have been safe. It was my selfish need to love them, my weakness for those two girls that ruined everything. I always said the moment you became weak for anything was the moment you were fucked, but sometimes, you just can't help yourself. And what do I do now...

"Fucking help me get this shithead outta here," I say, glancing at Gabriel. "Can you keep him somewhere?"

A wide grin spreads over Gabriel's lips. "Of course."

"Don't fucking kill him either, Gabe. I mean it." I glare down at Andrea as I lean over and grab his arms. "You don't fuck with my family. I swear to god I'm going to make you suffer. And I'm a little rusty on my torture these days," I drag him across the floor, "so it won't be pretty."

Gabriel stares at the trail of blood following Andrea. "Shit, he may die."

"He's lucky he's not already dead," Marney says. "Tor's a damn good shot." *That my girl is.*

I glance up at Gabriel. "Help me get him outside, would you? Shit."

Gabriel sighs as he bends over and grabs Andrea's ankles. We lift him up and cart him over the bodies and down the stairs, blood dripping from his wound the entire way. We walk off the porch and head to my car. Marney shuffles ahead of us, opening the door so we can throw

Andrea inside. He groans in pain when he hits the backseat. I stand in the doorway of the car, pull a cigarette from my pocket, and light it. "Why are they after my family?" I ask, pretty damn sure what the answer will be: *Domingo*.

Andrea opens his eyes, flinching when he moves on the seat. "Fuck..." he takes a deep breath, "you!"

I puff on my cigarette and narrow my eyes as I blow out the smoke. "God, I hate fucking punks like you." I lean inside the cab of the car and blow smoke in his face. His nostrils flare as he clutches his stomach. I take my cigarette and dab it out on his cheek. He screams, spitting and cursing as I move out of the car.

"You know, we can use this to our advantage," Gabriel says as he glances at the house. "Everyone is dead. If we left him here, he'd die..." He arches a brow. "We can get him treated. Then call Jesús and say surprise the piece of shit lives. Really fuck them up the ass with him." He grins. "There is no leverage like the son of Domingo Garcia. Like I said, ese, you aren't safe until they're all dead."

I glance at Gabriel, a sick feeling twisting in my gut as I nod. I know he's fucking right and I hate it. I glance at Andrea one last time and shut the door.

"Marney," I say, "get a few tanks of gas outta the shed. We gotta burn this house to the ground so they think Andrea died in this fucking raid."

Marney heads to the back of the house and after a few minutes I hear him shouting: "What in the hell..." He comes back around to the front with two tanks of gas, shaking his head. "They fucking shot Princess Buttercup."

I wrinkle my brow. "Princess who?"

"Princess Buttercup," he shouts, his face all red. "The pony."

"What the hell kinda name..."



"Who the fuck shoots a pony?" Gabriel asks, disgust in his voice. "You see, Jesús' cartel is sick and demented, ese." He walks to the front of the car. "Shooting a pony." I turn just in time to see him cross himself. "I'll take care of Andrea. You get the fuck out of here." Gabriel opens the door, climbs in, and cranks the engine, pulling off into the darkness.

"Well, hell," Marney groans as he sets the tanks down and flips off the caps. "Guess we're setting this shit on fire, huh?"

"Yep." I grab a can and head to the front steps, trailing gas behind me. This shit never ends.



## TOR

The tires screech as I pull onto the private runway, slamming on the brakes next to a small plane. Crazy Billy pops his head around the back of the plane and walks over to me.

"I need off the island right now, Billy," I say, throwing the car door open.

I unbuckle Cayla from her car seat and grab the passports, clothes, and money from the front seat. Without question Billy helps us into the small plane and I take a seat, strapping Cayla in next to me. She fusses, trying to get free. "Baby, you have to sit quiet. We're going to go up in the sky," I say, stroking over her hair.

"You all good?" Billy asks, eyeing my bloody shoulder as he pulls the plane door closed.

"Yeah, just get us in the air." I'm nervous, just waiting for someone to come after us toting bullets.

He buckles himself up and flips switches, the engines roaring to life. Cayla wrinkles her brow and stares wide-eyed at me. I place my arm around her, leaning down and whispering, "It'll be fun." The plane turns on the runway and we bump along the tarmac, slowly picking up speed. My heart pounds in my chest. I just want off the ground. We barrel down the runway and my stomach catches when

the wheels come off the ground. Cayla squeals as clouds whisk by. Billy banks and I watch the lights of the island grow smaller until I see nothing but black underneath us, and I finally breathe a sigh of relief.

Once we level off, I pull clean clothes from the bag and quickly change, using the tank top to rewrap my still bleeding shoulder. When I sit back down I find that Cayla has fallen asleep in the seat. Her head is slumped to the side and she's breathing softly. The farther from the island we get, the more my adrenaline simmers down. I'm able to more clearly think about what I need to do. My first instinct is to go to the address and wait for Jude, because Jude fixes everything...*right*? He may think he has this under control, but he doesn't. The simple fact is: my daughter was nearly killed tonight because of Jude. Whatever is going on, he is the target and Cayla and I are nothing more than collateral damage, targets his enemies can use to get to him. And as a mother, I cannot allow my daughter to get pulled into this storm.

When I had Cayla, I could never have comprehended how entirely she would change everything. I love Jude with every fibre of my being, but Cayla is my heart living outside of my body. She's my child, my reason. I will do anything to protect her. Anything. Even if that means hiding us both from the man I love.

When we touch down in Miami, I thank Billy and step onto American soil for the first time in over two years with Cayla cradled in my arms. The sticky Miami heat radiates up from the pavement as I make my way across the tarmac toward the entrance of the airport. Swallowing, I step inside, quickly swallowed up by the bustling crowd of travelers. A sense of disorientation surrounds me and my pulse quickens at the thought of what I must do to protect my baby. Readjusting the bag on my good shoulder, I walk straight to one of the airline counters and wait in line

behind a swarm of businessmen while Cayla plays with my hair. I steel myself, searching for my resolve when I step to the counter.

"May I help you," the attendant asks.

Nodding, I swallow. "May I use your phone please?"

She motions me to the side before picking up a phone and handing me the receiver. My mouth goes dry as I dial the operator. "Operator. How can I help you?"

"I need the number for the FBI." I say, my pulse hammering in my ears.

"Hold please." There's a pause. "I'm connecting you now."

"Federal Bureau of Investigations." A woman answers.

"My name is Victoria Pearson." I say calmly. "I need to speak with someone about going into protective custody."

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A few hours later, I'm sitting in the Miami FBI office. I glance down at the white sling my arm is now in, bouncing my knee anxiously as I wait. They had a doctor stitch my shoulder, but the pain still throbs with every heartbeat. The doctor offered me pain meds. I don't want them. I need to be alert.

The man behind the desk glances up and smiles as he speaks Spanish into a phone. I find myself holding Cayla a little tighter because, suddenly, everyone looks like an enemy, a potential threat. Cayla throws her body back, squirming and whining. She's tired and cranky. I readjust her on my lap, but she's still wiggling, trying to get down.

"Stay here with Mummy," I say, bouncing her up and down. "Mummy just wants to hold you."

"Dada..." she whines. That's like a punch in the chest. I kiss her forehead and hum quietly to her. When I look up, the man that was talking into his phone is watching me. I flash a small smile before my gaze darts away. Cayla grabs

at my necklace, her eyes fixing on the little hummingbird charm.

I glance up at the clock. I've been here for hours now. This isn't hiding, this is plain sight. Just when I'm ready to get up and walk out, a man with greying hair dressed in a smart black suit comes through the doors. His gaze scans the waiting room before landing on me, and when he approaches, there's a small frown on his face. He pulls his suit jacket back just enough that I can see the badge on his belt. "Victoria?" he says sternly. I nod. "Follow me, please."

I slowly stand up, bumping Cayla higher on my hip as I follow him. He takes me to an office and closes the door. The sound of the lock clicking in place makes me nervous.

"Just a precaution," he says and glances at me as he sits behind a small desk. He gestures to the seat across the desk from him. "Please have a seat." I sit, letting Cayla down. "My name is Agent Tidwell. I worked Jude's case two years ago." I let out a shaky breath. "I *know* he's not dead, Victoria."

I ignore that statement. "I need help. Someone tried to kill me and my daughter." I shake my head.

"Do you know who?"

"They were speaking Spanish. That's all I know." *But isn't it the Russians who should be coming after us?* I glance down at Cayla crawling across the floor and snap my fingers at her. She sits up and smiles.

"Where is Jude now?" he asks, his dark eyes meeting mine.

I press my lips together. I need help but I'm not about to sell Jude out.

Sighing, Tidwell leans forward on the desk. "Listen to me very carefully, Victoria. I will help you and your daughter." He glances down at Cayla. "I can protect you, but Jude Pearson cannot set foot on US soil. That will open up a can of worms that none of us will be able to fix."

There's a long moment of silence before he clears his throat. "Where. Is. He?"

"I don't know," I answer honestly. "The last time I saw him he was in the Caribbean, but for all I know he's dead." It's a little too coincidental that his barman was decapitated, forcing him to leave the house barely an hour before we were attacked. I swallow heavily at that thought, my stomach churning. *No, he can't be.* It's Jude. I'm not sure he *can* be killed.

"And if he's not," Tidwell says, "then he's undoubtedly coming for you and his daughter." He pushes back in his seat and the hinges creak. "Shit," he mutters under his breath.

"Please. I need...I need to run from him," I plead. Tidwell narrows his eyes at me. "Whoever tried to kill us, it was because of Jude." I glance at Cayla sprawled on her stomach on the floor. "She's just a child."

"I'll help you," he says.

"Thank you." I glance back at him, studying him. I have no idea whether I can trust this man, but I have no choice right now.

"You just hang tight here—where you are safe—" he pushes up from the desk, "and let me get a few things in order before we move you."

Within a few hours Tidwell walks back into the holding room with two other agents trailing behind him. One of them is a pretty woman with long dark hair pulled into a ponytail. She can only be in her late twenties and nothing about her slightly resembles a typical FBI agent. The other guy is older and he looks ex-military with his buzz cut and his hard expression.

"This is Agent Hart," Tidwell says, pointing to the woman. "And Agent Nelson." The guy nods at me.

"Hi. Thanks for your help," I say. They turn and walk out of the room and I scoop Cayla up.

Tidwell places his hand gently on my arm. "This way." He leads me to an elevator where Hart and Nelson are waiting. The elevator doors close and then we're going down. The doors open to a parking garage, and the second we step out, all three of them have guns in hand. My stomach knots uncomfortably at the true gravity of my situation. I am in the protective custody of the FBI. I thought my life was over when Jude took me. I thought it was over again when he died. And now I'm running from him. This truly feels like its own kind of hell. They load me and Cayla into a black SUV and we're whisked out onto the crowded Miami highway.

We ride in silence, my nerves on edge. Eventually we pull off the interstate, into a neighborhood of little pastel houses with palm trees and azaleas dotting the front lawns. We park in the drive of a normal looking house. Shutters. A pretty fern hanging from the front porch. The agents open the doors and climb out, walking to the back of the vehicle to stand guard. Agent Tidwell opens the passenger door and helps me out, taking my bag so I can get Cayla. Tidwell leads us up the sidewalk, onto the front porch, and straight inside the house.

There's a couch and a sofa in the front room. One lamp on a single end table. The walls are beige and it has that unlived in feel to it. But this is a place to stay, and more importantly, it's safe. The other two agents file into the house and here we stand in the middle of the living room.

"Are you okay?" Agent Hart asks me, smiling down at Cayla.

"I'm fine, thank you."

She nods. "We're sending someone to get supplies. Toiletries. Is there anything you need?"

"Uh, Pull-ups and maybe some Cheerios for her to snack on."

"Sure thing." She brushes her finger over Cayla's arm. Cayla fusses for a second, rubbing at her eyes. "There's a



bedroom back there. Why don't you go ahead and get comfortable?"

I wander down the hallway and push open a door to a bedroom with a twin bed in it. "You ready to sleep, baby?" I whisper to Cayla as I lay her down. "It's okay. We'll be okay." I kiss her head and brush the wisps of blonde hair away from her face. She yawns and I stay with her, stroking over her hair until she falls asleep. "We'll be okay," I whisper, blocking out the deep void that has taken up residence in my chest. I rub at the spot over my heart and close my eyes. I miss him. I'm here because I want Cayla to be safe, but the truth is, even in the middle of blood and war, Jude is the only person that has ever made me feel safe. I know it's all an illusion, but my heart pines for him regardless. I'm having to choose between the two people I love most in the world and it breaks my heart. But ultimately there is no choice. It's Cayla. It will always be Cayla.



## JUDE

The heat sticks to me like a film as I stand on the porch searching for the key. A thick strand of cobwebs cover the door and I swipe them away as I shove the key into the lock. The lock clicks and the hinges to the door groan as it swings open into the dark entrance way.

"Shit," I mumble under my breath as I step into the empty house. "Tor?" My voice echoes around the entranceway. "Doll, you here?" Silence.

Panic creeps through my veins as I go from room to empty-fucking-room. Nothing's been touched. They never made it here. My pulse goes haywire, my mind swirling with possibilities. With horrible what-if-scenarios. *Shit, what if the cartel found them after Billy dropped them off?* Swallowing that fear down, I pull my phone from my pocket and try Tor's number, but it goes straight to voicemail. Where the hell would she have gone, and how the fuck am I supposed to find her in Miami? I brace my forearm against the wall and lean my forehead against it as I take a deep breath. And that's when the fear sets in. Sweat pricks its way over my forehead, my stomach kinks and knots with worry. I push away from the wall and pace, shaking my head as I go over the awful fucking scenarios of what may have happened to my family. I grit my teeth. My chest

burns. Angry tears build in my eyes, eventually spilling down my cheeks. And then the rage sets in, slow at first but then, just like a freight train, it comes on full force, swift and hard. I pull my arm back and slam my fist into the wall. I punch hole after hole through the sheetrock, shouting and cursing until my arm aches and sweat drenches my shirt. Exhausted, I slide down the wall to the floor. Paint and plaster litter the open cuts on my knuckles. What the fuck do I have if they are gone?

My phone beeps and I frantically answer it. "Yeah?"

"She's not gonna be there," Gabriel says in a panic. "Diego said she's gone to the FBI in Miami."

"What? Who the fuck is Diego and how does he know?" I shout, pushing to my feet and heading toward the door.

"He's my ventana in the FBI. He contacted me just now saying he called in the order to have some Washington agent come down to handle this. It's bad for you, ese. Really fucking bad."

"But they're safe?" I pause. "Where did they take them?"

"You can't go to them. Everyone knows you're alive now —"

"How?"

"There are ears everywhere and Tor showing up, well... the word on the street is that Jude Pearson faked his death and escaped prison with the help of the fucking Russian." Gabriel takes a deep breath. "And he has a lot of fucking enemies, my friend."

"Ah, fuck," I shout, pacing the room. "I don't know what's fucking worse, them thinking I worked with the Russian devil to get out of prison, or the truth that I sold out Domingo."

"They're about the same, ese. You're basically stuck between a turd and an asshole."

It doesn't matter what I do at this point. They will find me. And they will kill me. I just need to see Tor and Cayla. I just need to know they're safe and kiss them one last time.

"Give me the address," I say, but I'm greeted with nothing but silence. "Gabe! Give me the fucking address to where they're at."

"Jude..."

"No, I just wanna see them."

He exhales. "Let me talk to Diego. I'll call you back."

I hang up the phone as I make my way out of the house, down the stairs, and to my car. I rev the engine before pulling out of the drive and heading to pick Marney up from Billy's hanger. Then...then I don't know what the fuck I'm doing.

\*\*\*break\*\*\*

I hate Miami. It's hot and crowded and people can't fucking drive. I lay on the horn as I swerve around some shitty-ass 1980s Mustang. The driver floors the accelerator and cuts back in front of me, blocking me from passing. *I swear to fucking god.* I veer into the other lane and gun it. The guy glares at me as he tries to keep up and he flips me off. I'm not in the mood for this shit today. He mouths "Fuck you" and I lose it, I pull my gun from my waist and aim through the window. The guy's eyes go wide at the sight of my gun and he jerks the wheel, ramming into the guard rail, metal flying everywhere.

"Take Exit 13 and keep right," the GPS instructs.

I skid across all three lanes of traffic and swerve in the exit lane, tires squealing as I round the ramp. Ten minutes later and I've pulled over on the side of the road. The houses are all pastel colors, palms in the front yard. I cut the engine and climb out of the car, shoving my gun into the waist of my jeans and tugging my shirt down to conceal it. My phone rings, I pull it from my pocket and frown at the unknown number.

"Yeah?" I answer.

"Pearson." I remain silent. I know that fucking voice. "It's Agent Tidwell," the man says. I close my eyes and inhale a deep breath. "I'm calling to remind you about the deal you made. Specifically, the part where you agreed not set foot on US soil."

I stop next to a manatee mailbox. "And what the fuck are you going to do if I do?"

"Jesus," he sighs, pausing, "this isn't just about you."

"I know damn well who it's about." Who the hell does he think he is trying to be my moral fucking compass?

"Then stay dead! You are about to screw us all over," he says with a growl.

I walk through somebody's backyard, and I can see the house from here. There are three black SUVs parked in the drive. Two men are standing guard on the porch. "So, is your fat ass on the porch or are you inside?" I ask.

"Damnit Pearson!" The phone cuts off and the front door swings open, Tidwell's bulky silhouette appearing inside the door frame. The two agents in the drive pull their guns and point them at me. I roll my eyes and keep walking toward the house because they won't shoot me in broad fucking daylight—at least not until I get on that lawn. "You can't be here," Tidwell shouts.

"I need to see Tor." I stop at the curb and stare at him.

He sighs and pulls his gun from the holster, aiming at me. "Victoria Devaux and Cayla Pearson are under the protective custody of the FBI. If you threaten that protection I will shoot you." I narrow my eyes at him, my jaw clenching. God, I'd love to beat the shit out of him. I hated him when I was in prison and I hate him now. "I need to fucking see Tor," I repeat.

"Jude," I hear Tor's voice before Tidwell turns in the doorway. Tor steps up, shoving him to the side. God, she looks like shit. Dark circles linger below her eyes. Her face is worn with worry and her arm's in a sling. I just want to fucking hold her and tell her it's all going to be okay.

I go to step onto the lawn and Tidwell flares his nostrils. "Pearson..." The hammer clicks as he cocks the gun. "Remember the deal we made..."

The deal we made where I sold out other criminals to no longer exist. No social security. No credit. No existence.

"That agreement is the only reason you don't have a bullet in your head right now," Tidwell says.

Tor grabs Tidwell's arm and yanks him into the house. The pair of them turn their backs to me, and I slowly edge my way along the walkway as they talk quietly. I can hear Tor pleading with him to let me in for a minute. After a moment, Tidwell glances over his shoulder with narrowed eyes. I can see his jaw ticking, the agitation evident on his face. "Ten minutes," he says. "And then you leave."

That's fine by me. That's all I need.

He shuffles to the side and I continue up the sidewalk, eyeing the two Feds who still have their damn guns drawn as I pass them. I don't even glance at Tidwell when I step onto the porch and shoulder my way inside the house right past his fucking ass. Tor gives me a pitiful look before she spins around and moves through the living room. "Where's Cayla?" I ask.

"With one of the agents."

We stop at the end of the hallway. She walks into a bedroom and I follow, closing the door behind me.

"What the hell happened to your arm?" I ask.

"I got shot, Jude." One bullet to the shoulder...she's lucky she's not dead. She sits on the bed with her gaze fixed on the floor. "You shouldn't have come here." She presses the palm of her hand against her forehead and closes her eyes.

"Why would you go to the FBI knowing damn fucking well I'm not supposed to be here?" My pulse clangs in my ears.

"That was the idea—that you wouldn't come here," she whispers, opening her eyes to stare at me.

"What?" I narrow my gaze at her "Why would you—"

"Because they came into our *house*, Jude! They were shooting to kill! They were in Cayla's fucking room!" She stands, chewing on her nail as she paces to the window. "I told you I didn't feel safe," she says as she turns around with a pain in her voice that cuts me. "I begged you to let me leave. Do you even know whose men they were?"

"I'm fucking handling it."

"Of course you are," she laughs. "And you wonder why I came to *them*?" She points to the door.

"Jesus, would you give me a fucking chance, woman?" I shake my head. "You didn't even give me a chance to fix this, Tor."

"Are you going to tell me who's after us, or just leave me in the dark? Because you know, I just love when my house turns into a war zone with no warning!"

I pace the room, rubbing my hand over my chest. If I tell her, she's going to lose her shit, and, if I don't tell her she'll lose her shit. *Fuck it*. "It's the goddamn cartel, alright?"

"The cartel?" She breathes, her eyes going wide, her chest rising in ragged swells. "The cartel..."

"Yeah, and like I said, I'm fucking handling it."

"God, I want to believe you," she whispers, shaking her head before her steel blue eyes lock with mine. "You treat me like I'm stupid, Jude but I knew you were getting in too deep."

"Oh, and you running off to the FBI is not pulling me any deeper into a load of shit?"

A bolt of anger flickers through her eyes. I watch her jaw tense. "You want to know why I came to the FBI? I came here because I didn't think you would follow."

"You didn't think I would follow?" I laugh. "You don't know me very fucking well then, do you?"

"I thought you'd see the writing on the wall. I thought you might be selfless enough to let us get to safety!" she



shouts, her voice breaking.

My chest tightens and I swallow around the lump in my throat. "Just let you and my daughter go? Never finding out what the hell happened to you? Not knowing whether you're alive or dead?" I shake my head. "Come the fuck on, Tor."

"Well, now you know. We're alive." She hesitates, her eyes falling to the floor. "And now you have to leave." Even though her words are stern, I hear the weakness in her voice. She doesn't want this. She's just afraid, and I can't blame her.

"You expect me to leave you and Cayla?"

"We're not safe with you, Jude."

I take a step toward her. "You're not safe anywhere *but* with me." Another step. "You hear me, Tor? You are only safe with me." Anger ripples through me. I don't like the thought that she doubts me, that she doesn't feel safe. That she feels safer with some fucking Feds than she does with me. One more step and I have her backed against the wall. I stare down at her, reaching up and brushing my finger along her jawline. I can see tears building in her eyes, the doubt, the worry. "Don't do this to me, doll. Don't..." I whisper, leaning down and gently pressing my lips to hers. "I fucking love you." I move back to find tears streaming from her closed eyes. Her lips tremble and I kiss her again. "I *love* you."

She grabs my shirt, balling it in her fists. "I love you too, Jude. So much..." Pulling away, she opens her eyes, her gaze slowly rising to meet mine. "But it's Cayla."

