

LP LOVELL STEVIE J. COLE

W

WAR

WRONG #4

LP LOVELL
STEVIE J. COLE

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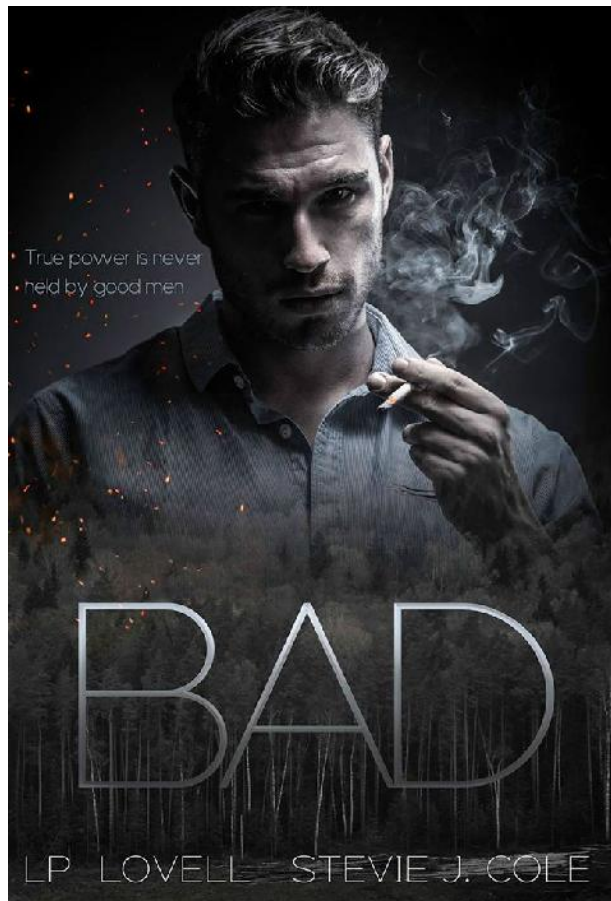
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BAD

Ronan's story is coming November 9th in Bad. [Pre-order now.](#)



JUDE

The wind howls across the desert, and all I can make out through the whirling sand is Tor's blonde hair whipping around her face. Jésus grabs her by the waist. Her eyes widen with fear. Bullets whistle past me. And all I can think about is saving her.

I move to run toward her, but my feet won't budge. Panic settles in my chest and then—*Bam*. A loud shot rings out. Tor's eyes slam shut, her lips part on a silent scream, and a patch of blood appears on her white dress, the stain quickly growing.

"Why did you do this to me?" Tor shouts, and that's like a fucking dagger in my chest. Because I did this to her. To us. I destroyed her the moment I loved her...

I wake in a sweat, my heart pounding as I reach out for her. But all I find are cold sheets, and fuck if that's not the emptiest feeling I've ever felt. I squeeze me eyes closed and bite down on my lip as I ball the sheets in my fists. My chest grows uncomfortably tight at the memory of her. Of our life...the life I've forever lost. The life I never deserved.

I try to recall the way she felt wrapped in my arms, how her lips felt, because I'm afraid I'll forget and if I can just hold on to some bit of that, then she's not really gone. Is she? Sighing, I drag my hands down my face.

It's been a week since I lost Tor, and as much as I want to drown myself in grief, I can't. Domingo is dead and so that leaves Jesús and Ronan to deal with. I've spent the last week searching for Cayla, going with Gabe and taking down bits and pieces of the Sinaloa because I have to do something to make myself feel some bit of worth.

I push up from the bed, pull on a pair of jeans, and go to the kitchen. Marney is usually down here drinking coffee and reading the paper at any given point of the day, but today his seat is empty. I fix a cup of coffee and sit down at the table, trying to sort through the thoughts swirling in my head. Part of me fears that since Tor is dead, Jesús would have killed Cayla, but then I remind myself he wanted something from me. Without Cayla he has no leverage.

I finish my cup and search the house for Gabe or Marney, but the only people here are Gabe's guards who constantly lurk in the hallways. I hate having nothing to do because that's when my mind gets away with me. That's when I start to think about things no man wants to think about. So, I go to the foyer and climb the stairs to my room. As soon as I get inside, I grab the bottle of whisky from the nightstand and take a heavy swig. If I can't keep myself busy, I'll just drink myself to sleep and hope I have peaceful dreams. Dreams of me, Tor, and Cayla, when my past had yet to catch up with me.

I've downed two more swigs when there's a knock on the bedroom door. "Jude?" Marney says, his voice low.

"Yeah..."

The door creaks open and he steps in with his chin to his chest. He shuts the door behind him without looking up, and I hear his breath catch before a strangled sob works its way up his throat. "The bastards..." he starts, but he can't finish. My heart holds back a few beats because I already know what he's going to say. "Gabe's informant said that Cayla...that she...you aren't gonna get the little darlin' back. She's—"

A fury of emotions pummel through me, and I'm not quite sure which one to grab ahold of. He glances up at me, and I don't want to fucking believe him.

"Jude, do you hear what I'm saying?"

I shake my head, a throbbing pain shooting through my temple. "No!"

He takes a step toward me. I can see tears welling in his old, blue eyes, but I don't want to believe him. He places a hand on my shoulder. "I'm sorry, Jude. It ain't right."

I swat his hand off, and before I know what I'm doing, I ball my fist up and punch him right in the jaw. "She's not dead!" I shout.

Marney holds his face and takes a deep breath. "I know it's hard, boy. And it ain't right." He hangs his head and bites down on his lip. "It ain't right..."

And like a ton of fucking bricks, it hits me and I fall back on the bed, my entire world imploding and blowing to fucking smithereens. She can't be dead, but then again, why wouldn't she be? Why would a fucking soulless bastard like Jésus keep her alive?

"She's dead?" I whisper, those damn words echoing into the very bottom of my soul.

"Jude..." Marney whispers.

I bury my face in my hands, pressing on my head in an attempt to make it all stop. "Get out," I barely manage the words.

"Jude—"

"Out!" I shout so loud my throat burns.

I hear him shuffle out of the room, the click of the door shutting behind him. I lean my head back against the wall and breath in and out with my heart going ninety to nothing and my stomach churning. Whatever was left of my life has just crumbled. Without them, I have nothing. No reason to live. I close my eyes and choke back a sob as my head falls to my chest.

Some people are the very air you need to survive—and the people who my world revolved around have been snuffed from my life. Those girls *were* my life and without them, without the promise of holding them again, there is no reason. No purpose. There's this black void sucking me in against my will, pressing in on me from all sides. My mind is unable to process the thought that I've lost my little girl *and* my Tor.

I stagger to my feet and begin to pace, dragging my hands down my face. My Cayla...her soft ringlets, that smile that could light up even my cold fucking heart. Gone. *Gone?* There's a moment, a split second where darkness covers me. Where an indescribable amount of grief consumes me, but then...then the rage slowly sets in, burning and breathing, growing with each passing second because the thought of Jésus killing my daughter, hurting her infiltrates my mind.

I slam my fist through the wall on a growl. "I'll fucking kill him!" I pick up the chair under the window and throw it against the mirror, shattering the glass. I go into a fit, punching and throwing things, raking shit from the dresser. My blood pressure rises with each second, with each thought of Cayla crying for me and Tor. And then I stop.

The tension in my muscles melts as the devastation sets in.

Cayla must have thought we abandoned her. My little girl thought I left her. I was her father and her protector. She was too little. Too innocent, and she was murdered because of who I was—who I am. My knees buckle and I sink to the floor, my head swimming with morbid thoughts of how she may have been killed, of where her body may be—out in some desert...

I pound my fists over the floor and scream until I'm gasping for breath. Not a damn thing I do will change this. Nothing will give my girls back to me. I've lost plenty of

people I've cared about, but *this* loss is a blanket of grief and regret and shame, and every form of pain you can imagine—it's unbearable. I open my eyes and stare at the ceiling, watching the ceiling fan blades circle for a moment before I reach for the bottle of whisky on the nightstand beside me. *She's dead. They are both dead.* I twist the top and bring the bottle to my lips, gulping back the warm whisky, waiting on some cheap form of reprieve from this shit.

But even after I've sucked back the rest of the liquor and dropped the bottle to the floor, the pain is still very real. My head spins, my thoughts numb. But not enough. Nothing will ever make this sense of loss bearable.

"Gone," I whisper to myself as I stagger to my feet.

I look across the room at the shattered mirror, down to the dresser drawer. Emotions swirl through me like a raging cyclone, sweeping me up against my will. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. There have been moments over the past few days where I could not believe this is real. And then, almost like the shifting of the tides, realization would set in. Panic would grow in my chest until it felt like I was going to implode, detonate like a bomb. I've been on a pendulum, swinging between grief and despair, anger and disbelief, but at the end there was always hope because I thought I still had my little girl, and now all there is, is hopelessness.

But there is hope in death.

After all, it would end the thoughts, the hurt, the guilt. There has to be so much peace in the quiet, in a place where I'm not without them. Glass crunches under my feet as I walk to the dresser, opening the top drawer and taking out Caleb's Colt 45.

A lump forms in my throat. My chest tightens, but the tears I know should come don't. I stare at the sleek black metal and skim my finger over the barrel, circling it around

the tip. This is control right here in my hand. A cold, metal form of control because I can choose to take all the shit in my head away. I can choose not to live without them. I can find the quiet, a way out of this unbearable fucking loneliness that will continue to choke me every fucking second of every fucking day.

I stare at my reflection in the shattered mirror as I lift the gun to my head and slowly press the barrel to my temple. My finger rests over the trigger. But I shake my head because this is not the best way to do this. I move the gun away and slip it into my mouth, biting down on the barrel. The taste of metal coats my tongue as I war with myself. *I miss them. I hate myself for dragging them into a life that had no room for innocence.* My nostrils flare. My finger trembles over the trigger. One slight movement. That's all it will take. A few seconds. A blinding pain, and if I'm lucky, this bullet will go right through my brain stem and my heart will stop immediately.

This will all stop.

My heart bangs against my chest, each beat thrumming in my ears. My palms sweat. It should be easy; I think as I stare at my distorted reflection. Shouldn't this be easy? Just pull the goddamn trigger. End it. I have nothing left. No comfort in this world. But I swear to god, it's like I'm paralyzed. It's like something is holding me back, there's a sliver of doubt in the back of my head. I close my eyes. I drag in several deep breaths, the gun still resting in my mouth. My finger slides down the curve of the trigger and all I can see in my head is Tor. Her smile...she could make me feel like a better person with just her fucking smile.

I drop my hand to my side and the gun clatters to the floor. Sighing, I brace my arms on the dresser and lean over. There will be no peace in death if I leave business unfinished, and Jésus and Ronan are unfinished business. As much as I'd love for this empty feeling to be blown into

oblivion, it's just not in me to allow the men who took my girls away to keep on living. I open my eyes and stare down at the gun. My peace will have to wait because vengeance is part of my nature. So, I stumble to the bed and fall back onto the mattress, my heart pounding as I close my eyes and wait for the world to fade away.

JUDE

2 WEEKS LATER

Around of gunfire booms outside the window, the loud noise waking me from a restless sleep. I hit the floor before I reach for the gun on the nightstand. As I slowly stand and peek around the side of the window, I cock it. From here I have a clear view of the long drive leading to Gabe's front gate. There's a black Hummer idling right outside the wrought iron fence. Men are propped on the roof with rifles aimed at Gabe's house. That's Jesús' men—men that helped take Cayla and Tor.

Anger swells in my chest.

I hear the explosion before I see the slight glow from the end of the gun. I shift in front of the window, lift the gun, stare down the site, and pull the trigger. The window shatters. I pull the trigger again and again. One of the men fall to the ground. A guard on the roof shouts before a hailstorm of gunfire ensues. Bullets ping off the house. Men shout. Tires squeal.

Gabe wants to take back the city the Sinaloa stole from him, and Ronan's little stunt has helped push the Sinaloa back. The very thing that cost me everything has given Gabe the upper hand, and I can't help but feel bitter as fuck about it. All I want is Jesús dead, and by my own hands, so I'll start my own path to weakening that motherfucker. But

I know I can't take down the cartel without a good plan, so I've spent the past two weeks plotting, planning, calling in favors. I've paid a few lowlifes for information on who J  sus' contacts are, and compiled a list. And at the top of my list is one of a dozen crooked ass cops that helps ensure their cocaine supply arrives without any issues, Jorge Hernandez. It's the in-betweens like him that I plan to go after first, cutting most of the Sinaloa's ties that connect the illegal with the legal.

Marney sniffs before taking a sip from his mug. "Damn cartels make a show outta everything." He shakes his head just as the front door opens and slams shut.

"Putas," Gabe groans. He stops midstride when he sees me standing in the kitchen.

I go to the cabinet, grab a bottle of liquor, and yank the cork out before tipping the bottle back. When I glance down to the counter I see an envelope peeking out from a stack of mail. The writing is neat and across the center is the word: *American*. The handwriting is neat. Taking another quick swig, I grab the envelope from the counter and hold it up. Gabe stares blankly at me as I brush past him with the letter and bottle of whisky. I wait until I get back into my room to open it, and inside is a single piece of thick, cr  me paper.

My sincerest condolences. Such is the cost of War.

My pulse steadily picks up as I stare at that letter. My skin heats. This was not my fucking war. Tor and Cayla—they were not mere casualties. The arrogance of this piece of shit, sitting in his fucking Russian mansion, smoking his fucking cigars while every bit of me has died. He wants power, and he doesn't care who or what he destroys in his search for it. The paper crumples in my hold. He was the reason I got dragged into this shit show. He went behind my back and talked Tor into selling me out. I wouldn't doubt if he had a hand in Cayla being kidnapped... I toss

the crumpled piece of paper to the floor and go to the closet, throwing open the door before I grab a rifle from inside the shelf because all this anger is about to be taken out on Jorge.

I load the rifle and head out of the room.

Gabe's in the kitchen shouting into the phone, which is good because I don't want to argue with him over this shit. I walk straight through the door and to the garage beside the driveway. I fling the door open and grab a box of grenades before I climb into one of the numerous cars parked in the drive.

I'll bring fucking J  sus to his knees and then I'll fucking kill him with a smile.

I've been sitting at this nasty bar on the outskirts of Juarez City for an hour downing whisky, but the buzz coursing through my body right now does little to relax me. Jorge is next to me, slamming back beers and groping women. Laughing, he whispers something into a young woman's ear. She smiles when he sweeps her hair from her face, but her gaze is locked on me. His hand snakes down her stomach. I watch as he discreetly slips some cash into the waist of her tight skirt. She grins at me before she shoves away from him, swaying her hips as she crosses the room and heads out the door. He grunts as he pushes his stool back and staggers to his feet. I take one last gulp from my glass and set it on the counter before standing myself and following him down the hallway to the Men's room.

He goes to the urinal and whips out his dick. He may have had nothing to do with Tor and Cayla being taken, but he is a link that I have to sever. This—this is the cost of war.

I grab the hilt of my knife as I start to pass behind him like I'm going to the other urinal. I stop, and before his

mind can even register what I'm doing, I hook one arm around his neck and slice over his throat with the blade. Blood spurts from the open cut, spraying with each frantic pound of his heart. He grabs at his neck and I release him, watching as he falls to his knees on the floor. There's a few gurgled grunts before he topples face first into the base of the urinal.

I tuck the knife into the waist of my jeans and walk out, straight through the bar and out to the car. I pull off and make my way along the desolate desert road. Lucky for me, there is no such thing as loyalty. For a hundred grand, some dealer for the Sinaloa gave me the location to one of Jesús' coke factories. He never asked my name. Never questioned me. I guess he didn't need to when he saw the duffel bag full of cash.

One fucker down. A warehouse to go.

There's not a cloud in the sky as I travel out of Juarez. I watch the filthy city disappear in the rearview and eventually the tires bump over the uneven desert trails. It only takes thirty minutes before the warehouse appears in the distance, its silhouette wavering in the heat. There's a line of black Hummers along the perimeter, and I glance at the box of grenades, wondering how many it takes to blow a coke factory. As I approach, two men step out from behind a parked SUV, rifles propped on their hips while a group of men carry boxes to the back of a big rig.

I let off the accelerator, and the guards take several steps from their post, shielding their eyes from the sun. This is Gabe's car. And by no fucking mistake, I'm going to drag him right down with me because I know I can't do this alone. I just have to force his hand in the matter, and that's exactly what I am about to do. I watch one of the guards point before his hand goes to move, but I already have my gun aimed. And I shoot.

The first guy falls like a rock, but the second only staggers back a few steps. Bullets clang against the car. I

fire another round and hit the guy right in the head. Blood splatters against the car behind him before he drops onto the sand. I roll the window down, and grab a grenade and pull the pin before tossing it out the window. I throw grenade after grenade, and they land against the exterior wall. When the last grenade is out the window, I floor the accelerator, because that motherfucker is going to blow any second.

Boom. Boom. Boom. The succinct explosions rock the car. Sand and metal go flying into the air, and huge ball of fire rolls into the sky, the heat uncomfortably close to the back of my head.

I watch in the rearview as a thick plume of smoke billows into the sky. I should feel something; I know I should. I just took out one of J  sus' factories...I just killed a handful of people who have no other means of survival but to cut coke for the cartel. Mothers, fathers, daughters...but I feel absolutely nothing. It's hard to feel pity for anyone when you've lost everything. And so I drive, emotionless, broken, only able to feel when it comes to revenge.

I glance down at the clock when I pull into Gabe's drive. It's been over an hour since I blew that factory up. Two hours since I slit that inbetweener's throat. I can hear him cursing in Spanish before I even open the side door that leads to the kitchen. *Fucking good. You had a hand in this, Gabe.* Part of me blames him for this shit show I'm now the ringleader of, even though I know I made my own damn bed.

The second the back door slams shut his gaze snaps to mine. He hangs up the call and glares at me with his nostrils flaring and face red. "What the *fuck* are you doing?" he grates as he steps toward me.

I shrug and open the fridge to grab a beer. The second I shut the fridge, Gabe's hand is on the back of my neck, and he slams me face first into it. I feel the crunch when my

nose breaks. A metallic tang runs down the back of my throat as blood pours over my lip. I can't help but grin because I'm going to beat the fuck out of him.

When I turn around, I crack my neck, and he takes a step back, but I just step toward him.

"Don't fuck with me, ese." He drags in a heavy breath, his jaw tense as he points at me. "You may be my friend, but shit on my business and I will kill you."

I slap his finger away from my face and grab him by his throat, my fingers squeezing into his warm skin. Gabe may be strong, but he's small compared to me. I slam him against the wall hard, my grip growing tighter as I stare him down. "You. I blame you for this shit."

Blood pulses through my temples and all I can think about is killing him. But I can't...I loosen my grip and the minute I do, he's swinging at me. His fist collides with the side of my face, dazing me. He drives several blows into my gut and sides, and I laugh as I gasp for breath.

He paces, cursing in Spanish. "You want to die? That's it?"

I punch him in the jaw, then grab the sides of his face and ram it down over my knee. Blood goes everywhere. Groaning he grabs at his nose when he stands, and blood drips between his fingers. I go to walk off, but he jumps onto my back. As soon as I throw him off, he's on me again, swinging. He gets in two good shots at my eye before I jab my finger into the base of his windpipe and send him sprawling onto the kitchen floor. I stand over him, panting. "Don't make me fucking kill you, Gabe," I say. I go to walk away and there's an audible click of a gun being cocked.

Glancing over my shoulder at him, I smirk. "Go ahead. Do me a favor." He won't. He knows it and I know it. I walk out of the room, passing Marney as I leave Gabe swearing in the kitchen.

"He's gonna be angrier than a hornet at you," Marney calls, but I ignore him.

My head's already throbbing by the time I make it to the foyer. I can feel my cheek swelling from the punches Gabe got in. I go up the stairs and into the room, grab my duffel bag, and begin cramming my clothes inside. He's not going to help me, and I sure as shit don't need to stay here. I hear Gabe shouting and seconds later the door flies open.

"You do not mess with my fucking business—"

"Gabe!" Marney shouts, panting when he appears in the doorway. "Just a minute, now." Gabe's staring at me, anger swirling in his eyes. "He's just lost his woman and daughter." Marney rests his hand on Gabe's shoulder. "That does things to a man."

Gabe's gaze drops to the floor on a heavy sigh. He scrubs a hand over his face and shakes his head. My heart thumps angrily in my chest.

He lifts his head and his expression has softened. "Do not think that I have not lost people. Camilla... He still has Camilla." He shrugs. "Or maybe the pale fuck has killed her, I don't know, but one thing is for sure, ese, in this business, you can't think with your emotions. This is a war I've—"

"This is not a war for me, Gabe. It's revenge. For Tor and Cayla."

He holds my stare for a moment, then sighs and crosses his chest. "I must be going soft, ese. Five years ago, I would have just killed you."

There's a loud bang downstairs, men shouting. Gabe cocks a brow and steps out into the hall. "¿Que?" he groans. Seconds later one of the guards comes running up the stairs and stops at the door completely out of breath. There's a cardboard box wrapped in duct tape tucked under his arm. "This was thrown over the gate." He holds out the box and Gabe reluctantly takes it. He tugs at the tape and tears it off with one hard pull.

When he looks inside, he groans. "One of my dealer's fucking cabeza." He snorts before handing the box back to

the guard and pacing the hall, mumbling in Spanish.

Marney walks to the guard and pulls the cardboard flap back, peeking inside and wrinkling his nose. "Sloppy ass work, if you ask me."

Gabe heads down the stairs and into the kitchen, and I follow him. He grabs a bottle of brandy from the counter, takes off the top, and brings the bottle to his lips, taking gulp after gulp. "You've gotten me into a load of shit, ese."

"I guess we're even now," I say, staring at him. I can see him thinking, fighting his urge to fly off the handle at me.

"What in the hell..." Marney mumbles when he comes into the kitchen. He stops and glances up at the ceiling. "You hear that?"

I can barely make out a faint humming sound. Gabe runs to the window and leans down, straining his neck to look up at the sky. "This is a load of shit," he mumbles.

The humming grows louder, now the distinct noise of a low flying helicopter. Suddenly, there's a loud thud on the roof, followed by another, then another. A crimson wave of blood comes gushing over the gutter in front of the window. "That's it!" Gabe runs to the door, opens it, and steps outside, shouting. And then there's gunfire.

Marney and I stand in the kitchen staring through the window as a piece of intestine falls from the overhang. "Well," Marney says, "don't see that shit every day."

Gabe comes storming back into the kitchen, slamming the door behind him as he glares at me. "You want him dead, ese?" His jaw tenses and he spreads his arms wide. "Welcome to the war."

JUDE

Gabe and I sit in his office, going through a list of contacts, maps of warehouses, and delivery routes. He's puffing away on a cigarette, still angry as fuck. There's the constant sound of the cleaners on the roof tromping around, scraping off what's left of Gabe's dead dealers Jésus had dropped on the house. I glance out the window just in time to see a mangled arm fall to the ground. I must have snarled my lip because Gabe turns in his chair and looks out the window just as more shit comes toppling over the edge.