My heart skips a few beats because fuck, I know she's right. Tor buries her face in my chest and I hold her while she cries. How many times will I break this woman? How many fucking times will we break each other? God, I fucking love her, and sometimes loving someone, well, you have to do shit that tears you apart. Tor was right to run

from me but it doesn't make letting her go any less painful. She steps away and I cup her cheeks, sweeping my thumbs below her eyes.

"You were right to leave," I whisper because I need her to know that. "You did Cayla right." A sob breaks from her lips and I kiss her one last time before slowly backing toward the door. "I'm gonna fix this though. Okay? I'm gonna fix it." And with that, I open the door and walk out into the hall because I'm going to fucking lose it if I stay a second longer. I can't fall apart.

When I step into the living room I see Cayla clinging to a female agent. She sees me over her shoulder and smiles. "Dada. Dada," she screams, holding out her arms.

"Hey, little doll," I smile even though everything inside of me is shattering. I reach for her and the woman hands her over to me. Cayla squeals when I lift her in the air. "I missed you," I say.

Cayla's little arms wrap around my neck and she lays her head on my shoulder. I squeeze her tight, closing my eyes as I kiss the top of her head. I could have lost her. I could have lost Tor. If Tor wasn't such a fucking good shot, they'd be dead now. "Daddy loves you." I kiss her cheek. "He loves you so much."

She grins and grabs at my face. "I wuv you."

I turn to the side and see Tor lingering in the doorway, her face crumpling as she fights back the tears. "Daddy has to go now."

"No, Dada no go," Cayla whines, grabbing me tight. "No, Dada." A pitiful sob breaks through her lips. "No!" I try to pull her off me but she holds on, and damn if this isn't breaking my heart. Tears blur my vision as I try again to hand her over. "Daddy has to go, Cayla," I say, "but he loves you. I love you."

She screams when the woman rips her away from me, her little hands opening and closing as she frantically

reaches for me. "I'm sorry," I say as I turn and head to the door.

She's still screaming for me when I walk outside and close the door behind me. I take a deep breath before looking up and noting the agents with guns drawn and aimed at me again.

I toss my hands up. "I'm fucking leaving," I say and walk right past them.

I go around the block and climb into my car, staring at the house my girls are in as I sit behind the wheel. I just walked away from everything in my fucking life. Tor and Cayla are it. I walk away...the cartel kills me—it doesn't matter. They'll come after them too on pure principle, and the FBI—they aren't a fucking match for the cartel or else the cartel wouldn't exist. My heart bangs in my chest. Heat drowns my face and I grip the steering wheel until my knuckles wash white. Whatever reason I got pulled into this—whether it's because of my deal with the Feds or just being in the wrong fucking place at the wrong time, I'm in it now. Right in the motherfucking middle and I may only be one man, but I'm pissed as hell, and I will not rest until every person who's now come between me and my family is dead. Whatever the cost. If I have to die to know that Tor and Cayla are safe, so fucking be it.



## TOR

We're moving to another house.

Tidwell doesn't like that Jude knows where this one is. He left, but I know Jude. He'll watch and keep tabs on us even if it's from a distance. And I don't know whether that's a good thing or bad thing at this point. I feel like I'm cast adrift with no direction, no anchor. Jude *was* my anchor and without him I'm just grappling, trying to do the right thing.

Tidwell climbs into the front seat of the car and Hart gets in the back beside Cayla's car seat. I turn around and watch as Cayla smiles at her. She likes her. It's nice to see a smile on her little face. Cayla cried for hours after Jude left. Every one of her tears felt like a blade slicing over me. I hate this. I hate it for me but more, I hate it for her. I turn back around and watch the suburban roads pass us by. I have no idea where we're going, but I just have to trust that we're safe. For now, I can only entrust my daughter's safety to these strangers and I'll be honest, it doesn't sit well.

We've been on the road for about an hour. I glance out the window and see nothing but miles of marshland. I think it may be the Everglades and all I can think about are all the snakes and alligators that inhabit it. Sighing, I lean my head back against the headrest and close my eyes for a second as I listen to the radio play quietly in the background.

I must have fallen asleep because I jolt awake when I'm thrown against the door. My mind struggles to catch up, processing the sound of squealing tires as the car careens sideways. I'm thrown forward. The seatbelt cuts into me when the front of the car collides with a telephone pole and a sharp, stabbing pain radiates through my wounded shoulder. And then all hell breaks loose. There's the distinct sound of bullets pinging against metal. Tidwell shouts. My heart slams against my ribs hard as I fumble for the seat belt and reach for Cayla—she's gone. Her car seat is empty, the straps tossed to the side, her sippy cup in the floorboard.

"Cayla!" I shout as I attempt to clamor to the door. Tidwell firmly grabs my arm and drags me across the driver's seat and out of the car, pulling me down to a crouch on the other side of it. "Where's Cayla?" I scream. "Where's my daughter?"

"Hart has her," he pants. "She ran for cover." He jerks his head toward a small barn about fifty yards away. "Can you fire a gun?"

I snatch the gun from him, flick the safety off, and pull my arm from the sling as I grip the gun with both hands. Bullets continue to rain down like a storm battering the metal car. I take a quick glance at the barn, thankful Agent Hart got Cayla away from this. My vision swings to the back of the car where it stays, waiting for someone to round it. There's a loud bang behind me and Tidwell grunts. I whirl around and fire the gun at the guy in a black

mask looming over Tidwell. I hit him right in the head and he falls hard and fast

"Shit," Tidwell groans, clamping his hand over his thigh. Blood pours between his fingers.

"Keep pressure on it," I shout. Another masked figure creeps around the car and I fire at him, hitting him square in the chest and taking him down. My heart is racing, adrenaline pumping through my veins. Tidwell moans next to me and I quickly glance down at his wound. His hand is covered in blood, the ground saturated with it. *Too much blood*. I shrug out of my shirt and throw it at him. "Tie that around your thigh. Above the wound. Tight."

The whirl and ding of the bullets stop, and I pause. The only sound is my breath. My rapid heartbeat... I hear car doors slamming and I slowly raise up to my feet, peeking through the windows of the car to watch several masked men hop into a silver Hummer. I stand a little more, gun still gripped tightly in my hands as relief washes over me momentarily. And then it's ripped away because Agent Hart is sitting in the passenger side of that car with Cayla on her lap.

"No. No!" I shout, hysteria and fear wrapping around me. I run around the car, shouting and screaming as the engine to the Hummer revs and they peel out, their car fishtailing as it speeds away. "Cayla!" Blind panic consumes me as I watch the car barrel down the road. Without hesitation, I grab the door to the wrecked car and jump in the driver's side.

"Victoria!" I hear Tidwell call, but I ignore him. They have my little girl.

I turn the key over, praying to anything and everything that the car starts. The engine sputters and chokes. I slam my foot over the gas and it roars to life. I shove it in drive, the gears grinding as I lay my foot over the accelerator. The car lurches forward, steam billowing from the smashed

hood as I floor it after the car. I can still see the red taillights. *Shit. What do I do?* I'm shaking, tears blurring my vision as fear cripples me. *Jude.* I have to call Jude. I steer with one hand as I shove my other in my pocket, fishing for the phone Tidwell gave me, but it's empty. *Shit,* I must have lost my phone in the chaos, but surely they have one in here? I open the center console and dig around before I yank open the glove box and feel around inside. A small bit of hope flares in my chest when my hand lands on a phone. I pull it out, keeping my foot flat to the floor as I dial Jude's number.

"Yeah," he says.

"Jude! They have Cayla!" I'm crying, sobbing into the phone. There's nothing but silence.

I pull the phone away and quickly glance at the blank screen. *No battery. Shit!* I grit my teeth in frustration and throw the phone into the foot well. The Hummer turns off ahead, skidding across the road and I follow, the tires screeching in protest as I floor it around the corner. We're now on an open country road with nothing but marshland either side of us. I just have to follow them and then...what? Jude doesn't know where I am, neither do the FBI. I'm alone. Completely alone. And so is Cayla. I'm all she has right now. So I keep going, never quite catching up because the demolished car won't go any faster.

After a few miles, the engine stammers and spits. The car slows regardless of how far I press the accelerator. I want to scream in frustration. "No!" I bang my hand over the steering wheel. "Come on. Please!" The steam coming from the hood thickens, the engine cuts out and black smoke pours from the bonnet. "Fuck!" I watch the silver Hummer drive away from me, taking my daughter with it. I've never felt so helpless in my life.

I throw myself out of the car and kick the door, slamming my palms against the window in frustration. I



brace my forehead against the cool glass for a second before my legs give out and I slide to the ground in tears. I can't explain this feeling, just...utter desolation, helplessness, worthlessness, because I am her mother and I'm supposed to protect her at any cost. I failed her. Hart—a woman I willingly handed Cayla over to—took her. I thought I could trust the FBI. We aren't safe with Jude, but Jude wouldn't have allowed Cayla to get taken. I did.



## JUDE

I sit staring at the TV. Nothing that rolls across the screen registers, it's just background noise. I have no idea what I'm going to do because I can't go to Tor and Cayla again. The FBI fucking hates, me and I'm sure as shit not trying to lead any cartel spies to them.

My mind is nearly numb from thinking, from trying to formulate some plan to get them back and get the cartel off my ass. The only hope I had was Andrea, thinking we could use him as leverage, as a threat, but Gabriel called earlier this morning and told me Andrea's condition is touch and go. If that piece of shit croaks—well, there goes that fucking plan. He also gave me the address to the new location the Feds are moving Tor and Cayla. If it's that easy for Gabe to get the address, how hard would it be for Jésus' guys to get it? I sink back in the chair and try to calm my nerves as I focus on the TV, watching some couple skip along the beach on an advertisement for some dementia medication. My phone vibrates on the table. A random number flashes across the screen as I pick it up. "Yeah."

"Jude," Tor shouts. "They have—" The line goes dead. I jump up, knocking the chair over as I frantically call the number back. It doesn't even ring before the line clicks over to a voicemail. "This is Agent Wilson. I'm not available

to—" I hang up, the panic in Tor's voice playing over and over again in my head. "Shit!"

I light a cigarette and take the first drag as an unsettling feeling grows in my stomach. They aren't safe even with the FBI. Blood pulses through my jugular, my vision thumps with each beat of my angry-fucking-heart. I grab the gun from the coffee table, loading it. I'm heading to the door when Marney steps into the living room. He has a can of beer in one hand and a newspaper in the other and he glances at the gun I'm now tucking into the waist of my jeans.

"Aw, shit..." Marney mumbles before he takes a sip of beer. He grabs his gun from the end table, sighing as he tucks the newspaper under his arm and follows me to the door. "I'm getting' too old for this shit."

\*\*\*break\*\*\*

We've been driving for two hours. I have no idea how I'm going to find them. All I have to go off is the address Gabriel gave me. I turn and stare out the window, watching the green, swampy marshes whirl past. I can't fucking think right now. Marney changes lanes, swearing under his breath as we pass a truck.

"Who the hell would live by the Everglades?" he mumbles.

I don't respond, I just sit in the passenger seat steaming. The car slows and I glance through the windshield at a crowd of people standing beside the road. A line of black SUVs are pulled onto the shoulder and there's an ambulance. An officer stands in the middle of the road, attempting to direct rubberneckers.

"Shit," Marney hisses, pulling the car to the side of the highway, the gravel crunching under the tires.

A line of black SUVs—that's got to be the Feds. I feel sick. The truck hasn't come to a complete stop yet, but I'm already throwing the door open and tripping over my feet as I run toward the flashing lights. I stop dead in my tracks

when I see the bodies. Two men with black masks lie sprawled out on the wet grass, blood seeping over the ground littered with bullet casings. Two officers are taping off the scene and another one is bent over placing the numbered evidence cards by some of the bullets. My heart hammers in my chest, my ears ringing as my head spins. This has to be why she called me. *Shit*. I glance at the ambulance and swallow, wondering if Tor or Cayla are in there. I head in the direction of the open ambulance doors, passing several cops on my way.

"Sir," a cop shouts, "you can't go over there." I continue toward the back of the ambulance and step behind the door. Two paramedics hover over Tidwell. He's laid on the stretcher, his pants torn off as the paramedics tend to his bloodied leg. And on the floor, next to the stretcher, lies Tor's crumpled bloodstained shirt.

"Where is Tor?" I ask, my voice low and strained.

One of the paramedics glances up, shaking his head. "Sir, you can't..."

I glare at Tidwell. "Tell me where the fuck Tor is!" I shout and the paramedic jumps away from me.

"She took my car and followed them," Tidwell says.

"Followed who?"

"The guys shooting at us." He swallows, wincing as one of the paramedics jabs an IV in his arm.

"What the...can't even do your fucking job!" I wipe my hand down my face. "This shit right here is *exactly* why I came for them." I slam my fist into the ambulance door as anger sweeps over me. I turn around, jog back to the car, and climb inside. All Marney does is stare at me. I think he's afraid to ask.

"Drive," I say quietly.

"Which direction?"

I focus on the floorboard because I don't know. "Just fucking drive, Marney."

He pulls the gear into park and we drive off. I stare out the window telling myself that she knows what she's doing. She's a fucking survivor and one hell of a mother. She will keep Cayla safe, regardless and I know that when she can, she'll call me. She will, but what the fuck am I supposed to do until then?



## TOR

The highway seems to stretch out forever. Heat radiates from the asphalt. My body aches and my throat is dry.

I don't know how long I've been walking, but it feels like hours. I have a gun tucked in the back of my jeans, and that's it. Nothing else. I keep following the empty highway in the direction they drove off. Why? I don't know. They're long gone. I need to find a gas station or something. I'm keeping a lock on the blind panic, trying to think rationally. I know Jude is the only one who can help me now. Isn't that what Jude does? He makes the impossible happen, moves heaven and earth for those he loves?

I'm in the middle of nowhere with the gut wrenching knowledge that I have no idea where my daughter is. I feel like I'm in hell. The humid Florida heat clings to me until I'm sweating through my tank, but I keep going, keep moving for Cayla.

Eventually, I spot the hazy outline of a building on the horizon. As I get closer, I see it's a truck stop. I take off in a slow jog, darting through the gravel car park and past several cars. I slam my palms against the glass and push, the cow bell clanging as the door swings open and I stagger into the dirty little shop.



An overweight man in a stained t-shirt stands behind the counter, reading a *Playboy*. He glances up, his sweaty forehead wrinkling when his eyes land on me.

I rush toward the counter. "I need a phone!" I say.

He frowns as his gaze drags over me. "You okay, miss?" he asks.

"Just..." I take a breath, wiping the sweat from my brow, "give me a phone. Now!"

His eyes widen and he fumbles around on the counter before passing me a grease-covered phone. I dial Jude's number and press it to my ear, waiting as it rings.

"Hello?"

"Jude—"

"Where are you?"

"I don't know." My voice hitches. "They took Cayla, and I tried to follow them, I did." I fight back the tears as they clog my throat.

"What the fuck? Who? Who took her?" he shouts.

"I don't know! They were shooting, and I...Hart took her. She got in the guy's car." I press my hand over my mouth, stifling the sobs trying to break free.

"Motherfuck..." he exhales. "Ask someone where the fuck you are. I'm coming to get you." I turn to the guy behind the counter.

"What's the address?"

"Gator Truck Stop, State Road 84, Ochopee," he rattles off. I can hear Jude swearing on the other end of the line.

"Stay there. I'm coming for you." He hangs up and I hand the phone back to the guy.

"Hey, do you need an ambulance or something...ma'am?" he asks, eyeing my chest. I glance down at my blood smeared white tank.

"It's not mine," I whisper, turning around and heading to the front of the shop, that damn bell jingling when I walk through the door. I go to the side of the road, leaning

against the rusted billboard pole. The hot sun beats down on me. Mosquitoes swarm around me. And I wait, not a single car passing by until Jude's car screeches to a stop in front of me, dust flying in the air as the brakes squeal. I hold my hand up to shield my eyes from the dust cloud.

"Tor!" Jude shouts as he slings the door open and stumbles out of the car, running toward me. Relief fills me, but it's short-lived.

I run to Jude and throw myself into his arms because I don't know what else to do. I want to fall apart, but I can't afford to and he's the only person that has a chance of keeping me together right now. His large arms come around me. His hand holds the back of my head.

"I never should have left you," I cry against his chest. "I just wanted to keep her safe."

I feel his muscles tense and he inhales in a heavy breath. "You did what you thought was best," he says. I can hear the restraint in his voice—I can literally feel the anger rippling through his body. I don't know what to say. There's nothing to say.

"Promise me you'll find her, Jude," I beg him.

"I'll find her."

He helps me into the car and climbs into the back seat next to me. Marney turns in the front seat, placing his meaty hand on my shoulder in silent support. Really, what can you say to the woman who just failed to protect her own child?

Marney pulls away and I can see Jude's jaw ticking, his pulse thrumming in his neck. I know he's trying to maintain himself for me. Fear and stress render me completely mute. Jude's words mean little. They are only empty promises until Cayla is in my arms.

"I don't know why she took her," I finally say.

Jude closes his eyes and shakes his head. "FBI my ass." He tosses his head back and swipes his hand over his mouth.

"I trusted her." I pinch the bridge of my nose. "I'm so stupid."

"Tor, Stop!" Jude exhales. "It is what it fucking is, okay?"

"Jude! The cartel is inside the FBI!" I shake my head. We will never outrun this. We can't fight them. "We're screwed," I whisper. *Cayla*. Tears fill my eyes as I think of my poor little girl, alone with those strangers. Most people wouldn't hurt a baby, but it's the cartel and whatever deep dark hole Jude has dug himself into, I'm terrified that she's never coming out of it.

"The cartel are fucking everywhere. You *had* to trust her, Tor. How would you have known?" He shakes his head. "I handed her back to that fucking woman when I left..."

I pull my knees up to my chest and rest my forehead on them. I can't breathe. I feel sick.

"They want something," he mumbles. "They have to fucking want something, which means they'll keep her alive." He pauses and I watch his fingers draw into fists.

I grit my teeth. "They want *you*, Jude!"

"Don't you think I fucking know that?" he shouts.

"Call them!" I scream through tears. "Make a trade." My voice breaks and I draw in a ragged breath.

"Give me a minute to get my fucking head together, Tor. Fuck! I just found you, I just found out my daughter's been taken. Just..." he huffs. "Just give me a fucking minute—"

*A minute? He wants a minute?* "Fuck you, Jude!" I punch him in the chest and he glares at me. I punch him again and again. "This is all your fault!" I'm so mad at him. I never should have gone to the FBI, but if he wasn't wrapped up in this shit then I never would have had to leave.

"Fucking..." He slaps my hand out of the way. "Stop it." I keep hitting him, screaming at him.

Rage and pain swirl together and I direct it at him. Every inch of it. "I hate you! This is your fucking fault!"

He grabs both my wrists and shoves me back against the warm window. I watch his eyes flash with anger and hurt as he inches his face closer to mine. "I know you're mad..." he breathes, his nostrils flaring, "but she's my daughter, too. Do you think I wanted this to fucking happen?"

My entire body heaves as I breakdown into hard sobs. I can't breathe. I'm not sure I want to without her. I cannot imagine a worse feeling than this agony. I know I need Jude to be rational, but right now it makes me so angry because I can't be.

Jude stares at me, tension rolling off him in waves and I stay silent. "Marney," Jude says, "find a fucking motel. I need a minute. I need to make some calls and Tor needs to get cleaned up." His fingers tighten over my wrists as his murky green eyes lock with mine. "I'm going to let you go," he says calmly, "and we're going to drive to a motel where I can get my shit together and figure out just what the fuck to do. Do *not* fucking hit me again."

I jerk against his hold and he glares at me. "Get the fuck off me," I say. He lets go and I swing my arm back, my palm colliding with his face. "It's nothing you don't fucking deserve," I say through my tears.

Closing his eyes, he inhales. "You feel better now?" he says with a growl as he opens his eyes.

"Is Cayla fucking here? No, I don't feel better!"

"I'm sorry," he says quietly.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I throw my head back against the glass. I swallow heavily before bringing my gaze to his. He looks so tortured and I know he feels everything I'm feeling. I see the pain swimming in his eyes—a pain that matches my own and my heart breaks even more.

We drive for what feels like hours and with every mile, the pain intensifies. We stop in a small town and buy some basic clothes and supplies. And then a few minutes later, Marney pulls up outside a motel. He's barely put the car in

park before Jude climbs out and heads toward the front office. I open the door and follow Jude inside to the front desk where he throws a wad of cash down onto the counter.

"One night. That's all," he says.

The young girl takes a drag from her cigarette, glancing up at him before her eyes drift over to me. A smirk inches its way over her face and she blows a cloud of smoke to the side. "One night," she says as she reaches behind her and takes a key from the board to the side of the counter.

We leave the office and Jude motions for Marney as we walk to room. The door swings open to a stale room that reeks of bleach and mildew. There are two rickety beds with ugly brown floral comforters and the air conditioner chirps. Marney steps inside and throws the supplies we bought on one of the beds.

"Go and take a shower, Tor," Jude says without looking at me.

I want to tell him to fuck off, but honestly, the fight has left me. He's lighting a cigarette with his phone pressed to his ear. "Hey, it's JP, I need a favor," he drawls into the phone before glancing back at me and pointing to the bathroom with an arched brow.

I just need Jude to do what Jude does and if that means making cryptic phone calls to shady characters, then so be it.



## JUDE

The shower cuts on and Marney takes a seat in a stained chair by the window. He pulls his pack of cigarettes from his pocket, takes one out, and twists it between his fingers. "What you gonna do?"

I shake my head. *The cartel? Who I am to go against the motherfucking cartel?* "They want me dead..." I say, more to myself than to Marney.

"Lots of folks have wanted your ass dead over the years," he chuckles before he flicks the flint to his lighter, holding the flame to the tip of his smoke. "You usually just tell them to go to hell."

I scrub my hand over my jaw and glance at the bathroom door. "It's different now..."

"It is." He exhales. "So what'cha gonna do?"

"Give them what they want." I shrug. "Cayla is all that matters—her and Tor."

He gives me an understanding nod before he drops his gaze to the floor, puffing away on his cigarette. "You're your dad through and through, son. You do him right."

Inhaling, I swallow and fish my phone from my pocket to search the web for information on inmates. Specifically, Domingo Garcia, and then I call FDC Houston. I smoke a whole cigarette while I wait for him to come on the line,

dabbing it out in the little tin ashtray just as I rustling sound comes over the phone.

"Si..."

Rage pummels through me at the sound of his familiar voice. "Domingo, old friend," I say.

"Ah, corredor de apuestas," a short-lived chuckle floats over the line. "I wondered when you'd call me."

"I want my daughter."