Sighing, he turns back around and jabs his cigarette out in the ashtray. "I just got those dealers a week ago. Took them right out from under Jésus...they still owed me one-hundred grand for the coke I supplied them." He shakes his head. "Putá," he mumbles before he swats everything from his desk. "To hell with a plan, ese. Fuck it." He angrily pushes up from the desk and paces. "The fucking Russian blew Jésus' house up, then I can blow his house up. He thinks the Russian was scary, I'll shove a stick of dynamite so far up his asshole, he'll taste shit before I blow him to bits."

"Gabe..."

"I mean it, ese."

And this is my chance to put the nail in the coffin. "Ronan has a lot more reach than you do," I say.

He spits on the floor. "To hell with that pale fuck. I'll go over there and blow it all up, dig Jésus' mangled carcass out from the rubble and take a shit on his forehead."

He's on a tirade and that's exactly what I need. I need him unhinged. I just need to provoke him a little more... "Gabe, you're *not* the Russian. You don't have enough power to—"

"What are you trying to say?" He narrows one eye at me while the other one goes into a spasm. "You think that Russian is smarter than me?"

"I'm not saying—"

"I have more talent in one testicle than he has in his entire body." He slams his fist over the desk. "Doubt me." He arches a brow, his eye still twitching, and I simply shrug. That's enough, I guess because he yanks the phone from the desk and angrily punches in a number, staring me down as he waits. "Gustavo," he says. "I need a bomb." There's a pause. "A big bomb. I don't give a shit and I don't care how you get it." He slams the phone down and grins as he folds his hands on the desk and takes a seat. "Fuck the Russian..."

I lean back in my seat and pull a smoke from my pack, lighting it. Just as I take my first drag, Gabe's computer dings with an incoming video call. He glances at the open screen and then spits on the floor.

"The pale lord of Narnia is calling," he says as he presses a button.

"What do you want, you pale fuck?"

"Ah, *my friends*, how is the desert treating you?" Ronan says. "American, you know, you live with these Mexicans too long and you'll start to smell like shit and dust."

The vein on Gabe's forehead bulges as he turns the computer around so I can see the screen. "At least my balls

aren't shriveled up inside my body from the cold," Gabe says. "What do you want?"

Ronan leans forward in his chair until all I can see is the black of his jacket as he rummages around on his desk. He comes back wearing a pair of glasses on and a mobile phone in his hand. "I am sending you an image." He pokes the screen with one finger. "I think it may interest you."

Mine and Gabe's phones buzz, and we cautiously look at each other as we dig our phones from our pockets. When the image loads, my chest goes tight. I stare at the picture of Tor in a bed hooked up to IVs. "What the fuck is this?" I say.

"Well, you were upset with me last we spoke." Ronan shrugs. "I hoped this might cheer you up, American." He smiles like the damn devil.

"What. The. Fuck..." My blood pressure skyrockets. "Is this?"

"You know what it is. Your woman did not die in the desert, although, she is still touch and go, so I am told."

My jaw clenches, my teeth grind together as I stare at that image, burning it into my mind. This fuck knew. All along. He fucking knew. "I want to kill you." I push up from the chair so hard it topples over. Gabe mumbles something under his breath.

Ronan leans back in his chair, folding his hands behind his head. "Ah, American, always so violent. I find out your woman is alive. I tell you, and now you want to kill me." He shakes his head. "So angry."

"Who has her?" I ask.

"Jésus of course. She is in his villa."

I blow a loud breath through my nose as I turn and head toward the door.

"Have fun with that, Colombian," Ronan says to Gabe.

"Where are you going?" Gabe shouts.

"Where the fuck do you think?"

He grabs onto my shoulder and I shake him off, turning to shove my finger in his face. "Do not try to stop me. I swear to god..."

I let that threat hang in the air as I make my way down the stairs and to the front door. I can hear Gabe yelling for his guards, but I keep going. I check the first car, but it's locked. I go to the next, and Gabe comes running out of the house with a rifle. There's a bang followed by a sharp prick in my neck. I swat at it, pull a fucking blow dart out, and toss it to the ground. I attempt to grab for the handle of the next car, but my vision blurs. My pulse pounds in my ears. My arms and legs grow heavy and before I know it, I'm falling forward and everything goes black.

TOR

Beep. Beep. Beep.

The noise sounds over and over annoyingly. Groaning, I blink and squint against the sunshine pouring through the window. I try to sit up but pain lances through my entire body. I gasp through the agony and catch movement in my periphery as I fall back against the mattress of the hospital bed. I glance around the room full of hospital machinery. A heart monitor beeps rhythmically to the side of the bed. This is one of Jésus' rooms...

"You should be more careful, Victoria." I turn my head on the pillow and meet Jésus' gaze. His hands are shoved deep in the pockets of his suit trousers, his inky black hair damp, I assume from a shower. A small smirk darts over his lips as he reaches inside his jacket pocket and takes out a cigarette. He places it between his lips and lifts the lighter to his face, allowing the flame to kiss the end of the cigarette. Taking a puff, he rounds the bed. "It hurts, doesn't it?" he whispers. "Coming so close to death." I glance down at the drip attached to my arm, and notice my body covered from hips to chest in bandages.

Frowning, I try to work through the fog of confusion clouding my mind. Jésus. Jude...it's all like a dream that I can't quite grasp onto even though I know I'm missing

something vitally important. "What happened?" I ask, my voice nothing more than a hoarse rasp.

"You were shot, chiquita. And not by my men." He lifts one eyebrow, and though his expression is schooled, I see the anger swirling behind them. I've seen Jude wear that exact look so many times before.

My memories blur together, pulling at the edges of my mind. I remember Cayla, Jude...the meeting in the desert. *I set him up. Oh my god, I set Jude up.* It all comes back in a rush, but it's more like a nightmare than a dream. And I almost wish I couldn't recall this particular nightmare. I squeeze my eyes shut. I can picture Jude's face, desperate and angry even from across that short expanse of desert that stretched between us. I can practically hear the gunfire, the explosions, the smell of burnt flesh, and scorched sand. And then, blood. So much blood and pain, and the only thing I could see was Jude's face, his anguish as he tried to run to me, as the men around him held him back. I remember knowing that I was dying, knowing that I would never see Jude again, that our story had ended in such tragedy.

Only, I'm not dead. I'm here. "Where's Jude?" I ask quietly.

Jésus tilts his head to the side as a small smirk works over his lips. "He's gone, chiquita. That was the deal you made, remember? His life for your daughter's."

The pain surging through my body does not compare to the pain that grips my soul. It's as though a vital piece of me is being torn away. All the tiny little threads that hold me together are being shredded and frayed.

He can't be dead. He can't.

Surely I would have known? I would have woken up with a gaping void in my chest because it's Jude. Without him, I'm ... I don't know what I am. I press my hand to my chest, rubbing over the spot where my frail heart beats so

pitifully. Oh my god. I am responsible for the death of Jude, the other half of me, the father of my child. I squeeze my eyes shut and feel a tear slip down my cheek. I know I can't show weakness, but I'm breaking. Part of me wishes I had died from that bullet because Jude is dead. I can never again see my own child. Everything I had is gone, and still, I'm a prisoner of the cartel. What I've woken to isn't worth living.

"You also traded *your* life for your daughter's." Jesus steps closer and reaches out, stroking my cheek with his rough finger. He catches my tear and lifts it as though he's inspecting it. "So pretty," he says before he leans over and brings his lips to my ear. "You are mine now, Victoria. I saved you. I saved your child. Everything that you are belongs to me, and I expect your loyalty."

I hear the words he doesn't say. Cayla's life depends on it. I take a shaky breath as his lips brush just below my ear. I can feel myself shutting down, my heart shriveling in my chest. "You have it," I say quietly.

If that is what it takes to keep Cayla safe, then I will do it. I will willingly lose all sense of the woman I once was and become something else. She is my only reason for existing now.

"Good." He grabs my jaw, twisting my face towards him. His dark eyes lock with mine, cruel and hungry. "And remember, that should your loyalties change. I know where your daughter is. I know where your sister is. I have no problem killing Elizabeth and her husband and bringing the little one right back to Mexico. Don't make me motivate you."

I swallow heavily, fighting tears. "No, please leave her alone. You have what you wanted," I beg.

Laughing, he shoves me away hard enough that pain shoots through my body. He turns and walks towards the

door. "I haven't even begun to get what I want yet. You need to rest, chiquita. I'll be back later."

The door slams shut and I'm left with my grief, my pain, and my fear. This is what I sacrificed— for Cayla— and even though I feel impossibly broken, I would shatter a thousand times over for my baby.

JUDE

I wake up with a fucking headache. *Tor!*

My eyes pop open, and I'm staring at the cinder block walls of that damn jail cell. *Again.*

"Gabe!" I shout, groaning as I slowly sit up. My voice echoes down the small hallway, and then I hear keys jingling.

"Hola, mi amigo," David says as he steps into view.

"Is this what you guys fucking do?" I shout, rubbing over the sore spot on my head. "Knock people out and lock them up?"

He shrugs as he shoves a sandwich inside his mouth. "Gabe said it was the only way he could make sure you didn't pull some loco stunt."

"Fucking hell..." I hang my head and stare at the filthy floor. I want to jump up and pound my fist against the wall, pull at those iron bars, but it will do no good. Tor is alive, and Gabe knew I'd lose my shit trying to get to her, so he does this shit.

I get up and pace the cell, dragging my hands through my hair over and over. David taps on one of the bars. "Want a smoke?" he asks.

I nod, and he passes a home-rolled cigarette through followed by a lighter. I cup the flame and inhale a heavy

drag, the sweet taste of cloves coating my tongue.

"Gabe said he'd be back tomorrow to get you," he says.

And so that's it. I'm fucking stuck in this shithole with David until tomorrow. Unable to get to her. Unable to do a thing.

TOR

I'm not sure how much time has passed since I first woke up. Days. Weeks maybe—I don't know. But I do know that although my body may be slowly healing, at the same time, my soul is dying. Piece by piece, day by day.

Jésus allows me to roam the house, but I don't. I stay in this room as much as possible. I'm here because I need to be, but it doesn't mean I have to pretend I like it.

"Chiquita."

I turn away from the window and find Jésus standing in the doorway, shirtless, wearing only a pair of linen trousers. A slight smile shapes his lips as he approaches me, his eyes slowly dragging over my body until my skin crawls under his scrutiny. He makes me feel like property, something to be possessed and desecrated all in the name of some twisted form of revenge. I've realised that my grief isn't enough. Jude's death wasn't enough for him. He wants to shit on Jude's memory, take what was once his. And I'm left with no choice but to allow it. Because Cayla is all that is left of him. She is Jude's legacy.

Dominance and lust pour from him, the same as always, and then without warning, he grabs my jaw and pulls me against his body. The heat of his chest seeps through my dress. His thumb strokes over my skin as his eyes drop to

my lips. Jésus has made it very clear this is what I am now: his.

He slams his lips over mine, and I don't fight it. I simply go numb. After all, without Jude, what is there to fight? I can barely feel enough to even identify the trace of disgust that rises under his touch. But my purpose now is to keep him happy so he leaves Cayla alone.

His tongue slides between my lips, and his grip tightens. "Oh, Victoria, you can do better than this," he says against my mouth. I open my eyes and look at him. *Really* look. His features are chiseled, his oil-black hair thick with a slight wave. He would be handsome if it weren't for the coldness in his eyes. He holds himself with an heir of power and authority, but he lacks the absolute resolution that Jude did. Jude walked into a room like he owned it, and he didn't care about a single person in it. He made people feel like they were inconsequential to him. Except me.

He made me feel like the world began and ended with me. With us, and then Cayla. He did stupid things. He was a criminal, a bad boy, but I never doubted his love, not for a second.

Jésus is sadly lacking. He wants to be like Jude but he never will be, even with an entire cartel behind him. But, nonetheless, I need to convince this man that I want him. And perhaps...perhaps if I accept that this is my life, things will be easier. I muster as much feeling as I can and, taking a deep breath, I kiss him. I imagine he's Jude for second, but my mind quickly coils away in horror. He groans into my mouth before he scrapes his teeth over my bottom lip.

"You taste like victory, Victoria," he says, laughing as he steps away from me. "And soon, I'm going to take my prize. I find myself quite taken with you." His eyes roam over my body in a way that has bile rising in my throat. "Consider yourself lucky." He turns away and walks towards the door.

"Oh, and you're moving to a new room," he throws over his shoulder casually.

"What room?" I ask nervously.

He pauses in the doorway and turns to face me, a satisfied smirk on his lips. Of course, I already know what he's going to say.

"My room."

My stomach knots tightly because I know exactly what that means. With that he walks out of the room. Leaning against the wall, I slide down it until I hit the floor. I wrap my arms tightly around myself as tears fall freely. This is what I am now: a cartel whore. The sooner I accept it, the sooner I let go of Jude, the sooner I can do what I need to protect my child. If I have to fuck Jesus for the rest of my life to keep her safe, I will.

For her.

*****break***

I sit on the edge of Jesús' bed, my stomach knotting horribly. The white gauze curtains catch on the breeze as the night air blows the scent of jasmine through the open balcony. My nails cut marks into my palms as I clench my fists in my lap. Anxiety has me so tight in its clutches that simply breathing is a struggle.

The distant sound of voices in the hallway sends my heart into a sprint. I try desperately to pull the front of the white maxi dress a little higher, but it's pointless. It dips to the bottom of my sternum, leaving my breasts partially exposed. This is all I have to wear. Jesús has an entire wardrobe of them, the same dresses that Camilla once wore. It's as though he wants us to look like something pure and innocent, carbon copies of each other. The dress may as well be prison chains because it does nothing but remind me that I am indeed a prisoner, not even allowed to cover myself. I've wondered often what happened to Camilla. I hear whispers from the guards that the Russian stole her, but I don't believe it. I picture Jesús breaking her

like an unwanted doll, replacing her with something new, something easier to manipulate. Me.

The door handle clicks, and I hold my breath as Jesús steps into the room, talking to one of his men outside. The door closes and silence descends ominously. He stares at me as he crosses the room, and I shrink away from his gaze.

"You look so perfect, waiting for me, Victoria."

"You ordered that I be here," I say, lifting my gaze to his. I may have to be here, but I can make it known that this is not a choice.

With a sigh, he takes a seat next to me. I tense, waiting for him to touch me, or remind me that I'm a prisoner. Instead his fingers gently trail down my arm, which is even more disarming. I'd rather he just hurt me. These games are the hardest part of being with him, because honestly, he's yet to hurt me. He's never forced himself on me beyond a kiss, and it throws me off. There's nothing worse than not knowing what your enemy's play is.

"The bookie is dead," he says.

"I know." I still try not to think about Jude, but with so much free time, it's hard. Strangely, my times with Jesús are an odd salvation. When I'm with him, I think only of myself and Cayla, and our safety. I don't have the ability to dwell on Jude.

He gently grasps my chin and twists my head towards him. His eyes search mine before flicking to my lips. "You are safe here," he says quietly, sweeping his thumb over my chin. "I would protect you, chiquita, from all who would harm you."

I stare at him for a beat. His expression is softer than I'm used to, and there's almost a vulnerability in his eyes. "Except you," I whisper.

His lips curl up into a small smile. "I do not want to hurt you." His eyes drop to my lips again. "Quite the opposite. I could give you everything."

"Why?" I frown. "Why would you want that?"

His thumb drags gently over my bottom lip. "You are an extraordinary woman, Victoria. You impressed me when you came here for your daughter. Women of such strength are hard to come by." He drops his hand from my face. "Your man is gone. Your daughter is safer away from you. I ask only that you join me." He holds out his hand and I stare at it. "You can be a prisoner, or you can be a queen. The choice is yours."

"Queen of what?"

He smirks. "The Sinaloa cartel, of course. Prove your loyalty, and everything you've ever wanted could be yours."

Everything I ever wanted is gone, but I don't say that. This could be an opportunity.

I stare at his outstretched hand. If I take it, I'm betraying Jude. I know that. But can you betray a dead man? Or do you do whatever you can to avenge him, to protect his daughter? Jude would hate this, but he understood revenge in a unique way. He would hate it, but he would understand, so I tentatively take Jésus' hand.

He grins, his fingers wrapping tightly around mine. "You are a woman that will bolster a powerful man. Stand beside me." His hand cups my cheek and he leans in, pressing his lips over mine. The kiss is gentle, yet probing, as though he's trying to coax more from me. I reluctantly part my lips. I feel myself folding in, imploding and crawling into this dark hole inside the deepest recesses of my soul. His fingers wind through my hair and he tilts my head back until my lips break from his. "I want you, Victoria."

I don't know how to play this yet, so I say nothing. His fingers glide beneath the strap of my dress, moving to flick it from my shoulder. I panic and grab at the front of the dress, holding it in place. "I..." I look up at him. "I'm not...I can't." I stumble over my words because honestly, I don't know how to rebuke him without angering him. I don't

know if there will be consequences, and I'm sure if I don't give him what he wants, he'll simply take it.

He smirks and pulls back slightly. "Sweet Victoria, you will come to me willingly." He leans in, whispering in my ear. "And I can wait." He stands up and pulls his shirt over his head, before undoing his trousers. He stands in just his boxers, and my gaze drops, my face heating in mortification. He rounds the bed and gets in, pulling the sheets up to his hips before he turns the lamp off. I sit rigid still in the darkness, listening to his even breaths against my racing pulse. "Chiquita, lie down," he orders.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I try to calm myself and steady my breathing. His fingers brush my wrist causing me to jump before lowering myself onto the mattress. Every muscle remains tense as I lie here. Jesús lets out a low chuckle, but makes no move to touch me. And I think this might be worse. The not knowing, the waiting. This is the worst part. I'd rather he just got on with it, whatever it is he has planned for me, because I don't believe that he's looking for some girl to meet his cartel wife criteria. This is a ploy of some sort; I just don't know what yet.

As hard as I try, I can't find sleep, so I just lay here, listening to Jesús' deep breaths. I remember when this was once Jude and I, captor and captive sharing a bed. Did I ever fear Jude the way I fear Jesús? Did I ever hate him like this? Jesús took everything from me, but I remember when I thought that Jude had taken everything too: my life, my career. How ironic that those things feel so insignificant now. But what Jesús took will never be insignificant. No, I never hated Jude like this. Honestly, I can't really remember a time when I didn't love him, even when it was so damn wrong. He always felt like something right, something true. And this...this will never be right.

TOR

I sit on the back deck, a glass of wine in my hand as I look out over the city below. Juarez is a sprawling mess of buildings, each fitted around the next in an odd jumble of concrete. The sun has just dipped below the horizon, streaking the sky in pinks and reds. As soon as night touches the city, it lights up, explosions creating dabs of orange glows amongst the city lights. The steady popping of gun fire is like its own morbid symphony, reminding me of exactly where I am.

Hell. Cartel central. Juarez.

I reach up, clasp my necklace out of habit, only it's not the little hummingbird charm that Jude gave me. Instead my fingers brush the heavy diamond that sits on a platinum chain. Jésus gave it to me, and the weight of it on my skin makes me feel cheap and tainted. Sighing, I picture Cayla wearing the little hummingbird and swallow around a lump in my throat.

I don't know how long I sit here, but the last traces of light leave the sky, and I shiver as the cool night air touches my skin. My glass is empty, so I get up to go back inside. When I turn around, I bite back a startled scream, dropping the glass. Shards scatter across the wooden decking. I wince when a piece slices my foot.

"God, you scared me," I say through clenched teeth. One of Jésus' men stands in front of me, a frown set on his face as he looks at me. He holds out a phone, and I stare at it before taking it.

"Who is it?" I ask, but he remains silent. I pull the phone to my ear and wait. "Hello?"

"Ah, Victoria. How are you fairing?" The arrogant Russian drawl instantly puts my back up.

"What the hell do you want, Ronan?"

"You wound me. I thought we were friends." I can hear the amusement in his voice, as though this were all just a big game to him.

"No, I did what you asked. I sold Jude out and now he's dead. I lost my daughter. I want nothing to do with you."

There's a long pause. "Your daughter is not dead though." Now I'm the one that says nothing. How does he know that? "And you are staying with Jésus to protect her."

"How do you—"

He laughs. "I hear everything. I am, after all, Ronan Cole."

"What do you want?"

"Only a small favor."

"I'm all out of favours where you're concerned," I say on a growl.

He laughs. "That's just not true." He sighs. "You want your daughter safe? She will never be safe as long as Jésus is alive. What happens when he bores of you? When your pussy gets too old for him to care about you? Killing him resolves all your problems."

"If I kill him, another will step up in his place, and the men that are watching Cayla...they'll kill her anyway."

"You forget who I am. You take care of Jésus, I will take care of the rest. Surely you haven't forgotten that I'm a powerful friend to have."

I clutch the phone in my hand. What do I do? I'm in bed with a monster, and now the snake wishes to wind its way

around my throat.

"Hello?" Ronan coos. "I'm not a patient man, Victoria."

"Why me? He's a cartel boss, Ronan, and I'm... I'm not a killer. Send one of your men."

"You think too little of yourself. Let's not pretend you have not killed before. I would do it, but he suspects me since the last time I tried to kill him. You *are* in his bed after all."

I hate the insinuation, hate that I'm seen as Jésus' whore. "I need to think about it."

"I'll give you one day. That seems fair. And Victoria, let's not forget, I know where the child is, too." He hangs up before I can respond.

Just when I think things are bad, they get worse. Surely there's only so much one person can take. I have to please Jésus to stop him from killing my daughter, and now I have to kill him to stop the Russian from getting to her. And I have no doubt that Ronan would use Cayla to get his own way. Whatever his issues with Jésus, they run deep and he's willing to do anything to end him. All I know is that Jude never really feared the Cartel. He took them seriously, but he never feared them. Ronan Cole on the other hand, is the only man to ever scare Jude Pearson. If that isn't the biggest red flag I've ever seen, then I don't know what is.

JUDE

I've been in this jail for a week. A fucking week! What the hell, is Gabe going to leave me here to rot? David comes waltzing over to the bars with a breakfast sandwich. "You need to eat, mi amigo."

"Where is fucking Gabe?" I say through clenched teeth.

Shrugging, he takes a bite of the sandwich. "He said he was coming today," he says, pieces of egg falling from his full mouth. He's told me that for the past seven days. "Sure you don't want some?" He holds the sandwich out with a grin before he turns his back to me and leans against the bars, watching the small TV placed on his desk. "I love Andy Griffith," he says before cramming more of the sandwich in his mouth. "I always wanted to live in Mayberry."

"But you chose the cartel instead," I say, taking a step towards the bars.

David's a nice guy. Too nice to be in with the likes of Gabe. He's just too trusting and I hate to do this, I really do but... I quickly slip my arm through the bars, wrapping it around David's thick neck and pinning him against the rails. He drops his sandwich and struggles, clawing at my arms as I squeeze harder.

"I hate to do this, David. I really have no other choice."