"Of course you do. And I want my freedom...we all want things we cannot have."

Closing my eyes, I toss my head back in frustration. "Tell me what you want."

"We used to work so well together. I gave you my money, you filtered it through your gambling ring. It was your ability to clean such large amounts of my money that helped my cartel soar to such great heights."

I remember the first time I got a call from Domingo. He wanted me to clean half a million. And I did, taking a twenty percent cut. Easiest money I ever made. I had no idea at the time who Domingo was. No fucking idea he was the boss of the Sinaloa—and by the time I found out, I had been working with Domingo for years and figured there was no point in fixing something that wasn't broken. "What do you want, Domingo?"

"I hate Juárez. I hate your stupido amigo." I hear him spit. "You make him too much money. And that's a problem because money means vendtatas, weapons, more drugs. More power. You would help him after all I did for you? It doesn't make me happy, amigo." His voice drops to a low rumble. "And now there is a price to pay." *Shit. Does he know I turned him in?*

"Fucking kill me then, just let my little girl go."

"So easy? You've gone too soft, *coño*."

I take a breath. A deep breath. "Give me my daughter."



"I'll arrange for you to meet Jesús. He'll send your daughter to Gabriel before he kills you, sound good?"

"And you'll leave my family alone?"

"Of course." A sadistic laugh bubbles down the line. "You have my word. My people will call you."

I hang up the phone, adrenaline buzzing through my body. The most powerful human drive is the will to survive and I've been damn good at that in my thirty-two years of life, but it hasn't been about me from the moment I held Cayla. There is no surviving if I lose her.

Marney stares at me. I can see his wheels turning as worry etches its way over his weathered face. "So that's it?" he asks.

"I don't trust him," I say and shake my head. "But what the fuck else am I supposed to do?"

Marney leans back in the chair, wiping his hands down his legs. "Cat's got my tongue on that one, boy."

My phone beeps with a text that includes an address and the directions to go to Hanger 4. I guess Domingo has been ready for this. Waiting. Hoping. The shower cuts off and, for a moment, I'm crippled with the thought of leaving Tor. Of telling her. I glance at Marney as I grab my gun and load the clip, slamming it back inside. "Don't you dare fucking tell her what I'm doing," I say, pointing at him.

He slowly lifts his hands as though he's surrendering. "Don't worry. I don't want to deal with that meltdown. I told you, I'm *too old* for this shit."

I grab a duffel bag and sling it onto the rickety bed, shoving a few items inside just so Tor won't be suspicious. The door to the bathroom creaks open and Tor comes out. Her damp blonde hair falls down her back and drips onto the grimy motel carpet. She glances at me, then at the gun and the bag on the bed.

"Where are we going?" she asks.

"I'm going to Mexico to meet up with Gabe." I shove the gun into the waist of my jeans and glare at her. Her nostrils flare. I can see it all over her face: she thinks she's going to come, too. Well, she's fucking not...

She frowns. "Don't even *think* about leaving me here, Jude!"

I groan. "You don't need to go with me goddamn it."

I shove some more things into my bag, and she moves closer to me, jabbing her finger against my chest. "If you think I'm going to just sit here waiting for you to do...whatever, you are sadly mistaken. She is my child. I'll go after her myself if I have to."

"There is no reason for you to go to fucking Mexico. I don't need to worry about you too." I zip my bag and throw it over my shoulder as I glance at Marney. "Do not let her fucking leave." I turn back to Tor and she has that look on her face. I point at her. "I fucking mean it. Do *not* leave." I spin around and point at Marney again. "Drug her if you have to."

"Fuck you, Jude," Tor huffs as she glares at me. I groan and sweep a hand through my hair. I can't leave her like this. Those cannot be the last words I hear from her.

"Marney, give us a minute."

Grumbling, Marney stands up, placing a cigarette between his lips as he heads for the door. It clicks shut behind him and I look at Tor. There's a world of fucking hurt behind her eyes. I step toward her and gently rub my hand over her arm. She, of course, snatches away. "Doll," I sweep my finger over her shoulder and up her neck, "please, I don't want to leave you like this."

"Then take me with you," she pleads.

"I need you to be safe. For Cayla." I swallow because, fuck, I hate lying to her. "I need to know you are safe in case something happens to me. Someone needs to be able to take care our little girl."

Her eyes lock with mine, narrowing slightly. I see the moment the realization sets in. She swallows hard and nods as her face softens. She steps up to me and places her arms around my waist, resting her cheek against my chest. "I'll stay," she whispers.

I stroke a hand over her damp hair. "I promise, I'll do whatever it takes to get her back." I say that with as much certainty as I can because I know damn well this is all a shot in the dark. It's the cartel. I'm not a fucking idiot. Their words—Domingo's words—mean nothing, but I have no choice but to hope for once they may stand by them. And isn't hope a fool's daydream only promising to fucking torment me?

"I know," she says, "and I'm sorry. It's not your fault. I'm the one who gave her to them." Her fingers dig into my back.

"You didn't give her to them, Tor, they took her." Grabbing her chin, I force her to look at me. "You are the best mother to that little girl, don't ever fucking doubt that." She squeezes her eyes shut and tears spill down her cheeks.

I stroke her hair back from her face and lean in, placing my lips to hers. This kiss isn't hard or ruthless. It's tame and reverent—something reserved for goodbyes, and I'm afraid she can feel that. My lips brush gently against hers and her grip on my arms tighten as she chokes back a sob. I don't want to stop. I want to kiss her for-fucking-ever because I know I won't ever get to do this again. *Cayla*. One last touch of Tor's lips, one last sweep of her tongue, and I rip myself away from her, staring down into her steel-blue eyes.

"I love you, Jude," she whispers.

"And I fucking love you too, doll." I take one last look at my Tor, drinking in the way her blonde hair falls over her shoulders, her eyes, her fucking smile. I burn this last

glance at her into my memory choking back the words I want to say. The goodbye I want to tell her: that she changed my life. That I would never change having her and Cayla. That she is what made me fucking real and before that I was just lost. But I can't, so I smile at her. "God, I fucking love you." And turn around, opening the door and stepping out into the bright-ass sun and closing the door behind me.

\*\*\*break\*\*\*

The shitty little plane hits the shitty little runway hard and my water spills in my lap. A few minutes later and I'm walking down the stairs of the private jet. A black Hummer is parked to the side of the runway with the engine running. A tall man in a gray suit steps out from the driver's side. Tattoos cover the side of his neck. "Corredar de apuestas," he says with a laugh as he approaches. "The bookie."

I glare at him. Handing yourself over to death so easily is a shit feeling, but I would do anything for my daughter. I had two years of freedom I never deserved. For two years, I was able to hold her, love her, and Tor...Death comes for us all at some point, I accepted that long ago, but it still fucking sucks.

"Arms up," he says as he stops in front of me, the heavy scent of his cologne assaulting my nose. I raise my arms and he pats me down, snatching the gun from my waist with a smirk. "Really?" he asks, shrugging.

He grabs me by the arm and yanks me forward, and I follow him toward the car. The closer we get I can make out another man sitting in the backseat. When we're just a few feet away, he throws open the door and steps out, and the guy escorting me shoves me inside. Groaning, I lean

against the leather seat while the fucking Neanderthal climbs in beside me and slams the door.

"Jesús is gonna be real happy, mi amigo," the driver says as he puts the car in drive and slowly pulls off. He turns the radio up and some Mexican rap music blares through the speakers, rattling the tinted windows. I watch the little Mexican flag strung from the rearview mirror waver. We barrel down the dirt road, down along a hillside, past rundown buildings covered in graffiti. When we stop at a traffic light the driver turns in his seat and smirks.

"What the fuck, ese?" the guy next to me groans.

He remains silent as he pulls a gloc from his lap and aims into the backseat. My heart pounds, and before I can form a rational thought—*Bam*.



## TOR

**T**wenty-four hours. It's been twenty-four hours since Jude left. I heard Marney on the phone last night talking to Gabriel, telling him that Jude wanted him to go and retrieve Cayla.

There's a sense of dread that clings to me like a cloak, and I can't seem to shake it. I was on edge when I panicked and told Jude to turn himself in for Cayla, but I know that's exactly what he's gone to do. I saw it in his eyes. He was saying goodbye.

My already battered heart is crumbling in my chest because I've just lost the two most important people in my world, and I have no idea whether either of them will come back to me. The thought that something may happen to him is crippling. The idea of anyone hurting Cayla is a pain I cannot even put into words. I know Jude feels the same, so I can't persecute his actions. If I were wanted I would trade myself for Cayla in a heartbeat, and truthfully, I'd trade Jude as well. I love him with all my heart, but for my daughter—I would sacrifice even him. I would sacrifice everything and anything to keep her safe. And not being able to do so is torture.

Every time I close my eyes, I can't help but picture my little girl scared and alone, suffering at the hands of men

who hate her father. My worst fears constantly play out in my imagination and I can't stand it. I can barely breathe knowing she's there. The door opens and Marney comes back in from outside, a cloud of smoke still clinging to him.

"I need to use a phone," I say, chewing on my thumb nail.

Sighing, he looks at me for a second before handing me his phone. I dial Jude's number and place the phone to my ear. It rings once and goes to voicemail. I hang up, clutching the phone in my hand. *Shit*. He's been gone too long to have heard nothing. Scrolling through Marney's phone, I stop when I see Gabriel's name. My finger hovers over the call button for a second before I press it. After only two rings he picks up.

"Si?"

"Gabriel."

He sighs and I hear the creak of a chair. "Tor."

"I...do you have Cayla?" I ask, my heart pounding as I wait for the answer.

"I'm sorry. I don't."

I pull the phone from my face, swallowing back a choked sob before I bring it to my ear again. "I know Jude made a deal. I know you were supposed to get Cayla. Where is she? Where is Jude?"

"You do realize that if Jude goes to Jesús, he will fuck me?"

"I don't give a rat's arse if he fucks you so hard his dick comes out your fucking mouth!" I shout. Marney chuckles.

"Trying to seduce me with that foul language will get you nowhere." Gabriel laughs.

"This is not funny. They have my daughter, Gabriel." My temper is spiking dangerously right now. I'm not sure how much more I can take.

"No, it's not. But you and Jude do not understand the ways of the cartel. This is not his little bookie bullshit. The



cartel is something the devil doesn't even fuck with." He exhales. "Domingo and Jesús don't negotiate, they provoke fear." There is such a cold indifference to his voice, I almost don't recognize him. "Trust me, I've slaughtered entire families to teach others a lesson, and we rarely trade a life for a life. That's not the kind of message that makes people fear you. That is a message that gives hope. There is no hope in this world."

I swallow back the bile rising in my throat. I don't know what to say to him. I have no words. "Where is Jude?" I ask again.

"I'm handling Jude," he says, then hangs up.

I clutch the phone in my hand, but I don't cry even though every bit of hope I had is now crushed. And on the heels of my denial is acceptance. The cartel has my daughter and no one is getting her back. I can't just sit here. I won't. I don't care if I must walk right into the lion's den, I will not leave Cayla alone. If she's with the monsters, then I want to be as well. I have trusted Jude time and time again to fix things, but this time, Cayla is involved and that changes everything. I lean down and slip my hand inside my handbag, palming my gun and slowly bringing it out.

I nervously glance at Marney, holding the gun down beside the mattress as I clear my throat. "Marney, I need a favour."

"What'cha need?" he says, completely focused on the TV.

"I need to go to Mexico," I say. I know he has orders. I know Jude would never allow this, but I'm done giving Jude chances. Twenty-four hours is too long. Cayla needs me.

"Aw, now, little darlin', you know I can't go doing that..."

I pinch the bridge of my nose, fighting off the tension headache that's threatening. I pull my gun, pointing it at him before I slowly lift my gaze. Marney slumps down in the chair, shaking his head. I like Marney, but I can't even feel guilty about this. No one is going to stand between me

and my daughter. Not even Marney. "Pick up your keys and start walking, Marney."

"Jude's not gonna be happy about this now, Tor..."

"Jude got us into this fucking mess!" I shout, my voice cracking with the strain. "Jude is the reason they have my daughter, Marney."

Marney sighs and shakes his head. "Hell, Tor I—"

"Don't." I cut him off. "Don't try to change my mind. I need to be with her and I don't care what that costs me. Now, take me to the cartel or I swear to god, I will shoot you."

"Easy there," he chuckles as he pushes up from the chair, "you ain't got to go shooting nobody." I keep the gun aimed at him as he opens the door and then I slip it beneath my shirt. He walks to the car and opens the door. "You do realize this is the cartel," Marney says as he walks out into the car park. "This ain't no gun and pony show. They string guys up out in the streets. They make Joe look like a soft bastard."

Tears prick my eyes. "Yes, and they have Cayla!" My voice is edging on hysteria, but I fight it back.

"Hell, what's it matter? We're all about to die anyway, may as well be Jude that puts the bullet in my head..." he mumbles as he opens the driver's side door to the car. He takes a deep breath and nods once before turning the engine over. The truck roars to life and we pull away.

A mile down the road, I grab Marney's phone from the dashboard and throw it out the window. I know the second I'm out of this car he'll find a phone and call Jude, but I don't need Jude stopping me before I get there. I know this isn't a plan, but it's what I need to do.



## JUDE

B<sup>a</sup>m.

Blood splatters the window, my face, my shirt, and the guy next to me slumps over in the seat. Both doors to the back fly open, and someone on the outside yanks the dead man's body out onto the street. Two men climb inside, settling on either side of me. The doors haven't even shut before the Hummer is speeding off, the engine revving as it flies over the uneven road. I sit in silence wondering what the actual hell is going on when I hear the distinct clicks of guns cocking. I glance to each side to see guns pulled and aimed at my head. *What the fuck just happened?*

"Gabriel," the driver says to me, "is not happy about this."

\*\*\*break\*\*

We pull up to a large, iron gate with two men standing guard. The driver rolls down the window, shouts something in Spanish, and the gate slowly opens. We wind up a long drive that stops in front of a white stucco house roofed with Mexican clay, and there, in the drive, with his arms crossed stands Gabriel.

"Ah, fuck," I groan, slamming my head against the seat. The man to my right opens the door and clamors out. I follow suit, walking around the front of the Hummer and

straight up to Gabriel. "What the fuck?" I ask. He glares at me before turning to walk inside. "Gabriel!" I shout.

"I didn't take you to be so stupid."

Heat flies over me and I storm up to him. He doesn't even flinch, just smirks at me like a slick fucking bastard. I pull my arm back and ram my fist right into the side of his jaw. His head slams to the side and he grabs his face with a groan. I hear guns cock behind me, and Gabriel holds up his free hand, shaking his head.

"Don't shoot him," he says, annoyance dripping from his tone. He takes a deep breath before he turns to look at me. "Do not ever do that again." And he walks away, motioning for me to follow him.

"Damn it, Gabe," I shout as we walk through a garage.

"You're too impatient." He stops in front of a door and spins to face me. "He would have killed your daughter right in front of you. He would have strung her up to the streetlight by her intestines and then fed her to the dogs. He would have found Tor and taken her, fucked her, then slit her from her stomach to her throat, spilling her blood onto the streets for the Sinaloa to dance in. Then, and only then, would he have killed you."

My stomach knots, my head swimming because I know damn well I've never seen anything like this before. I've never been in such a fucking shit situation, and that's saying a lot.

Gabriel glares at me as he reaches for the door handle. "You're corredor de apuestas. The ghost. You work with me and you're a fucking snitch. You are a warning to everyone else. And don't worry," he throws the door open, "Miguel is on his way back to tell Jesús I had you kidnapped. He will believe that because you are an asset and this is business, after all."

"Fucking amazing, Gabe. Just fucking great."

He laughs. "But look, we have an advantage," he says as he steps inside the room. I follow him in and see Andrea

strapped to a cot with duct tape over his mouth and IVs in his arm. His face is bruised, eyes swollen. The symbol for the Sinaloa cartel is carved in his cheek. "The little shit pulled through," Gabriel says. "Rarely will they exchange a life for a life but in this case, they just may."

Gabe rips the duct tape off as he pulls a phone from his pocket.

"My father will kill you," Andrea snarls, bucking against the restraints.

"I know, I know..." Gabriel sighs, waving his hand through the air as though he's heard that a thousand times and is bored with it.

"Jesús," Gabriel purrs into the phone. "How have you been?" There's a pause. "Guess who is still alive and in a fucking garage? Andrea Garcia." I watch a slow smirk work over Gabriel's face. "Sure, as long as you show me proof of life as well." His eyes flits over to mine. "Tengo ese pedazo de meirda!" Gabriel shouts into the phone before holding it out to Andre. "Di algo."

"Matarlos de tolo," Andrea shouts. "Matarlos de tolo!"

Gabriel snatches the phone away. "There is your fucking proof. Now where is ours?" He puts the phone on speaker and I hear rustling, men shouting.

"Gabriel," A woman's thick Spanish accent comes over the line.

"Camilla," Gabriel says.

"The child is fine. Say hello, Ángel bonito. Say hi to your daddy."

"Dada," Cayla whimpers and my chest goes tight.

"Hey, little doll," I choke.

A soft sob breaks over the line. "Dada," she cries. Everything inside of me shatters, my heart pounds violently against my chest and all I can think about is how I will slaughter every fucking person that took her from me. "Dada..."

The line crackles. "See, bastardo," a man says, " she is still alive. We make a trade. Your amigo's daughter for Andrea." The phone goes dead and Gabe looks up at me.

"He will kill you and your daughter and fuck your wife," Andrea says. "And I'll help him."

Gabriel already has a piece of duct tape covering Andrea's mouth. He mumbles against it, his eyes going wide, nostrils flaring. I pull my arm back and punch him one good time in the face, busting his nose. I drag my arm back to hit him again, but Gabriel catches it, laughing. "I'll let you beat his ass later, but right now, ese, we have a ton of shit to figure out. Let's go to my house."





## TOR

We've been driving for twenty-eight hours straight through. I'm exhausted, but driven by the fact that I'm actually doing something—I'm moving towards my baby.

The Texas landscape whirs past the window, the sparse desert seemingly endless as we follow the desolate road that cuts through it. Marney hums along to a country and western song as he throws a cigarette out the window only to immediately relight another.

My phone rings. I glance at it in the console, my heart leaping to my throat when I see Jude's name flash on the screen. I snatch it up. "Jude?" I answer.

"Hey doll," his voice washes over my fraught nerves like a soothing balm.

"Where is Cayla?" I ask slowly and he exhales. "Jude?"

"I'm working on that."

I suck in a deep breath, fighting back the disappointment. Perhaps Gabriel is right. What if they had killed them both? Maybe them not having Jude is the only thing keeping Cayla alive right now. "I spoke to Gabriel," I say quietly, the Colombian's words whirling through my mind like a nightmare.

"I swear to god," Jude sighs. "I want to fucking kill him." There's a pause. "But, what the hell do I know? Maybe he's

right. Hell, I know he's right..."

I nod even though I know he can't see me. "It's okay, Jude, you did what you could."

He's silent for a minute and I'm sure he thinks I'm being too accepting of the entire thing. "Are you...in a car?" he asks.

"We're going to the shop."

"Marney with you?"

"Yep." I glance at Marney.

"Let me talk to him for a second."

"Sure." I pull the phone away from my ear and glare at Marney. "Jude wants to talk to you." Marney takes the phone and I point the gun at him.

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head. "Yeah?" He pulls out a cigarette and lights it. "Uh-huh." He blows the smoke out. "Yep, sure did." He cuts his eyes over to me. "Nah. It's fine...yep, just as fast as a chicken on a June bug."

*God, he's so redneck.* I snatch the phone back from him. "Happy?" I snap at Jude.

"Tor, I fucking know you. If you got Marney in on your shit, I'm gonna have to hurt him and I'm fond of the old fuck." He sighs. "Don't make me do that, Tor."

"You won't hurt Marney," I say on a huff. "You're full of shit." Marney grumbles next to me, puffing on his cigarette.

"You do not set foot in fucking Mexico, do you hear me, Tor? I swear to god. Why the hell you can't just listen to me and trust me to fix shit. Why do you have to go and try to handle shit on your own. Jesus, you are aggravating and stubborn as all fuck, woman!"

"You're not fixing shit!" I inhale. *Do not bite. Do not bite.*

"Do *not* come to Mexico." And he hangs up. I call him back, but it goes straight to voicemail.

That might be the last time I talk to him. I may never see Jude again. If I walk into the cartel I'm fairly certain I'm going to die, or that Jude will in order for us to earn our

freedom. I don't want to go in there and leave him on bad terms so I text him: *I love you*.



## JUDE

I sit on Gabriel's leather couch, my knee bouncing as I listen to him shout over the phone. "Jesús, tomorrow night is not good enough." There's a pause. "Chihuahua," he huffs. "Fine."

I watch the stream of smoke swirl in front of my face. I close my eyes. The phone beeps with a text and I glance down at it. *I love you.* I text back: *I love you, too.*

Closing my eyes, I think of my Tor. Of the last time I saw her. *God, that woman.* My chest goes tight at the thought of her. She is undoubtedly my fucking weakness. I pull a deep drag from the cigarette into my lungs. The sound of Cayla crying for me, that pitiful sob that broke over the phone has been etched into my memory, and the longer I think about how scared she must be, about what they may be doing to her, my rage begins to bubble over. All I see is red and then suddenly, I'm plunged into this awful darkness because I can't do a fucking thing about it. I'm her father. Her protector and I can't do anything. I push up from the couch and pace, fighting the swarm of emotions threatening to fucking drown me. Anger and rage and grief cycle through me at lightning speed. I pace and smoke. Smoke and pace, trying to calm the anger tearing through me like a fucking F-5 tornado.

"Ese..." Gabriel's voice comes from the doorway and I turn to face him. "Tomorrow morning we meet them in Chihuahua to trade Andrea for Cayla."

I comb my hand through my hair, my jaw ticking. "Tomorrow?"

"Si. It's the best Jesús would do." His eyes narrow. "I think he's going to try some sneaky shit, try to find Andrea so he doesn't have to hold up his end of the deal. We need to move Andrea from that house to another."

"We?"

He heads toward the door and I follow him. "I don't trust anyone but the two of us with Domingo's son."

\*\*\*break\*\*\*

I watch some of Gabe's men cram a drugged Andrea into the back seat of his Hummer, his hands bound behind him.

"By tomorrow, it will be over," Gabriel says, clapping his hand over my shoulder. "You will have your daughter back." But I can see the doubt in his eyes. The line that settles in his forehead. Nothing is ever certain with people like this. There is no honor. No loyalty. Words mean nothing.

I nod and walk around to the passenger side, yanking open the door and sliding inside. Gabriel climbs behind the wheel and starts the engine. Classical music blares through the system.

"Jesus, what the..."