His frantic movements weaken and within seconds, he's limp. I grab the keys from his belt loop, ripping them off before I release him. He falls to the floor with a thud, and I reach through the bars again, shoving key after key in the old lock until one finally clicks and the heavy door creaks open. I step over David's unconscious body and run out of the jail, because he won't be out long.

The heat envelops me when I fly out into the parking lot. I fumble with the keys, looking for anything that resembles a car key and finally find one with the Toyota logo. I glance around the parking lot, my eyes stopping on a rusted Toyota pickup, and I hurry to it, opening the door and climbing inside. The smell of stale drive-thru food hits me and I choke back a slight gag as I peel out of the lot with no idea where I am going. I sure as fuck can't go to Jesús unarmed.

When I reach the outskirts of Juarez, I stop at a small gas station to use a phone.

A bell dings when I walk inside and an old woman peeks up from behind the counter, smiling. I wave and grin as I step up to the counter. "¿Puedo usar tu teléfono?" I clear my throat. "Por favor."

She grabs an old rotary, and I dial Marney's number, swearing under my breath as I wait for the dial to come back around. "Y'ello?"

"Don't say a fucking word. Is Gabe around?" There's nothing but static on the line. "Marney? Oh for fuck's sake, just don't say my name."

"Nah, he's gone."

"I need you to come get me. And bring guns."

"Um-hmm, so I see you broke out. I told him not to do it, but ain't nobody listening to old fucking Marney..."

"Marney! Are you gonna come get me or what?" I grate into the phone, and the woman warily lifts a brow at me.

"Yeah, yeah. Where am I meeting you at?"

"I don't fucking know."

"Well, hell, boy, how the hell am I supposed to get you if you don't tell me where to meet you."

I glance out the window and see an old McDonalds with half an arch lit and blinking. I look up at the woman behind the counter. "¿Qué calle es ésta?"

"Veneza Avenue," she says.

"The McDonalds on Veneza Avenue, about twenty minutes from the jail."

"A'ight. Sit tight and hold your britches," he says and hangs up.

"Gracias," I say to the woman as I hand her back the phone before I walk off, shoving my way through the door.

I climb in David's truck and pull it around back by the dumpster just in case Gabe comes looking for me, and then I sprint across the street and wait inside McDonalds. I go through half a pack of Marlboros waiting. Every time the door opens, I tense. Finally, about an hour later, Marney pulls up in one of Gabe's Hummers. He opens the door and the second he steps out; I'm bolting through the exit and toward the car.

"I can't believe he locked me up," I groan as we pull onto the highway.

"Ah, hell. I can," he says. I shoot him a glare and he shrugs. "Well, we all know you got a temper on you, and you—"

"Marney!"

"See!" He shakes his finger at me. "Getting' all pissy right now."

"I'm trying to fucking think here. Jesus." I stare out the window at the filthy city passing by, racking my brain about what the hell to do.

"Where the hell we going?"

"Just..." I know I can't go back to Gabe's... "drive. Get out of the city."

"A'ight." Marney floors the accelerator and we drive down county road 2 until we spot a motel with a flickering

light. I can't afford a mistake. I can't lose her again, and I know I can't pull a stunt like taking down Jésus with just me and Marney. I may have lost control of most things, but the one thing I do still have is money. And mercenaries are a dime a dozen in Juarez.

I just need to find a few...

JUDE

No wonder Juarez is the crime capitol of the world. Within a matter of twelve hours, I've found six guys willing to go take over Jesús' house. Of course, they don't exactly know it's *his* house... Six guys are not exactly enough to take down Jesús' fully guarded house, so I have to make sure he's out of there. And there's only one way to do that—have him think he's got a drug trade he can't resist, and use his own men against him.

The sun's not yet come up when I park outside the tiny brick house of one of Jesús' dealers, which makes it easy for me and Marney to slip between the bushes and the house.

"Aw, shit..." Marney mumbles. "Stepped in dog shit."

I turn and glare at him, placing my finger over my lips as I slowly stand up beside the car and tuck my gun into the waist of my jeans. "Watch for me."

Marney nods and cocks his gun as he turns to face the house. I take the wooden wedge and shove it in the crack at the top of the door. Just a little elbow grease and there's just enough space to slip the coat hanger inside. Carefully, I feed the wire hanger through, narrowing my eyes when I try to press the unlock button. I nearly have it pressed

when the wire slips. "Shit." I try again, and just like that, the lock pops and the interior lights buzz on.

"Alright, now you go wait around back," I whisper to Marney. "After he comes out, you sneak in. I'll call you, so have your ringer on."

Marney nods and disappears around the side of the house. I climb in, lock the doors, and crawl into the very back of the SUV to lie down and wait.

The suns just peeked over the horizon when I hear a dog barking followed by a man shouting for him to shut up. The click of the locks sets a jolt of adrenaline through me and I steady my breathing. The door opens and closes. The engine cranks and some godawful R & B song blares through the speakers. The car backs up, gravel crunches underneath the tires. I move just enough that I can see out the window from where I'm lying. The tops of houses whir past, and when there's nothing but sky, when I feel the pavement grow rough and bumpy, I know we're in the desert.

My heart hammers in my chest. I close my eyes for a brief moment before I pop over the backseat, wrap my arm around his neck, and press the loaded gun to the man's head. He swerves off the road and my finger nearly slips on the trigger before his hands go straight to my arm, clawing.

"Don't fight me," I say and pull my forearm tighter over his throat. He gasps for breath, mumbling something. "I won't kill you. I just need a favor, so why don't you go ahead and put your hands around the headrest." He doesn't budge and I dig the gun deeper into his temple. "Do it. Now." I loosen my grip a little as I reach around and yank his gun from his belt.

"Just shoot me."

"Well, you see," I sigh. "There's a little bit more to this than just you, you got a baby on the way..." He freezes, I feel his Adam's apple bob underneath my arm when he swallows. "So, I suggest you just go ahead and put your

arms behind the head rest here. And trust me, you don't want to fight me. If you kill me, or I kill you, your girlfriend and baby will pay the price." I feel like a piece of shit for even doing something like this. It makes me no better than Jésus and Ronan, but I just want my woman back. Call me selfish.

I keep the gun pressed to his head, remove my arm from his throat, and he places his arms around the headrest. I pull a zip tie from my pocket and bind his hands before I climb into the front seat, never dropping the gun from his head. "Alright," I say as I dig my phone out and press Marney's number. "What I want is simple." The phone rings. "I just need you to set up a meeting with Jésus for some time tomorrow. Tell him you have a new client that wants to give him a thirty percent cut to use his trucks or some shit that he'll believe. You figure that out. I just need him and his fucking men out of that house for an hour."

He narrows his gaze, slightly shaking his head.

The phone is still ringing and panic slowly rises in my chest. "I didn't ask you if you wanted to do it, did I?"

The phone rings again before it clicks over. "Yep," Marney huffs.

"Jesus, that took long enough."

"When a man has to shit, he has to shit."

Groaning, I close my eyes. "Put her on." Static rustles the line, and I meet the guy's gaze. "I really don't want to have her killed..." I say, and put the phone on speaker.

"Alright, tell him," Marney says. I can see the guy's eyes swirling with fear and worry. There's a loud sob on the other line. "Ah, come on now, I done told you I ain't gotta hurt you as long as he does right." Another long cry.

The man's eyes are watering with tears and a fog of helplessness rolls over them. That's a look I know all too well. But this is the price men like he and I pay. When you have only one weakness, it's what everyone goes after. And love—that is a weakness on every damn level.

"Pepe," she sniffs. "Pepe?"

"Please don't hurt her," he pleads with me.

"Pepe, haz lo que quieran." And she breaks down into loud wails.

I hang up the phone and glare at him. "Now, you gonna make that meeting with Jesús or not?"

break

I focus the binoculars, watching as Jesús and about seven of his men climb into Hummers and pull away from the compound. I send the text to Dingo the lead mercenary I hired signaling that it's a go. Minutes later, a black Silverado pulls up beside my car and four men file out. They're dressed in black, their faces covered by ski masks. Marney looks at me before tossing an uneasy glance out the window. "Where'd the dickens did you find them, a Zorro convention?"

"Some gang banger at a bar slipped me Dingo's contact for fifty bucks."

"Dingo?" Marney says. "You made a deal with a man named Dingo?"

"Would you..." The back door opens and the men climb inside, guns strapped to their chest.

The one who climbed in first nods. I put the car in drive and pull off. Another car follows behind us, winding down the hillside. We go around a sharp curve, and I cut the headlights just before we near the end of Jesús' private drive and pull over behind one of the large shrubs.

"No," one of the men say. "No me estoy involucrando con Jesús Lopez."

Marney turns slightly in his seat and glances at me. I can see his gun moving ever so slightly. An argument breaks out in the backseat and within seconds there's a

loud bang and the small flash from a pistol firing, one of the men slumps over in the seat dead.

"I pay them for professionalism," one man says. "I apologize."

Marney faces the front. "Well, hell."

We pull up and file out of the car, slinking around the outskirts of the landscape. Dingo and his men go ahead of me and Marney. As soon as the gates are in sight, Dingo fires two lethal shots, and the guards fall like trees. We hurry toward the entrance, climbing over the gates and dropping to our feet on the other side.

There's shouting followed by gunfire and we rush toward the tree line on the edge of the property. A bullet hits one of the trees behind me. I glance up and catch one of the men on the roof, so I aim and shoot, watching as he stumbles before toppling over the edge and landing in the bushes beside the house. A hail of gunfire breaks out. The bullets nick the trees we're using as cover, bark flying off in every direction.

We shoot until there is a moment of silence, and then we head toward the house with our guns drawn and senses on high alert. A twig snaps under my foot and the entire group halts momentarily before continuing on. The closer we get to the villa; I can hear men shouting on the inside. My pulse picks up and a cold sweat breaks out over my forehead.

Tor's in there.

There's something unbearably overwhelming that presses in on you when you realize that the life of the person who makes life worth living depends on what you do next.

TOR

I wake up to the sound of gunfire. Men are shouting, rushing through the halls of the house as they bark instructions to each other. Jesús is away negotiating some drug exchange and, strangely, I think I'd feel safer if he was here. He may be a piece of work, but when people are shooting at me, I want the psycho cartel boss standing between me and them.

I climb out of Jesus' bed and hurry across the cold tile toward the open patio doors. I keep behind the wall as I glance outside. The repetitive *pop, pop, pop* of the machine guns on the roof is deafening. Men lie—some dead, others wounded—all over the courtyard. Jesús took a lot of men with him and there aren't enough left here to defend the villa. My heart pounds in my chest and my ears ring. I have no idea who is coming, but they're enemies of Jesús which means they will likely kill his whore...or worse.

I rush to the closet and go to the chest of drawers. Hunching down, I shove all my weight against the side of the unit and it slowly moves, revealing a metal door to a panic room. I stare at the keypad, trying to remember the code. *1678*? I type it in with shaking fingers but the light remains red.

"Shit," I hiss under my breath.

The distinct click of a gun being cocked right behind me sounds. I freeze, my breaths growing shallow and desperate.

"Tor."

My heart stumbles over itself and I frown, slowly turning around. It's dark in here, and I can't make out his face, but I'd know him anywhere. I could be deaf and blind, and I'd still know Jude. My pulse pounds against my ears, a backdrop to the gunfire still carrying on outside.

"Jude?" I whisper, moving closer to him. There's a tense moment of silence when it feels like all the air in the room is sucked out. I stand in disbelief, and then he grabs my hand. That touch alone sends a wave of emotion through me. He's real. He's here.

I close the distance between us and slam my lips over his, a hitched breath breaking through my lips. His hands grip my waist, his fingertips burning through the thin material of the nightdress I'm wearing. "I thought you were dead," I say, my voice a hoarse whisper against his lips as I place my hand to his cheek.

He strokes a loose piece of hair behind my ear, staring at me while a million unspoken words pass between us. Everything that has been, everything that once was falls into nothingness because he's alive. I reach out and cup his face, inhaling the scent of whisky and cigarette smoke that clings to him constantly. A small frown pulls at his features as he places a hand around my wrist to remove it from his face.

"We gotta go. Now," he says, his voice clipped.

I stumble forward, allowing him to drag me from the closet. His skin is warm and familiar against mine. It's like a drug sending a soothing pulse through me. For a second, I forget everything that isn't him—until I don't. "Wait," I say in a panic. "I can't." I pull back against his grip and his fingers tighten around my wrist until he's bruising me. Still, he keeps dragging me towards the door. "Jude! Stop!"

"I don't have time for this, Tor." He yanks on my arm, and I stumble into the hall.

"Jude!"

He whirls around and slams his hand over my mouth. Another gunshot rings out and his nostrils flare as he inches closer to my face. "Not fucking now. Don't say another fucking word," he whispers before removing his hand and continuing down the hallway.

I glance around wildly. Some of Jésus' guys are still alive, hunkered down and under fire. The more I fight him, the more likely they are to kill him. So I go with him. I thought I was responsible for his death once, I'm not about to get him killed now.

He drags me through the house and out into the courtyard where a black Range Rover screeches to a halt. Bullets are still flying, echoing around us until my ears ring. Jude keeps me close, shielding my body with his own. He shoves me into the back of the car and climbs in behind me before the engine revs and we're barreling down the Jésus' winding drive. Grabbing my chin, he turns my face to his before slamming his warm lips over mine, his fingers digging into my skin. The kiss is angry and desperate. He pulls away and stares at me, a tornado of emotion swirling in his murky green eyes. "I thought you were dead..." he says.

I relish in the warmth of his touch, the way he makes me feel whole for the first time in so long. I stroke my fingers over his jaw, just taking in his handsome face—a face I was sure I would never see again. "Nearly," I breathe, pulling my nightgown down to reveal the ugly bullet wound just below my right breast.

He stares at it for a second before he closes his eyes and inhales a deep breath. Taking my hand, he laces my fingers between his. "You're all I have," he says, pain laced in his words.

I swallow hard and drop my chin to my chest. Cayla. She's all I have. All that matters. What will Jésus do when he finds out I'm gone?

"Jude, I..." My throat feels like it's closing up. "Things have changed." I squeeze my eyes shut, fighting tears from all the things I have done to survive, to ensure Cayla's survival. I thought he was dead, but now he's here, and it all feels like such a brutal betrayal, and one I must continue. Only this time, I have to do it knowing he is alive. I have to lie to his face. *What do I even say?* "You need to take me back to Jésus," I whisper. God knows I don't want to go back. I want to never leave Jude's arms again. If Jude and I run now, we might be able to get to Cayla in time, but then we'll always be running. I have an opportunity here. The only one we're going to get.

His expression falls blank on a disbelieving laugh. "Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"He'll find me. He'll kill us both. Please, Jude. I'm handling it, okay. I just need time."

"Oh, trust me, I saw how you're fucking handling it, Tor." Shaking his head, he swipes his hand down his face. "I mean, fuck, you were in his room," he swipes the strap of my nightie from my shoulder, "in this shit."

I bite the inside of my lip and swipe at the tear that escapes. "It's not...I had no choice. You were dead."

"Oh, nice to know how you handle mourning the fucking dead."

"No one was coming for me, Jude! You weren't coming for me. You lost. Gabe lost, Ronan lost. And I was the damn prize. So I saved myself. Do not judge me!"

He glares at me, his jaw ticking. "You're not going back, if I have to handcuff you to my fucking body, by God, I will. Don't test me."

I grit my teeth. "You cannot get to him. I can. It's this macho bullshit—you thinking you can handle everything —

that got Cayla taken in the first place." I see the pain mask his features with such intensity that I want to hold him. He loves her so much, and his pain is more than I can take. He doesn't know what happened to her. Very few do, and for now, it's best that it stays that way. I throw my arms around his neck, because this right here is the cruelest thing I will ever do in my entire life. I do this for her though.

He tenses under my touch. I rest my cheek against his hard chest and can hear his heart pounding, breaking. And one day, I hope he'll see that. One day, he'll forgive this. If I tell him now, he'll go for her. He'll endanger her further and there will be nothing I can do or say to Jesús that will stop him from killing them both.

"I'm not letting you leave," he says.

I know there's no fighting with him. This won't be a negotiation. I'll have to bide my time. How much time do I really have though? Without me, what reason does Jesús have to keep Cayla alive?

The rest of the drive we sit in a painful silence with Jude staring out the window.

We pull up outside a villa on the very outskirts of the city and Jude gets out, holding the door open for me. I slide out of the car and glance at the villa nestled in darkness. The cool, desert air blows through the thin material of my nightgown and I shiver. The car doors slam and the driver brings a couple of bags to the front door.

Jude speaks to the man quietly and shakes his hand, and I wait. The guy gets back in the car and drives away, and now it's just us. My mind strays to the thought of Jesús walking into his house to find dead men littering the grounds. He will know I was taken, and he will be fuming and what will that mean for Cayla?

Jude opens the door and I walk inside with him. He dumps the bags in the hallway and closes the door behind

me. The house is nowhere near as lavish as Jesus' or Gabe's. "Whose house is this?"

"One of Gabe's safe houses."

I nod, watching as he moves through the house, turning on lights. I follow him into a living room and he turns around. His eyes lock with mine and my breaths falter under his dark green gaze. His jaw tightens and he closes his eyes on a sigh. "How did she die?" he asks, his voice is full of pain and heartbreak. Cayla. He's talking about Cayla. He thinks she's dead? Of course he does, that's what Jesús told anyone other than me, him, Camilla, and the two men who watch Lizzie's every move from the shadows.

I swallow around the lump that lodges in my throat. My heart skips erratically, letting out a painful, stilted thud in my chest. *What do I tell him? What do I say?* I close the distance between us and cup his cheek, wishing I could tell him everything, but I can't. Maybe I could tell him she's alive, but that I don't know where she is. But then he's going to look for her. He's going to come at Jesús with everything he has.

"How did she die, Tor?"

"I don't know," I whisper, chewing the inside of my lip anxiously. "Don't...don't think about it," I whisper.

"Don't think about it?" His eyes flash open swirling with anger and hurt. "My daughter—*our* daughter, Tor—"

"I don't know!" My voice cracks and tears slip down my cheeks, because I am a horrible person. My chest physically aches keeping this from him. "I can't tell you. I'm sorry." I try and push a grain of truth into my words, all the while feeling like the worst person in the world.

He glares and the silence cuts through me. Cold. Hard. "You set me up for Cayla, you know—"

"You weren't supposed to have half the Russian mafia with you!"

"What did you expect? It was Ronan's fucking plan, that I wasn't let in on, mind you, until you had gone to fucking Jésus."

I turn away from him and drag my hand through my hair. "No." I grit my teeth as I say the words. "As far as Jésus was concerned, you were supposed to die. Gabriel was supposed to die." I turn back to face him. His eyes are focused on me, his jaw ticking with the tension. "You needed to kill him," I say, "and you failed. This is the price. We lost, Jude." In truth, I am the price and the prize. But I don't want to tell Jude that he lost us both.

"So what now? Huh?" He drags his hands through his hair before reaching in his pocket for a cigarette. He cups the flame as he lights it and takes several heavy puffs. "What fucking now?"

"Now we accept what we can't change." I drop my gaze to his chest and place my palm against his hard stomach. I miss him. I miss everything about him. "And we take revenge where we can." I have to go back to Jésus and then I must kill him to protect Cayla. It's best if Jude thinks this is all in the name of revenge. He'll understand it.

Jude laughs disbelievingly as he takes a step toward me, backing me against the wall. "I don't accept shit," he says. He inches closer to me, his warm breath fanning across my face. I want to kiss him, touch him, but I don't. I can't because if I do I'm afraid I'll never let him go. "Tor," he says, "she's not dead, is she?" I close my eyes and press my head back against the wall as I swallow heavily. His fingers wrap around my throat and I feel his lips brush my jaw. The lie is on the tip of my tongue. "Don't lie to me. I know you." I open my eyes and he pulls back slightly to look at me. That energy crackles between us, the magnetic pull that always seems to anchor me to Jude so irrevocably. My eyes drop to his lips. I can't do this with him. He grips my chin so hard, so very Jude. "Is she alive?" he says.

"She's gone."

"Is. She. Alive." His grip hardens, his eyes flickering.

I take a steadying breath and close my eyes. I force myself to remember everything that brought us here. I tell myself that Jude started this. The cartel wanted him, so they took Cayla. Every single thing my little girl has gone through is his fault. She may not be dead, but I have *lost* her. I'm resigned to being J  sus' whore to protect the daughter I can never see. I have lost everything I love, including Jude. He may be alive, but he might as well be dead because yet again, I have to choose Cayla over him. I will make the same choice, over and over, every single time until it breaks me, and it is breaking me, piece by piece. Bit by bit. I allow all the rage I feel to fill me, coursing through my veins until red-hot heat takes over. I plant my hands on his chest and shove him away from me. He moves back half a step before he's right back in my face.

"You want the truth?" I shout. "I hate you, Jude. All of this is your fault. You are the reason my daughter is gone. You are the reason I will never hold her again, never see her smile." Tears blur my vision and I choke on my words. Rage and guilt collide, swirling and blending until I don't know whether I'm mad at him or myself. My pain and his pain become one and the same until his failures are mine, and the cuts I inflict on him wound me every bit as deeply. "Never watch her grow up, or get married." The tears streak down my face. This is all true. She might not be dead, but she is gone, and if I can't kill J  sus, then she might soon be dead. I will always be the mother she never knew, and she will forever be my heart living outside of my body. "I was willing to give up everything to save her, and where were you?" I shove against him again, and this time he does step back. I follow him, pushing him again. "Your life for hers. It was simple."

Him dying wouldn't have changed a thing, I know that, but I'm angry because I feel so alone in this, and I wish he

could help me, but he can't. I love him, but everything has changed. The life we had is a distant fairytale and now, all we can do is survive. In order to do that I can't be with him, and that breaks me a little bit. He just stares at me, his expression riddled with a pain that mirrors my own. "All I have left is to kill Jésus," I say. "I don't care if I have to fuck him for the next ten years to do it. I will end this."

Jude exhales before turning and walking toward the door. "Do whatever the fuck you need to do, Tor. Hate me if it'll make you feel better. But you're just as much to blame as I am."

He might as well have thrust a blade into my chest. "There are days where I wish I'd never met you, Jude. I wish I'd had a normal life, where my daughter would have been safe." I swipe the tears from my face. Cayla can have that life now, just not with me.

He turns around, glaring at me. "I gave you that opportunity, Tor. When I went to jail, but you chose me."

I laugh humourlessly. "I loved you." *Love. I love him.* Despite everything, I do, and I always will.

His eyes land on me, cold. Hard. "We never belonged together."

I'm trying to push him away. His words shouldn't hurt, but god, they do, and I can't handle it. "Please don't," I can't help but beg on a whisper.

He shakes his head, swiping his hand over his mouth. He closes the space between us, sweeping his fingers over my jaw as he studies me. His teeth rake over his lip and a line sinks between his dark brows. "We can't do this to each other. Don't do this to us..." He exhales. "She's dead, Tor. Going back to him, what the hell is that going to do? Huh?" He leans close to me, so close I feel his warm breath fan across my throat and everything inside of me crumbles. "It won't bring her back. Don't leave me for revenge, Tor. Don't."

This is like standing in a fire and allowing the flames to lick over my skin, fighting every natural instinct to get out and holding myself by the sheer force of will. Tears pour down my cheeks, and I wish I could control them but I can't. This may be worse than having to let Cayla go. At least then I only had to deal with my own pain, but now I'm shouldering his too, knowing that I am the cause of it. I stroke my fingers over the rough stubble of his jaw and tilt my head back, pressing my lips to his. The saltiness of my tears mixes with the agony and torment of a kiss we both know can't last. Yet I wish I could make it last forever. I wish I could fuse myself to him and never let go. He grips the back of my head forcefully, desperately. When we finally break apart, he rests his forehead against mine.

"Don't leave me alone, Tor." There's such hurt in his voice.

"I have to do this, Jude. You should understand it better than anyone." I pull back and meet his eyes. His expression shutters, and I know I just lost him.

"No, I can't fucking understand it."

"But you do. Joe consumed you, until killing him was all you lived for."

"I had nothing else until I had you, and then I chased him *for* you. I would never choose revenge over you, Tor."

I shake my head, gripping the front of his shirt tightly in both hands. "It's Cayla." It's all I can say. What else can I say? "It's for Cayla."

"She's dead!" His eyes well with tears. I watch his jaw tighten as he fights them back.

She's not though, and that's why I'm fighting so hard. "Jésus has to pay for taking her from me, Jude," I say. "He has to."

Jude sighs before he scrubs his hand over his face. He steps toward me, cupping my cheek in his warm hand. "That means more to you than me?"

"It means everything to me," I barely manage the words.

There's a look of regret in his eyes I've never seen. "I'll always love you. Remember that." And with that, he presses a kiss to my forehead before turning around.

Panic grips me in its clutches. "Jude!" I grab his arm. He halts with his back to me. I move closer to him and place my hands on his sides, pressing my face into his back. "Don't give up on us. I will come back to you," I choke. "I promise."

"Promises don't mean shit to me, Tor." He walks out of the room, leaving me alone.

"I love you," I say quietly, knowing he can't hear me.

Whatever was left of me shatters and I slide to the floor, pressing my forehead to my knees. I cry. I cry for everything that we've lost, including each other. I always thought that Jude and I had a love that could withstand any storm. Cayla is the only thing that could ever break us. My heart aches for him. I want to get up and follow him. I want to tell him that I love him, but I just can't be with him right now. That he is, and always will be, the other half of me, my soulmate. But how can I? How can I tell him that and then ask him to let me walk into the arms of our enemy? No. I have a plan, but, in order for it to work, everyone must believe that I am with Jésus, especially Jude.

So I get up and walk out of the room.

On the table next to the front door is a set of keys. I pick them up and stare at them before glancing down the hallway where Jude disappeared. Everything in me is torn in two, separate parts of myself pulling in opposing directions.

There's a stack of post it notes and a pen on the table, just sitting there. I pick up the pen and stare at the little yellow square before I start writing:

Loving you has never been a choice, it just is.

I'm sorry,

Tor.

I open the front door and walk down the short path to the driveway. A SUV sits in the drive, and I press the button on the key fob. The locks beep. As soon as I'm inside, I rev the engine and pull away from the house. I glance in my rearview mirror, and I swear I can see Jude standing in the top window watching me go. I swipe at the tears that track down my cheeks. I can't break over Jude right now. I have to get back to Jesús.

I drive into Juarez, my eyes skimming the sidewalks where dirty-looking bars spill onto the street. I have no idea where I am and no way of contacting Jesús, but he practically owns Juarez. Surely anyone can point me in the right direction? Unless I get one of Gabe's guys. *Fuck*. I see a bar I vaguely recognise, and take a chance. I pull over to the side of the road and glance up at the front. There's not even a name, just a red neon sign of a dancing woman that blinks on and off. I yank the glove box open and rummage around. It's a cartel car. There's bound to be...my fingers brush over the metal barrel of a gun. I pull it out, slam the glove box, and get out of the car.

As soon as I step around the front of the car, I can feel eyes on me. A blonde woman in a negligée isn't exactly common around here. A group of guys stand outside the bar smoking. I recognize the tattoo on one of their forearms: a snake coiled in a knot. Taking a deep breath, I tighten my grip on the gun, and walk over to him. Five men all turn to look at me when I stop in front of them. Towering over me, their eyes freely roam over every inch of my body.

"You going to use that gun, little gringo?" The guy with the tat asks on a smirk.

I glare at him. "I need Jesús."

His smirk turns into a grin. "Well, *his* name is Jesús." He jerks his thumb towards the guy next to him.

"Jésus Garcia. Your boss." The smile falls from his face. "Trust me," I say, "he'll be looking for me."

He looks me up and down again and fumbles around in his pocket, pulling out a phone. He says something in Spanish to the group of men and they circle me, their backs to me, guarding. He presses his phone to his ear and waits. Words are exchanged, and then he nods, his eyes narrowing at me before he hangs up.

"The boss is on his way," he says, his accent thick.

"Thank you. I'll just... wait here." I gesture towards a small table propped against the crumbling concrete wall of the bar.

He shakes his head and steps into my path. "Please come inside."

I eye the doorway, and then look back at him. "I'm fine here."

"I insist." He takes a step closer to me, and I fight the urge to step back from his hulking form. His friends subtly move away, disappearing into the shadows.

I don't think I'm left with much choice, so I allow him to guide me to the front door and through the packed bar. Sweaty bodies jostle up against me, and someone sloshes cold beer down my arm. Eventually, the guy leads me to a door in the back. I glance nervously over my shoulder. What if he's just bringing me to some back room so he can rape and murder me? I'm not stupid. This is Juarez and these men in this bar are far from gentlemen. The cartel is the main business in these parts, and it breeds a certain community.

The door opens and I walk into a dirty office. There's a torn-up leather sofa pushed against the back wall and a desk off to the side. That's it. There are no windows—no escape. I take a seat on the sofa, trying to calm my racing pulse. It'll be fine. I'll be fine. The universe couldn't be so cruel as to take everything from me only to have me murdered by some random gang banger now.

The guy stands facing me, his back to the door and his thick, inked arms folded over his chest. Yeah, I'm definitely a prisoner. I sit here, drumming my fingers over the arm of the chair for what feels like an hour. Eventually there's a knock on the door, and the guy steps to the side before he pulls it open.

Jésus strolls into the room in a pair of chinos and a white shirt looking like he owns everything he looks upon. He drags a hand through his pitch-black hair and a strand falls over his forehead. His dark eyes lock with mine before sliding over my body. Tension radiates from him, making his movements stiff and controlled.

"Are you hurt?" he asks.

"No." I stand up and walk over to him. He cups my cheek, swiping his thumb over my bottom lip. My stomach knots tightly, and suddenly this feels all the more wrong. Even thinking Jude was dead, Jesús' touch felt repulsive to me, a betrayal...but now I know he's alive, my frozen heart seems to be limping back to life.

Jésus snaps his fingers at the hulking body guard and barks something in Spanish. The guy takes off his leather jacket and hands it to Jesús. He drapes the heavy leather over my shoulders, covering me.

"Thank you," I say.

He takes my hand, threading our fingers together before he leads me out of the room and back into the busy bar. I feel the eyes on me, the way their probing gazes inspect me. They're wondering who I am, who this woman is on Jesús Lopez's arm. We walk outside and he leads me to the silver hummer, opening the back door for me and helping me in. He climbs in after me and barks something at the driver before he turns to look at me. He strokes my face, his eyes flicking over me in concern.

"Who took you, chiquita?" he asks.

I pull away from him and lean back in the seat. "You said he was dead," I whisper. Jesús is not my friend, and we owe

each other nothing. We are enemies. However, I can't deny that I'm angry at him for lying to me. I know I can expect no less, but it feels so unnecessarily cruel.

He falls back in his seat, tapping his finger over his bottom lip. Eventually he looks at me. "Jude Pearson."

"You said he was dead," I repeat slowly.

I watch his fist tighten where it rests on his thigh. His jaw clenches so hard that the muscles twitch with the strain. "He should be."

"But he isn't."

His eyes narrow, his jaw clenches and then his hand darts out, gripping my jaw so hard that I cry out in pain. "Is this what you want, Victoria? To know he's alive and to have to sacrifice him for your child?" I whimper and a small smile pulls at his lips. "We both know it changes nothing. You would still be right here with me, no matter what." He leans in closer. "I only wanted to make it easier on you. The sooner you let go of him, the easier this will be." He lets go of me and I drag in a ragged breath as his dark eyes lock with mine. "I have been patient with you, but I will not wait forever." His voice is layered with implication. This right here is a crossroads. Yes, Jude took me, but I came back. I need him to think it was for more than just Cayla. I need him to trust me.

I take a deep breath and climb across the seat, throwing my leg over him until I'm straddling him. My eyes lock with his as I thread my fingers through his hair, fingers that less than an hour ago were in Jude's hair. He cocks a brow, his expression guarded. "I hate him," I say. "I loved him and he cost me and my daughter everything. You could have killed us both, but you didn't." I stroke my fingers over his cheek. His hands land on my hips and I can feel him hardening beneath me. "And I could have run with him, but I came back to you."

"Do you think me a fool?" he asks.

I shake my head. "No," I whisper, my eyes dropping to his lips. Gripping his hair, I lean in and kiss him. For a moment he doesn't respond and my heart pounds as the seconds pass. But then his fingers dig into my hips and he kisses me back violently. His hands skate down my body until he pushes my skirt up. *I can do this. I can do this.* My heartbeat rises as panic grips me in its clutches. I break the kiss and my hands dart to his wrists, my fingers wrapping around them and halting him. His fingers are just sweeping the edge of my underwear and I feel like a dirty whore. I press my lips to his once more in an attempt to soften the blow. "I'm still... I can't..."

"I'm running out of patience with you, Victoria. You tell me you came back for me, but you don't want me to touch you." He laughs and grabs my chin, pulling my bottom lip down roughly. "Your lips say one thing but your body deceives you." He tilts his head to the side, studying my mouth. "You are here for your daughter and while I appreciate your loyalty to her, do not lie to me."

He knows. He's never going to trust me. Think fast. Shit. "No. It's...I..." I take a deep breath. "I'm not good with this." I steel myself to say the words, to confess things that only Jude, Marney, and I know. It's all I have though. "I was raped," I blurt. It's true that if it weren't for Joe then I could probably convince myself to whore myself to Jésus for a greater good. But every time I remember what it felt like to have every facet of who I was stolen from me, I can't do it. Jésus' eyes search mine. "It was a long time ago, but it was bad. Days..." Tears prickle my eyes as I recall it. "I thought I was going to die. I wanted to."

He cups my cheek gently, his action a complete contrast to his expression. "Who is he?" he growls, barely concealed rage taking over.

I shake my head. "You would kill him?"

A sadistic grin works over his lips. "No, I'll keep him alive for days and make him wish for death and when he finally dies, I'll hang his dickless body up by his own intestines for all to see."

My lips twitch on a smile. "That's sweet, J  sus, but he's already dead. I shot him." I look at him. "He's dead, but he left his mark on me." I squeeze my eyes shut. I can practically feel the brands on my spine burning all over again. I guess I never really thought about the physical and mental scars Joe left. Jude's arms have always been a safe haven from the memories because he knows. He saw me at my worst, my most worthless and ashamed, and he always wanted me anyway.

"I'm sorry, chiquita," J  sus says genuinely.

"I came back to you. Trust me."

He lifts a brow and sighs. "You have to earn my trust, Victoria."

"How?"

He tucks a stray hair behind my ear. "Simple. Wear the crown," he says, a twisted grin on his lips.

I just got into bed with the devil, and truthfully, I have no idea how far I'll have to go in order to do what the Russian wants. For now, whatever it takes. For Cayla, and for myself, so that I can get back to Jude.

JUDE

I sit on the edge of the bed, staring at the wall. Just staring at the damn wall.

She's left. I saved her and she ran away. And that just does a fucking number on my heart. I just let the only thing I had left walk away. As I sit and think about that, my heart slowly pounds harder and harder. I wring my hands as I try to reason with myself. She blames me. Hell, *I* blame me. Sighing, I scrub my hands over my face before I lie back on the bed. I'm exhausted but I know I will find no sleep. No peace.

My daughter is dead and my Tor—*I loved you*—she's gone.

The mind is a tricky fuck. It does things to a man that nothing else can. It is, for all intents and purposes, a man's worst enemy. Something you can't escape, and mine is doing me in right now. It keeps replaying memories of her, of us, of our family. It keeps telling me what a piece of shit I am for ever loving Tor. For not letting her and Cayla live as normal of a life as possible. I never should have come for her after I got out of jail. I shouldn't have. I think of Cayla, and as much as I try not to, I can't help but play out the

ways she may have died. Alone. Crying for me. Terrified. And I failed her.

I failed us all.

The sky outside the bedroom window is changing from black to the light blue of daybreak when my phone vibrates in my pocket. I sit up and pull my phone from my pocket, and without looking at the number, I answer it. "Yeah?"

"I will tell you one time, bookie," a heavy Spanish accent snarls over the line. "Leave my woman alone." And the line goes dead.

My fingers curl around the phone, my pulse banging in my temples. My chest rises in ragged swells as I try to control the absolute-fucking-rage swirling through me, and I chuck the phone at the wall. As much as I want to fight, Tor gave up on me and now it's time for me to give up on her.

break

It's late in the morning, and I've done nothing but lie in bed with my back to the door. I hear the car pull up outside the safe house. I hear Gabe cursing and swearing as he walks past the bedroom window on his way to the front door. The lock clicks, but I don't move.

"You couldn't just wait, could you, ese?" he shouts as the door slams shut. "¡Eres un bastardo!" His boots clomp over the floor. I don't move. "Where are you, ese? I swear to..." I hear his footsteps stop outside the doorway. There's a moment of silence. "Where...where is she?"

"She went back to Jesús." I expect anger to flood my system at any moment, but instead there's only this hollow emptiness filling me with each passing second. Gabe doesn't say a word, but I hear him step into the room and round the bed.

"Oh shit. That's fucked up," he says, and leans against the wall beside the window. We sit in silence for a moment before Gabe clears his throat. "I'm sorry I locked you up."

I grunt.

"I just wanted to have it planned out, ese. Keep you from getting killed and all, I..."

"It's fine, Gabe. You did what you thought you had to do. Like you said, you can't think with your fucking heart in this business."

"No," he sighs. "No, you can't."

I wonder how he handles Camilla being in the possession of men like Ronan and Jésus. How he stood knowing she was there, unable to leave, and then I figure it's just a way of life for them. The way I grew up was not normal, that's for damn sure, but it doesn't begin to compare to being raised in the cartel. Everyone has their own normal, I guess...

"Are you going to take her back," he asks.

"No." I glance over at him and he nods.

"Then what are you going to do?"

"I don't know, Gabe. I don't fucking know." I slowly sit up and scratch a hand over the back of my head. Honestly, I feel like I'm falling apart on the inside, but I can't let that show. There's no point, after all, is there? Not now. "Drink?" I say.

Gabe nods as he pushes to his feet. "Drinking is always an option, ese. Always."

TOR

I'm sitting at the breakfast bar in the kitchen sipping coffee when I hear footsteps behind me. I turn on my stool, a smile painted on my face, but it falls when I see it's not Jésus. I don't like Jésus or his men, but I don't have to pretend with them. I realise it's the same guy who works for Ronan. He hands me the phone again and I eye it tentatively. My gaze darts around the massive kitchen, but we're alone. I snatch the phone and place it to my ear.

"Really? Your guy is putting me in jeopardy," I snap.

"Ah, sweet Victoria. You are in no danger," Ronan drawls.

"What do you want?"

"I am checking on your progress."

My temper spikes. "I do this my way or not at all. Unless you're going to drag your arse down to the desert and do it yourself..."

"Careful, Victoria. Remember why it is you do this. For your daughter."

"No," I take a breath, "I do it because you threaten her."

He huffs a small laugh. "I am no threat to your child. Jésus however..."

"So, if I don't do what you want..."

He groans. "Do not push me, Victoria. Kill the Mexican, free yourself and your child, and win the war. Simple."

"This is not *my* war!" My blood pressure rises, casting a dizzying heat over me.

He laughs. "This became your war the second you agreed to go to Jésus."

"No—" The line goes dead. He just hung up on me. God, I hate the Russian.

I practically throw the phone back at the guy and get up, taking my coffee with me. I go to the French doors and step out onto the back deck. The sun is just starting to cut through the morning chill. Everything out here is peaceful; the city below is in a calm between storms in this moment before the day begins and after the chaos of the night. I clasp my coffee in both hands and allow my thoughts to drift to Cayla and Jude. I wonder what they're doing right now.

I jump when hands land on my waist. Jésus laughs, his breath washing over the side of my neck as he does. "You're jumpy today."

"You caught me by surprise," I say, turning to face him. He takes my coffee from me, and lifts it to his lips for a sip.

"Get dressed," he says. "We're leaving."

"Where are we going?"

"I told you last night, you want me to trust you—wear the crown."

Jésus gets out of the car and holds his hand out to me. I take it and he helps me out of the car. We're in the middle of the desert and in front of us is a corrugated iron barn surrounded by some fenced-in pens with cattle roaming around in the dust. It looks like a cattle ranch, but of course, it won't be. Jésus wraps his arm around my waist

and leads me towards the barn. His men walk ahead of us, rifles in hand.

"Where are we?" It took hours to get here and I can't see another building in any direction.

"Just a brief stop, chiquita."

Jésus says nothing, simply walks through the open side door into the barn. The smell of cow shit, hay, and stale air greets us. A man steps out of a gated pen, his straw hat tilted at an angle. He greets Jesús in Spanish and they begin a conversation. I glance around at the shabby barn with a cluster of pens holding calves. Why on earth would Jesús have any business on a ranch?

Jésus waves a hand at one of the guys and he steps forward, dropping a duffel bag on the dirt floor of the barn. He unzips it and steps back to reveal wads of dollar bills all banded and packed into the bag.

I glance at the man again, then at Jesús. The man steps forward, hoisting up his dirty jeans before he holds his hand out to Jesús. They shake, and then we're leaving.

"Am I supposed to know what just happened?" I ask as Jesús holds the back door open for me.

He smirks as he gets in the car after me and slams the door. "I just bought this ranch."

"Uh, why?"

He glances at me, smiling. "I'm a business man. I seize opportunities when they arise."

I feel like I'm missing something here because why would a cartel boss buy a ranch? There's not exactly millions to be made from raising cattle.

"Why bring me with you if you're just going to be cryptic?"

His lips press into a tight line. "I do not trust you fully. This is not why I brought you."

He says nothing as we drive back to Juarez. I watch the desert pass by the window, a barren wasteland of nothingness. When we reach the outskirts of Juarez, we

pull up outside a little grocery store. Everyone gets out of the car and I stay close to Jesús as we step inside. The bell over the door chimes and luke warm air conditioning blows over my exposed skin.

A man steps through a beaded curtain from the back of the store, a wide smile on his face, but it falls the second he sees Jesús' men. I see the fear in his eyes, the movement of his throat as he swallows and the small step back he automatically takes. He looks like any average man, middle aged, dressed in the shop uniform.

"Mr. Lopez," he says, feigning a smile.

Jésus steps forward wordlessly. His men seem to wonder off, picking up drinks from the shelves and opening them. "Victoria, this is Samuel. He runs this fine establishment." The man's eyes dart to me and he bobs his head. "He works for me."

"Si, si. I work," Samuel says.

Jésus turns to look at me, titling his head to the side. "He also works for Gabriel Estrada." I school my expression under his scrutiny.

The man starts rambling in Spanish, pleading. He staggers towards Jesús, but Jesús simply puts his hand on the man's shoulder, forcing him to his knees. As soon as he does, the man starts to cry, begging in a frantic rush of words.

Jésus closes the distance between us, taking my chin between his thumb and forefinger. "This man is a traitor to the Sinaloa cartel." He steps back and takes my hand, placing a gun in my palm. "Prove your loyalty, chiquita. Kill him."

My heart pounds in my chest and my breaths become short and choppy. I've shot people before, but I have always killed to protect myself and my family. This man has done nothing to me. In fact, he's helped Gabriel which means he's probably helped Jude in a way.

I close my eyes for a second and take a deep breath. I've killed to protect Cayla before and is this really any different? I wonder if he has a family, a child just like Cayla. What would he do to protect his child? Or perhaps I'm wrong. Any man willing to double cross two cartels can hardly have anyone else's interest besides his own in mind, and even his own interest is questionable at this point.

My stomach knots uncomfortably and the gun feels like a lead weight in my hand. I look at Samuel and his eyes lock with mine. "Please."

My pulse pounds against my ear drums and my vision narrows. I don't want to do this.

"He is a traitor to the Sinaloa, chiquita." Jesus brushes the hair off my neck. "If you are loyal to me, this should be easy for you. If not..." If I'm not loyal then I'm just like Samuel, disposable. And if I die, then Cayla has no one to fight for her.

I release a long breath and raise the gun in front of me. My hand trembles as I stare down the barrel at Samuel. He's pleading and begging, praying, to who, I don't know. Everything slips into the background until it's just me and him and the gun. My raspy breaths echo around me, my heart beat racing. I line up the shot, pointing the gun right between his eyes, my finger squeezes over the trigger and I feel it right there, the power over life and death. This isn't survival anymore, this isn't self-defense, it's just cold murder. Another thing I would do for my baby girl. I inhale a breath, look Samuel in the eyes one last time and then I close my eyes and pull the trigger. BANG. The gun explodes in my hand and the scent of gun powder fills the air. There's the muted thud of Samuel hitting the ground, and when I open my eyes he's sprawled face down, a pool of blood growing around his head.

Jésus gently caresses my shoulder and leans down next to my ear. "So ruthless," he whispers against my neck before he grabs my arm, takes my gun, and leads me from

the small shop. Holding the back door of the car open, he helps me inside and gets in before the driver pulls away. Silence envelopes the car as we drive into Juarez.

I feel no guilt, although I know I should, but I've come to learn that as humans we like to think we're selfless. We like to think that in the moment we'll do the right thing—save the innocent person. The truth is, we are nothing more than animals driven to base instincts and the simple primal need to survive. We may be selfless for those we love, but simply because we cannot cope with the pain of losing them, but that in itself is selfish. We will always choose ourselves, and when you accept that...when you accept that the killing of another person is nothing more than human, you are absent of guilt.

But the absence alone is sometimes enough to make you feel as though you have lost your humanity.

Chapter Tor

Three Weeks Later

I sit in the passenger seat of the bulletproof Hummer as Michael, Jesús' right hand man drives up to the gates of the villa. The gate's swing open and the headlights pan across the front of the house, illuminating Jesús' form standing in front of it. The engine cuts and the entourage of men Jesús sent with me get out of the car. He rounds the front of the car and opens the passenger door, smiling as he grips my waist and helps me to the ground.

"Oh, chiquita, you look beautiful. As always." His eyes roam over my body, taking in the white pencil skirt suit that I'm wearing. One hand fists my hair whilst the other skates down my body, grabbing my arse and yanking me tightly against him. "How did it go?"