"I like to have that refined edge to me when conducting business," he says as he unlocks the console and pulls a gun, clutching it in his palm as steers with his free hand.

Sweat dots his forehead as he drives along the road. The fact that he's on edge makes me nervous. I hold my gun with my finger on the trigger as we weave our way through the hillside and down into the city. This place is filthy as shit. Rundown buildings, stray dogs everywhere.

"Ah, look at that cholita, ese," Gabe laughs as he nods out the passenger side window. There's a woman in a

halter top and a blue jean skirt on her knees, sucking some man off on the street as people walk by.

We head down a hill toward an overpass. The sun is high in the sky and I can just make out three shadows underneath the bridge. The closer we get I notice those shadows are bodies swaying in the breeze. "What the..." I mumble and duck down to get a better look as we drive underneath. A drop of blood splatters the windshield. "Fuck, in broad daylight?" I ask.

Gabriel shrugs. "It's cartel land, ese. The murder capital of the world."

Andrea moves around in the backseat, mumbling around the gag. "Sleeping beauty woke up," Gabe chuckles. "Don't worry, Andrea, I'll come back and kill you in your sleep once this is all over," he whispers. Andrea mumbles louder and Gabriel reaches over, turning up the radio.

The music blares over the speaker and then. *Bang!* Glass shatters, tiny cubes landing in my lap. I glance in the backseat and Andrea's laid out on the seat, blood pouring from a bullet hole in his skull.

"Fuck!" I shout at the same time as Gabriel pulls over to the side of the road, brakes screeching.

"What the fuck?" He pounds his fists over the steering wheel. "You've gotta be kidding me." He reaches into the backseat and shakes Andrea's lifeless body. "Fucking shit, ese!"

I watch the blood trickle over the edge of the seat and puddle in the floorboard. What the hell just happened. Reactions set in and I raise the gun, turning and aiming out the window as I search for someone. People are walking the street like nothing just happened. "Who the fuck shot at us?"

Gabriel stares out the window, his hand on his gun. "I don't know. This is bad. This is bad, ese. Very, very fucking bad." He glances back at Andrea. "Ah, that's Domingo

Garcia's dead son in my fucking backseat, and I didn't even have the pleasure of killing him." He looks at me as he puts the car in drive. "We don't speak of this."

"What?"

Shaking his head, he pulls back onto the road, flooring the accelerator. "No, we have to keep this between us as long as we can—until we can figure out some other plan, because the second Domingo finds out Andrea's dead..." he trails off, but I know where that sentence was going. The minute they find out he's dead, Cayla is dead. My heart sinks to my stomach like a stone and fear churns its way through me.

"How the fuck are we supposed to hide this shit?" I ask, resting my head against the window.

"Get rid of the evidence." He shrugs, swerving off onto a deserted dirt road.





## TOR

We sit in bumper to bumper traffic at the border, inching our way to the little toll with a sign that reads: Mexico. There is a brown metal fence on one side, dark hills rising behind it in the distance. The Mexican agents stand at the checkpoints, dressed in green and wearing black masks. I swallow, reminded of the men who took Cayla.

"Why do they have on masks?" I ask Marney, my nerves bunching in my gut.

He peers out the window. "They don't want the cartels to know who they are. It's for their own protection." A bolt of fear fires through me. The cartel is feared by everyone and they have my baby... We pull up to a checkpoint, the brakes squeaking as we come to a full stop. I roll my window down as the masked man approaches my window. My heart goes haywire and I attempt to calm it, but I can't.

"I need to see your vehicle registration and a credit card with the same name, señora," the man says. I swallow because I don't have either.

"I...uh, I don't have—"

"What's your name?"

"Victoria..." I fumble, trying to recall one of, any of my alias' Jude has given me. "Perry." He turns his head toward

a walkie-talkie on his shoulder and calls in my name as he eyes Marney.

"Can you pull over please? Pop the trunk."

I do as asked, anxiety rolling through me. When I pop the trunk, he walks around to the back and I hear him rummaging around. He comes back to the window, his dark eyes the only thing visible underneath the mask. "Do you have any weapons you're trying to bring into Mexico?" he asks.

"No." I swallow. I can feel the gun beneath my seat literally burning a hole in my arse. His walkie-talkie crackles and someone says something in Spanish. His eyes lift to mine as he talks back into the speaker. "I'm going to need you to get out." He glances at Marney. "Both of you." I glance at Marney and open the door, cautiously climbing out. "Follow me," he says as he grabs my arm.

Another agent comes over and takes hold of Marney. I want to ask why they are detaining us, but I don't. Sometimes it's best to not ask questions. They lead us to a building and when I step inside, the chilled air conditioning makes my skin flush with goose bumps. Maybe I should be worried, but I'm not. If Jesús Lopez knows I'm here then surely he'll want me, which means he'll come and get me and take me to Cayla.

We're taken down a long corridor before the man stops in front of a metal door. He opens it and steps back, waving us in. Inside, the temperature drops by several degrees. People are sitting on benches, huddled together and glancing nervously towards us. Marney bumps into my back as the door shuts with heavy finality. I whip around and hear a bolt slide home. "What the hell?" I ask

He shrugs. "The cartel's got ears everywhere."

Okay, this is fine. This is what I wanted, isn't it? I swallow down the nerves gnawing away at me. Cayla. I need to get to Cayla. And this is the only way. There's an empty spot on one of the benches and I approach it. The

woman sitting next to it scoots over a little more when I go to take a seat.

"It's cold as balls," Marney says, sitting next to me.

I nod, glancing at the faces around us. Women and children, families that I guess are trying to make a better life for themselves. A little girl with long, dark hair sits huddled against the chest of a woman across from me. The woman wraps as much of her clothing as possible around the child, rubbing her hands over her arms. It seems so wrong for someone so young and innocent to be locked up in here. And then I think of Cayla locked up somewhere like this, cold and completely alone. At least that child has her mother. A hollow pain radiates through my chest, reminding me that something vital is missing, that a part of me is gone.

I swipe at my tears and turn towards Marney. He flashes a sympathetic smile and places his arm around me, pulling me to his pudgy side. "It'll be alright, little darlin'."

I shake my head, resting my cheek against his shoulder. "How *can* it be, Marney? Nothing will ever be right again." I know it, he knows it, and Jude knows it. We've been clinging to this hope, but like Gabriel said, there is no hope in this world we are now unwillingly immersed in. All we have is action. All we have is sacrifice, and there is no fairytale in which we all walk out of this. That is the cold reality.

"You forget your dealing with Jude Pearson," he chuckles before falling into a hacking cough.

"He's not god, Marney."

"Nah, that boy's the devil."



## JUDE

Andrea's body falls to the ground with a thud and a cloud of dust flies up into the air. A goat runs past and Gabe kicks at it. "Get out of the way, you bastardo."

I glance at my watch. It's already one 'o clock. Time's running out. We were supposed to have Andrea there by eight tomorrow morning. And we have no Andrea. Panic grips me, my mind goes into gridlock because what the hell can I do now? Gabriel bends over, stripping Andrea's clothes off his body.

"I can use these," he says.

I shake my head and pace in front of a wooden fence as I try to come up with some type of solution to this shit show we've fallen into. When I spin around, Gabriel's standing over Andrea's body, a golden stream of piss raining down on his bloodied face. "Yeah, ese, how does my piss taste?"

"What *the fuck* are you doing?"

"Taking a piss. I always wanted to piss on his face." Gabe laughs.

Anger seers through me. "We have less than twenty-four hours to figure out what the hell we are going to do about this shit and you're pissing on him?"

Gabriel shoves his dick back in his slacks and zips his fly with a shrug. "We're fucked, ese. What else am I gonna

do?"

"Fucked—we're *dead* Gabe. Cayla, me, you, Tor. We're all fucking dead." I point at Andrea's body. "This is about as bad as it gets."

Gabriel taps his finger over his chin and nods his head. "We just need to buy some time."

I pull my phone out. "I'm calling the fucking Russian."

"Yeah, I guess call the white devil." He groans as he leans over and grabs Andrea's arms, dragging him across the lawn.

I walk away from Gabriel because he's not going to like this shit, but fuck him, I didn't ask him to intercept my ass at the airport. The phone barely rings once before someone picks up.

"Zdravstvuj."

"Cole," I say as I light a cigarette.

"Ah, American..."

"We got a fucking deal."

"We do?"

"Yep," I take a deep breath from the cigarette and hold the smoke in my lungs. "Gabe's in. All the fucking blow you want. I'll clean your money, but we got a problem."

"There is always a problem where the Mexican's are concerned," he laughs.

"Domingo Garcia—"

"The man you ratted on? Yes, I know who he is."

My pulse skyrockets. The Russian knows I sold Domingo out. Fucking hell.

"Ventanas are everywhere. I know everything and I wonder, how much do the Sinaloa know?" He sighs. "You should have stayed dead. They are very angry with you, American."

"Are you gonna fucking help me."

"What do you take me for?"

I groan. I'm not trying to stroke his cock right now. "You could get blow anywhere. Gabe may think you want his cocaine, but I see it for what it is, a declaration. You want a fucking horse in this race and that's why you want a deal with him." My pulse clangs in my ear. "Well, if I don't get my daughter back from Jesús, your horse is getting a fucking bullet. So are you gonna help me?"

There's a pause and I hear him blow out a long breath. "I always did like Juárez City. I am, after all, rather fond of the snow." *What the hell is he talking about?* "You didn't laugh?" he says.

"No, it wasn't fucking funny."

"Ah, American, there's so much blow there it could make the desert look like Santa's grotto." He sighs. "My jokes are lost on you." He shouts something in Russian. "I have my friends on their way to your little Mexican's casa. Figure out a way to buy your daughter some time." And he hangs up.

I shove my phone inside my pocket and turn around just in time to see Gabe dragging Andrea's naked body into a pen. I watch as he shoves him inside a dry trough and dusts his hands clean.

"Now..." He walks to the side of the yard and lifts a gate.

Hundreds of swine come stampeding through, grunting as they head straight to the trough. Gabriel hops over the fence and comes to stand beside me. And here we stand at the edge of the trough, almost in a trance as we watch the pigs tear into Andrea's flesh. A sick feeling of dread worms its way through me.

"Well, they won't find him," he says. "What did the fucking Russian say?"

"That they are on their way to your casa."

Gabriel cocks a brow. "I'm not letting the Russian into my house."



"Well," I clap my hand over his shoulder, "you're working with the Russian now," I say and Gabriel turns to glare at me.

"I'm *not* working with the fucking Russian."

"Yeah, you are." I lift both brows. "I made a deal with him so," I exhale, "you need to start shipping your coke up to fucking Narnia."

Gabriel's jaw drops and his eye twitches as he paces, clenching his fists. The noise of the swine slurping fading into the background. "Dios, dame la fuerza para no matar a este maldito gringo. Jodido culo mudo. Debería derramar su sangre en la calle y—"

"Gabe!" I shout and he stops pacing. "You're not spilling my fucking blood anywhere...you hate the Sinaloa. Use the Russian as an ally and fucking end them."

Gabriel glares at me, his tanned cheeks red with anger. "You had no right—"

I storm toward him and jab him in the chest with my finger. "I had every fucking right. As far as I know, you're half the reason I'm knee deep in shit right now. The reason my family was almost slaughtered," I say with a growl.

"Your fight with Domingo is of your own making," he says through clenched teeth.

"It was all fine until you killed Jesús' guy in my yard and then all fucking hell breaks loose. It's working with you that has them after me!"

He has a look in his eye that reminds me exactly who he is. He may be my friend, but he's ruthless. Cold and calculated. He lets out an aggravated sigh and drops his chin to his chest. "The fucking Russian!" Gabriel swipes his hand down his face and shakes his head. "I swear to god, if I didn't like you, I'd kill you."

"Yeah, yeah. Feeling's mutual, trust me."

Gabriel groans. "So did the fucking Russian say what we do about this shit?" He points at Andrea's body.

"Buy time."

"Buy..." Gabriel throws his head back and grabs both sides of his head. "Ai, ai, ai. Why don't we just fucking kill the men we're supposed to meet?"

I stare at him, a small smirk slowly working its way across my face because that's exactly what we'll fucking do. "Why don't we?"

"Have you lost your mind? You fucking loco gringo. We kill them, Jesús kills everyone before you ever leave Ciudad Juárez."

"So don't let him know it was us."

"What the hell are you on? Did you find some peyote and eat it?" He shoves his hands in his pockets and paces, mumbling in Spanish.

"There are ways to kill them without ever touching them," I say, and Gabriel stops pacing, looking at me with a flicker of curiosity. "Poison."

"Poison?" He rolls his eyes. "It's a fucking pussy way. The woman's weapon."

"Gabe!" I shout.

"You're trying to make me soft, ese."

I swipe my hand down my face. "They have my daughter, Gabriel. They have Cayla!"

Closing his eyes, he sighs. "Fine. And how do you suggest we *poison* them?"

"Just give me a minute to think this through."

"Time's something we're a little short on."

"I know." I fucking know... We start toward Gabriel's car and my phone rings with a call from Marney.

"Yeah?" I answer as I make my way around the back of the Hummer.

"So, uh..." Marney huffs a slow breath. "We're at the border. Detained."

"What the fuck, Marney? I told you to fucking watch her."

"Yeah, yeah and she's just as stubborn as your ass. You gonna leave us here to rot or what, because she said she ain't leaving?"

"Fucking hell. Just..." I groan, wiping my hand over my face. "Just wait there." I hang up.

I climb inside the SUV and chuck the phone on the floor. "How far is the border?" I ask.

"Fifteen miles, why?" Gabriel laughs. "Let me guess, your woman showed up?"

"Of course she fucking did because, you know," I toss my hands in the air, "she's gonna take on the cartel." I sigh. "I've gotta go get her."

We pull out of the farm and turn onto the highway. "As much as I'd love to see Tor angry at you," Gabriel laughs, "I try to stay away from the border as much as possible, so I'm going to drop myself at my house and let you have the car to go get her."

I throw my head against the headrest, watching the shitty little houses whizz past, wracking my brain on how the fuck to poison a handful of cartel members.



## JUDE

I wait anxiously at the front hallway while they go to get Marney and Tor. One of the officers keeps staring at me and it's making me want to throat punch him. Marney comes out first, shaking his head. "She held a fucking gun to my head," he mumbles as he passes me. "She's crazy."

Moments later, Tor comes storming out of the holding cell. I grab her by the arm as I go to walk down the hall. She pulls against me, but I keep dragging her. "Let go of me," she says, clawing at my hand. All I do is tighten my hold.

"Keep it down until we get outside, for fuck's sake."

Marney's pushes open the door and steps out into the late afternoon sun. I catch the door just before it closes and we step out, the humidity clinging to me like a damp cloth. "Marney." I point toward the Hummer and click the lock, the alarm chirping. "That one."

Marney mumbles as he climbs into the back. I drag Tor to the passenger side. She snatches out of my grip with that look on her face like she's got a fucking hair up her ass. I step closer to her, dropping my face to her neck. "Don't even think about it," I say as I open the door, shove her inside, and close the door. She goes to open it again and I slam it right back, pointing my finger at her. "Don't

fucking do it!" I glare at her as I round the front of the car and climb in, cranking the engine.

"Aw, hell," Marney grumbles. I glance in the rearview mirror and see him holding up a blood-soaked palm. "Welcome to Mexico..."

"Yeah, we had a bit of a problem."

"Oh, fucking brilliant. More murder, Jude?"

Gritting my teeth, I shove my finger in her face. "Don't, fucking say another word to me, Tor." I glare at her. "I fucking mean it. Just sit there and be quiet before I lose my shit on you."

My pulse bangs in my temples as I put the car in reverse and pull toward the gates. An officer waves me straight through. Tor stares out the window, her knee jerking anxiously.

"Where are we going?" she asks, annoyance lacing her voice as she glares at me.

I hold up a finger. "I told you not to say a word, didn't I?" I shake my head. "Goddamn women..."

"He's on edge, darlin'," Marney claps a hand over my shoulder and I knock it off.

"You fucking shut up, too, Marney."

"This isn't on Marney," Tor shouts, "this is on you!"

"No," I tighten my hold on the steering wheel, "*this* is on you, Tor. You're the one who held a gun to Marney's head and left when I told you to just fucking stay put!" She punches me in the chest and I press my foot over the brake, the car fishtailing across the shitty desert road.

"Is all that violence necessary?" Marney asks from the backseat. Tor and I both turn around and yell at him to shut up.

I redirect my attention to Tor. "Hit me again and I—" A hard slap across the face stops me mid-sentence. "That's it!" I shout, ramming the gear into park. I sling the door open, my cheek stinging as I march through the sand and

around the side of the SUV, open the door, and grab her arm, yanking her out. "How many fucking times do I have to tell you not to slap me, woman?" I slam the door closed and shove her back a few feet. "What the fuck is your problem here? I mean, what the hell were you going to do? At least tell me you had a motherfucking plan." I pace. "Fuck!"

"I can't just sit and do nothing. She's alone. She's probably scared." Her voice catches.

"Tor," I drag my hands over my face as the sun beats down on my back, sweat soaking through my shirt, "you can't just walk up to the fucking cartel and ask to be with your daughter they've taken as a captive. Shit, that's not how this works." She should know this; she was a fucking captive once.

"Why not? It's only more collateral to nail you with, isn't it?" She glares, but there's desperation behind her eyes.

"You are impossible." I start toward the SUV. "Get back in the car."

"She wouldn't be with the cartel if you weren't up to your fucking neck in this bullshit! What the hell did you do, Jude? Why do the cartel have a hard on for you?" She jabs my chest. "You can't tell me just working with Gabriel caused this shit."

My blood pressure skyrockets. "What the fuck did I do?" I laugh as I clench my fists. I take a threatening step toward her. "Blame the big bad bookie for everything, right?"

She steps toward me, pressing her chest against my stomach. "It's not what you *do*, it's what you *are*, Jude! You have a child—a family and you're still involved in this shit."

I bury my face in my hands because I can't with this fucking woman. I look up at her. "You have no idea what the hell you are talking about, so why don't you," I jab a finger in the middle of her chest, "just shut the fuck up!"

She shoves my hand away from her and goes to fucking slap me...*again*. I catch her wrist and ram her against the car. My cock involuntarily swells and I roll my eyes. This is inappropriate on every level, but when she's like this...I can't control that urge to own her.

"I am her mother, Jude! Do *not* tell me to shut up. Do not tell me I don't know what I'm talking about!" She's pushing against me, snarling in my face.

"You don't, Tor. How the hell do you think I managed to get out of *fucking prison*, huh?" I groan. "Do you think the FBI just let me waltz out of there because they had a conscience or some shit? I was a goddamn murderer..." I toss my hands in the air. "*This* is out of my control and I'm doing the best I can." My chest goes tight at the thought of Cayla, the thought of what I—what *we*—stand to lose.

Her eyes lock with mine, searching, probing. "What *did* you do?" she asks quietly.

Shaking my head, I pull a cigarette from my pocket. I light it and take a deep drag before blowing out the smoke. "They wanted three names. Three men that I had dealt with, laundered money for. Extortion. I helped them get enough shit to arrest them. Domingo Garcia was one of them...and he was the boss of the Sinaloa cartel."

"Oh my god." She drops her head, sweeping her hands through her hair before she slides down the side of the car to a crouch. "Oh my god, they're going to kill her," she whispers, wrapping her arms around her shoulders. "They're going to kill her." Her voice breaks and her shoulders shake as she cries.

My blood runs cold, all the anger sweeps from my body and is replaced with a sense of panic and helplessness. Sighing, I walk over to Tor and kneel beside her, sweeping her blonde hair from in front of her face. Two hours ago, I would have assured her they wouldn't because we had



Andrea, but now...I don't know what we're going to do, but I have to reassure her.

"They won't. They want me not her." My stomach knots. "I'm working on it. I swear to god I am." I stare at her. I know she must see it, she must see the fucking worry and fear, the absolute sense of helplessness I'm drowning in at this moment.

She covers her mouth with her hand and slowly nods.

"Trust me," I say. I take her hand and pull her to her feet, tugging her close to me. I stare into her eyes as I tuck a piece of hair behind her ear and stroke over her cheek. "Get in the car, Tor. Please." I open the door and help her into the car.

Marney has a deep frown set on his face. "You okay, darlin'?" he asks Tor. She doesn't answer him, just sits in the seat, staring out the window.

I put the car in drive and pull off, following the uneven road down into the rundown city of Juárez.



## TOR

Jude drives around the outskirts of Juárez. The streets are dirty. Busted windows are on most of the buildings. The whole place screams of poverty and desolation. I watch a couple of younger boys run down an alleyway without any shoes on. This is how the cartel thrives: the city is so poverty stricken and they can promise money. They can promise a way out. They can offer protection.

We wind up the country roads that climb into the hills until we reach a set of metal gates, manned by two armed guards. The gates swing open and we drive up to the front of the house, parking amongst the row of SUVs.

Jude gets out of the car and rounds the back. I open the door and stare at the enormous villa in front of us. White stucco with shuttered windows and a red tiled roof with little vines of flowers crawling up the walls. A stone water fountain sits in the middle of the cobblestone driveway, two rearing horses spurting water from their mouths. And beyond the drive, the ground drops away, revealing a beautiful view of the mountains. It's a villa and a fortress because no one could mount a surprise attack without being seen from miles away.

Jude leads the way and I follow him through the arched double doors at the front of the house. I step inside onto

terracotta floors. The walls are covered in artwork; the furnishings antique and lavish. The most noticeable thing though is the sheer number of men. They lurk in every corridor armed to the teeth with rifles and handguns. I know they're for protection, but the sight of them makes me feel inherently unsafe.

"This is Gabriel's house?" I ask, knowing that it is.

"Yeah," he responds without turning to look at me.

I hear Gabriel's voice coming from a distant room, shouting, swearing in Spanish, as we walk through the house. We pass a guard, his dark eyes studying me as Jude leads me into a huge kitchen. He grabs my waist, picks me up, and places me on the kitchen side. His hands brace on either side of my thighs and he ducks to meet my gaze. "How long's it been since you've eaten?"

I blink at him. "I don't know."

Pushing away from the counter, Jude sighs. He makes his way to the cabinets, opening and closing cupboards before he comes back with a frying pan and places it on the stovetop. I frown at him. "What are you doing?"

"Making you food." He grabs eggs from the fridge and reaches for a bottle of tequila on the counter on his way back to the stove. He unscrews the top and hands me the whole bottle. "Drink it," he says as he turns back to the skillet. I stare at the bottle for a second. "Drink it, Tor. You need to calm your nerves."