I paint a smile on my face, fighting back the tension I feel with his hard dick pressed against my stomach.

"Swimmingly. They turned on the kid just like you said they would." It's a simple notion I guess. You have a street gang that deals for the cartel, but one kid is a bit too sharp and rises to a point where he thinks he can take a larger cut. Some industries might reward ambition, but not the cartel, not the drug industry. So you go to them and make them an offer, in front of the kid. We'll give them a bigger cut, as long as he's not in charge. They'll go for blood faster than a pack of sharks on a wounded seal. And of course, Jesús sends me to do it because if I'm not loyal, it's a fairly irrelevant task. If I am loyal, then my willingness to carry it out proves said loyalty.

"Good. Come." He steps back and leads me back to the house. He says nothing to anyone as he pulls me up the stairs and into his massive master bedroom. "Get changed," he says, reaching for the button of my jacket. It falls open, revealing just my bra beneath. His eyes lock with mine as he reaches around me and releases the clasp at my back. The straps fall away and I fold my arms over my bare chest, dropping my eyes away from him. A small laugh slips from his lips and he trails his fingers over my cheekbone. "So pretty when you blush." He kisses my forehead. "Get changed." I glance at him and back towards the closet. As soon as I'm inside I unzip my skirt and push it over my hips. I take one of the many white dresses off the rack and slide the thin material over my head. He does this deliberately, makes me leave the house wearing a power suit, representing him and the cartel. But when I'm here, in these walls, I have to wear this dress because I am his. His property, his prisoner, his woman, and he likes to remind me of it in a subtle yet oh so obvious way.

When I step out of the closet, Jesús is waiting, his hands casually in his pockets as he leans against the far wall. His crisp white shirt clings to his broad shoulders, contrasting the deep tan of his skin. The afternoon sun plays through the jet-black strands of his hair, throwing his face into

shadow. "I have a surprise for you," he says, pushing away from the wall.

He wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me from the room. The scent of his aftershave wraps around me, but I don't like it. It's too clean, too sharp. He takes me to his office, and closes the door behind us. There's a guy sitting there, an empty chair next to him and a tattoo gun in his hand. Oh, shit.

I glance at Jésus and swallow heavily. The look on his face says it all. This isn't optional and it's as much a test as the last few weeks have been. I silently take the seat next to the guy. I'm not about to fail now.

JUDE

A cool breeze howls over the top of the hill. The near full moon disappears behind thick clouds, making the lights from Jésus' house in the distance seem all the brighter. I shift on the hood of the car as I adjust the focus on the pair of binoculars glued to my eyes. I search each window for a glimpse of her. I just need to know she's okay, then I'll leave.

The door to the patio opens, the movement catching my attention. Tor steps outside. The white dress catching on the wind and almost making her look like an angel. But she's too tainted to be an angel, and I know that. She rests against the stone balcony and stares off, her gaze eventually straying to the very fucking hill I'm on. For a moment, I pretend like she's looking for me. A small line sinks between her brows and she looks...lost.

"Why did you leave me, Tor, huh?" I whisper. "Why?"

Just as I'm about to pull the binoculars from my eyes, the patio door opens again. Tor turns when Jésus walks outside, and I tense. Smiling, he reaches for her, pulling her close to his chest before wrapping his arms around her waist. My pulse kicks up, angry blood hammering through my veins as I watch his hand slowly trail down the small of her back to her ass. He says something to her and she

smiles. She fucking smiles just before he kisses her. She *lets* him kiss her.

I drop the binoculars and slide off the hood, pacing as I drag my hands through my hair. My heart slams around in my chest so hard I can't catch a good breath. The word betrayal doesn't touch this. She said she wanted vengeance—I glance back toward that fucking house on the hill. That is not vengeance.

She is giving that fuckface my smiles, my kisses, my damn life. I pound my fist over the hood again and again until it's dented to all fuck and back. My knuckles sting from the splits. Blood coats my hand and trickles to the ground as I go back to pacing.

I've lost her in the worst sense possible. Within death, you can make no changes. Fate did not decide this. Tor did. She decided love wasn't enough, or maybe there's only so much shit one woman can take before love morphs into hate.

"Fuck you," I shout, my voice fading into the rolling hills overlooking the desert. I let my shoulders fall as I go to the driver's side of the car and yank the door open. I slam it closed so hard the car rocks, and then I crank the engine and peel off, leaving her to the life she's chosen.

She's not the woman I once loved.

She's no longer my Tor.

TOR

The driver speeds along the rough desert road. He takes a hard turn, the abrupt movement sending up clouds of dust around the Hummer. Three of Jesús' armed guards sit in the car with me, and anxiety bubbles in my stomach because I know exactly why Jesús is sending me to deal with the Juarez cartel. He wants *me* to deal with Gabriel. Jesús wants Gabe to witness my loyalty to the Sinaloa cartel, and honestly, he probably wants to insult him by sending someone he won't take seriously.

The car pulls up outside a ramshackle gas station in the middle of the desert. The tint on the windows is peeling; the pumps have weeds growing out of them. When the car comes to an abrupt stop, all the guys get out. One of them holds the door open for me, and I step out of the car, my high heels clicking over the dusty tarmac. There's an old man wearing a straw hat in the rocking chair on the porch of the shack. He has a pipe hanging from his mouth, but no smoke is coming from it. He tips his hat to us before pulling it down over his eyes as though he's taking a nap. I slide my sunglasses onto my face and glance across the expanse of desert. In the distance, there's a trail of dust billowing into the sky. When the approaching car gets closer the sun glints off the black paint.

I steel myself and hold out my palm, waiting as Michael hands me a gun. I feel the weight of the cool metal when he places it in my hand, and I grip it. The car finally pulls up, skidding slightly on the loose gravel a few feet away from us. The windows are tinted, so I can't see inside. The engine cuts, and I wait on baited breath to see who will get out. There's every possibility that Gabriel will show up himself and bring Jude. Some cartel bosses let their men make deals for them, but Gabriel tends to get his hands dirty. Having spent time in the Sinaloa cartel, it's something I've come to respect about him.

The car doors open and several men I vaguely recognise from Gabriel's compound get out before Gabe climbs out himself. He closes the door, and I find myself breathing a sigh of relief when I don't see Jude.

Gabe saunters towards us with that usual arrogant swagger he carries. Jesús is always dressed in a suit, but Gabe's dressed in his usual low-hung Jeans and a plain black t-shirt that clings to his muscular body. He always looks more like an Abercrombie model than a drug lord. There's a shotgun slung over his shoulder, a smoldering cigarette in his hand. His eyes drag over me, and a sneer pulls at his lips.

"Gabriel," I greet him coolly. All eyes are on me. I must not only prove my loyalty, but be the queen that Jesús wants me to be. This is the ultimate test, facing one of Jude's allies—one of my friends—and demeaning him. Jesús wants to make Gabe eat dirt, and by sending me to do it he's just rubbing salt in the wound.

"What are *you* doing here, Tor?" He glances at the men surrounding me before his gaze falls to the gun in my hand. He takes a drag from his cigarette and blows the smoke through his lips, completely unfazed as his eyes lock with mine.

"I'm here to negotiate with you on behalf on the Sinaloa cartel." I hold his stare, never flinching, never backing down. I've watched Jude enough to know that perception is everything. The way you hold yourself, the way you speak... it all creates an image. I need Gabriel to believe wholeheartedly that I've turned because word travels. Jesús hears things, and it all helps my cause. The more he trusts me, the easier he is to kill, but more importantly, the easier it is to convince the rest of the cartel that it wasn't me who did it.

His eyes narrow and he takes one last puff on his smoke before tossing it to the desert floor. "I don't negotiate with women or traitors." He arches a brow.

I inhale a slow breath and click the safety off my gun. His gaze flicks to the gun in my hand. "I don't negotiate with Juarez dogs, but here we are." The guys behind me chuckle.

"Wow, and to think I used to come over to your house for dinner."

I raise an eyebrow. "Times change. We came to talk, so talk. It's the only chance you're going to get. I'll be sure to relay your concerns to Jesús." I turn towards Michael on my right and hand him my gun. I hear a low curse from Gabriel, and I can guess why. On the left side of my neck, below my ear, is my tattoo. Jesús insisted that my hair be braided back on one side so it was clearly on show. He said it would offer me protection. That's bullshit, he wanted me stamped and claimed for Gabriel, and therefore Jude, to see. I turn back to Gabriel and he passes his shotgun to one of his men. I step forward and so does he until we're barely a foot apart. It's bullshit really, a sign of diplomacy I guess, to be unarmed. But there are six other armed men here. I really don't need a gun.

"I didn't call this meeting, your man did," he sneers.

I sigh. "You need to stop with the hits, Gabe. It's not good for business, for either of us." He's been killing Jesús'

men, bombing drug factories, ambushing our drops. Of course, secretly, I want to shake his hand, but all he's doing at this stage is pissing J  sus off, and that's never good.

"Business, yes..." he laughs. "I see you are now very concerned with that." His eyes trail over me.

"It concerns the boss, and therefore it concerns me."

"There is nothing lower than a woman who turns on her man." Gabe glares at me.

I clench my fists until my nails bite into my palms. I shouldn't rise to it, but I do. "A man's job is to protect his family and when he can no longer do that, a woman will find the man who can." I hate it. I hate myself for saying it because I love Jude no matter what has passed between us. He has to buy this though. More importantly, the men standing behind me need to buy this.

"The man who can." He laughs again. "That Sinaloa shit took my sister, he killed your child, and yet you spread your legs for him," he says through clenched teeth before taking a deep breath. "You're a whore. Jude deserves better than this bullshit." He turns and waves me off. "Tell J  sus I will not have dealings with you." He spits before he walks away from me.

Michael hands me my gun. "You will do business with whoever we see fit to offer you," I say. "Careful what you wish for Gabriel. Next time J  sus might just come in person, and you might leave missing body parts."

He flips me the bird. "Tell J  sus I look forward to the day I take a piss on his dead body."

I take a deep breath, lift the gun, and pull the trigger. Gabe hits the ground swearing, and suddenly there are guns pointed at me. The men standing behind me aim their guns, the click of the safeties going off surrounding me. Smirking, I stare down Gabriel's three men. I wink at the one that I know is his right hand of sorts. "Don't worry," I say. "It's just a flesh wound." Gabriel groans, clutching his

thigh. "Stop being a pussy, Gabe." I smile. "That's for my fence post."

He glares at me as he manages to push to his feet. Blood soaks through the material of his jeans. "Tell your boss, that I'm going to keep coming at him until he's on his knees, and then I'm going to make him suck my fucking dick," he says, and I roll my eyes at him. "You don't know what you're getting into, Tor."

I meet his stare. "I'll get into whatever I have to." I lift an eyebrow, hoping he hears the words I can't say here. I turn away from him and get back in the car. Closing my eyes, I press my head back against the seat rest as we pull away.

I honestly have no idea what I'm doing anymore. I just shot one of Jude's closest friends, and for what? To prove a point, to show loyalty to the man who has my daughter hostage. In the fucked-up world I live in, this is my reality.

JUDE

The door slams shut and Gabe comes in cursing. He limps into the kitchen and grabs the bottle of brandy from the counter, yanking out the cork. I glance down at his leg. There's a bandana tied around his thigh, his pants soaked with blood.

"Got shot, I see."

He glares at me as he tips the bottle back. "By your woman."

"What?" There's a pause. "*What?*"

"She's working for Jésus," he says before taking another swig.

I drop my head. A slow rage simmers in my veins as the mention of her and him brings the memory of their kiss to mind. Gabe leans down into my line of vision. "Did you hear me?" he asks. I push up from the chair and pace in front of the counter.

"She's turned, ese. She shot me." He motions frantically at his leg. "Look. Shot me! And she has the mark of the Sinaloa tattooed behind her ear. She's gone. Turned." He limps across the kitchen to the sink. "Fucking whore."

I don't even realize what I'm doing. I just react, darting across the kitchen and grabbing him by the throat before I pin him against the cabinets. My heart races, my skin

prickles with sweat as a war wages inside me, confusion drowning my senses. "Don't talk about her like that," I say through clenched teeth, and I'm not even sure why that should bother me anymore. She's not mine, and that's clear.

Gabe pulls at my hands and I let him go, taking an unsteady step back. "Your loyalties should be rearranged because Tor sold you out. She left you for a dirty bastard."

I stare at him, my mind reeling. Tor is working with the man who took our daughter, the man who wanted me dead. I no longer know who she is.

"She offers peace with one hand and shoots me with the other. Fucking Sinaloa." Mumbling, he paces beside the counter. "I've played nice, ese. I really have, but this..." He shakes his fists. "They want to try and fuck me in the ass, I'll fuck them in the ass." He snatches a phone from the counter and dials a number before pressing it to his ear.

She works for him. I try to process that. I try to make sense of it because deep down, no matter how much she may hate me or blame me, no matter what she's endured, at the end of the day Cayla was her world. She would never forgive someone for taking her much less work with them. What the fuck is going on? "Something's not right, Gabe."

He shakes his head. "Yeah," he speaks into the phone. "Gustavo? There's a new Sinaloa in the mix." My stomach knots. "A fucking gringo. A woman. Blonde..." Pausing, he glances at me. "Yes, that one. Watch her carefully. Do not trust her." He hangs up and stares at me. "I am sorry, ese, I am, but she is now the enemy, you understand that?"

My jaw clenches as I force a nod.

"Now, I have to go fuck them in the ass, if you'll excuse me."

"I'm going with you," I say as I follow him into the hall.

He turns and gives me an unwary look. "You don't want to do this, Jude."

"I do. I need to, Gabe."

His gaze drifts to the floor on a heavy sigh. "Fine." He nods before he disappears down the hall. "Come on," he calls over his shoulder.

I remind myself that she was the enemy when I first met her, surely things have not come full circle?

break

Gabe and I are parked in an abandoned lot half a block down from one of the cartel bars.

"This is where they exchange their money," Gabe says. "We'll go in there and take their shit, stab his men, piss all over them before we cut their faces off and sew them onto a soccer ball and kick it down the street, and then..." He stares through the binoculars. "Oh shit." He leans closer to the dash. "It's Tor."

"What?" I hold the wheel with one hand and snatch the binoculars with the other, placing them against my eyes. *It is fucking Tor.* I toss the binoculars down and my grip on the steering wheel tightens. "What the hell is she doing?"

"Something for Jésus."

"No shit, Gabe."

"Look, don't get all angry with me because your woman went rogue."

"Just...shut up."

He shrugs and settles back in the seat, mumbling under his breath. Tor pulls up in front of El Pedro's, some shitty little bar that serves as a front to launder money no doubt. There's one window in the white cinder block building and a single door. The door to the Hummer swings open and Tor steps out. The tight white dress she's wearing hugs every last curve. Her blonder hair is swept to one side and pinned and that damn tattoo is visible even from here. My chest tightens and anger beats away at me. Betrayal has never felt so hollow, so damn painful.

"See, ese. See!" Gabe shouts, pointing at her as she makes her way to the door. "She's tattooed."

"I see, Gabe." I grab my gun and open the door.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Going to talk to her."

"To talk to her?" He climbs out of the car and groans. "You're an idiot." He thumbs back at Tor's car. "See those shadows in that car, those are Jésus' men. She's Jésus' woman now..."

I don't say a word, just walk right to the door and yank it open. There's a thick cloud of smoke inside and only a few people scattered about. The waitress behind the bar eyes me when I walk in and whispers something to Tor. Tor glances over her shoulder, doing a double take before she grabs a paper bag off the bar and walks right over to me.

"What are you doing here?" she hisses, glancing around nervously.

"I could ask you the same thing." I nod toward her neck. "Nice fucking ink, Tor."

She grips my forearm, drags me to a door at the back of the room, and pulls me through, shutting it behind her. We're in a cramped hallway, the door at the end open to what looks like a dirty office. Closing her eyes, she leans her head back against the wall and chews on her bottom lip. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." Her eyes flash open. "You cannot be here, Jude. You're going to screw everything up."

I fucking knew it. I fucking knew it! I smirk and shake my head. "You shot Gabe."

She huffs out a breath. "He forced my hand. I have to look unfailingly loyal. A slight to Jésus is a slight to me. He said he wanted to piss on his dead body. What was I supposed to do?"

I stare at her. I can't believe she's gone to these lengths when there is no reward...and what lengths *exactly* has she gone to? My eyes lock on that tattoo wondering how much

of herself has she given to him? "This won't change a thing," I say. Anger slowly swells within me as I think about Jésus touching her, kissing her, trying to fucking claim her. "It won't do a goddamn thing," I shout, punching the wall behind her. She flinches. My knuckles split and I find the slightest form of relief in the pain.

She takes a tentative step toward me and places her palm on my chest. "Please just trust me. I'm in too deep now, Jude. Even if I wanted to walk away, Jésus is...he would hunt me. I have to finish this."

"In too deep?" I laugh as I lean in close to her. I inhale her scent, and it's no longer her, it's different. It's unfamiliar and tainted. Tainted by another man. "You fucking think?" I grate. Closing my eyes, I take a breath. "Tell me, Tor. How fucking deep *in you* has he been?"

She sighs and grabs my jaw. "Look at me." I glance down at her, my pulse thrumming in my neck. She's no longer mine and I've never known a time when she wasn't. I don't know what's going on in her head, her fucking mind, but all I know is she's lost. "I haven't fucked Jésus," she whispers, her eyes watering.

"So, you do his deals for him. Shoot fucking Gabe for him and yet, you haven't spread your legs for him. Come the fuck on, Tor." I groan. "Don't disrespect me with lies." I inch my face toward hers, brushing my mouth over her warm lips. It takes every ounce of restraint I possess not to kiss her. I graze my fingers over her arm, her skin so soft under my touch, and then, I grab the bag from her. "Tell Jésus I send my fucking regards, would you, *doll*?" I turn away, but she grabs my arm.

"Give me the money, Jude."

I arch a single brow at her and smirk. "Nah. Can't do that."

I hear the distinct click of a safety being removed before the barrel of a gun is rammed into my stomach.

"Sweetheart, I really need you to give me back that money." She narrows her eyes and her lips curl in the hint of a smile.

I see the hesitation, the fear in her eyes. "Shoot me," I dare. "Can't be any worse than what you've already done to me, now can it?"

The gun presses deeper into my side. Her teeth slide over her bottom lip. "I can't go back empty handed."

I hold out my hands and shrug one shoulder. "Then by all means...pull the trigger."

She slams her palm against my chest. "Damn it, Jude. Don't do this."

"I'm just doing my job, nothing personal."

She sighs and drops the gun, closing her eyes. "Then at least hit me and make it look good."

The woman in front of me is the love of my life, my meaning, my sole-fucking-purpose. She learned vengeance from me. I taught her how releasing it was with Bob and Joe. I made her this bloodthirsty beast. When I go to touch her, she flinches. I shake my head as I cup her cheek, sweeping my thumb along her jaw and over her plump bottom lip. "There's no way in hell that the last thing you'll remember about me is hate." I press a gentle kiss to her forehead and force myself to take a step back, fighting the pain tearing through my chest like a razorblade.

"He'll just do it instead, Jude. Either give me the money or take a swing. *Please*."

I drag my free hand down my face and turn toward the door. "Bye, Tor." I open the door and walk through the shitty bar. I'm nearly to the door when I hear a gunshot from the back, and I freeze, the next beat of my heart hesitating for a second before the door bangs open. Tor comes storming through, gripping her thigh with blood running down her leg and staining her white dress. Jésus' men come pouring in through the front entrance, guns

raised. Tor waves them off as she heads toward the door and they fall in line behind her—the newly crowned princess of the Sinaloa cartel.

I may love her, but sometimes you just have to know when to let shit go. She's gone, mad with the drive for vengeance and bloodshed, and I know nothing I can say or do will bring her back. I'm angry that I'm not enough to force her need for revenge away, but Tor's been through a lot. We both have.

And you can only break so many times in one life.

TOR

As soon as I get back, Michael greets me at the door. "Boss wants to see you," he says.

I sigh and limp towards Jésus' office. His eyes meet mine the second I push open the door. His dark brows pull together as he rests his elbows on his desk. "What happened?" he asks. He takes a cigarette from his pocket and slowly places it between his lips, lighting it. The click of his lighter snapping shut sounds entirely too loud in the silence of the room.

"I was shot." I point to my leg, stating the obvious.

He inhales a deep breath, his eyes locking onto the bloody bandage wrapped around my thigh. "Where were my men?"

"In the car," I say carefully.

"Who was it?"

I shrug. "I don't know. He shot me and took the money. Maybe one of Gabriel's men, I can't be sure."

He studies me through narrowed eyes for a moment. "Michael!" he shouts.

A few seconds later Michael walks into the office. "Boss."

"You let her get shot?"

Michael eyes me. "No, it wasn't his fault," I say.

"You let my woman get shot!" Jésus' cheeks turn red, his nostrils flaring as his hand moves to the desk.

BANG.

Warm blood splatters the side of my face and I close my eyes, swallowing back the horrified scream that tries to make its way up my throat. No matter how long I live in this world of criminals, murder and corruption, I will never get used to the utter ruthlessness, the complete lack of morality that comes with it.

"The doctor will be here soon," Jésus says. "You can go."

I nod and leave the room, my stomach churning uncomfortably. He's mad, but I don't know whether he's mad at me or the situation. I'd rather not stick around to find out.

I wake up when I feel something sweep over my arm. My eyes take a second to adjust to the darkness of the room. My head spins slightly from all the pain killers the doctor gave me. I can just make out Jésus sitting on the edge of the bed dressed in his trousers, no shirt.

"Jésus, come to bed," I say.

"Victoria," he breathes, a soft smile touching his lips. I roll onto my back and he reaches for my face, gently trailing his fingertip down my cheek. "So beautiful."

I inhale a shaky breath, fighting my hammering pulse. Jésus is a monster, a murderer, a drug lord. He does awful things without feeling an ounce of remorse, and yet that side of him doesn't worry me. This is what scares me, the moments when he's kind and gentle. The moments when he treats me like a lover, something valued and precious. I lie here in silence, just waiting.

"Such a slut," he whispers, trailing his hand down my body until his fingers brush over my bandaged leg. The smile fades and then he grabs me by the jaw with his free

hand, his fingers digging into my skin so hard I can feel the bite of his short fingernails. "I know what you did, Victoria. *Maybe* one of Gabriel's men? Jude Pearson was at El Pedro tonight, and you were in there for quite some time. Did he shoot you, or did you shoot yourself to protect him?" He grabs my thigh squeezing. I scream out and he laughs. "Was this before or after you fucked him?"

My heart leaps into a sprint and I sit up, trying to pull away from him. He releases me, and I dive for the other side of the bed, but he grabs me around the waist, yanking me back. I struggle, but he lays his weight over me, pressing me into the mattress. "Stop," I plead.

Laughing, he wraps his hand around my throat. I turn my head to the side as his lips touch my cheek. "You betrayed me, Victoria." I close my eyes fighting back tears. My mind short circuits as his hot breath blows over my neck and his fingers tighten on my skin. "After I gave you everything. And you gave him *my* fucking pussy."

"I didn't!"

"You still want him, but you won't let me have you. What makes him so good? Am I so bad?" he snarls.

I buck beneath him, fighting before I snap. "*You* took everything from me!" I shout.

He shoves me down on the bed hard, and I cough against his brutal hold. "No," he says, a flicker of amusement in his voice, "but I'm about to." He roughly yanks the material of my dress over my thigh. Complete panic consumes me. He slams his lips over mine, and a muffled cry slips from my lips. "I wanted you to come to me, chiquita, but you've been a bad girl. I want you, and now I'm going to have you."

He tears the thin dress down the front, baring my breasts to him. I fight, clawing at his arms as he tries to pin me down. "Such a shame about that scar," he says, on a laugh as his palm glides over my right breast, brushing

over the ugly scar tissue from the bullet that nearly killed me. "But then, someone already fucked you up long before that." His fingers trail down my stomach, following the long line that runs from my sternum to my belly button. His hand dips lower and lands on the inside of my thigh. Wrenching my legs apart, he grinds his hard cock against me. Bile rises in my throat and I shove him, but it's pointless. The harder I fight him, the rougher he is. I thrash and claw at him until he smacks me across the face so hard that my head snaps to the side and blood wells in my mouth.

"Don't move!" he growls.

I freeze and he pulls away from me, roughly yanking at his belt as he kneels over me. This isn't happening. Not again. A man took everything from me once, but never again. I tilt my head back looking for something I can use as a weapon. Anything. With a thrash of my legs I kick him in the stomach hard enough to push him away, and I scramble for the bedside table. He grips a handful of my hair and I scream.

My fingers wrap around the wire of the lamp as he tosses me down on my back. I yank the wire, grab the base, and swing the lamp at his head. It shatters against the side of his face, sending pieces of shattered porcelain everywhere. He falls off me, but only for a second, and then he's right there, his face an inch from mine, his body crushing me into the mattress. Blood trickles from a cut at his hairline. "You're going to pay for that one, chiquita. I'm going to fuck you like the slut that you are, the bookies whore." He shoves his trousers down and fists his dick. My stomach rolls and my breaths become nothing more than rapid pants. He grabs my thighs, a sick smile working over his lips. "I bet your pussy feels amazing," he says, laughing.

The shame and degradation wash over me, stealing all sense of who I am, making me feel weak and powerless. Images flash through my mind, Joe holding me down and

forcing himself inside me, him branding me. My hands scramble around on the sheet beneath me until my fingers brush over a large piece of broken porcelain from the lamp. I clutch it in my hand, gripping hard enough to slice my palms. Mustering every bit of strength I have, I drive it into the side of his neck. His eyes go wide, all the colour draining from his face as he coughs. I ignore the pain in my hand, ramming the shard further into his neck. Blood runs down my arm. It drips on my chest. I shove him off and straddle his prone body.

"Fuck you, Jésus," I say, wrenching the shard out of his neck.

Arterial spray shoots across the bed, and he clutches frantically at his neck. He opens his mouth and tries to shout, but I slam my hand over his trembling lips. I hold him down, watching him bleed out, and I feel nothing. This man would have raped me. He took my daughter, he used her to keep me here. He is scum, and his pathetic death is nothing but justice. His movements weaken and his breaths become gasping pants, like a fish out of water. And finally, he goes limp. I fall off him, sitting on the blood-stained sheets as I try and catch my breath. I glance at Jésus, then at the door. Now I'm fucked. I hated Jésus, but he was the only thing keeping me alive here. I leap off the bed and run to the bathroom, stopping in front of the mirror to look at my reflection. Blood coats my chest and neck; my torn dress is splattered with it. I pull the dress over my head and turn the taps on, attempting to wash the visible evidence off because I don't have time to shower. One of his men could come in here at any point and see their dead boss on the bed.

I go to the closet, take out another dress, and tug it over my head. As I'm smoothing it out, I go to the bed and toss the duvet over this body, hoping it will buy me a little more time if anyone takes a quick glance. I open the bedroom door and look out in the hall. There are two guys walking

with their backs to me at the end of the hall, so I slip through the door, closing it behind me. I'm not a prisoner here as such. I can walk the halls freely, but someone might wonder why I'm not with Jésus at this time of night.

I calmly make my way through the house, keeping my gaze fixed on the floor. The guards pay no attention as I make my way to the front door. There's a line of SUV's parked outside the house. I keep walking until I find Jésus' Hummer, and open the door. I yank the sun visor down and the keys fall into my lap. Taking a deep breath, I shove the key in the ignition and start the engine with a roar. The second I reverse; I hear a bullet ping off the hood. *Fuck.*

I slam my foot over the accelerator and floor it down the drive. Bullets ricochet off the car like rain, but there's a reason I picked this one. It's bullet proof. I charge towards the gate, bracing as the car crashes right through the steel and taking it off its hinges. The car jolts awkwardly and there's the sound of metal grinding against metal before I'm flying down the long, winding road that leads down to the city. I clutch my phone, pressing Gabe's number and holding it to my ear. It rings and rings before it goes to voicemail.

"Damn it, Gabe!"

The loud, rapid fire of a machine gun rings out along with the *chink, chink, chink* of bullets hitting the back of the car. I drive as fast as I can, passing the boundaries of Juarez city. I could try and call Jude, but I don't think he'll answer, and I don't have time for that right now.

I fumble with the phone that Ronan's man gave me and press number one. It rings several times before Ronan picks up.

"Ah, Victoria."

The turn I need to take creeps up on me in the dark and I nearly miss it. I slam my foot over the brake and jerk the wheel to the right. The car spins around and screeches

around the corner, taking out a road sign. People leap out of the way, horns blare and bullets fly. I just need to make it to Gabe.

"Jésus is dead!" I shout over the noise. "You need to get Cayla."

"Already taken care of. I have the little one," he says. *But he didn't even know Jésus was dead.* I frown down at the phone in my lap.

"What?"

"I have your child. I'll be in touch, Victoria." And the line goes dead. *What the hell?* He screwed me, I know he did. This horrible feeling settles in the pit of my stomach. The Russian has my daughter and this time, I have absolutely no idea how to get her back. I need Jude. I need Gabe. I need help.

I try and call Gabe again, and again it goes to voicemail.

"Gabe, I swear to god..." Another hail storm of bullets hit the car. "Pick up your fucking phone!"

I glance at the mob of cars following me in the rearview and push the accelerator all the way to the floor. Looks like I'm bringing this shit show to him then.

JUDE

My vision swims as I lean back in the leather chair in Gabe's office. I glance down at the nearly empty bottle of tequila, and clumsily wipe at my mouth.

I walked away from Tor.

One minute I'm angry as piss at her, the next I'm heartbroken. I miss her. I miss Cayla. *God, I miss Cayla.* I close my eyes and think about her little hands rubbing through the scruff on my face, her laugh. I take another swig of tequila. I hate the way it tastes, but it does a damn good job of numbing you up.

Gabe walks into the living room with a wide grin. "I see you're drunk. See, tequila makes everything better, and..." He waves his hand through the air, "strippers and tequila make everything mucho better." He claps as two women strut into the room in nothing but thongs.

"Shit, Gabe, I don't want—"

"Just watch, ese. Just watch them."

I sink further into the chair and lift the bottle again, groaning. He turns the stereo on, slaps one of the girls on the ass, then takes a seat next to me. I stare down in my lap, picking at the label on the bottle. Gabe claps his hand over my shoulder. "Come on, ese, it's been too long. Your poor dick must be thirsty as fuck."

I glare at him. "I'm not interested," I say.

"You say that, these are Juarez's best ladies. Look at them, my friend." He points, a drunk smile crossing his lips. "Look at the chi chis on that one. Don't tell me you don't miss the feel of a woman, her curves, the taste...ai ai ai."

I wipe my hand over my face and shake my head.

"She's gone," he says. "She turned on you, Jude." That comment slices to the bone, so I turn the bottle back up, sucking down the remaining tequila. "It's not good for a man to have nothing but his hand," Gabe laughs, and I shove him.

"Fucking shut up."

One of the women trots over, swiping her finger over Gabe's jaw before she straddles him. "Oh, cholita," he says, and I groan.

The other one comes swaying over to me, her red lips pulled into a tight smile. "Not fucking interested," I say, but she just plops her ass right on down. I grunt under her weight.

"Que?" she bats her eyes.

"Gabe, I'm gonna fucking punch you for this shit."

"Ah, ese, just let her grind over your gringo dick for a minute—"

The sound of gun fire erupts. I shove the woman off my lap and grab my pistol from the table.

"What is this shit?" Gabe shouts with a hint of a slur as he adjusts his dick and cocks his gun. "Nothing pisses me off more than having a lap dance interrupted by cartel bullshit."

We stagger to the window. I have to cover one eye with a hand to see straight. All I can see are the sparks from guns firing. "Fuck...I'm too drunk for this shit."

"I'm too drunk and my cock is too hard." Gabe laughs, waving his loaded gun around.

"Would you stop with that shit?" I shove his hand away.

"Oh, what bookie? You scared of a little bullet." He raises the gun again and smiles before firing it straight into the air. The women scream. "Did you piss your little girly panties?"

Shaking my head, I stare through the window.

"Let them all shoot each other," Gabe says. "It'll be fine...Cholita?" he shouts. "Come back. Sit in my lap."

There's a loud bang. The grating noise of metal against metal as a Hummer comes crashing through Gabe's front gate.

"Oh, hell no. They did not just run through my gate." He stands up and wobbles before firing his gun through the window, glass shattering and spraying in all directions. "Fuck you, puta."

I laugh. We're about to get fucking killed. I'm too drunk. He's too drunk. A spray of bullets comes pummeling through the sheetrock. Vases bust. Feathers fly from pillows. The strippers are in the corner crying, and Gabe just laughs. "Welcome to the cartel," he sings.

There's a few explosion. Pops of guns. People shouting, and then silence.

"Come on, ese," he says, wobbling toward the doorway and grabbing a machine gun from underneath a table. I follow him through to the front of the house. When the door swings open, two cars are in flames, and a silver Hummer has crashed into the side of the house.

"Jesus fucking—"

"Jésus!" Gabe shouts. "You pussy fuckface bastardo." He lifts the machine gun and randomly fires at the Hummer, but the bullets just ricochet from the side. "Fucking pussy in his bullet proof car." He stumbles across the courtyard, and I follow with my gun raised. I stare down the sites, but everything's blurring. Double vision's a bitch in situations like this.

The door to the Hummer clicks open and Gabe holds up his gun as he drunkenly sways back and forth. "Don't shoot

me, Gabe, you asshole." The door opens wider and a bare foot touches the ground, then another, a swash a white material billowing around them. Tor. Her lip is spit, her jaw swelling. She slams the door and the side mirror falls off.

Gabe groans and tosses his hands up before he glares at me. "This is why I stick with strippers, this shit." He glares at Tor. "You broke my gate."

"You broke my fence," she says. "And if you answered your bloody phone, you could have saved the gate."

Emotions swirl within me like an angry wave. Heartache and anger, longing and hate. Fuck, this woman is like a violent storm that I can't help but get swept up in. The wind blows and her blonde hair catches on the breeze, whipping around her face. I want to hate her, I want to love her...I drag my hand down my face, staring at her as she approaches.

"Jude," she whispers, so close I can practically fucking feel her.

"Why are you here?" I ask, my tone a mask of indifference.

"Ah, ese, those strippers cost me a lot of money and now," Gabe tosses his hands into the air and snorts, "this shit." He moans as he stumbles over to one of the blazing cars and opens fire with his machine gun.

Sighing, I grab Tor's arm and drag her away from the flaming cars.

Her eyes lock with mine. "Jésus is dead."

"Congratu-fucking-lations?" I shrug and grab a smoke from my pocket and light it.

Gabe fires off a few more rounds, shouting something in Spanish. She sighs and throws her head back before turning and walking back toward the house.

I stumble after her, taking a deep drag of my cigarette. "So, that's it, he's dead and you just prance your ass back in here?"

She stops and turns to face me, her eyes swirling with pain. "I'm back because I need you, Jude."

"Oh," I snort, blowing smoke from my lips. "You do?"

She closes her eyes. Her shoulders tense. Her brows pull together.

"What in the fucking hell do you need *me* for, huh, Tor?" I step toward her and she drops her chin to her chest.

"Cayla's..." She won't look at me and with each passing moment of silence, the beating of my heart grows more furious. "She's... she's alive, Jude. I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

There's nothing but white noise. Static. For a moment, that comment sobers me. My chest goes tight and I can't breathe. "She's..." I grab both sides of my head and stagger on my feet. "She's alive?" I want to fall to my knees and thank a god I don't believe in, but just as soon as the disbelief, the relief has set in, it's quickly consumed by a blinding rage. She said she was sorry. She knew. She knew she was alive and she let me believe my daughter was dead. My face burns with anger. I step right up to her, staring down at her as all my muscles tense. "Tor," I say through gritted teeth. She won't look at me, so I grab her chin and force her head up. "I've believed my little girl was dead, and you've fucking *known*? Tell me you haven't known, Tor. "

She squeezes her eyes shut. "I'm sorry. I couldn't tell you," she says quietly.

"Sorry?" My jaw clenches, and before I can even think about what I'm doing I grab her shoulder and shove her. "You're sorry that you couldn't tell me my daughter was alive?"

"I made a deal with Jésus. I—"

"I don't give a flying fuck what deal you made, you could have told me she was alive goddamn it."

"I sent her to my sister in exchange for you...and me. She *was* gone. I thought you were dead, and as long as I stayed with him, she was safe." She shakes her head. "I thought she would be safe, I—"

"What do you mean *thought*?" My grip on her shoulder tightens. She pinches the bridge of her nose, and I shake her. "Where is she, Tor?"

"Ronan has her."

Red flashes across my eyes and I shove Tor back so hard she stumbles into the wall. I pace, taking drag after drag from my cigarette, because what the fuck are we going to do now?

"I need your help, Jude," Tor whispers.

"Now that the goddamn Russian devil has her you need my help?" I shake my head. "Jésus, Tor, I could have managed Jésus..." I scrub my hand over my face and let the anger and rage melt into my body. I stand glaring at her, my pulse visible with each beat of my heart.

I pull my phone from my pocket and dial Ronan's number. It only rings once before he answers. "Ah, *American*. I expected a call from you." He laughs.

"Give me..." I can hardly breath I'm so angry, "my daughter back, you sorry sack of Russian shit."

"You wound me," he says.

My heart threatens to pound out of my chest. I want to yell and scream at him, but it will do no good with this man. Empty threats are just that. Empty. "I want my daughter," I whisper. "Please."

"I will not harm the little one, I simply need a favor from you before I give her back."

Closing my eyes, I throw my head back. "I just want my little girl." My throat goes tight and catches on the desperate feeling clawing its way up my throat.

"You pain me, American. You do. I promise she will be safe. I will cherish her as if she were my own -"

"I want to see her." I clench my teeth.

"I can send you a picture," he says.

"No." I take a deep breath. "I need to physically see her before I agree on shit with you."

"Fine." He sighs. "I will send you the address of a hotel in Moscow. Go there, and I will be in touch." He hangs up, and I grip the phone in my hand as I glare at Tor. There's so much I want to say to her, but I can't go over any of that right now. Before I've even shoved my phone back in my pocket, it dings with an address.

"Gabe," I shout. "Gabe?"

The sound of someone gagging bounces around the courtyard. "Ese..." Gabe mumbles. "Tequila and gunfire are not a good combination, si."

I round the corner and Gabe comes staggering around, stepping through the plants. He goes to lean against the edge of the house and he nearly falls. I grab his shirt and hold him up. "I need to go Russia?"

"Fuck the Russians..." He slumps against the brick exterior of his house. "And fuck Narnia, too."

"Listen." I slap his cheek and his eyes go wide. "I need a way to Russia right fucking now."

He hiccups before he yanks free from my grasp. "So angry..." he mumbles as he pulls his phone from his pocket and presses it to his ear. "Gustavo," he slurs. "I need a plane, my friend."

break

I toss some clothes into a duffel bag and check my watch. I have another hour before the plane will be ready and it seems like a motherfucking eternity. I zip the bag and grab my gun, shoving it in the waist of my jeans. I take a breath, and it hits me all over again. Tor lied to me, allowing me to believe the most precious part of my life had been lost.

The door to the bathroom creaks open and she comes out wrapped in a towel. When she glances up at me,

everything ignites. A raging fire spreads over my cheeks. "You lied to me," I say, grabbing her and slamming her against the wall. Her eyes widen as I inch my face close to hers. "You fucking lied to me, Tor."

She shoves me. "You left me no choice! I did what I had to do to save her."

I want to shout and yell, fuck, I want to punch a hole in the wall. The rage is so strong, I can't even form words, all I can do is use brute force. I push her harder against the wall. "She's my daughter, too, Tor." I lean closer in, my lips almost brushing hers. That primal part of me is tempted to kiss her, but we are not the same people we were—and I don't know that we ever will be. She betrayed me, not by selling me out. Not by staying with Jésus, but by letting me believe my little girl was dead. I focus on the fact that Cayla is alive and yet in no better position than she was before and my fingers dig into Tor's skin.

"I'm sorry." She struggles under my hold, and I just glare at her, rage battering my insides. With each hard breath I draw in, I tighten my grip on her until she winces. "It killed me not to tell you that night," she whispers. "But you would have gone for her."

"Your damn right I would have." I give her another shove before I release my hold on her and walk away, pacing. "I'll never fucking forgive you for letting me think she was dead." I point at her.

"I don't need your forgiveness. I just need you to do what you do best, Jude. I want her back."

"Do what I do best?" I laugh. "Amazing! Now...now...after you've let me believe she's dead, after you've played the part of Jésus' fucking whore, now you want me to do what I fucking do best?" I shake my head.

Her jaw clenches, her eyes dance with anger, and then she fucking slaps me. "Fuck you, Jude."

Closing my eyes, I release a slow breath because I want to slap her right back. My fingers twitch at my side. "I should fucking slap you right back."

"Nothing Jésus hasn't already done," she says.

And then my gaze falls to her split lip. My emotions war with each other, a push and pull between hate and love. This is not us. This is not my Tor... I step to the side, dragging my hands through my hair before I slam my fist through the wall. That small amount of pain that shoots up my arm provides little release for me.

"I don't know what you want me to say," she breathes.

"Nothing. You can't fucking say anything to fix this." I glare at her before I turn and cross the room, grabbing more clothes to shove in my bag.

"It's Cayla, Jude!"

"I know it's fucking Cayla!" I shout, my nostrils flaring with the rage boiling and simmering back to the top. I feel like a dormant volcano desperate to blow.

She charges at me. Her palms land on my chest and she shoves me in the chest. "Tell me one thing you wouldn't do for her, Jude!"

"There is nothing, *nothing* I wouldn't do for her, and at one point, Tor, there was nothing I wouldn't have done for you. But I would never let you believe she was dead. I would never do that to you."

"We lost her! I did the only thing that was left to protect her." Tears spill down her cheeks and she angrily swipes at it. "I gave her up, Jude. To save her. Can you imagine what that's like?"

"You gave both of us up, Tor." I feel the anger dying down, being swallowed by the sick feeling of grief and helplessness.

She shakes her head. "You were dispensable. She wasn't. If our situations were reversed I'd want you to do the same. Every. Time."

I glare at her. She thinks that's what she'd want. It's easy to think anything until you experience the hurt, the betrayal. "I would have found another way that didn't lead you to believe she was dead," I say as I shake my head. None of that matters. All that matters is Cayla.

"You think that now, but I was desperate, and Ronan handed me a way out. The only way I could see."

She trusted the Russian over me. That's enough to bring that anger bubbling right back to the top. It pops until it finally spills over and I swat at the lamp on the table, watching it topple to the floor and crash. "Making deals with everyone except me. Fucking Jésus and Ronan..." I storm toward her. She squares her shoulders and steps closer to me until I can feel her warm breath blow across my face. I clench my fist. It's all I can fucking do to maintain myself.

"You want to hurt me, Jude?" she says before shoving me again. "Do it. Make yourself feel better," she dares.

The thin thread of control snaps and I grab her throat, squeezing as I push her across the room and pin her to the wall. "You've forgotten who I am. I'm not nice, Tor. Don't fuck with me." I tighten my grip and she claws at my hands while her eyes narrow in defiance.

"I'm not nice anymore either. Guess we're even."

Each breath I draw is audible. I stare at my fingers twitching over her throat. When my gaze lifts to hers, I find her eyes void. Blank of all emotion. And I've seen her like this before, after Bob, after Joe, after Caleb. After the person she was—the person she was meant to be— was slaughtered.

Sighing, I drop my hand from her throat and walk to the door, opening it and slamming it closed behind me. There is nothing I can do to fix this. Nothing that can be said to take back the hurt. The lies. It is what it fucking is, but Cayla is still alive and I have to find her.

TOR

I walk up to the battered Hummer and open the boot, throwing my bag inside. Jude is standing just outside the door of the house talking to Gabe. He glances over at me, a frown marring his face. I ignore him and climb into the driver's side, starting the engine. He glares at me as he starts walking this way, and I know he's going to lose his shit in three, two, one...

He rounds the front of the car and opens the passenger door, climbing in. I glance at him, waiting for him to kick off, but instead he simply faces the window. I'm glad he's not pulling his macho shit and insisting I stay safe, but at the same time, I'm not. It means he doesn't care if I'm safe anymore, and that hurts. After everything that we've been through, everything that I've done to try and protect our daughter...

I guess I always believed that he would forgive me.

I pull away from Gabe's house and head down the long driveway. Jude and I don't talk as we make our way through the streets of Juarez. He simply gives me directions every now and then. Eventually we arrive at a small airfield on the outskirts of the city. There are several men standing around when I pull up next to a private jet. The stairs are already down, the door open and waiting.

I don't even have the car fully in park when Jude opens the door and gets out. I shove the shift in park and he's already around back, grabbing the bags out of the car. I climb out of the car.

"Give Benji the key," Jude says, pointing at the man now standing next to the car.

Without question, I hand the key to the man. He bows his head and gestures towards the steps leading into the plane.

I climb the steps and take a seat in one of the plush leather chairs. Jude steps in and glances at me, the muscles in his jaw ticking. I completely expect him to sit as far away from me as possible, but instead he takes the seat opposite me. We don't say a word to each other, and he simply sits there, his shoulders so tense it looks as though he's forcing himself to remain seated.

The engines start and the plane hums like an angry bee on the runway. Jude's hardened gaze remains fixed out the window, and I hate it. I hate the tension that stretches between us, but he's here. He's helping me. I want to say something to him, but I don't know what. I don't know when Jude and I became strangers, or worse, enemies.

"Ronan came to me like the fucking hand of god," I say, "willing to make sure Cayla was safe while I killed Jésus." I shake my head. "And the whole time, he was screwing me over."

"Sure, Tor. Sure," he grumbles and tosses his head back against the seat and closes his eyes.