I glare at him as I tilt the bottle back, watching tiny bubbles work their way up the neck. I relish in the way it burns as it travels down my throat. Jude cracks a few eggs into the skillet and a small plume of smoke rises. I look around at the impressive space, the expensive granite and tile.

"What *exactly* does Gabriel do for the cartel?" I ask, but he doesn't answer me. "Jude. *What* does Gabe do for the

cartel?" I take another swig of warm tequila because my nerves are crawling up my throat.

When he sighs I know this is going to be bad. "Gabriel is the boss of the Juárez cartel," he says.

"The boss?" Of course he is. *Of course* he fucking is. I've had the boss to the Juárez cartel over for dinner. Let him spend the night in my house... "What cartel has Cayla then?" I ask and he remains silent. "At least you have powerful friends," I whisper. We both know that powerful friends can both help and hinder, but in this case, I hope Gabriel can help us. Jude flips the eggs before opening a cabinet and grabbing a plate. "That's...that's good. Gabe can help us."

I'm not sure who the hell I'm trying to convince, him or myself because truthfully, it's too late. There is no going back—no ifs, ands, or buts. Cayla is gone, and I will take any help I can get to rescue her.

He dumps scrambled eggs onto a plate and hands it to me. Shaking my head, I shove the plate to the side. "I can't eat anything right now."

He leans over the counter, placing his elbows on the worktop as he drags his hands through his hair. We sit in silence for a few minutes before he glances up at me, his expression soft as he pushes away from the counter and closes the gap between us. He grabs my arms and slams his lips over mine. The kiss is hard, violent, angry—all Jude. I close my eyes, allowing the touch of his lips to soothe me for a moment before he breaks away from me.

"Come on," he says.

We leave the kitchen and he leads me through several rooms and up a winding staircase. Up here, the guards thin out. I'm grateful to be away from them. We follow a long corridor to a room at the end of the hall. Jude leads me inside and closes the door. A four-poster bed sits in the middle of the room, drapes hanging elegantly from the

wooden frame and pooling on the terracotta floor. To the side of the room are a set of French doors which I assume lead out onto a balcony.

Jude walks me over to the bed and I sit down. He kneels in front of me, rubbing his warm, rough hands over my arms. "I have to go," he says softly. "I'll be back soon. Don't leave, Tor. Please, for once, listen to me."

His fingers trail up my arm, my neck, and he sweetly strokes over my cheek, coaxing a shaky breath from me. "Okay."

He nods and presses his lips to my forehead before he steps away. An uneasy feeling settles in my chest as I watch him close the bedroom door behind him. Silence surrounds me in the massive room. It's now, when I'm alone, that I feel Cayla's loss the most. I lie back on the bed, rolling onto my side and curling into the fetal position. I miss my baby girl so much. I'm in Mexico. I'm so close yet so far, and sitting here doing nothing is the worst feeling in the world, but I must trust Jude. I have to trust that he knows what he's doing and that he'll get her back.



## JUDE

"Fuck, Miguel," Gabriel groans into the phone. "Just get Roberta, she's Escavar's favorite whore. You can't tell me you can't talk them into pussy." He pauses, skimming his finger over the bottles of liquor on the shelf of this dingy little store. "Si, we just need them stalled."

I check my watch: 9:27. Stress mounts in my chest. The heat in here is nearly unbearable, the air thick with humidity. There's a mangy looking dog that keeps pacing back and forth beside the counter, every once and a while stopping to snarl at Gabe.

"Fucking get her to suck his dick," he says. "Hell, you suck his dick for all I care." Gabe hangs up and heads to the counter. He slams the liquor down and shoves his phone inside his pocket.

The old man behind the counter takes his time bagging the bottle as he eyes me. "Ese Gringo?"

Gabriel glances over his shoulder. "Es mi amigo. Corredor de apuestas."

The man grins and nods before he hands the brown bag to Gabriel. We walk out of the rundown store and into the dark night. Gabriel groans. "If this works, I'll start praying to you." He shoves the bag in my hands and opens the door to his car.



We drive in silence to the hospital. Gabriel pulls around the orange building, parking where the ambulance bay is. Within minutes the door slides open and a short man in scrubs walks out. He comes right up to the window, hands Gabriel a bag, and Gabriel hands him a wad of cash. No words are ever exchanged and as soon as the man turns his back, we're pulling off. Gabriel tosses the plastic bag to me. "How the fuck you know about this shit anyway, ese? You aren't a fucking serial killer, are you?"

"No," I laugh, "Google is your best friend sometimes." I quickly take the bottle of liquor out of the bag, staring down at the label: Domecq Brandy. "Brandy?" I ask.

Gabriel shrugs. "Oh what, you expected tequila?" He groans. "Mierda, everyone thinks we drink the fucking tequila. Mexicans like brandy."

"Fine," I say as I unscrew the cap and take a large swig. The hot liquid burns its way down my throat before settling in my unsettled stomach.

"Eh, ese, what the fuck are you doing?"

"I have to get rid of some of it."

Gabriel snatches the bottle from my hand and takes a few gulps. "It tastes like shit when it's that hot," he says as he shoves it back in my direction. I set the bottle between my legs and grab a knife from the console, tearing a hole in the bag of Succinylcholine. Carefully, I dump more than half the drug into the bottle then roll the window down and toss the rest of it to the side of the road. I cap the brandy, making sure it's on good and tight before I shake the bottle.

"You're sure that will kill them?" Gabriel asks as we pull over into a motel parking lot.

"Yeah, it will kill them within a matter of minutes. They use this shit for surgery. Fucking paralyzes you, and without a breathing machine, you're fucking dead." I hand him the bottle and he reaches to the back to grab a duffel bag.

"They'll fucking taste it and then..."

"They won't. It tastes like sugar."

He crams the bottle inside and glares at me, tapping his finger over the steering wheel as he peers out the window. A curvy woman in a short skirt and tight red top struts across the parking lot. "Can you trust her?" I ask.

"You can never trust a whore," he says with an arched brow. "But I'll kill her and she knows it. She's handing it off to Roberta, in case anyone is watching."

I nod as he rolls down the window. The woman leans into the cab, her curly hair spilling over the inside of the door. Gabriel whispers something to her in Spanish and she nods. She hands a brown paper bag to him and he pushes the duffel bag through the window. She takes it, slings it over her shoulder, and kisses him on the cheek.

This woman is our last hope right now. She's supposed to give that bottle of liquor to Roberta who Miguel has arranged to pay our friends a little visit tonight.

"You tell her, every fucking one of them drinks that shit even if she has to pour it in her pussy to get them to drink it."

The woman rolls her eyes. "Si, si. Ese loco. Este es jodidamente loco."

"Remember, Alessandra," Gabriel grabs her long hair, fisting it and yanking her farther into the truck, "I'll kill you if you fuck this shit up," he spits. "Don't tell her what it is. Don't fucking tell anyone."

Fear ripples across her face, her eyes watering as she slowly nods her head. "Si. Si, Gabriel." He shoves her out of the cab and she disappears around the corner of the motel. Sighing, Gabriel drops his chin to his chest. "Poisoning people, next I'll be the one dressed in a fucking clown suit at kid's birthday parties. Fucking poison..."

"Ah, come on." I pat him on the shoulder. "It's a shit way to go. They'll be paralyzed for minutes while their bodies shut down. Just think: unable to cry or scream or fucking blink." I smile. "Pure agony, Gabe. It's pure agony."

"That does make it a little less pussy." He sighs. "So now we wait, huh, ese?"

I nod. Wait and fucking pray because we'll have no way to know if it worked until we show up— without fucking Andrea.

"Ah, shit," Gabriel groans. "Fucking shit. We need a stand-in for Andrea." He pulls out of the motel parking lot, tires squealing. A string of Spanish profanities swirl around the front of the car and Gabriel pounds his fist over the steering wheel before he turns his classical music up full blast. He shakes his head, still mumbling in Spanish as we tear through the city.

He stops at a red light and a young guy walks in front of the car, the headlights bouncing off his white shirt. "Good enough," Gabriel says as he throws the door open and hops out of the car. The classical music keeps blaring as I watch Gabriel run up to the guy, point the gun at his head, and grab him by the arm, yanking him across the street to the car. Gabriel opens the back door, keeping the gun aimed at him as he climbs in the front seat. "Damn, ese." He throws a hand up. "Pull your gun on him."

Eyeing Gabriel, I slowly raise my gun and point it at the guy shaking in the backseat. "Por favor no mates," the guys pleads.

Gabriel laughs. "I won't kill you. Welcome to the Juárez cartel."

I glance back and notice a growing dark spot on the guy's jeans. "Gabe," I say, shaking my head. "You just made him piss his pants. This is fucked up, even by my standards."

"Ah, everyone wants to be in the cartel," Gabriel shouts, pulling a U-turn and speeding off.



## JUDE

We pull up in front of a rundown, concrete house. Chickens scurry across the yard and there's a little boy next door riding a tricycle around on a patch of dirt. Gabriel and I stare at the house. Watching. The guy Gabriel abducted last night sits in the back seat wearing Andrea's bloodied clothes and shaking. His hands are tied and a burlap sack covers his head. He is our dummy just in case anyone sees us.

I go to open the car door, because damn it, if Cayla *is* in there, she's all alone, but Gabriel grabs my arm, halting me. "Wait, we have to make this believable. We have to be surprised. Outraged..." He takes his phone and taps the screen before he pulls it to his ear. "Jesús, we're here. Your men shoot at us and Andrea is dead. You hear me? You call them and tell them not to touch us." I can hear some man shouting on the other end of the line. "We get Cayla first." More shouting. "I'll put a bullet in his head right now and then you'll have fucking Domingo to answer to."

I grab Gabe's arm, glaring at him. Gabe looks at me and nods before closing his eyes and biting his lips. "Bueno." And he hangs up.

"Ready?" I ask, cocking my gun.

"I guess, ese." He sighs as he pushes the door open.

The hot air wraps around me when I step out of the Hummer. Gabriel drags the guy from the back seat, pointing the gun at the back of his head and forcing him to walk. Loud music thumps from the house—which is a good sign because hopefully it's been playing since last night.

With each step we draw nearer, my heart races. I'm only a few feet away from the house where my daughter is. Alone and amongst hopefully dead bodies. My stomach knots, slipping around itself as I think about how terrified she has to be. Crying. Her cheeks red. I clench my fist, closing my fingers more tightly around the cool metal of my gun. Gabe flips the latch to the gate and it creaks open. As soon as we set foot in the yard, a dog comes bounding through the tall weeds, barking and snarling.

"Aw, shit." Gabe moves his gun away from the guy's head, aims at the dog, and shoots. The guy jumps and screams at the same time as the dog yelps. Gabriel glances back at me. "It's a good sign, no? It's quiet." He doesn't wait on a response, just keeps forcing the guy to march along with us to the front door.

The music pounds through the wooden door, shaking it with each thump of bass.

I use the heel of my gun to bang over the door. The music is thumping so loud I can hardly hear Gabriel telling me to wait. Gabe's already on his phone again, using the hand he's holding his gun with to plug his ear. This is the part of the plan everything hinges upon. If the guys inside that house drank that poison, they're dead and we have to pretend to be surprised. We have to pretend they wouldn't let us in. We have to pretend to be outraged. Bust down the door..."Jesús," Gabriel says, "Tell your hombres to open la puerta. They aren't answering the door." Gabriel bangs over the door. "Open the door coños." There's a pause. It may only be seconds, but it drags out. "What the fuck?" he says into the phone. "Did you set me up, Jesús?" He glances at me, a deep grin spreading across his lips.

"The fuck," I shout—all part of the script. Every-fucking-thing about this must seem real. "What the fuck, Gabe?"

"Ese, what the hell is going on?" he shouts in the phone. "I'll put a bullet in Andrea's stupid head."

My heart clangs in my ears. "What the fuck is going on, Gabe?"

"Jesús!"

"Open the fucking door," I bang over the wood. "Where's my daughter?"

"Jesús, where are your guys? I'm gonna end Andrea..."

I can hear Jesús shouting, swearing. And I don't give a shit, I take a few steps back and run toward the door, slamming all my weight against the door.

"Ese!" Gabriel says. I just back up again and ram my shoulder into the door over and over until the hinges start to give way. Breathless, I step back and kick the door. It comes crashing down, that shitty music blaring out into the early morning air.

"Oh, Jesús, your guys are all dead," Gabe says, dropping the phone to his side.

Dust settles and all I see are bodies. Ten men lay sprawled out on the floor. Two of them naked. The empty bottle of brandy is on a table. Roberta is on the couch without pants, her legs spread wide with two men slumped between them on the floor. I step over the threshold, the shattered door crunching underneath my shoes.

"Cayla?" I shout, frantically looking around. I'm angry as hell she's been in the middle of this shit right here. "Cayla?"

Gabriel shoves the guy inside the beaten-down door and rams the barrel of the gun against the burlap sack near the guy's temple. "You fucking move from this spot and I will kill you. Do you understand?"

The guy nods and Gabriel starts down the hall with his gun drawn.

"Cayla...little doll?" I shout. With each second that passes, fear takes root in my chest. I walk to the stereo and turn it down, the sudden silence almost deafening. Doors bang open as Gabriel clears each room. I push dead bodies out of the way, pull the couch from the wall, open every fucking cabinet in this shitty house, and she is nowhere

I feel uneasy. Lost. I'm in a foreign fucking land owned by the cartel, maybe that's why.

"Jesús," Gabriel screams. "Lying fucking puta." I sink to the chair right next to one of the dead men and bury my face in my hands. He grabs our hostage and shoves him back out the door. "I'm fucking calling him and..." His voice trails off.

I can't think. I can't process a damn thing. Rage and loss—the greatest fucking loss I've ever experienced—settles over me like a slow fog because they never intended to hand Cayla over. She's not here. She never was here, and if the life of Domingo's own son won't cause them to release her, I don't know what will. Tears blur my vision and I hang my head to my chest. I want to rip the heads off all Jesús' guys. I want to gut them and drown them in their own blood, but that's nothing but a fucking pipe dream. If they hurt her though—I will kill as many of them as I can before they kill me. At least I can die knowing I served some type of justice for my little doll. I choke on the tears, angrily swiping them away as I allow the anger to consume me. Anger I can handle because it drives me but fucking grief, it drowns me. I can't drown right now. I take a steadying breath and drag both hands down my face before I push up from the filthy couch.

When I step outside, Gabriel is leaning against the Hummer with his head hung.

"She was never here, was she?" I ask as I cross the yard, stepping over the dead dog on my way to the driveway.

"No." He exhales. "I don't know where Jesús is keeping her." Slowly, he moves away from the car. "I am sorry, my



friend." He opens the door and climbs in, cranking the engine. My last hope right now is Ronan and I don't know how I feel about that.



## TOR

I walk through Gabriel's gardens, the perfectly manicured, damp grass soft beneath my bare feet. The scent of Jasmine swirls around me as I wander through the darkness. The further I get from the house, the less light there is and I like it.

I find a stone bench next to a huge pond filled with coy fish. I sit, watching the white and golden fish swim aimlessly in circles as I allow the night air to wash over me. It goes a small way to calm the turmoil that's constantly swirling through me like waves crashing against rocky cliffs. I don't want to see anyone. I don't want to talk to anyone. I sit out here for a long while, submerged within my thoughts, my worry, and then I hear Jude calling my name, a hint of panic in his voice.

The shadowy outline of his large frame comes into view and he pauses midstride. "Tor?"

Fear grips me. "Where is she?" I ask, but I already know if he had her she would be in his arms. I doubt he'd ever let her go again. I know I wouldn't.

"She wasn't there," he says quietly.

The worst thing is, as upset as I am that she's not here, the fact that she wasn't there at least means she might still be alive. Hope can become such a tenuous thing when

absolute tragedy lingers so close. Jude takes a seat next to me, wrapping his arm around me and rubbing his warm hand over my shoulder. We sit in silence, because honestly, what can either of us say? There is nothing that will make this better, nothing that can fix this aside from getting her back.

I wind my arms around him and press against the warmth of his chest. He's the only thing keeping me from losing my mind right now. I know he'll get her back. *He will...*

His hand strokes over my hair. "I'll never forget the first time I saw her," he says. "God, it took me days to get to you two, and when I walked in that room and saw her lying in that crib..." A smile works its way over his lips and it breaks my heart into a million tiny pieces. He loves her so much. "I picked her up and she was so tiny in my arms. The way that felt, Tor..." He kisses my temple. "You two are my world."

I pull him closer, wanting to clutch onto him as tightly as possible. He stands up and takes my hand, pulling me to my feet as his arm comes around me. I feel like he shelters me from everything with his massive presence. Bringing me into his side, we walk.

He leads me through the house, up to the bedroom, and straight through into the massive bathroom. He turns the water on and undresses himself. Then, without a word, he strips my clothes off before pulling me into the shower. I can see the pain clinging to him, swirling through his eyes. This hurts him every bit as much as it hurts me and yet, he pushes it aside. He tries to be strong for me.

Exhaling, he squeezes shampoo into his hand and washes my hair, his hands roughly pulling at the strands as his fingers massage over my scalp. I close my eyes. The hot water pours over my body as his hands work at washing the suds away. When I feel him place a light kiss to my shoulder, I open my eyes.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. I can't say anything. He takes the soap and lathers his hands, sliding them slowly over my bare skin. His hands glide over my legs, my arms and back, my neck. My chest grows tight with each loving caress, each soft touch. He kisses my cheek, his warm breath fanning over my skin.

"I'll make it better, I promise..." he says so quietly I'm not sure if he's talking to me or himself. "You need to rest, Tor," he says as he gathers my hair in his hands and wrings the water out. Jude moves me toward the door and steps under the spray himself.

I open the door, grab the thick towel from the hook, and wrap it around me as I head into the bedroom to crawl onto the bed. I just sit here, numb. Unable to think about anything that isn't Cayla.

When Jude walks into the bedroom, he takes one look at me and sighs. He pulls on a pair of boxers and crosses the room, crawling onto the bed and sitting behind me. He takes my hair and places it in the towel, drying it. After a few minutes, he pulls the duvet back and lies back, dragging me down against his chest.

"Try and go to sleep, Tor," he whispers, placing a tender kiss to my head.

We both lay here in silence, but Jude's breaths never even out. Neither of us will get any sleep tonight.



## TOR

*Cayla. She's right in front of me, in the arms of a stranger who's face I can't see. My baby smiles wide and reaches for me, but the stranger turns and walks away. I try to follow but my feet are heavy, as though they're stuck in cement. Cayla's smile fades and a look of panic crosses her soft features.*

*"Cayla!" I scream, watching as she continues to reach for me over the stranger's shoulder, her little face breaking in anguish as tears streak down her cheeks.*

*"Please," I beg weakly as I collapse to my knees. I watch as the stranger takes my baby from me and there's nothing I can do. Not a single thing.*

*A bang jolts me from my sleep and I sit bolt upright, dragging in several deep breaths. Warm afternoon light pours through the open balcony doors. How long was I asleep?*

*Another loud bang startles me and I realize it's someone rapping on the door. I get out of bed, swiping the tears from my face as I open the door. Right in the doorway stands a man dressed in an immaculate suit. His skin is pale, his hair so blond it's nearly white. He looks as though he just stepped out of an office in New York rather than the*

dusty streets of Mexico. I vaguely recognize him as the man I caught Jude and Gabriel meeting with at that cafe.

"Victoria," he says in a thick Russian accent.

"Who are you?"

"Boris," he says. That's it.

"Okay." I eye him warily. "What do you want?" I have no idea where Jude or Gabriel are, but I don't like this man being here.

"My boss would like to speak with you." Boris simply hands me a phone and I take it hesitantly. "I will wait here," he says and I nod, closing the door before lifting the phone to my ear.

"Hel..hello?"

"Ah, Victoria, how are you, my dear?" The accent is Russian. Articulate, almost seductive.

"I've been better. Who are you?"

"I am Ronan Cole, and I am going to help you."

"You're the mob boss," I say.

"That makes me sound so sinister." He laughs. "Think of me as a friend in your situation. As I said, I can help you get your daughter back." I clutch the phone for a moment in silence. This is the Russian, the man that had even Jude worried. That means I should fear him, but it also means he's powerful...and the cartel is powerful. Sometimes you must fight fire with fire, right?

"How?" It's one word—an invitation and I know deep down that I'm selling my soul to the devil, but for Cayla, I'd give it up in a heartbeat.

"It's simple," Ronan says. "Very, very simple..."

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Hours later, I'm half asleep again when I hear the bedroom door creak open. The gun under the pillow is in my hand before a thought crosses my mind. I sit up, aiming it at the obscure figure in the doorway.



"It's me, Tor." Jude holds his hands out in front of him and I blink, slowly lowering the gun.

Between the armed guards everywhere and the creepy Russians seemingly appearing out of nowhere, this place has me on edge. I slide the gun beneath the pillow and lie back down. I know Gabriel is Jude's friend—his ally even in this fight—but this is still the cartel. I lost Cayla because I trusted someone with her and that experience has taught me that anyone could be a mole. Anyone could be an enemy. This is a dirty fight where rules do not apply and underhanded tactics rule. Jude is the only person I'll allow myself to trust.

I watch Jude move around the room, undressing as he makes his way to the bed. The mattress dips with his weight and then his warm arm wraps around my waist, tugging me against his hard body. His lips brush the back of my neck and I close my eyes, basking, for moment, in his ability to make me feel complete. The empty void that has taken up residence in my chest slightly threads together in his arms, because despite everything that has happened, Jude is still the other half of me. And he is the only person who can possibly understand what I'm feeling right now. I'm mad at him, I am, but I'm tired. I'm tired of being angry. I'm tired of this turmoil. And I now have a plan. I'm going to follow it through even though I know it will hurt Jude every bit as much as it will hurt me, but it's necessary. For Cayla. So, for now, I don't want to fight with him. I turn over and he holds me close, stroking his fingers gently across my cheek.

I glide my palm over his chest, allowing the heat of his skin to seep into me. He captures my hand and threads his fingers through mine. Tilting my chin back, I seek his mouth and tentatively brush my lips across his. He kisses me gently, cupping my cheek and stroking his thumb along my jaw. "I'm sorry, doll," he breathes against my mouth.

I shake my head and press my lips harder over his. I just want to feel connected to him one last time because we both know we can't all survive this. The walls are pressing in on us. Jude has a gun pointed at his head and he's just waiting to see who will pull the trigger. I shift in the bed until I'm straddling his body. My tongue dances over his lips and his hands land on my hips as he sits up, bringing us face to face as he stills over me.

"Tor..." he groans against my lips, his hands finding their way to my hair.

"Just..." I grip his face in both hands, "make me feel whole again, Jude. Just for a moment."

This is all I will get. A moment. A memory. I want him—all of him—imprinted on my body and soul.