I hate that we're here, but I can't bring myself to regret what I did. Cayla is still alive, and that has to be enough. I lean forward and bounce my leg nervously. "He won't hurt her." I say, more to myself than to Jude. If being with Jésus has taught me one thing, it's that everything is strategic. Ronan used Cayla as motivation for me to kill Jésus, and now she's motivation for something else.

Jude scrubs his hands over his face and groans. I can feel his aggravation, his anger, but underneath it all I feel this drowning sense of helplessness swallowing us both whole. "You do realize," he says, his eyes trained out the window as the plane taxis to the runway, "this is not something we can all escape alive, right?"

"Nothing new there," I mumble. The plane bumps along the tarmac, picking up speed and soon enough the wheels and my stomach catch as we lift into the air. The tension fills the small space until I feel as though I can barely breathe. He's like a force of nature, the static electricity that hangs in the air before a storm. And I'm just waiting for the thunder, so I call it forth.

"Just say it, Jude." I sigh.

He slowly looks at me, cold, detached...this is the man I met three years ago. The bookie. "Did you enjoy fucking him?"

I sigh, tightening my fists until my nails cut into my palms. "I didn't fuck him."

Jude snorts and I want to slap him. "Another one of your lies? "

"Why would I lie to you? At this stage, why would I lie to you, Jude?"

He sighs. "You expect me to believe he just kept you there. Some sick son of a bitch like him—and he didn't touch you?"

I drop my gaze to my lap. I can't lie to him anymore. "He kissed me, but he said he wanted me to come to him willingly. I was never willing, so..." I lift my head and tilt my face to the side, watching him. "That's why he told me you were dead. As long as you were alive, all the time in the world couldn't make me betray you. Not like that." I frown. I still can't understand why Jésus did the things he did, why he was kind to me, why he never forced himself on me...until he did. "I only stayed for Cayla. Be mad all you want, but deep down, you know that."

His jaw tightens and he drags his hand through his hair. "It doesn't matter what you did, Tor." His voice softens but he still won't look at me.

"Then why can't you look at me?"

"Because, I'm fucking pissed." He drags in a deep breath and swipes his hand over his face. "I can almost understand why you did what you did, Tor. *Almost*. What I will never fucking understand is why you lied to me about Cayla." His nostrils flare and he closes his eyes.

I don't know what to say to him. What can I say? "Jude, what would you have done if you'd known where she was?"

"Gone and fucking gotten her."

"Exactly, and I would have come to you, Jude, and we would have never stopped running. From Jésus, or Ronan. Whoever."

"And now?" He laughs sarcastically. "Now, how is it going to be any different?"

"It wasn't supposed to go like this!" I fight tears of frustration. "Ronan fucked me over, but I tried, Jude. I tried to do the impossible." A choked laugh leaves my lips. "God, I used to be a doctor, now I'm killing cartel members. Just how I always dreamed my life would be." This blind hysteria clings to the edges of my consciousness and I feel like I'm losing my grip on reality.

"There is no way outta this. Ever. It will always be like this. Us constantly running. We're in too deep. We're—"

"No!" I shake my head. "No. We're going to end it, Jude. We'll end it, and....and it will be fine." My hands shake and I turn my face towards the window in the hope that he can't see the blind panic consuming me. I've lived for months with one purpose. Protect Cayla. Kill Jésus. I sacrificed everything for it, and that has to be worth something. Jude always fixes everything. He makes it right. He keeps us safe.

"This type of lifestyle, Tor—the kind I've lived since the day I was born, you never escape it. It's like a shadow that clings to you and sucks the life right out of you. There is no ending it, only postponing the final blow."

I turn my gaze towards him and close my eyes, allowing the tears to fall. "Please don't," I whisper.

"Well, what the hell do you want me to say then, huh?" His fists are clenched, his knee bouncing.

I open my eyes and meet his green gaze, so turbulent and angry all the time. I feel like I'm splintering, like the shattering of a mirror. I'm now distorted, an ugly reflection of what I once was. "Tell me you'll fix it," I breathe. "Like you always do." My breaths come in rapid pants as my chest constricts. This cannot be it. His expression softens and he leans forward, stroking his fingers over my cheek as he presses a soft kiss to my forehead. I lean into him, gripping handfuls of his shirt, inhaling the scent of his cologne mixed with smoke. I hate that he thinks we're defeated, because Jude is never defeated. "Please," I beg, my voice breaking.

"I'll fix it," he sighs, brushing his fingers through my hair.

I know it's naïve to believe him, but I do. I have to.

JUDE

The second the door to the plane opens, I'm out. The cold wind burns my face as I step down the stairs.

"Jude," Tor shouts behind me. I ignore her and continue across the snow-covered tarmac. "Jude."

"What?" I spin to face her and she glares at me.

"Where are we going?"

"To some fucking hotel." I continue toward the tiny airport, my pulse throbbing through my jugular. "Don't worry about the details, Tor."

She runs to catch up with me, and grabs my hand, winding her chilled fingers though mine. Such a simple fucking touch, yet it leaves me uncomfortable. There's so much that has been left unsaid, and so much that has been said that can't be taken back. Maybe that's the way it should be. I don't know. I can't think straight right now, so I just give her hand a subtle squeeze and keep walking.

Soon enough, we've hailed a cab. The ride through Moscow is silent. The large man in the front of the taxi looks angry, a permanent scowl set on his pale face. He drops us at the hotel and we check in without a word to each other.

Tor seems on edge as we head down the hotel hallway, her eyes constantly assessing each person that passes us.

She stands close behind me when I unlock the room, and as soon as the door closes behind us, Tor bolts it, checking that it's locked. She turns and presses her back to it, watching me for a moment. I can see the worry churning in her steel-blue eyes.

That woman is my weakness on every level. I'm torn between wanting to throw her down on the bed and fuck her until she can't move, and choking her. Everything's changed, and I don't know how to handle us. "I guess we stay here tonight," I say.

She nods and slowly takes a deep breath. "Do you hate me, Jude?"

"No." I look away from her. I don't hate her. I'll always love her. I'm just angry and anger is an emotion I don't have the best ability to manage. "It's fine, Tor."

I look up in time to see her nod. "I'm going to take a shower." She reaches for the bottom of her shirt and pulls it over her head. My eyes roam over her bare skin, over that damn scar that is like an eternal reminder of how destructive my existence has been to her. I've destroyed her body, her mind, and now her heart. I swallow around the lump in my throat and turn to cross the room. "Jude, look at me," she says.

I drag my hands through my hair, sighing before I turn to face her. "Yeah?"

She studies me for a second, as if she's taking in every single feature. "I love you," she says, and then she walks into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

I stare at the door. After all this, she still loves me, and I still love her, and that has to mean something.

I sit on the edge of the bed and drop my chin to my chest. I have no fucking clue what I'm going to do. This shit is so deep and although I've known nothing outside of a life of crime, I know nothing of the level of depravity I'm now submersed in. This is not fucking Alabama. This is not a bad bet. A drunk redneck who just needs a good beating.

This is the Russian mob and the cartel. What the actual fuck?

How the hell am I going to infiltrate this shit? I pull a cigarette from my pocket and stare at the "no smoking" sign as I light it, blowing a ring of smoke and watching it dissipate across the sign. *Guns*. I need guns and contacts. *Shit*.

I take another drag and a sudden knock on the door startles me. There's another, more determined knock and I stab the smoke out before I grab my gun from the bag, cock it, and hold it behind my back as I head toward the door. Staring through the peephole, I see two Russians—one of them familiar—Boris number two. Fuck my life right now. I happen to catch movement and can barely make out the glint from the gun in Boris' hand. Ronan has Cayla, and now what? He's lured me here just so he can kill me? I don't have time to fuck around with this shit. I place the gun to the door, lining it up where I figure the other guy's head is and pull the trigger. Blood splatters the peephole. A bullet comes flying through the door, whizzing by my ear and I move my gun to the right and shoot. Boris grunts and I hear one of them fall against the wall. I quickly open the door with my gun still aimed. The guy I don't know is sprawled out on the floor, blood pouring from his head and Boris is slumped against the wall clutching his stomach. Blood wells between his fingers, and his face is twisted in pain.

Propping the door open with my foot, I lean down, grab his arm, and drag him into the hotel room, locking the door behind me.

"Where's Ronan?" I shout, aiming the gun at his head. The door to the bathroom slams against the wall and Tor comes bolting out, a thin towel wrapped around her soaked body.

"What the hell, Jude?" She rushes to the door and opens it. I know she sees the dead guy on the floor in front of her, and now she's glancing up and down the hallway. Sighing, she turns around, clutching her towel in one hand as she walks toward me. "Give me the gun," she says, holding out her hand. "Go drag the other one in here before someone sees."

"It's fucking Russia. No one gives a shit," I mumble as I drop the gun in her palm, open the door, and drag the dead fuck inside.

"I give a shit," she mumbles, pointing the gun at Boris. "Did you need him?" she asks me.

"I don't fucking know." I shrug and stare down at him. "Where the fuck is Ronan?"

She lets out an aggravated sigh and rolls her head to the side. "He's going to bleed out, Jude. If you need him, now would be the time to say."

"Well," I wave my hand at him. "Fix him or some shit."

Grumbling, she shoves the gun into my hand and grabs a towel. She kneels beside him and presses a wadded-up towel against his bloodied stomach. Boris glares at her, gritting his teeth. "Hold that," she says to him.

She walks over to our bags, taking out some clothes before she slams the bathroom door. A couple of minutes later and she comes out dressed in a pair of jeans and a hoody, her hair braided over her shoulder. "Why are you braiding your hair when you're telling me he's going to bleed out?"

She huffs as she drops to her knees beside Boris and lifts his shirt, examining the bullet hole. She presses her hand over it and glances up at me. "Jude, go to my bag and get the tampons."

"The what?" I stare at her. "You want a pussy plug?"

She rolls her eyes. "Oh my god. Yes. The purple box."

I glare at her as I go to her bag and rummage through it. I grab one of the slender packages and hand it to her. "There's your tampon." I look at Boris. "Where are they keeping my daughter?"

He grits his teeth, staring at me while Tor rams that tampon right into his gut. "Another one." She holds out her hand, wiggling her fingers, and I get her another one. She's ramming shit into him left and right. "Now," she pats his cheek and then grabs his jaw, forcing him to look at her. "I really think you should tell us where she is, or things are about to become really unpleasant for you."

He spits on the ground and curses at her in Russian. She shrugs and climbs to her feet. "Bad choice. Now you get him." She points at me. "And that's going to be so much worse than bleeding out." She turns and walks over to me with a smirk. "Try not to make too much noise. It is a hotel." She walks into the bathroom, and I hear the taps turn on.

A sick smile spreads across Boris' lips between groans. "I'm not afraid of you, bookie."

"Yeah, fucking yeah," I mumble as I walk over to him and crouch beside him. "So, did you know you were fucking me up the ass when you were in Mexico? 'Cause that really doesn't set well with me." I lean close to his face, my heart pounding in my chest. "I can't fucking stand when people think they outsmart me, and you, Boris number two, you thought you outsmarted me, didn't you? You and that slimy, pale bastard."

He laughs, and well, that just flies all the fuck over me. I grab his suit jacket and yank him up, and a phone clatters to the floor. He glances back at Tor. "Pity," he says. "She really is too pretty to have been a Mexican's whore."

There is no thought. I lift the gun, shove it under Boris' chin, and pull the trigger. Blood splatters my face and his body slumps over.

"Why did you make me waste tampons if you were just going to shoot him?" Tor groans.

"He pissed me off."

"Of course." She steps beside me, staring down at Boris number two. "Well, we won't be getting the deposit back."

"Did you really expect any less?" Here we stand with two dead Russians at our feet. Blood everywhere.

I can see it in her eyes, I can see that she revels in this more than she lets on. This violence has leaked into her soul, her mind, her body. She thrives in it just like I do, and it's in this moment I realize I've missed it. Some men are destined for great things and some of us are destined for bloodshed.

I take a step toward her and grab her by the back of the head, yanking her body against mine. I stare down into her eyes filled with vengeance. I'd be a fucking fool to think I'd find anything better than this right here, to think that anything would ever be able to come between us. I slam my lips over hers in a brutal kiss. My tongue brushes against hers and my dick twitches. "Fuck," I say against her lips. "I've missed this."

My hands roam over her body, my skin heating with a primal need to own her, claim her. She moans into my mouth, her fingers threading desperately through my hair and then, Boris' phone rings in my hand. I break away from Tor and stare down at the screen with Ronan's name flashing across it. My jaw tightens when I answer it.

"What," I say.

A low chuckle comes down the line. "Ah, bookie. Is Alex still breathing?"

"What the fuck do you think?"

"You just cannot get good men these days." He sighs. There's a long pause, the creak of a chair and shouting in the background. "I want to meet with you...and Victoria. We will discuss terms, and then you can see the child. All will

be well." I hear gun shots come over the line, followed by muffled cursing in Russian.

I should have known it wouldn't be so simple. All will be fucking well, what a load of shit. "Somewhere public," I say.

"Keep the phone. I will be in touch." He hangs up.

Tor folds her arms over her chest, chewing on her lip. "I don't like it. I don't trust him."

"Well, it's not like we have much of a choice, now is it?"

She turns and paces toward the window. "Let me meet him."

"Have you lost your fucking mind, woman?" Groaning, I shake my head.

She turns to face me. "Jude, I don't trust him. If we both go, he can kill us both. Then Cayla has no one. If anything happens to me, she'll still have you." She shrugs one shoulder like it's the simplest fucking thing in the world.

"No way in hell I am letting you go. Jesus, he wants something from me, Tor. He's not going to kill me and besides, you're a woman for Christ's sake."

"Yes, Jude," she glares at me, "I'm a woman. I'm the woman that birthed our daughter. I'm the woman that helped you kill Joe. And I am the woman who killed the boss of the Sinaloa cartel. Don't come at me with your bullshit."

"Oh, I guess you want a crown now?" I mumble as I step over one of the bodies on the way to take a piss, "I don't care how badass you think you are, you're not going by yourself. End of, Tor." I whip my dick out and piss.

"Ugh! Can you not? For a second, just stop and think about it logically, Jude?" she says from the bathroom doorway.

"I did." I shake my dick before I stuff it back in my jeans. "The answer is no." I smirk as I step around her and back into the room. I flop down on one of the chairs, pull a cigarette and light it as I stare at the two dead Russians on the floor.

She leans against the wall next to the bathroom door, looking at me. "No, it is *not* logical. You don't put all your eggs in one basket."

I cock a brow at her. "Tor..." I grab the gun from the table and pull the chamber out, loading it with more bullets. "Fucking drop it, would you?"

She crosses the room, snatches the gun from my hand, and slams it down on the table. Grabbing the arms of the chair, she leans over and brings her face close to mine. I should be looking at her eyes but I can see straight down her shirt. "Jude!" My gaze snaps up to hers. "Please," she whispers.

Her eyes drop to my lips and she scratches her nails over my jaw before she leans in. "For me," she whispers before she kisses me, scraping her teeth over my bottom lip. I try to cling to my anger, but she speaks to every ingrained bit of primitive need inside me.

I pull away from her, lifting a brow as my cock swells. My hands come to rest on the curve of her waist and I groan. "Fuck me..." I mumble when she straddles me, pressing herself over my hardening dick.

"Please," she whispers against my ear. The heat from her breath sending chill bumps racing over my arms. She is too fucking good at this seduction shit.

I let her kiss my neck for a second and then she works her way down, pulling and tugging at my shirt before she falls to her knees between my thighs. My expression remains stern as she undoes my zipper, freeing my cock. She glances up at me with those innocent fucking eyes just before she licks over the head. I stifle a groan, my fingers digging into the arms of the chair as she swallows me back. "Shit..." I mumble. As good as that feels, it's been so long since I've been inside her and I crave it, so I grab her shoulders and shove her away before I pick her up and

carry her to the bed. I know she thinks this shit right here will work, but it won't.

I throw her onto the mattress, pull both our jeans off, and hold my dick right there. "This what you want?" I breathe against her throat.

"I always want you," she says, scratching her fingers through my hair as she stares up at me. God, she makes me weak, but not as weak as she thinks.

My fingers wind around her throat, my grip growing tighter. She tosses her head back. Her lips part on a breathy moan and just as I slam inside her, I say, "And I always have the final say and the answer is no."

Growling, she bucks underneath me until I'm balls deep inside her tight pussy. I grit my teeth, my hold on her throat tightening. She pulls at my hair and drags her nails down my back. "I missed you," she breathes against my lips, and I drive into her deep and hard, fucking myself into her, claiming her. Because this is mine. She is mine and she always will be. Within minutes, she's panting, her body tensing just before she comes. I give one final thrust and all that tension, the anger, it all bleeds out of me in a warm heat. I hang my head, sweat dripping from the bridge of my nose before I gently kiss her and roll to the side of the bed. She sits up and drags her hands through her tangled hair as she glances to the side of the room.

"That's not creepy at all," she mumbles, her eyes aimed at the two bodies sprawled out in a pool of blood.

"We've done worse, Tor." I laugh. "At least you're not covered in blood this time."

She rolls her eyes and climbs on top of me, straddling me. "Look, you don't want me to go, so you go and meet Ronan. I'll stay." She traces circles on my chest with her fingertip.

"That easy, huh?" I smirk "Don't go doing some stupid bullshit. You hear me?"

"I told you, I don't trust him. Both of us in the same room...it's too easy." She leans forward and grabs my face in both hands, and something inside me grows uneasy. "I don't want you to go either, but one of us has to. I'm just thinking of Cayla."

"I know, doll. I know."

She touches her forehead to mine, holding me so tight it's like she's afraid I'll disappear, so I hold her. I just hold her thinking about how much I hate that we're always on the edge of disaster, that we have to make choices about which of us might live or die. I pull away and look at her. "I love you."

And just like it's been orchestrated, Boris number two's phone dings. I get up, grab it from the table, and read over the text: An address with a demand to be there in one hour.

break

I'm in the center of Moscow, staring up at an old stone building with *Savva* is written in script on the glass door. Just as I step up to it, the door swings open and a man in a tuxedo motions me in. The smell of fresh bread and steak hangs in the air. Classical music plays softly in the background. The blonde woman at the hostess stand smiles and says something in Russian. I glance to the restaurant behind her and see Ronan sitting at a table. He taps his fingers over the white table cloth. There's a dark-haired woman sitting next to him, and he is staring at her like she's a piece of prey. The candle in the center of the table flickers, casting shadows over his face. I can't help but think he looks like the damn devil. Or a vampire. Or some crazy demonic shit.

He looks away from the table and the moment his eyes land on me he smirks. I go to move past the hostess stand and the hostess says something else to me. "I'm fucking American," I say as I wave her off and weave my way through the restaurant toward Ronan.

Ronan stares at me as I approach, his face breaking into a smile. "Ah, my friend, sit." He looks past me as I pull out the chair. "No Victoria?" The disappointment is clear in his voice.

Blood pounds through my jugular. "Let's skip the formalities."

He rolls his eyes. "Fine. Sit." His voice changes, a demand, not a request.

I take a seat, my gaze straying to the woman sitting next to him. She looks annoyed as all fuck as she drums her long nails over the table.

"I'm not here for a lunch date, Ronan." I want to tell him to fuck off, and I try to restrain that because that won't end well. A waiter stops at the table and pours three glasses of red wine.

"No, you are here because I have something you want." The waiter says something in Russian. Ronan's eyes never leave mine as he answers, and within minutes, the waiter hurries away. "I ordered for you," Ronan says with a smirk.

"I want my daughter. She's not a fucking pawn." I glare at him. "What the hell is it that you want from me, huh?"

Sighing, he lifts the glass of wine to his lips. "I would never hurt your daughter. On the contrary, I saved her from the circling vultures of the cartel." He shrugs and sips the deep burgundy liquid. "Now, your child is safe, your woman is no longer Jésus' whore, and *all* I ask in return is a favor from you, American."

I glare at him and cock a single brow. It's not a favor when he's holding my daughter hostage. God, I want to choke him.

He puts his glass down and leans forward, propping his elbows on the table. "Camilla here has been caring for young Cayla." He motions toward the woman.

Her eyes trail over my face, down my chest, and a slightly arrogant smirk crosses her red lips. "Bookie," she

says, her Spanish accent thick. I should have recognized her, I guess, she has similar features to Gabe. So the Russian did take his sister which means we are fucked in the ass. This bastard has the strings pulled so tight from every angle...

"The bonita ángel is safe." She glares at Ronan. "I would not allow any harm to come to her." Something about her makes me believe it.

I nod at her before redirecting my attention to Ronan. "I'm losing my patience, so how about you tell me what the fuck it is that you want me to do?" The waiter stops back by and tops Ronan's glass off, and I notice a slight shake in his hand, the way his eyes are locked nervously on Ronan.

Ronan smiles before lifting Camilla's hand to his lips and attempting to kiss it. She slaps him, the clap echoing around the restaurant. A sadistic grin spreads across his lips. "A challenge," he says, his eyes flickering with excitement. She folds her arms over her chest.

My temper spikes and I slam my palms down on the table, the sudden movement causing the glasses to rattle. "What do you want?" I shout.

He closes his eyes and exhales a breath as he shakes his head. "Careful, bookie. All in good time." He straightens in his seat and steeples his fingers together in front of him. "Simple. I want you to end the entire Sinaloa cartel."

Fuck me. Tossing me head back, I groan. "Tor already killed Jesús—"

He holds a finger up with a smirk. "Yes, she is quite a woman. However, Jesús has already been replaced. Cut off the head of the snake and another grows. You must burn the body."

Here he goes with his motherfucking riddles again. "So, you want me—a single man—to just burn the entire cartel to the fucking ground?"

He tilts his head to the side. "It is because you are a single man that you are equipped to do it. If I send my men,

it's a declaration of war. War is not good for business. Victoria and yourself have proved resourceful." He taps one finger over his bottom lip. "And really, you wouldn't be doing it for me. Even if you had your daughter, where would you go? You ratted on Domingo, attacked the cartel head on, and your woman killed Jésus. You, my friend, are a dead man walking, *unless* you take the war to them."

Heat washes over my body, my muscles tense. I point my finger in his face as I push up from the table. "I fucking hate you."

He claps his hands together. "That's settled then. I will have my new Boris organize the details."

"Don't let anything happen to my daughter, or I will find a way to fucking kill you." I shove the chair back under the table and turn to walk away.

"And American," Ronan says, "do tell Gabriel that his sister is here in Russia, and that his assistance in this matter would be greatly appreciated."

I don't acknowledge him. I just weave my way through the crowded restaurant, a sense of hopelessness settling uneasily in my gut.

TOR

I pace across the hotel room, glancing at the clock.

Jude has been gone for two hours. I know Jude, he won't stay longer than he needs to—unless something happened. No, I refuse to believe that. It's not Ronan's style. He wouldn't sully himself with such things.

I pick up the burner phone Ronan's man gave me and press 1, listening to the foreign dial tone. "Ah, Victoria. I missed you at dinner," Ronan says.

"I need to know what was discussed."