## JUDE

"Make me feel whole again, Jude. Just for a moment," she breathes against my mouth, her warm breath washing over me.

*Fuck.* I thread my fingers through her soft hair and kiss her. I want to stop her because this feels wrong. It feels wrong to love her like this when the most precious part of us is gone. Lost.

Her tongue slips between my lips. There's a sense of helplessness and defeat, longing that bleeds through this kiss. And I cave for her. Like I always have—even in the most wrong situations, I cave for her. I fist her hair, tugging her head back. "Fuck, Tor."

"I just need..."

Her fingers slide over my arms, her long nails digging into my flesh like she needs this just to stay grounded. I deepen the kiss, letting the anger and violence, the bloodshed swirl through me like a violent wave until she consumes it. Until she fucking takes it all away. My hands creep beneath her shirt, her warm, smooth skin so perfect against my palm. I cup her breast and groan into her mouth as she slowly grinds over me.

Tor grabs my fly and unzips it before pulling my jeans down my thighs and tossing them to the floor. Sitting up, I

grab onto her, gliding my hands along the indentation of her spine, slowly trailing my way to her neck. I cup the back of her head, forcing her lips against mine in another kiss. Deep. Hard. Fucking violent. I grab the waist of her sleep shorts and rip them down her legs with her thong. As soon as she's kicked them off, she's straddling me again, grabbing at my hard cock and shoving it inside her pussy. I clench my jaw on a groan because this woman feels so fucking good. She is everything I could ever want or need. She makes me a better person just because she's crazy enough to fucking love me, and it's moments like this I wonder what the hell I ever did to deserve her.

I tighten my hold on her, forcing her against my chest as she rides me. "I fucking love you," I breathe against her neck, kissing down her throat before I bite her. She tosses her head back and moans as she moves her hands along my sides, my arms, resting them on my shoulder. Her head's still thrown back, and I take this moment to watch her, to fucking admire the way she moves and feels, and then I grab her chin and tilt her head down. Each thrust is hard and slow, determined. "Look at me, Tor," I say and her nostrils flare. "Tor..." She moves over me harder, her hold on my shoulders tightening. There is something here that feels so desperate, so angry and lost. "Look at me," I say again.

When she finally opens her eyes, several tears roll down her cheek and she falls forward, burying her face in the crook of my neck. Her movements slow and I grab her by the waist, attempting to move her off me, but she locks her thighs around me. "No," she says.

"Tor—"

She keeps grinding over me, her pace quickening. "Fuck me, Jude, please," she whispers.

Exhaling, I grab her and flip her onto her back, quickly settling between her spread thighs and sinking into her slow and deep. She stares up at me, her hands on my

cheek, her eyes searching mine. I move steadily inside of her, my eyes locked with hers. "I love you," I say, and she chokes on a sob.

"And I love you." Tears fall down her cheek. "I always will, no matter what. Know that." She pulls me down to her, kissing me hard and deep.

I can't help it, and honestly, under the circumstances I feel guilty as shit, but my dick reacts to her without my permission. A bolt of pleasure tears through me hot and fast and I come, groaning against her lips as she clings to me. Her fingers sweep gently along my jaw as I rest my forehead against hers and catch my breath, then I lie back, pulling Tor onto my chest. I comb my fingers through her hair. "Sleep, doll. Try to sleep," I whisper.

Her fingers weave a trail over my arms, tracing my tattoos as she inhales a deep sigh. She's falling apart. I feel it and I fucking hate it, but the truth is: so am I. Every moment that passes and Cayla's not here tears a piece of my fucking heart clean out. But I can't let Tor see that. I have to be strong for her. I must give her hope even though I fear there is none. Things have gotten out of hand and Ronan...I don't trust him. I should, but it's hard to trust anyone in this twisted world of power plays and death traps. Only fools completely give their trust to someone. Only fucking fools.



## TOR

I wait until Jude's breaths even out and grow heavy with sleep, and then I sit up, silently climbing out of bed and throwing on clothes. I feel bad for doing this, of course I do, but what else *can* I do? What I'm doing may seem rash and desperate, but I *am* desperate. I stand at the side of the bed and watch Jude sleep for a second. His dark lashes shadow his cheekbones and the hard, angry lines of his face seem so much more peaceful in sleep. I lean over and very gently brush my lips against his.

"Tor," he mumbles in his sleep before falling silent again.

"I love you," I whisper. "More than you know." I smile sadly. My beautifully broken man, so strong and fierce, so loyal. I step away, tucking my phone in my back pocket before I walk to the door. I quietly open it and slip out of the room, jumping when I turn and find Boris leaning against the wall.

"Jesus." I press my palm to my chest. "Do you have to loiter out here like a creeper?"

He offers a blank expression before he turns around and walks down the hall. My pulse thrums erratically in my ears as I follow him. The hallways are dark. I'm anxious, nervous that at any moment the guards will descend on us. When



we reach the bottom of the stairs, two figures emerge from the shadows. I jump away from them, but they simply fall in behind us following us silently. I assume they must be Russian.

It's not until we're near the front of the house that we encounter some of Gabriel's men. Two of them step forward. "¿A dónde vas?" one of them says, pulling his gun.

Boris already has his gun drawn and shoots them both in the head, the small *pop pop* of the silencer the only noise before their bodies slump to the floor.

I gasp, stepping around the two men and the blood now spreading rapidly across the carpet. Doubt starts to creep in. These are Gabriel's men, and isn't Gabriel trying to help us? "Do you have to kill them?" I ask.

Boris glances over his shoulder, his chilling blue eyes meeting mine. "They will not let the bookie's woman escape. How else will you leave?" I release a steady breath. I'm doing this because I have to, I tell myself. This is for Cayla. And really, who's life wouldn't I sacrifice for Cayla's?

When we step outside the front door, two more of Gabriel's men greet us. One takes a bullet, the other gets a snapped neck. We hurry down the drive where a car is waiting for us. I'm bundled inside, the two strange Russians taking a seat either side of me as Boris pokes his head in and offers me a shark-like smile. "Goodbye, Victoria Pearson," he says and slams the car door.

The vehicle lurches forward. This is it. My choice is made. There is no turning back now. By the time we reach the front gate the guards are already on the ground, dead. The gate is wide open and we pass through without a problem. I'm not sure whether I should be terrified or in awe of how organised they are. They just made breaking out of a cartel compound look like a stroll in the park. And now, they sit here, perfectly stoic as though they've done just that. I've judged Jude for getting into bed with the

cartel, but *what* have I just done? Who are these people I just made a deal with? They may be worse than the ones who have my daughter, but I have to take my chances.

An hour later and we're winding through the dusty hills just outside the city. The truck climbs a steep hillside dotted with small trees and then I see the gate appear in front of the headlights. At first glance it looks abandoned, but within a few seconds several masked and armed men appear, filing out in front of the gateway. My heart pounds in my chest as a very real fear takes hold of me. I don't want to do this. I'm scared, but I won't leave Cayla and my need to be with her is stronger than any fear I might have for myself.

"We are here," one of the men says before he opens the door, climbs out, and waits next to the car for me.

I take a deep breath and slide across the seat to get out of the car. The ground is even under my shoes, but I feel like it's shaking. The second the door closes behind me; several guns are pointed at me. I hear the car engine rev as it pulls away. Tyres squeal as the Russians pull off. I'm on my own now. Absolutely, completely on my own.

I raise my hands in surrender as I cautiously walk towards the gate. "I need to speak to Lopez," I say. The guards don't budge. Their guns remain raised. "He has my daughter."

One of the men finally steps forward and shifts behind me. "Andale," he shouts, jabbing the barrel of his gun into my back. "Walk."

The massive iron gates swing open and I'm escorted through to a villa and an unknown fate. Bright lights shine along the driveway and the entire area around the house is lit up like the Fourth of July. Olive trees dot the path that leads to the large, wooden front door and an array of fast cars decorate the white gravel drive. The roof is lined with a stone ledge and armed men patrol along it, looking

deadly and vigilant. Maybe I should be scared, but I'm not. All I can think is that Cayla is *here*. I'm so close to my baby.

The front door creaks open and more armed men file back, standing either side of the doorway as I'm shoved through. Just inside the door is a foyer with marble floors and chandeliers hanging from the ceilings. It is beautiful, like a Mexican palace—beautiful things bought with ugly deeds. I'm led through the house, down a hallway, and to a door. One of the guards opens it and the guy behind me rams the gun into my back as he shoves me inside. I fall to my knees. Before I'm able to stand, the door pulls closed, the lock clicking behind me. Climbing to my feet, I glance around the large room. There's a bed in the middle, a dresser, and an open closet full of long white dresses. I turn and test the door handle, sighing when I find it locked. *A bedroom or a prison cell?*

"Hello?" I shout. "I want to see Lopez." Silence. "I need to see my daughter." No response. I close my eyes and inhale.

*Okay, I need to just calm down.* I came here for Cayla, but this is enemy territory. I have to be patient and wait. I must play by their rules and their ways because honestly, what other option do I have? This is not the same as when I ended up captured at Jude's. I could tell Jude wouldn't really hurt me, or perhaps it was Caleb...I always knew he had Caleb as his moral compass. But this is different. These men don't have morals. They kidnap children for god's sake and I have no doubt they would kill Cayla if that suited their needs.

I sit on the edge of the bed, bracing my head in my hands. This sick feeling in my gut tells me I made a grave mistake coming here, but how can this possibly be wrong? Cayla is here, and dead or alive, dangerous or not, I will be with her. I would never abandon her.

Ronan's words ring in my ears as I think about what I need to do. My heart squeezes painfully, but I push the hurt away. I'm doing what I must—the only thing I can do for my daughter. I'm not stupid, this is the cartel. You don't survive the cartel, so I must buy our freedom with the only thing I have to offer.



## JUDE

The warm sun streams through the window and I roll onto my side to escape it. I reach out for Tor, but feel only cold sheets. I open my eyes and stare at the empty space as I groggily sit up and swing my legs over the edge of the bed. I stumble into the bathroom, leaning one hand against the wall to steady myself as I force my morning wood down to take a piss.

"Fucking bullshit!" I hear Gabriel shouting in the hallway. "Fucking bullshit."

I finish peeing and rush out of the room, through the house, and to the living room. From here I can see Gabriel and Marney standing over two men. Their bodies lie sprawled out on the floor by the door and there's a pool of dried blood on the carpet. "Where is Tor?" I say with a deep growl, my blood pressure rising with each breath. Gabriel glances up at me and I see it on his face. "Did she..." I swipe my hand down my jaw before I point at the dead men. "Did she fucking do this?"

*Why the hell would she have done this? Why would she...* Inhaling, I clench my fists and make my way through the kitchen to the den. "Tor!" I shout. "Fucking Tor?"

I throw the French doors to the patio open, the sudden commotion causing the birds to take flight in a flutter.

"Tor!" I scream, but I'm met only with a deafening silence. "Shit." I slam my fist against the stucco wall, pain splintering through my knuckles. She's fucking gone. That's what that shit was about last night. "Damn it," I breathe as I turn and storm back into the house. "Gabe!" I call as I head down the hallway. "I know she's gone to that fucking cartel to try and get Cayla."

Gabriel steps out into the hall, groans, and throws his head back. Marney comes creeping down the hallway. "Should've known she'd pull a stunt like this," he says. "She's determined to get that baby back."

"She's gonna get them both fucking killed," I shout just as Boris appears in the doorway with two men on each side of him. He has a sly smirk on his face. *It was him.* "You mother—" I rush him, shoving my palms against his chest and him against the wall before I slam my fist into the side of his face. His lip splits. Blood dribbles from the fresh wound and rolls over his pale chin. I yank my gun from the waist of my jeans and cock it as I aim at Boris' round head.

Boris' men draw guns on me. My finger itches over the trigger. "Tell me why," I demand.

He stares coldly at me. I hear the click of another gun cocking. Now Gabriel has one pointed at him, too. "You killed my fucking men." Gabriel's gaze swings from Boris to me as he points a finger. "I told you I didn't want to work with the Russian and this is why. Backstabbing pale fucks." Gabriel steps forward, shoving the gun against Boris' temple.

"It would not be wise to shoot me." Boris sighs. "It's all part of the plan."

"Part of the..." I throw my hands up and grip my head, the cold metal of the gun I'm clutching searing through my flesh. "What fucking plan, Boris?" I glance at his men who still have guns raised.

"Ronan's plan," Boris says. I stare at him, Gabriel swears under his breath, kicking the wall as he drops his gun. Boris' men still don't lower theirs. "He knew you wouldn't agree with it."

"Oh, really?" I snort. "How fucking genius of him to realize I wouldn't willingly let my woman walk into the cartel." I spin around to face Gabriel. "Take me to Jesús."

"Fuck no, you've lost your mind, ese."

I aim the gun again, this time at Gabriel. "*Take me* to fucking Jesús." My teeth grind together as anger beats away at me shredding any bit of rational reasoning I have left. I'd just as soon put a bullet in every fucker's head that's in this room right now.

"Jude..." Marney's voice comes from behind me. I jump when I feel his cold, meaty hand land on my arm, slowly lowering the gun. "That's not gonna do you any good."

Boris clears his throat and turns away just as another one of the Russians walks into the room with an open laptop. Boris grabs it with a nod of gratitude and props it on his arm. There, on the screen, is fucking Ronan.

"Ah, American...and the Mexican," Ronan says. "Everyone is here." He grins, placing a cigar between his lips.

"Fuck you!" I shout, spit flying from my mouth. It's all I can say to the fucking pussy sitting all the way in Russia.

"I am sorry. " He sighs. "But I did what none of you could do. I made a plan. Victoria understands that sacrifices must be made."

"You gonna tell us this fucking plan?" I ask. All I can hear is the blood pulsing through my ears as a savage heat consumes me.

"It is simple, Victoria will lead Jesús to you at an agreed location. We set a trap and we kill them all." He shrugs. "All you have to do is wait for her call."



My nostrils flare. "Why the fuck would you send *her*? Out of everyone fucking here you send my woman, you sick fuck. I swear to god if I ever see you again I will slit your motherfucking throat."

"American's are so angry." He smirks. "I sent her because she has the most convincing reason of all: a mother's love."

Swallowing, I glare at the screen.

"You fucking idiot," Gabriel mumbles. "The cartel doesn't give two flying shits about a mother's love."

Ronan laughs. "Ah, my friend. Maybe not, but they will buy the fact that Victoria is willing to hang her dearly beloved out to dry in exchange for her sweet daughter." He smiles like the sick bastard he is. "You know they'll kill all of you unless you kill them. This is the only way." His eyes flicker with a type of madness I've never seen before. "Ambush," he laughs.

"He's fucking loco, ese," Gabriel whispers. There's a pause. I have no doubt that Tor would go along with this plan, and I have no doubt she will be convincing. I've seen her do it before, but..."What if they see through it?" I ask.

"They would see through it if it were a *lie*..." That word hangs in the air. "But your woman doesn't think it's a lie. She truly will do *anything* for that daughter of yours, American. Even sell out her one, true love." He lifts a brow and blows a stream of smoke through his lips.

I fight the choking sensation working its way up my throat. I fight the hurt threatening to consume me. I want to kill them all—Ronan, Boris, Jesús...my grip on my gun tightens. My finger plays with the trigger. Part of me is crushed that Tor would sell me out, but the bigger part of me is fucking proud. The only things that matters to me are her and Cayla. I know she did it to save Cayla, I just wish she would have told me. My heart violently pounds against

my chest, sweat creeps over my brow, and I exhale a long held breath.

"Do not be upset my friend," Ronan says. "She is a good woman that one."

Growling, I jerk the laptop from Boris' hands and chuck it against the wall. The screen cracks and splits, pieces of plastic fly everywhere. Boris huffs and shakes his head before he turns and makes his way down the hall.

"This is fucking bullshit," I shout, glancing at Marney and Gabriel.

Gabriel steps beside me, clapping his hand over my shoulder. "He has this web woven so tightly, any way you turn you're fucked."



## TOR

I sit at the window and watch the sun slowly creep into the sky. They left me here all night. What did I expect really? I reach for my necklace, clutching the small hummingbird charm which instantly makes me think of Jude. I glance into the courtyard below, watching as men pass by like clockwork, guns slung over their backs and guard dogs at their heels.

Eventually the door to my room swings open. A man with a gun appears in the doorway and jerks his head in a gesture for me to follow him. I gather my dress in my hands as I slowly make my way to the doorway. The moment I step beside him, his hand wraps around my arm in a bruising grip. He leads me through the house until we reach a door that leads outside.

The early morning sun blinds me as we walk around the side of the house to a large deck. Amongst the bright rays, I can barely make out the silhouette of a man sitting at the edge of the deck. The guy with the gun releases me, shoving me forward hard enough that I stagger. I catch myself as I stumble into the shadow of the flower-covered arbor and approach the man sitting calmly on a wicker chair with a newspaper in his lap. His greying hair is damp and swept away from his face. He looks like any normal

businessman in his white shirt and linen trousers. When I approach, he looks up from the paper and glances at the man behind me.

"La esposa del corredor de apuestas," the man laughs over my shoulder.

The man in the chair smiles as he waves the other guy away. I stand nervously, my heart pounding as his dark, intelligent eyes drag over me. Propping his elbow on the arm of the chair, he taps his index finger over his lips. "Victoria Devaux, in the flesh," he drawls, his accent barely noticeable. "Or is it Pearson?"

"Jesús Lopez, I assume?" I say, attempting to seem calm although I'm anything but.

He pushes to his feet and slowly approaches me, his grin widening with each step. He stops right in front of me and I look up at him. He's tall, but not as tall or broad as Jude. The strong scent of his cologne overpowers my senses as he takes a piece of my hair, twirling the strand around his finger. "Jude Pearson and Gabriel Estrada have proved a thorn in my side these past weeks. I have lost my brother and one of my men at their hands, and the boss—well, Domingo wants his son back and their heads on spikes. Andrea is the only reason they are still alive. You have walked into the middle of a war *señorita* How *desperate* Pearson must be to send his woman."

I take a cautious step back, my hair dropping from his grasp. "He doesn't know I'm here," my voice trembles.

"So then," he quirks an eyebrow, "why *are* you here?"

My temper bubbles dangerously. "Because you took my daughter!"

He laughs, the grin never leaving his face. He gestures to one of the chairs. "Please, sit."

I take a seat in a wicker chair as Jesús sits next to me. From here I can see a single man looming in the doorway of the double French doors that lead back into the house. For

some reason, I take a small comfort in his presence. Jesús leans back, leisurely crossing one leg over the other. "I did take your child, señorita. It's not personal. Just business."

I grip the arms of the chair so hard I can feel my nails bending and screaming in protest. "She is my child. It doesn't get more personal," I say through gritted teeth.

"Pearson has made some dangerous friends." He shrugs one shoulder before lifting a cup of coffee from the small table next to him. "Gabriel Estrada," he sighs and tilts his head to the side. "That is a problem. It's a problem for me, which means it's a problem for your man and now...you."

"What do you want?"

"Ah, chiquita," he smirks. "Never ask a powerful man what he wants." He sips on his coffee. "The answer is always more power."

"And how does taking my daughter achieve that?"

He sets the coffee back on the table and picks up a cigar. He places it between his lips and lights it. I wait as he inhales a stream of smoke, snapping his lighter closed. "It is not of your concern. You are here now." A grin pulls at his lips. "Your mistake will play to my advantage." He leans across the arm of his chair and grabs my chin. His thumb drags across my bottom lip and bile rises in my throat. "I hope Pearson comes through for you, chiquita," he whispers. "It would be a shame if I had to... *motivate* him."

My lungs falter for a second as a rush of memories surrounding Joe flood my mind. This wouldn't be the first time that I've endured horrible things at the hands of one of Jude's enemies. But this isn't for Jude, this is for Cayla.

"I want to see my daughter," I whisper through my tightening throat. Jesús stares at me for a moment before his gaze drops to my lips. I swallow hard. I know it's all intimidation tactics, but I can't help but close my eyes and start praying. I walked in here for Cayla. I know what needs to be done to get her out, but this is all a game to men like

Jesús. Show my hand too soon and I've lost before we've even started. After a moment, Jesus huffs a laugh and releases me. His fingers snap. I open my eyes, my stomach knotting as I watch the man lingering inside the French doors turn and walk away.

"You are foolish coming here, chiquita, foolish but brave," he says, inhaling on his cigar. "I can appreciate both qualities in a woman."

"I'm a mother."

Closing his eyes, he tilts his head back before releasing a long stream of smoke. When he drops his chin, his eyes flash open. "Children are but a blade in the heart, are they not? A crippling weakness. So innocent, so precious."

A horrible feeling washes over me and it feels as though there are a thousand tiny spiders with prickly legs crawling over me. Jesús is still smirking at me when I spot movement in my periphery. I turn in my chair just as a woman sets foot onto the deck, her long white dress—just the same as mine—blowing around her legs. And in her arms, is Cayla. My heart threatens to pound from my chest as I jump up, knocking the chair over as I rush toward her.

"Momma! Momma!" Cayla's face lights up as she reaches for me, and the second she's in my arms, my heart can beat properly again. She wraps her little arms around my neck and I inhale the scent of her hair.

"It's okay, baby. I'm sorry I left you," I say. She rests her cheek on my shoulder and I fight back tears at the sheer relief of feeling her in my arms again when I never thought I would.

"Milla," she says, lifting her head and pointing to the woman who was holding her.

The woman's long, ebony hair falls across her face, tumbling over her shoulder in thick waves. Her eyes are focused on the deck and her hands clasped gently behind her back as though there's a sadness that clings to her.

"Thank you," I say quietly. "For looking after her."

She lifts her head and her turquoise eyes meet my gaze. "De nada," she says, smiling softly at Cayla as she turns to leave.

Jesús steps up behind me and clears his throat. "You will be a guest in my home."

I turn to face him, clutching Cayla more tightly. "A guest?" *A prisoner.*

"Call it what you will then." His eyes drift to Cayla and a twisted smirk tugs at his lips. He laughs, waving his hand through the air. "A cage without bars—at least until your man makes his move." He strokes his hand over Cayla's head and I yank her away from him. "Such a pretty child," he says. "It would be a shame to hurt her."

A shiver works over my body. He offers one last smile before he turns and walks away, smoke billowing around him as he disappears through the French doors. I stay on the deck, unsure of what to do. I sit back down in the chair, clutching Cayla, holding her, staring at her to reassure myself that she's okay.

She squirms in my lap. "Dada..." she whines.

I sniff back tears. "Oh, baby. Daddy isn't here." She looks so heartbroken and it guts me. "He's...he's with Uncle Marney." I want to tell her she'll see him soon, that it won't be long, but I can't lie to her. I kiss her forehead and stroke her cheeks. She's so young, so oblivious to the dangers surrounding her. I wish I possessed just a touch of her blissful innocence. All I can do now is sit and wait to play my hand, hoping it's good enough to tip this game of life and death.





## JUDE

Gabriel is on the phone yelling about weapons and cocaine. One of his guys is sitting at the kitchen table with me, gun on the table. This is bullshit. Gabriel basically has me hostage. This Neanderthal sitting across from me watches my every fucking move because Gabriel is afraid I'm going to go on a rampage and start a cartel war... although, I feel the war has already started. Marney shuffles out of the kitchen and over to the table with a cup of coffee and newspaper. He sits down and pops out the paper as he takes a slow sip.

"Marney, what the fuck are you doing?" I ask. "You can't speak Spanish, let alone read it?"

He peeks around the side of the paper and lifts a brow as he takes another drink from his mug. "I have to have the paper with my coffee. It's ritual, besides there's pictures—" he folds the paper back and points to a picture of body bags lining the streets. "Violent place if you ask me. Mmm-mmm-mmm." He shakes his head and resumes—whatever the fuck he's doing with that paper.

Gabriel storms into the kitchen, his face blood-red. He stops by the table and drums his fingers over it before locking his eyes with me. "Fucking rocket launchers?"

Gabriel shakes his head. "I guess the Russian's going to blow up Juárez City."

"It's been a day, Gabe," I say. "An entire fucking day." All he does is nod. "I don't like just sitting my ass here while my woman and daughter are with the fucking cartel."

Gabriel scrubs a hand over his jaw. Marney mumbles something under his breath. Boris walks into the room whispering into the phone in Russian. I glare at him, my temper spiking dangerously. I don't trust him. I don't trust Ronan. Fuck, at times I don't even trust Gabriel. Boris hangs up the call and glances at me.

"What the fuck are you guys doing about this shit?" I ask, my muscles tensing.

"We're working on it."

"It's been a fucking day and shit's not happened." I stand and step toward him. He stares coldly at me. "What the fuck is going on? How do you know she's safe?"

"We don't."

Blood pounds through my veins sending an angry rage washing over me. My vision spots. My throat tightens. Every last one of my senses is on edge. I stare at him, at his smug fucking smile. He's Ronan's peddler and it's his fault Tor is gone. It's his fault I may lose both of my girls. It's his fucking fault I'm sat here with my thumb up my goddamn ass not able to do a fucking thing worth a shit to find my family. Without hesitation, I pull my gun, cock it, and before the sack of shit can bat a fucking eye, I pull the trigger. Blood splatters the table. A sense of euphoric release washes over me as I watch Boris fall to the ground, his blood pouring out onto the tile and staining the grout.

"Did you..." Gabriel groans and throws his head back. "Ai, ai, fucking ai, ese." He shakes his head as he stands over Boris' body. Gabriel glances at me, sighs, and walks off mumbling under his breath.

Marney peers over the paper watching Boris bleed. "I didn't like him much anyway," he says before flipping the

paper back up and sipping his coffee.

Gabriel shouts at one of his men as he steps back into the room. "Had to shoot him, huh, ese?" he says as he places a hand on my shoulder.

I turn to face him and feel a sharp pinch in my neck. The bitter taste of metal fills my mouth as a warm tingling sensation shoots down my neck and through my arm before everything fades to black.



## TOR

I'm sitting on the bed in the same room I've been staying in for the last twenty-four hours. I'm not locked in, but I don't want to leave this room. Cayla is starting to get restless, but I'm not about to start wondering around the compound. There's a light knock on the door before it opens, and the pretty woman I saw that first day slips through the gap in the door.

"Milla, Milla," Cayla squeals.

The girl smiles wide at her—a perfect, blinding smile. "Ángel bonito," she coos before she looks at me. "I'm Camilla," she says.

"Tor." She's one of Jesús' people. And no matter how nice she may seem, that means I don't trust her.

Camilla tilts her head to the side and then glances over her shoulder towards the door. She nods to the side of the room before she walks into the bathroom and waits by the door. I scoop up Cayla and follow her. She softly closes the door behind us before she goes to the shower and turns on the water.

"There are eyes and ears everywhere," she says quietly. I narrow my eyes, watching her warily. "You are the bookie's woman?"

"Yes."

She tilts her head slightly. There's a beat of silence where the only sound echoing around the room is the noise of the water spraying the shower floor. "Gabriel didn't tell you about me?"

"Gabriel?" I'm so confused.

She rolls her eyes. "Es un idiota," she sighs. "Gabriel is my brother."

"What?" My eyes go wide. I did not see that coming, but now that I look at her, Camilla is just a more beautiful version of her brother. Turquoise eyes. Defined nose. I'm still wary though. This could all just be a trap to lead me astray.

"When Domingo took Juárez City from Gabriel," her voice drops to just below a whisper, "the Sinaloa took me as a hostage. It's a ploy to keep my brother in line." Her eyes dart nervously to the bathroom door. "I can get word to Gabriel." I stare blankly at her. "That is why they sent you, is it not?"

I drag a hand through the knotted strands of my hair. Cayla fuses in my arms and I shift her to my other hip. "I...not exactly." She frowns. "Jude would never have let me come here," I say. "He thinks they'll kill me, but I needed to be with her. And so far, Jesús..."

She shakes her head. "Jesús is a cruel man and Domingo even more so. Domingo runs the Sinaloa from prison. His reach is far and he will not hesitate to order your death if it suits him." I inhale a shaky breath as my chest tightens. "Do not underestimate them, and do not take any kindness at face value," she says. "You need to escape."

*Escape? Oh yeah, sure. I'll just get past the armed guards and then cross the desert with a two-year-old.*

"I can't," I say. "I came here to—I have a plan."

"Whatever it is, be careful." She steps close to me, stroking her fingers over Cayla's cheek. Cayla stares up at her adoringly. "I will help protect her at all costs." Camilla

kisses Cayla's head before she steps away, opening the door and leaving the room.

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Cayla is sound asleep in the middle of the bed. I tiptoe to the door and open it, slipping outside and locking the door behind me. I place the key in my pocket and venture down the hallway. I've been here for two days and two days is long enough. With each passing hour, the likelihood of Cayla and I getting out of here grows smaller. Time is not our friend.

Ronan said to wait a few days, that I needed to bide my time and make Jesús think that this is a ploy of desperation. It is a ploy of desperation, so it shouldn't be too hard to convince Jesús. I wander through the house, every guard I pass staring at me, whispering under their breath. I walk into a large den with an open fireplace, finally stumbling across an unarmed man.

"Jesús?" I ask him.

"Si." His eyes shamelessly drag over me before he turns and leads me through a hallway.

All of the men here look at me like a piece of meat, and as angry as it makes me, I can't do a thing about it. Everything I do here must be tentative because honestly, the only thing keeping Cayla and I alive is the fact that they want Jude.

The man stops in front of a large wooden door, knocking before he pushes it open to Camilla sitting on Jesús' desk. Her dress is pooled around her waist and her legs wrapped around Jesús' hips. His large hands roam over her body as they kiss. Jesús glances over Camilla's shoulder and I immediately drop my eyes to the floor. "I'm sorry. I...uh..." I stammer awkwardly as I back out of the room, bumping into the guard in the hallway.



"Victoria," Jesús drawls, "come in." I freeze for a moment. A shiver of disgust works over me, as I wonder if that may be how he treats all his prisoners?

I step inside the room as Camilla pulls her dress back into place. She hops down from the desk and moves around it, her hips swaying with every step. Everything about her is exotic and sensual. I'm not surprised Jesús wants her, but I can't help but wonder if Gabriel knows his sister is sleeping with the enemy. Maybe she's doing it to get close, to feed Gabe information? Jesús grabs her arm, stopping her midstride and placing his arm around her waist before he kisses her neck. She smiles at him, and it looks so genuine. He slaps her arse and she walks off with her gaze trained on the floor.

"Victoria," Jesús says, directing his attention to me. He readjusts himself and I fight the bile creeping up my throat. "Please, sit." He moves back behind the desk and falls into the chair, smoothing his hand down the front of his white shirt.

I take the seat across from him and cross my legs. My long dress billows around my ankles, but the front drops low, exposing too much cleavage. I don't miss the way he stares—the appreciation in his eyes. I feel like a deer caught in the sights of a predator which means I have to make this quick. I know all too well that men like him take what they want. I have a neat row of brands down my back to show for it.

"What can I do for you, chiquita?" His voice is laced with implication, and the smile that pulls at the corners of his lips backs that theory.

I clear my throat. "I want to make a deal with you," I say.

Jesús throws back his head, a deep laugh rumbling from his lips. "You have cojones, I'll give you that, chiquita. And you are a pretty little thing. " His eyes meet mine, his face going serious. "But I would suggest you do not push me."

My heart pounds as I try and force the next words past my lips. *You have no choice. You have no choice.* The words ring through my ears over and over. "You want Jude," I say and his dark eyes narrow in interest. "I can get you Jude."

His lips curl into a wry smile again and he leans forward, bracing his elbows on his desk. "Interesting," he muses. "You would rat on your own man?" He takes a cigar from a marble ashtray on his desk, placing it between his lips. I watch as he strikes a match and cups it carefully, puffing away as he lights the cigar.

"Yes."

He shakes his hand, extinguishing the match as he takes a deep pull from his cigar and stares at me. "Now why would you do that?"

I lean on the desk. "We both know that me and my daughter are on borrowed time. I'm not stupid. We serve a purpose, we're collateral right now, but the second this goes on too long, we will serve as a message," I say. He tilts his head to the side and smirks. "I love Jude, but Cayla is my child. There is nothing I wouldn't sacrifice for her."

"Hmm." His eyes flash as his gaze crawls over my body, "What do you propose?"

"I can lead you to Jude. You can send men to kill him, and in exchange, let me and my daughter go."

"You would betray the man who loves you?"

"I would sacrifice him for her," I say. Ronan was right, this is the *only* way.

He sits, silently smoking on his cigar as he studies me. "No," he says. One word that sends my heart galloping through my chest because this is it. This is the plan and it's all I have. "You are too much of a risk, Victoria Pearson."

"I swear, I will never breathe a word of this. Why would I when you can just find me and kill me?"

He props his cigar on the edge of the ashtray. "Normally, I would say yes, but you..." he points at me, "are

still wanted by the FBI. They are looking for you, and I don't like that. It's too dangerous."

Trying to think fast, I rub my hand over my forehead. Something. Anything. "Then send Cayla away...to my sister. My sister knows nothing of this world. Send Cayla to her. I'll lead you to Jude. Kill me. Kill him. Just let my baby go." I lock eyes with him, hoping there's just a trace of humanity left in this monstrous man. "Please," I beg, knowing he can hear the desperation in my voice.

My heart pounds, my head swimming in a dizzying heat. He takes a deep breath and leans back in his chair, steeping his fingers together. "I will consider your proposition. It would be a shame to kill you though, chiquita," he purrs. I close my eyes, taking a steadying breath through my nose before my eyes flash open, my gaze crashing against his.

"As long as my daughter is safe..." I leave the words hanging in the air. The thought of what he's asking of me sends a wave of disgust crawling through me. The simple fact is I can survive anything as long as I know Cayla is alive and safe.

Jesús stands, brushing his shirt off as he rounds the desk. With each step he takes, my pulse thumps harder. I don't want him anywhere near me. He stops in front of me and I push to my feet, not wanting to be lower than him and at a disadvantage. He grabs my face and drags me closer to him. His fingers grip my jaw with such force I can't help but whimper. I clench my fists, allowing my nails to cut into my palm in a bid to stop myself from pushing him away. *For Cayla. This is for Cayla.* His cigar-laced breath fans over my face and I suddenly feel ill. Closing my eyes, I swallow heavily as his lips brush mine. I don't move, just simply stay put. Submissive to him because this is what he wants. His fingers dig harder into my face as his tongue brushes against my lips.

"You can do better than this, Victoria," he purrs. "I thought you wanted your daughter to live."

Hot tears prick my eyes, but I force them down and part my lips to allow his tongue inside my mouth. I feel soiled and dirty in the worst way as the guilt of what I'm doing to Jude gnaws away at my gut. Jesús finally pulls away from me, laughing before he brings his lips to my ear.

"I can see why your bookie likes you so much. I may just take you up on your offer, maybe make him watch me take you right before I kill him." He bites my earlobe and I flinch away.

The second he releases his hold on my jaw, I back towards the door. He folds his arms over his chest, a satisfied smile on his face as he watches my leave. "I do so look forward to our next little chat, Victoria," he says.

I yank the door open and stumble out into the hallway, tears of shame falling as I make my way back through his house and to my daughter. If this is what I must do, then I will pay the price a thousand times over for a mother's love knows no bounds.



## JUDE

My head throbs with each beat of my heart. I'm burning up. I toss and turn, completely aware of my sweat-soaked shirt clinging to my chest. After a moment of fighting it, I slowly open my eyes and a bright halogen light causes me to slam them closed again. I can hear someone whistling the theme song to *The Andy Griffith Show*, and I just want them to shut up. I'm dazed as shit.

Rolling onto my side, I open my eyes again and am staring right at a set of fucking iron bars. I sit up so fast my head spins and I grab the edge of the ratty cot I'm sitting on to keep from toppling to the piss-stained concrete floor. The air is thick and stagnant with a sweltering heat. I'm in a motherfucking Mexican jail cell. "What the fuck?" I shout, my voice booming around the small space.

The whistling stops and footsteps echo down the hallway. "Hola, mi amigo," the voice says, laughing. A large man stops in front of my cell. His brown uniform is soaked with sweat and his face glistens. "Mi amigo..."

"Hablo Inglés." I stand up and cross the cell, grabbing the bars.

"Si..." He clears his throat. "You're the trouble maker," he chuckles, and I swear to god if I could reach through these bars and choke him, I would.

"Why the hell am I in here?"

"Gabriel, he says you have an ugly temper." He frowns. "Said he had to drug you. Dragged your ass in here like a dead horse." I clench my jaw and grit my teeth. "No worries...you'll only be here for a day or so. Gabriel said this was the only way to keep you from fucking his shit up." He shrugs. "Said to tell you he's sorry, ese." A quick grin dances over his lips.

My heart feels like it's going to pound right out of my fucking chest. I cannot believe Gabe would put me in here. Shit...I grip the bars so hard my knuckles ache. What the actual hell am I going to do? I shove away from the bars and pace.

"Hey, you want something to eat?" the guard asks. "I've got pimento cheese and turkey, some fucking Spam."

"No, I'm good, thanks." I shove my hand in my pocket for my cell phone, but it's fucking gone. "Damn it, Gabriel."

The guard looks at me. "Oh, you want your cell phone? It's on the charger. Gabriel said to make sure it stayed charged, said you were expecting a call or something." I glare at him. "Don't worry. If it rings, I'll bring it to you." He disappears from sight.

When he comes back, he's toting a metal *Hulk* lunchbox. He pulls out a Ziploc bag, opens it, and takes a bite of a sandwich. "So, Gabriel, he says you're corredor de apuestas, man, you are the reason the Sinaloa made so much money." He shakes his head. "You are a legend." He takes another bite before holding the sandwich out. "Sure you don't want some? Pimento cheese is the best." I sit down on the cot and stare at him. "Anyway," he says through a mouth full of food, "Gabriel says you and he are friends. Gabriel's cool, man, I like him. He scares the shit outta me, but I like him..."

I flop back on the cot and groan because I have a feeling this guy is never going to shut the fuck up and it looks like

I'm stuck here until Gabriel decides to get his head out of his ass.





## TOR

A loud knock on my door wakes me from a dead sleep. I sit up just as the door flies open and a man with a gun steps in. Panic rips through me and I dive over Cayla, protecting her with my body. She barely stirs from sleep.

"Come with me," the man says impatiently. I glance over my shoulder and he glares.

I slowly crawl out of the bed, careful not to disturb Cayla. I don't like leaving her, but better she remains here in this bed than come with me to whatever this is. As I walk down the hallway, my mind whirs through the possibilities. It's the middle of the night. What if Jesús has summoned me? There's only one thing a man calls a woman for in the middle of the night. *Oh god*. I press my hand against my stomach, trying to calm it. I'm shown to Jesús' office door and then the man steps back, gesturing for me to go inside.

When I open the door, Jesús' eyes snap up to meet mine momentarily before he glances down at the laptop on the desk in front of him. "She is here," he says.

"Ah, good." I recognize that Russian accent, the arrogant drawl. *Why is Ronan calling Jesus?*

"Victoria come here," Jesús says.

I round the desk and he pulls his chair out, patting his thigh. Swallowing, I lower myself onto his lap. His hand

lands on my hip and I go rigid tense. The computer screen is pulled up to a pixelated video call. The fuzz on the screen slowly disappears and I'm staring at the image of a man wearing a fine suit, his red tie perfectly knotted at his throat. His face is chiseled, his jaw and cheek bones prominent. Dark hair is swept back with a slight, natural quip. He looks so young, not much older than Jude and myself. For some reason, I expected a man with so much power to be older. Ronan smiles at me through the screen, and I can't help but think he would be handsome if it weren't for his icy hardness. His blue eyes are so hard and calculating, they make me tremble just looking at them.

"I see you are enjoying your little guest, Jesús," Ronan says.

"Do you know this man?" Jesús asks, ignoring Ronan's comment. I hesitate. Should I say that I do?

"It's okay, Victoria. You can tell him," Ronan says, leaning back in his chair.

"I've spoken to him on the phone," I say.

"You see, Jesús," Ronan claps his hands together, a pleased smile on his face, "I sent her to you."

Jesús exhales a long breath. "Your reach never fails to impress, Cole," he mumbles, his hand rubbing slowly over my thigh. "So, now you can tell me what you want."

"I called to give you some information."

"And why would you do that, Russian?" Jesús asks, his tone bored.

"I want something you have, and you want something I have. It is the way the world spins and—"

"What do you want?"

"Cocaine. I want your cocaine. I'll cut you in fifteen percent," Ronan says.

Jesús laughs. "Twenty-five."

"Eighteen and not a cent more!" Ronan says sternly.

"Twenty," he says slowly, shifting forward in his chair.

"Trust me," Ronan laughs, "what I have to offer you is worth far more than two percent..."

"Talón de quemar Ruso." He mumbles. "Nineteen. Final offer."

"Done."

"What is it you have that you think is of such worth?"

"Oh, you'll like this. " Ronan grins, taking a long puff on his cigar. "I know who turned Domingo over. I know who your rat is."

My heart seizes in my chest and the panic must be written all over my face. "Who?" Jesús growls, his fingers flinching into my hip. There's a pause, a tension that ripples through the air like a wave rising high above the waterline.

"Jude Pearson," Ronan says and the wave crashes down, dragging me underneath the cold, murky depths. I close my eyes, my body going rigid as I wait for Jesús to react. I hear Ronan's low chuckle echoing through the speakers. "Oh, and just so you know, Andrea is dead. I *am* sorry, Victoria. It's just business," Ronan says before he hangs up.

Jesús' rapid breaths rustle against my ear. I can literally feel his heart pounding through his chest and against my back. His fingers tighten painfully on my hip before he shoves me out of his lap. I shoot up and whirl around just as he launches out of his chair, trapping me against the desk. His entire body bristles with tension. He grabs my hair, yanking my head back so hard that I wince in pain.

"Did you know about this?" he snarls like a rabid dog, angry and ready to attack.

"I thought... " I swallow hard. "I thought you knew about Jude and Domingo," I whisper. "I thought that was why you took Cayla, why you wanted Jude dead."

He snorts. "I wanted your bookie dead because he's making the Juárez cartel too much money, giving them too much power. Domingo wanted to use your kid, use you to blackmail Jude into killing Gabriel Estrada. But now..."

"Why involve us?" I shout. "Why not just kill Gabriel?"

He lifts a brow, flashing me a dangerous expression. "Cartel bosses do not kill each other. But now...*now* I might make an exception because the Juárez are working with a fucking rat, and I will kill every one of them!" His eyes search mine as he inches his face closer. He nips at my jaw, sending a warm breath over my neck. I recoil from his touch. "You wanted to buy your daughter's freedom," he says, nodding. "You have a deal, chiquita. Your daughter's freedom for Jude Pearson's life."

Cayla for Jude. Isn't that what he wanted anyway? For a moment, the thought of Jude consumes me. I remember his smile, his kisses, the way he touches me, the way his voice softens only for me or Cayla. My hardened, ruthless man who is kind only for me. The man who broke me and fixed me at the same time. The man who made me stronger than I could ever hope to be. But am I strong enough to survive his loss? I must be, for our daughter. "Done," I whisper.

He leans in, his lips brushing mine as he speaks. "I want him to know that you sold him out. I want him to die with a broken heart knowing that I'm going to take you, chiquita." His lips press against mine and I can't help the tear that escapes and falls down my cheek. Jesús grips my jaw, roughly turning my face to the side. "Tears will do nothing. I like it when you cry." He laughs as he swipes his tongue over my cheek..

I feel like I sold my soul to the devil, but what mother wouldn't in my position? My body is nothing. This is nothing. Cayla is everything.

Jesús hands me a phone. "Call your sister. Tell her to meet my men at the El Paso border crossing in twenty-four hours' time." He grabs my waist and lifts me up, placing me on his desk before he sits in front of me.

My legs are shaking and my heart is racing so fast I feel like I'm going to throw up. I lift the phone, typing out my

sister's number and praying she hasn't changed it. "Hello," she answers.

"Lizzy," I say quietly. Silence greets me. "Liz?"

"Ria?" she whispers.

I want to ask her how she is, how her life is, but I can't. "I need..." I take a deep breath. "I need a favour from you."

"Ria, I haven't heard from you for over two years and now you call me up and want a favour?"

"I need you to look after my baby. I'm in trouble. I need her to be safe..." There's nothing but silence and my heart falls to my stomach.

"Ria, come home—"

"I can't, Liz!" I snap. "Just listen to me. I need you to go to El Paso, to the border crossing. There you will meet with some men. They will give you my daughter. Her name is Cayla. Please, *please* look after her. Promise me. She's all I have, just...promise me you'll look after her." I fight the sob choking me, the pain twisting in my chest. I fight it all. I wish I could tell Lizzy just how desperate this situation is, but I can't. I only hope that she'll do this for me.

"What the hell, Ria?"

"Please!" I plead desperately.

"Okay. I'll...I'll book a flight now."

Jesús hands me a piece of paper and I read her a set of coordinates and a time. "Thank you." I swallow around the lump in my throat. "Thank you..."

"When will I see you?" she asks. "You're coming back for her, right?"

I drop my chin to my chest. "No. I can't. Promise me she'll never go a day without knowing how loved she is." I swipe at the tears escaping my eyes.

"Ria..."

"I have to go. I love you." I hang up, staring at the phone in my hand.

"You're breaking my heart," Jesús says as he pushes to his feet. He steps between my thighs and trails his fingers over my cheek.

"Do you have one?" I say it as an insult, but he just laughs.

"Maybe. Now...you are going to call Jude Pearson and tell him you got Cayla out. Tell him Camilla helped you. He'll believe it." He reaches for a piece of paper and scrawls something across it. "Tell him to meet Camilla here." He hands me the paper. God, this is really it. I'm setting Jude up and the guilt, the treachery is eating me alive.

My fingers shake as I dial Jude's number and place the phone to my ear. Jesús takes a piece of my hair, twirling it around his finger as the phone rings.

"Yeah?" It only takes that one word for me to hear the agitation in Jude's voice.

"Jude," I breathe.

There's a long pause. "Where the fuck are you?"

"I'm with Cayla."

"You have her? She's alright?"

I swallow hard. "I don't have long. I'm sending her to you." I have never hated myself more than I do in this moment as I use the promise of our own child to lure him to his death.

"Tor...what did you do to get her?"

"Camilla is helping me. She's Gabriel's sister just...just meet her," I force the words out and my stomach churns violently. I give him the address written on the piece of paper along with a time to meet. "Just... I love you."

"What did you—"

I can't do anymore. I hang up the phone, and the second I do, I cry. Jesús wraps his arms around me. I want to shove him away from me, but I don't. I can't. After everything I've endured in my life, my spirit has finally been broken

because I just led the man I love to a certain death. "This will all be over soon, chiquita," he says.

Cayla will be safe. I can't think of anything else.





## JUDE

She hung up.

"I need outta here!" I shout, my voice echoing around the cell. I immediately try Gabriel's number but he doesn't pick up and his voicemail is full. "I need outta here. I need to go get my daughter. DO you fucking hear me?"

I hear keys jangling, footsteps coming down the corridor. "You alright in there, amigo?" David, the guard that never shuts up, shouts from down the hallway.

"I need fucking out."

He comes wobbling into view, stopping in front of the bars to peer into my cell. "Gabriel said he'd be back to get you soon."

"I've tried calling Gabriel countless times over the past two days and he won't fucking answer."

David shrugs. "He knows your pissed, amigo." The thought of Gabe drugging my ass and having me hauled off to this shithole burns me up. I grab my phone, jabbing angrily over the keys to dial his number again.

It rings and instead of going to voicemail someone picks up. "Ah, ese, have a nice stay at the Holiday Inn?" he laughs and all that does is piss me off even more. "I told David to take good care of you. I see he gave you your phone."

“Tor just called me and said she is sending your sister—your fucking sister who is with the fucking Sinaloa cartel—to meet me with Cayla.”

“Ah, Camilla, that’s a long story—”

“Gabriel,” I growl his name, blood pulsing through my jugular, “I’m supposed to meet them in two hours. What the fuck where you thinking?”

“Well, you shot Boris. I told you, you have anger problems. I couldn’t trust you wouldn’t go nuclear and kill half my men trying to find Tor. I’m in enough shit as it is, ese. I didn’t need you making this any messier than it is with these fucking *Russians*,” he shouts the word so loud his voice cracks, “all over the place.”

“Get me the fuck outta here.”

“I’m coming to get you.” And he hangs up.

Shaking my head, I fall back onto the lumpy jail cot, the springs creaking under my weight as I rest my elbows on my knees. What did Tor promise? I could hear the fucking desperation in her voice and the fact that she’s so tormented makes me angry. I don’t care if she sells me out for Cayla. That’s fine, but the fact that Ronan didn’t let her know it’s a plan—the fact that he just let her believe this was her only option, it infuriates me. And Gabriel’s sister—he never told me Camilla had been taken by Jesús, which makes me suspicious as all fuck. “Shit,” I groan, burying my face in my hands because all I can do is wait, thinking over what may happen. Knowing damn well I may die without ever holding my little girl again. I take peace in the thought that Tor will make sure Cayla knows how much I loved her. That she will tell her she was my everything. After all, death is certain and all that really matters is the legacy we leave behind. Up until Tor my life was nothing but bloodstained chaos. She brought peace to an earthly form of hell. A sacrificial angel who taught me what love was. Who gave me a daughter, hope, a reason for my shitty

existence. If I die, it will be knowing that I'll leave one thing behind that's not been tainted, and that's Cayla.



## TOR

I wrap my arms tightly around Cayla, pressing my cheek to her soft head. "I love you, baby girl."

"Wuv you," she says, playing with my necklace. The thing that breaks my heart is that she's too young to understand anything that's happening. She doesn't know that she'll never see me again. She doesn't know what I had to do to save her. The thought that she will lie awake at night crying for me and Jude ruins me. I don't want her to think we abandoned her, that we didn't love her, but what else will a two-year-old think? I fight back the sob, the utter destruction working its way through my very soul as I cling to my child for these last few moments. I wonder what she'd think of me if she were to ever find out what I've done? Would she hate me? Would she understand? But then again, until she is a mother herself, she will never be able to understand because a mother's love is something unexplainable. I place my lips to her forehead and close my eyes, inhaling her scent one last time. I fight back the tears because I don't want to upset her, but it's so hard. This is the last time I'll see her.

Camilla steps closer, her eyes swimming with sadness as she looks at me. "I'm sorry, Tor," she says quietly.

"She'll be safe." I shake my head. "That's all I want."

We once had a fairytale. We once lived in paradise with our perfect family but fairy tales don't last, and soon the monsters come crawling back in. Lizzy will give Cayla a normal life. She'll live in a suburban house and go to school and have friends. Jude and I never would have given her that, even without the cartel chasing us. I pass Cayla to Camilla and smile through my tears. Reaching behind my neck, I unclasp my necklace and place it around Cayla's neck.

"Your daddy gave this to me," I whisper. "You keep it safe for me, okay?"

Cayla grasps the little silver hummingbird in her hand and nods. That necklace is more than just a trinket. It was Jude's mother's. He gave it to me right before he let me go. It was his way of telling me he loved me when he couldn't yet speak the words. That necklace was I love you and goodbye, just like it is now.

"I love you, Cayla. More than all the stars in the sky." I give her one last kiss on the cheek and force myself to step away, to let her go.

Camilla rests her hand on Cayla's back and gets in the car. The second the door closes, I fall apart. My heart shatters, crumbling to dust. I will never see her grow up, never see her get married, or have a child of her own and it kills me. But she will do those things now. She will do them, and just knowing that has to be enough for me.

Jude and I sacrificed everything to keep our baby safe. I just hope she doesn't one day hate us for it.

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A few hours later and there's a knock on the bedroom door. Camilla steps inside, sweeping her curtain of hair back behind her ear. I sit bolt upright, swiping at my tear-stained face. "Did Lizzy get her okay?"

She nods. "Yes, your sister took Cayla."

A huge weight releases from my shoulders and I breathe a little easier. "Good. That's...good."

She comes and sits on the edge of the bed next to me. "You did the right thing. What you're doing... it's brave."

I pull my knees to my chest and rest my cheek on them. "I don't feel brave, Camilla." *I feel broken.*

"Cayla is lucky to have a mother as strong as you. You remind me of my mother." She gently runs her fingers through my hair. "She died when one of my father's enemies tried to kill Gabriel. She took a bullet for him."

"How do you do this?" I look at her for a moment. "Live in this world of violence?"

She shrugs, a small smile touching her lips. "It's all I know."

I nod. "Thank you for taking her. I didn't want her to be with Jesús' men and be scared."

The door bursts open and Camilla leaps from the bed, moving to stand in front of me. I peer around her and see Jesús looming in the doorway with his arms folded over his chest.

"What's this, little gatita?" he says. "Feeling protective?" He crosses the room, stopping in front of Camilla and stroking his knuckles down her cheek. She jerks away from his touch. "Perra estúpido," he says, and she slaps him.

Much to my surprise, he laughs. I stare wide eyed as she saunters past him and out into the hallway, slamming the door as she goes.

He swipes at a spot of blood on his lip. "Colombian women. A little too feisty, eh?" He walks toward me and I shrink away from him. Smiling, he leans over and places a finger beneath my chin. I go rigid when he brings his face closer, dragging his nose up the side of my throat and inhaling. "I prefer my women to cower a little." He laughs again and straightens. "Come, chiquita, I have a bookie to kill. You wouldn't want to miss the show now, would you?"



He wants me to watch him kill Jude? I can't. He shoves a hand inside his pocket and pulls out a piece of cloth. "Turn around," he says. I have no choice but to obey, so I do. He slips the soft piece of material over my mouth, tying it so tight around the back of my head my teeth cut into my lips and the bitter taste of blood fills my mouth. I mumble against the gag.

"Shhh, Victoria" He softly strokes a thumb over my chin. "Soon this will all be over." And then he turns around and heads toward the door. "Come."

How much more can I take? He wants me to lose Cayla and Jude in the same day? I guess he figures he might as well get all the breaking over with at once, but I have to wonder if there's a point where someone is just too broken, a point of no return. If so, then surely I'm on a collision course with it.

I follow him through the house and to the driveway where a line of black SUVs wait. The second in line has the back doors open wide. Jesús points to the car and I go to it, climbing into the back. Jesús slides in beside me, resting a rifle across his lap. Nausea washes over me and I swallow heavily. Cayla is safe and as long as that is the case, I can do anything. I reach for my necklace the same way I always do when I'm anxious, but it's gone. I close my eyes and picture Cayla: older, happy, and beautiful with that hummingbird around her neck. She may never truly know what that necklace means, but it brings me comfort knowing she has it.

Jesús skims his fingers down my cheek and my skin crawls. I turn my gaze out the window, watching the barren desert fly past. Everything looks the same. Sand and sky. Eventually the car slows as it trails off into the sand.

Jesús shoves me forward. "Just to make sure, chiquita," he says as he grabs my hands and pulls them behind my back.

There's the click of a zip tie being fastened before I feel plastic bite into my skin. Steeling myself, I look out the windscreen. A single Hummer sits about fifty yards in front of our convoy, and leaning against the front of it is Jude looking so dark and deadly. Ready to make the world bleed if he needs to. Gabriel stands beside him, a gun in each hand. My heart clenches painfully. He came. I really hoped he wouldn't. And now...now I'm going to have to watch him die, because not even Jude and Gabe are no match for all Jesus' guys.



## JUDE

I hear Gabriel talking to David and I grab my shirt from the end of the cot and jump up, walking straight to the bars and gripping them. David grins as he shoves the keys into the lock. The door groans as it swings open and I rush out, stepping right up to Gabriel and glaring at him. "I can't fucking believe you," I say, pointing at him before I slip my shirt over my head.

He shrugs. "Eh, I did what I had to do to make sure your crazy ass didn't get us all killed. I told you, ese, you got a bad temper." He laughs. "Shooting the fucking Russian." He shakes his head as he steps to the side, allowing me out of the cell. "They sent me a fucking Boris number two. I don't like him any better."

I glare at him as I wipe the sweat from my brow and follow him through the shitty little jail. I want to cuss him out. Hit him. But there is no point, this anger needs to be funneled toward Jesús. "We better be going to get my girls," I say as we walk outside into the bright-ass sun, the door slamming closed behind us.

"We are." Gabriel heads toward the Hummer parked to the side of the building. The back window is cracked and I see a stream of smoke floating out of it before Marney rolls the window the rest of the way down.

"What's that make?" Marney says. "An Alabama prison, a federal prison, and now you've served time in a Mexican jail," he chuckles as I round the car. I open the door to the back and slide in next to Marney.

"Not in the fucking mood, old man."

He laughs again and takes a drag from his cigarette. I glance to the front and notice a pale guy in the driver's seat. Gabriel opens the passenger side door and gets in.

"Who the fuck is this?" I point at the driver.

"Boris number two."

The man turns in his seat, veins popping in his forehead. "Alex," he says before putting the car in drive and pulling out of the parking lot. Marney holds out a pack of smokes and his lighter. I take one and light it as I stare through the window, watching the desolate landscape pass by. My stomach kinks and knots. Never in my life have the stakes been so damn high. My entire life has revolved around taking bets, but now the wager is the death of those I can't live without.

\*\*\*break\*\*\*

The Hummer rattles down the desert highway before veering off into the sand and slowing to a crawl. Gabriel bangs his fist over the dashboard. "Why the fuck you driving so slow, Russian?"

Alex turns his cold, blue eyes toward Gabriel and smirks. "Trust me, this path is...*tricky*."

Gabriel groans and turns up the radio, classical music filling the inside of the Hummer. Marney glances over at me, his brow wrinkling as he blows smoke from his lips. "What in the ever-lovin'..."

"Flower Deut," Gabriel says, waving one hand through the air as though he were conducting an orchestra. A small smile spreads over his lips. "It gives me peace."

The car comes to a slow halt and we stare out over the desert, the mountains to our side. I glance at the clock. Ten

minutes. My heart pounds in my chest. My shirt clings to my sweat slicked back and chest. Marney grumbles next to me as he loads his gun, gripping his cigarette between his thin lips. "Never in a million years did I think I'd be in the fucking Mexican desert with a Mexican and a Russian." He shakes his head. "Always thought I'd die in a bar fight. Hmph." He cackles to himself.

"Jesus, Marney..." I groan, gripping my gun in my hand.

Gabriel turns in the seat to look at me. "This—" he points to Alex, "this is what the almighty Lord of Narnia gives us? One fucking man?" He slouches down in the seat and grumbles. "Fucking bullshit."

"There are more," Alex says as he stares forward.

"Yeah, yeah, that's what he promises. I don't see them." Gabriel points through the windshield. "I want to see them with my fucking eyes. I don't like this sneaky-sneaky bullshit." Groaning, he turns the radio up and inhales a deep breath.

"Aw, shit," Marney says, leaning up in the seat. "Here we go."

I stare at the red cloud of dust billowing in the distance, my stomach knotting. They are still miles away, but we can see them coming. My pulse quickens. This is it. This is my last chance to save my family. We all sit in silence, taking in the peaceful sound of the music playing. They're close enough now that the blaring sun reflects off the paint of the vehicles.

Alex turns in his seat and glances at me. "Do not step more than twenty feet away from this car." He looks at Marney, then at Gabriel, and pulls his gun from the console, cocking it.

I push the door open, the unbearable desert heat wafting into the car. Gabriel meets me at the front of the car and Marney and Alex duck behind the open doors of the Hummer, guns aimed.

I watch the convoy of cars come closer. The first one rolls to a stop, followed by the second. The back door on the second opens and Jesús gets out toting a rifle over his shoulder. I aim my gun, my finger touching the trigger as he reaches back inside and drags someone out, bound and gagged. *Tor*. Smiling, he grabs her long blonde hair and yanks her in front of his body. I drop my gun to my side.

"Jude Pearson! Corredor de apuestas," he shouts. "I brought your woman to watch you die!" *Tor's* brow scrunches in pain and she thrashes in his hold.

I start toward them. "Jude, do not go more than twenty feet!" Alex says with a slight growl.

Another car drives over the desert—*boom*—a huge ball of fire explodes. Black smoke balloons up into the sky as pieces of metal and rubber go flying everywhere.

Jesús ducks down against the side of the car, using the open door and *Tor's* body to shield himself. *Tor* turns her face to the side to protect herself from the heat that visibly radiates from the explosion.

"Holy shit, ese," Gabriel says, dropping behind the open door.

One of Jesús' guys jumps out of their car. There's a small pop in the distance and the guy falls to the ground, sand flying up around him as blood oozes from his head. Jesús shouts and the other men fire at us. Bullets ping off the cars, they skitter in the sand. I aim and fire at one of the men and he falls. Another explosion shakes the ground followed quickly by another, smoke puffing up from the ground. I watch as one man runs across the sand and then *bam* the ground explodes, the man's body blowing to bits as pieces of skin and bones rain down around us.

Alex picks up his phone and growls something in Russian into the receiver as he aims his gun at Jesús. "Don't fucking shoot at him!" I shout. "Don't fucking shoot at him!"

Tor is still hunched against the side of the car, tucked between Jesús' legs to serve as a human shield. Suddenly, her body jerks and I freeze. The gunfire, the explosions, the noise all falls into the background as a red stain bleeds across the front of her white dress. Her head drops forward and she goes limp, Jesús catching her before she collapses completely to the sand.

"No!" I shout, panic wrapping around my throat. "Fuck, no!"

Jesús is shouting at his men as he stands and drags Tor up with him. I take several fast steps toward them and someone grabs me, yanking me down. I fall to the ground, the hot gritty sand stinging my flesh. I struggle against the person's hold. Shouting and screaming.

"You will die, ese," Gabriel says. "There's fucking land mines."

I manage to shove him off me and stumble to my feet before I feel his arm come across my neck, squeezing. I grab at him, clawing my fingers over his skin as I jerk violently in his hold. "The fuck, Gabe!" I elbow him in the ribs. I buck like a fucking bronco trying to get him off.

"Stop it. You can't fucking save her."

*But I can't sit here and give up.* I keep trying to pry his hand loose, but all he does is squeeze harder until I can't fucking breathe. I fall to my knees, Gabriel's arm still around my throat like a vice. All I can do is watch as Jesús drags Tor into the car, blood trailing behind her.

My ears ring, my vision narrows and Jesús' car turns around, speeding off over the rugged desert terrain. Gabriel releases me and I sit back on my legs, watching the cloud of dust as they disappear. My chest heaves. I attempt to catch my breath. Tor's dead. And for all I know Cayla's dead, too. It's over. It's all over...



## EPILOGUE

"Clear sir," Donovan says through the car window. Since the American shot Boris, Donovan has become my right-hand man. He pulls the door open and I step out, brushing my hand down the front of my suit. I don't like this country. It's dusty, dirty, and hot.

I pass the metal gates hanging from their hinges. Dead men litter the ground like garbage scattered on a sidewalk. I step over a body, careful not to get blood on my Versace shoes. My men fan out in military formation. Jesús' men never even saw this coming. After all, you can't fight what you can't see and snipers are impossible to spot from half a mile away. When going to war, it is stealth that wins. And why waste men when I can win so easily?

I shove open the front door to Jesús' house and I'm greeted by one of my men. "You might want to see this, sir."

I wave my hand through the air and he leads the way down a hallway. We stop in front of the open door, and I peer inside of the ransacked office. In the middle of the room, much to my delight, sits a beautiful woman with her hands bound behind her back and a gag tied around her head. I circle around her and she turns her head to follow me, her jaw clenching angrily as she glares at me. I

carefully untie the gag and slip it off, tossing it to the floor. She spits at me before swearing in Spanish.

I laugh. "I do love a feisty woman."

I take a seat behind Jesús' desk and remove a cigar from my pocket, lighting it as I lean back in the chair and kick my heels up on the desk. The woman glares at me. I smile around the cigar and allow a cloud of smoke to puff up.

"Why so angry, *krasivaya*?"

Her nostrils flare. Her jaw ticks. "You will die, Russian."

"Hmm. I doubt that." I smile and take a slow drag from the cigar. "Jesús will be dead by now. Tell me, what is your name?"

"What's yours?" she counters.

"Ronan Cole."

Her expression changes ever so slightly and I catch it. She knows who I am, which means she's not just a whore.

"Now, *what* is your name?" I repeat.

"Camilla."

*Oh, this is too good.* "Camilla Estrada?"

Her eyes meet mine and in those pretty turquoise depths I find an awareness not dissimilar to that of the very cartel boss who holds her. "Yes."

I chuckle. "Well, well, isn't this an interesting turn about? I did not know you were sleeping with the enemy. Your brother will be disappointed."

"Fuck you."

I allow my gaze to roam over her body—and what a body it is. "Gladly," I say as I continue to drink in her petite curves and golden skin. Her long white dress dips just low enough in the front that I can see her cleavage and my cock swells at the sight. She squirms in her seat, the movement causing her long, ebony hair to fall over her shoulder. "I can see why you would make the perfect *ventana*," I say. "You would be an awful weakness to any man, *krasivaya*." I shift in my seat because she's making my dick hard.

"Donovan," I shout and he comes running into the room. "Take her. Put her in the car," I say.

He unties her and she fights, bucking and writhing like a feral cat. I calmly walk over to her and grip her jaw hard as I drag her close to me. "Keep fighting little kitty. I will only break you." She stills for a moment, her hard breaths causing her perfect breasts to rise and fall in ragged swells.

"Vieta a la meierda," she swears before Donovan drags her from the room fighting.

I check my watch before I pick up the phone and dial Alex. They should be done by now.

"Boss," Alex answers.

"It is done, yes?"

He sighs. "Jesús got away."

A slow rage burns through me. "Did you just say he *escaped*?"

"Yes."

"How the fuck did he escape? I gave you snipers, mines, missiles if you wanted them!" I seethe. If you want a job done right, you have to do it yourself.

"He used the American's woman as a shield. She died."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Shit."

He'll be completely impossible now and if Jesús is still alive, I still need the American. Jude Pearson may be only one man, but that's exactly why he's so perfect. One man who makes people a lot of money. One man with loyal connections, and possibly the only man who actually ever stood a chance of getting his child back from the cartel. He's smart and he took Andrea, which really was a masterful play, but not one that fit into my game unfortunately...

"Get me the American." There's a pause, a rustling, and then silence. I know he's listening. "I am sorry," I say. "You must stay your hand. As Wilson Meizer once said: 'Many a live wire would be dead except for his connections'. Your

child may still be alive. She will need you, American, and a war is coming."

**The end**

## **WAR**

Read the final instalment of Tor and Jude's story in WAR.  
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## **AFTERWORD**

**T**hank you for reading and loving Jude and Tor. We fell in love with these characters in 2015 and gave them their HEA, but we've always wanted to come back to them.

Thank you so much for your support and loyalty and for sticking with Jude fucking Pearson. It means the world to us!

If you loved Wire and would like to leave a review, we'd be so grateful. We hope you'll read War!

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

As always, there are a whole host of people behind every book, so here it goes.

Drew Truckle, thank you for being Jude. We couldn't possibly have anyone else!

Max Ellis, thank you for shooting the cover image and designing the cover.

Kim Ginsberg, thanks for proofing for us on such short notice.

Kerry Fletcher, you are the best PA ever. You put up with us, you help us and you have the patience of a saint while we are squirrelling our way through life.

Jen Lum and Jill Mackenzie, thanks for beta reading for us!

Nutty Squirrel PR and Give Me Books, thank you for all your PR work.

To all the bloggers, readers, friends....thank you for your unending support of us as authors but particularly this series. There are far too many to mention, but we have to give a special shout out to Totally Booked and Schmexy Girls who discovered Jude and shouted about him from the roof tops.