He laughs. "Don't you trust the American to tell you? Oh no, don't tell me there is there trouble in paradise?"

I sigh. "Ronan."

"Perhaps you should have attended our little meeting as I requested."

A reply is on the tip of my tongue, but I stop. I don't want to talk about meetings and deals. I just want Cayla. "Ronan, please," I say. "Imagine if she were your child. I set up Jude. I killed Jésus. I have done everything you asked. Please, just let me have her," I plead, my voice breaking.

He sighs. "All you have to do is finish the job you started. I'll be in touch, Victoria. And good luck." He hangs up and I stare at the phone for a second. The job *I* started...

The door to the hotel room slams shut, the sudden bang causing me to jump. "God, I've never wanted to slit someone's throat so bad in my life," Jude says.

I put the burner phone in my back pocket. "Did you see Cayla?" I ask in a rush.

"No." He looks at me and I guess he sees the worry etching itself across my face. "Camilla was with him. She said she was watching her."

My muscles relax slightly. I don't like that he has Camilla. I know she won't be with him willingly, but if anyone will protect my little girl, it's her. She's done it before. "What does he want?" I ask.

"Oh, you know, nothing too fucking extravagant." Jude scrubs his hand over his face. "Just for me to take down the entire motherfucking Sinaloa cartel." He groans. "Insane fucker."

"But... Jésus is dead."

He looks at me. "The *entire* cartel. Dead and buried, completely."

I feel all the blood drain from my face. "What?" It's impossible. He is asking the impossible. We will never get Cayla back. My hands start to shake and I lower myself to the edge of the bed. The fight that has been raging through me ever since I ran from Jude, ever since I sacrificed everything for Cayla, leaves me. It was all for nothing. Once again, I am powerless to protect her.

"He's fucking crazy," Jude says. I nod, staring at the worn carpet in front of me. "It's fine. It's fine," he mumbles, pacing the room. "As long as we can—"

"Jude." I lift my gaze to his. There's that fire burning in his eyes that's all Jude, and I don't want to be the one that puts it out, but this is ridiculous. "It's impossible," I whisper.

"It's not impossible. It's just gonna require a lot of fucking planning."

"I've been inside the Sinaloa. We're not talking about killing a few guys. It's an international operation. Thousands of people, soldiers, police in their pocket, corrupt politicians... You're talking about a war, Jude." I stand up and close the distance between us, grabbing the front of his shirt. "Even you can't take on an army." I rest my forehead against his chest, inhaling the scent of his cologne and allowing it to console me a tiny bit. "Not even for Cayla."

"If Ronan doesn't doubt me, you shouldn't." He kisses my forehead and pushes away from me just enough that I can see his murky green eyes swirling with the promise of danger. "We just have to be willing to die for the cause, that's all."

I frown. "Die for the cause," I repeat on a whisper.

"She needs a normal life, you know that. You've said that." He sighs as he scrubs his hand over the stubble covering his jaw. "There's still hope for her to get out. There's no hope for me. None for you." He brushes his fingers over my cheek. "I've taken you too far down the hole with me. I've tainted you, but we don't have to taint her."

I stare at him. "What are you saying? You want me to abandon her?"

"I want us to save her from this fucking hell we live in."

"You mean, save her from us..." God, it hurts. To know that the greatest danger to your child is yourself. He's right. At one time I might have blamed Jude for everything, but I'm no longer innocent. I've done things that I can't come back from, put a target on my back. Jude and I are a ticking bomb just waiting to go off, and no matter how far or fast we run, we can't outrun ourselves. We can't outrun the inevitable.

He places his hand on my shoulder and gently rubs it. "She's little. It won't be near as hard on her if we die now, because, Tor, even if we fucking survive, we'll be hunted

for the rest of our lives and you know that. You don't just take down a cartel and walk away."

I thread my fingers through his hair. His hands land on my hips as his eyes lock with mine. "So, we die," I say.

"For Cayla," he whispers.

A small smile pulls at his lips, a challenge and a promise all in one. Perhaps this is our legacy, to die for our daughter. Jude and I are so tainted, but Cayla is the one good thing we've done. Something pure and good. I'd lay down my life a thousand times over for her.

"There's no better cause," I say.

He strokes his knuckles over my cheek and an ache forms in my chest. The truth is, death is easy. It's the living that's hard. Cayla will live without a mother or father. She will never know that she was loved more than anything or anyone has ever been loved in this world. She will never know what we died for, and I wouldn't want her to, but it hurts...the idea of her without us, the thought that she might grow up feeling alone in a world that can be so dark. "All I ever wanted was for her to be happy," I breathe.

"She will be, doll." He pulls me tight against him and holds me until I almost believe that we can do this.

"She will be." He takes the phone, dials a number, and places the receiver to his ear, waiting a few seconds before he clears his throat. "I'll do it," he speaks into the phone, "but I want to see her first." Jude's gaze drifts to mine, his nostrils flare. "Fine." And he hangs up.

"Well?"

"Tomorrow morning." I can see the worry, the stress all over Jude's face. Just one night, and I'll get to see my little girl. It's been months since I held her, since I smelt that scent of baby powder on her golden-blond hair. Jude grips my chin and tilts my head back, placing a soft kiss on my lips. "Get some sleep, doll."

He pulls back the duvet and I lie down on the bed even though tension has my body in a vice like grip. Jude lies

beside me and pulls me into his side. He strokes over my hair rhythmically. I'm not sure if he's trying to calm me or himself.

In a messed-up way, I don't want to close my eyes. I've been away from him for so long, and now that it feels as though the world is about to end, but we still have this. We still have each other, despite all the odds, and that means something.

Perhaps even death can't kill my love for Jude.

It's early morning when we pull up outside a graffiti-covered warehouse. There's a layer of snow on decorating the smashed glass of the windows, and litter's strewn about the concrete.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" I ask Jude.

His jaw is clenched so hard I can see the muscles jumping beneath his skin. He nods, his eyes never straying from the windscreen. There's a groaning sound, followed by the screeching of metal, and then the enormous metal rolling door slowly lifts. As it rises it reveals two men standing with rifles pointed at our car. Jude holds his hand out to me, never looking away from the two men. I place his gun on his waiting palm, and he puts it on his lap, covering it with his hand. One man walks over to Jude's window, and Jude winds it down. The man shouts something in Russian, and then we're waved forward into the dark recesses of the warehouse. My palms are slick with sweat. My heart hammers in anticipation as we roll forward, parking across from two black SUVs, both facing us. Jude cuts the engine, his fingers wrapping around his gun.

The doors of the other cars swing open and men file out. The soft thud of their boots moving over the concrete floor echo around the warehouse. The unmistakable click of rifles being loaded puts my senses on high alert. The

gruffness of the men speaking in Russian all around me causes my hair to stand on end. They fall silent before the army of men part, Camilla moving out from between them with a pink blanket over her shoulder covering Cayla. My heart pounds and skips, my chest so tight I can hardly breathe. I can feel Jude tense beside me and he grabs my hand, squeezing hard.

Camilla smiles as she stops in front of us and gently rubs her hand over the blanket. "Wake up, bonita ángel. Wake up," she coos. Cayla sits up and the blanket falls from her head, her blonde hair sticking up in all directions. And my heart stops.

She rubs sleepily at her eyes before turning to face me. The second her eyes land on us, they widen and she squeals, kicking her legs and clapping her hands. "Momma. Dada."

Jude rushes toward her, grabbing her and holding her close as he chokes on a sob. Tears stream down his cheeks and it breaks my heart. "I've missed you so much. So much, little doll."

Cayla lays her head on his chest, scratching her fingers over his broad shoulder. I move closer and kiss her forehead, stroking her soft hair. "Hey, baby girl." I fight back the emotions, swallowing around the lump that's threatening to choke me. This is hard and heart breaking, but *I* at least understand it. I won't cry in front of her because she doesn't understand any of this. She's just an innocent baby.

She reaches for me, and Jude passes her over. I prop her on my hip and kiss her forehead, squeezing my eyes closed, God, she's everything, my whole heart. She holds up her hand, showing me a little colourful bracelet on her wrist. "That's pretty," I say

"Milla makes it."

I lift my gaze to Camilla who is leaning against the front of the car. There are tears in her eyes even as she offers me a soft smile. She's been looking after my baby when I couldn't. It makes me both love and hate her.

Jude steps closer to my side, placing his hand on Cayla's head. I meet his gaze, witnessing the same crippling pain in his eyes that I feel in the very depths of my soul. This is likely the last time I will see her, the last time we will see her.

One of the men steps forward, shouting in Russian and pointing at Camilla. I hold Cayla tighter as Camilla moves towards me. And suddenly she doesn't look like the beautiful woman who once helped me and my daughter. She looks like an avenging angel, the one who will take my heart from me.

"I'm sorry, Tor," she says quietly.

"No," I say, my voice breaking as tears track down my face. I don't want to do this. I don't want to cry in front of my little girl. She comes closer, and I take a step back, pressing my hand over the back of Cayla's head as if I could protect her from all this.

"Just give us a minute, goddamn it," Jude shouts. He steps between me and the men, and like clockwork, one of them pulls a gun and presses it to Jude's temple.

"Jude," I choke out. He turns to face me, and I shake my head at him. This is a fight we cannot win, and we only endanger her by trying.

My heart is breaking in my chest, but somehow I manage to drop to a crouch and prop Cayla on my knees, looking at her perfect little face, her big blue eyes, and rosy cheeks. "Mummy loves you, Cayla." I spot the little hummingbird at her neck and bite the inside of my lip. She puts her tiny hand on my cheek, trying to wipe away my tears, and it makes it worse. This is the worst pain I have

ever felt in my life. "I love you, more than all the stars in the sky," I whisper.

Her little eyebrows pull together in a frown. "Momma?" I kiss her forehead, allowing my lips to linger on her skin before I reluctantly stand up. My legs feel numb, and I can't make myself move. Camilla closes the space between us, and I see the pity in her eyes.

"I will guard her with my life," she says as she grabs Cayla under the arms, lifting her from my knee.

Panic washes over Cayla's face. "Momma, no!" I choke on a sob as Camilla takes her from me. "No!" The sound of her distress breaks me. Tears pour down her little face and she reaches for me. "Dada. Dada." She gasps for breaths between deep cries.

"I love you," Jude says, his voice strained. "Camilla will watch after you until we can come back. I'm sorry, little doll." He takes a deep breath. "I'm so sorry." There's so much strain in his voice, so much heartache filling this room.

I press my hand over my mouth, and I do the only thing I can do. I turn my back on my baby.

Stumbling over to the car, I yank the door open and climb inside. I can't do this. Heaving sobs rack my body as guilt consumes me. My poor baby girl. She thinks I abandoned her. Again. Pulling my knees up to my chest, I try to just fucking survive. I just need to survive this pain and do what needs to be done. The driver's door opens and Jude gets in. The engine starts and he reverses out of the warehouse so fast I get whiplash.

As we drive away from Cayla, the only sound in the car is my breaking heart and pain filled cries. I wish I was stronger, but I'm not.

I will never be strong enough to say goodbye to her.

JUDE

I've seen a lot of shit, been through a lot of shit, but that right there—leaving Cayla—that is the hardest thing I've ever done. Helpless doesn't touch the way I feel. I'm her father. My sole job is to protect her, and even though that's what I'm trying to fucking do, she can't see that. She's a baby and all she sees is her parents leaving her with strangers—her crying parents turning their backs on her and leaving her, terrified and afraid. The distress and despair consuming me morphs with each passing second until a familiar anger settles in my chest.

Tor lets out a sob and I glance over at her. I know it's tearing her up and, the thing is, she's done this before. She had to let her go when she sent her to Lizzie's, believing she would never see her again. How hard is that? How selfless?

She would do anything to protect Cayla, and I will do everything in my power to protect them both. I reach across the console and grab her hand, stroking my thumb over her small knuckles. "We'll get her back. I promise," I whisper.

She drags her free hand through her hair and leans her head back against the seat. "What if she never knows, Jude?" she asks, her voice breaking. "What if she never

knows that we loved her?" She turns to face me and I have to look away.

"She will." I grip the steering wheel and try to just breathe.

"Okay," she whispers. I glance at her out of the corner of my eye and she's staring out the window. I want to say something to her, reassure her, but I know it's useless. All she has been fighting for, to this point, she feels has been in vain. We are leaving our baby girl in Russia—in another fucking country. No words I can utter will provide an ounce of comfort, so I just drive to the airport where a plane is waiting to take us back to Mexico.

Fourteen hours later, we touch down in Juarez. I don't even have both feet on the tarmac before Gabe's storming across the runway shouting. "He has my fucking sister, that pale bastard." He spits. "He has Camilla."

"I can't do this," Tor whispers as she passes by me and heads to Gabe's Hummer.

"I know, Gabe," I say. "I know."

"Bastardo, and now, now..." He lifts his fist and shakes it. "He says he'll kill her if I don't take over Juarez and let him shove his hand up my ass and be his little puppet." He stops in front of me, his eyes wild with rage. "Jésus, I didn't worry about, but Ronan..." He closes his eyes for a brief second. When he opens them I see fear, which sends a shiver down my spine. Gabe grew up in violence and bloodshed. He grew up in a world most people would fear, but this—Ronan Cole is what scares him. "What the hell have we gotten into, ese?"

I shake my head because I don't really know. "A pile of fucking shit," I say and head toward his car.

TOR

My back presses against the rough brick of Gabe's house as I sit on the railing of the stone balcony, one leg dangling over the edge. A bottle of tequila rests against my thigh, and I tap my nails over the glass. It's gone midnight and I haven't seen Jude since we got back. He disappeared as soon as we got in, talking things through with Gabe, I guess, or maybe he just needs some space.

The moon hangs low in the sky, casting a silver light over everything. I imagine that same light shining through a window somewhere in Russia, looking down on my little girl. I wanted to see her, of course I did, but I hate that it upset her. Her anguished scream has been branded into my mind. An eternal heartbreak. I lift the bottle and take a long swallow, relishing in the burn that brings with it a numbing sensation. It both soothes me and makes me feel guilty. Surely I deserve to feel every bit of this pain? I picture Cayla clutched in Camilla's arms, crying herself to sleep. It should be *my* arms that hold her, *my* fingers wiping her tears. And she wouldn't have tears if I weren't half a world away from her. I tip the bottle back again, craving the numbness far more than the pain.

I catch movement in my peripheral vision followed by the cherry-red glow from a cigarette. Smoke wafts past me

as I brace my head against the wall, inhaling the smell that I will always associate with Jude.

When he steps out onto the balcony, he eyes the tequila in my hand. "What are you doing?"

I hold up the bottle. "Thinking."

He moves closer and takes the bottle from me, taking a long drag from his cigarette. When he lowers his hand, I pinch the smoke between my thumb and forefinger and pluck it from his grasp. He huffs a laugh as I inhale a lungful of smoke. It's somewhat cleansing, stress relieving. He turns the bottle up and takes a swig.

"You did what was right."

I snort, taking the bottle back from him and offering him his cigarette. "I've given up on what's right or wrong. It all just turns to shit no matter what we do." I tip the bottle back, wincing against the burning liquid as it cascades down my throat. "It's never enough to save her."

"But you haven't given up on her, and that's all that matters."

I think of Cayla, her joyful smiles and chubby cheeks, the way she clutches my hair in her hand when I hold her. My eyes prickle with tears even though soft smile pulls at my lips. "Never."

He wraps his hand around the nape of my and pulls me away from the wall, turning me to face him. His large body presses between my legs as he tugs me close. I can feel the tension, the loss clinging to him every bit as tightly as it clings to me. We're tied together, bound in grief and driven by the simple need to sacrifice everything for the one thing we love more than each other.

I tip my head back, meeting his eyes glinting like two pieces of jet in the moonlight. He strokes my hair away from my face and stares at me for a moment. This is it, this is the final stretch, the race to the wire. It seems fate has done everything to destroy us, and yet, here we are. There are some things that never should have been and yet...they

just are. Jude and I are one of those things. Fate doesn't have a clue what to do with us. I press my face into his chest, allowing the warmth of his body to seep into mine. His arms wrap around me and, for a moment, I feel untouchable. Invincible. He makes me feel as if maybe, just maybe we could actually win this and walk away. A pipe dream, but a beautiful one nonetheless.

"It feels like we were always destined for tragedy, Jude," I whisper.

"Maybe..."

I focus on his chest, on the hills and valleys of his muscles beneath his cotton shirt. "I love her more than anything, but sometimes...sometimes I wonder whether she deserves so much better than us. If we do this, and we die, perhaps it's really a kindness. I just have to make sure she's taken care of when we're gone." I swallow around the lump in my throat. "Lizzy will give her a normal life."

"What the fuck is a normal life anyway?"

I glance up at him. I can barely remember a time before Jude. He's branded me, imprinted himself irreversibly on my soul, and I wouldn't have it any other way. But there was a time before him. Before this life. "I had normal once," I whisper. I had normal and I gave it up for him, for love.

"Were you happy?" he asks.

His dark green eyes burn into me. I reach up, sweeping my index finger over his bottom lip. "A captive animal may think it's happy having never known what it is to be free."

He stares at me for a moment, smirking. "Can you just answer the damn question?"

I smile, biting my bottom lip. "I thought I was."

"Have you been happy in the life I've given you?"

I stroke his jaw, brushing my lips over his. "It's not about the life you gave me, Jude. It's just you. You make everything before seem... inconsequential."

"So, love then, huh? Love makes it worth it?"

I close my eyes and touch my forehead to his, breathing him in. "Always."

"Well, doll, if that's what makes it worth it, I'd say Cayla's pretty lucky, wouldn't you?"

I sniff back tears and nod. The thing is, Cayla won't remember us. We'll be nothing more than the parents she never knew. But she will be that animal, in it's nice, safe cage, never knowing the dangers of the wilderness, never knowing this life. I want that for her. I need that for her, even if it's not the path I chose for myself.

Jude presses his lips to my forehead, lingering there as his arms envelope me. I feel like he's physically holding together all my fragmented pieces, like a cracked vase stuck back together with sticky tape. Without him, I would be an ugly mess right now. His hand trails down my arm and his fingers lace through mine. "Let's go to bed," he says, then pulls me towards the doorway and into the room.

My head is spinning from the tequila, and I feel emotionally drained. Jude reaches for my shirt, dragging it over my head before he rummages through the bag on the bed and takes out a t-shirt. His eyes lock with mine as he removes my bra and shoves the shirt over my head. Next, he unfastens my jeans and pushes them down my legs until I step out of them. His jeans and shirt disappear, and he gets into the enormous bed, pulling me with him. I wrap my arm around his waist and rest my cheek against his warm chest. At a moment where we've lost the most precious thing we have; he feels like the only thing left. His fingers stroke through my hair soothingly as I listen to the steady beat of his heart.

"I love you, doll."

"I love you," I breathe.

Jude drifts to sleep, and though I'm exhausted, I can't sleep. Eventually, I give up, sliding out from beneath his thick arm. I get out of bed and quietly leave the room.

Marney's laughter float up the stairwell, and I follow the sound until I find him in the kitchen. Gabe and Marney are sitting at the table, smoking and drinking with cards in their hands. "I'll raise you a hundred," Marney says.

I clear my throat and they both look up before I step into the room and pull out a chair. "Hey."

"Want in?" Marney winks and tosses some poker chips at me.

I shake my head. "I'm good." There's a pause. "I actually need to talk to you both."

"Suit yourself," Marney grumbles.

Gabe puts his cards down and brings his beer to his lips, I guess waiting on me to say something.

"This is bad. You know that..." I trail off. "We're taking on a cartel. You know that the likelihood of us surviving that is slim. I have to plan for that."

"I don't plan on surviving each day," Gabe says.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Well, I need you to, Gabe." Sighing, I meet both their gazes. "I need you to promise me that you will make sure Cayla is safe." I look at Gabe. "Camilla has her. Get them out of there, get Cayla to Lizzy." He opens his mouth to speak, but I rush on. "And I'm going to need papers for Cayla and Lizzy. Birth certificates, passports, a driver's license. New names, make it so Cayla is Lizzy's daughter." That hurts so much more than it should.

"What do I look like to you?" Gabe tosses his hands in the air. "I run a cartel, not a secret service."

I clench my teeth. "Gabe, do not mess with me right now. I know you can get this shit. You're a corrupt fucker. Just get it done. I'll pay whatever you need."

He glares at me before he sniffs. "Corrupt... I run a legitimate business."

"Ah, don't take it too hard, Gabe," Marney chuckles, staring at the cards still fanned out in his hand. "She don't mean it."

"Promise me," I say, staring at Gabe. "Please..." My voice hitches, my façade crumbling fast.

"Fine. Fine." He picks his cards back up and pushes a stack of coins towards the center of the table. "I'll raise you another fifty, gringo."

I roll my eyes. "Marney, a word?" I stand up and start walking towards the door.

Marney grumbles something under his breath and drops the cards on the table before he grabs his cigarette from the ashtray and places it between his lips. The chair legs scrape over the floor and he grabs the waist of his jeans, hitching them back up underneath his gut.

Gabe swears in Spanish and throws his cards down. Marney follows me out of the kitchen, coughing while we move into the hallway. "What's up, darlin'?"

I stare at the floor. "I'm scared, Marney," I admit. "I'm scared of leaving my little girl in this world without me, without her father." He grabs my shoulder, squeezing it in his meaty palm. "Your family to her," I say, "and I know it's asking a lot, but I want you to go with her and Lizzy. Watch over her like you watched over Jude and Caleb." God, we've lost too many people we love, and it just feels like a bottomless pit.

He inhales, his gaze drifting to the floor. He takes the cigarette from his lips and blows a puff of smoke through his nostrils like a bull. "Now, now, you ain't gonna die." He glances up at me. I can see the doubt behind his old, blue eyes, the worry. "But if it'll make you feel better, I'll promise you I'll take care of her. Don't need to promise it because no one's dying, but I'll promise it anyway."

I smile sadly at him and kiss his cheek. "Thank you." I back away from him and turn around. And that's it.

I have done all I can. Cayla's fate is now in Marney and Gabriel's hands, which isn't completely reassuring, but I trust them to make sure she's okay. I trust Lizzy. Now, I have to push down all these emotions. I have to take the

memory of Cayla, the pain of her loss and lock it in a tiny box. I need to become someone I don't like. I need to be the woman that the cartel themselves fear, the woman who killed J sus Lopez.

TOR

I sit at the breakfast bar clutching a cup of coffee. My head is pounding and my stomach churning from last night's tequila. Gabe strolls into the kitchen wearing only a pair of jeans and a scowl. He's still harbouring a slight limp from where I shot him.

"Tor," he says curtly.

"Gabe." I push a cup of coffee towards him and he inspects it as he takes a seat across from me.

"Is it poisoned?"

I roll my eyes and shove his arm. "Don't be a dick."

"I'm sorry if I have problems trusting a woman who shot me."

"I shot myself if it makes you feel any better," I say, sipping my caffeine supply.

He lifts a brow. "It doesn't."

I roll my eyes. "Don't be such a pussy. It's just another scar to add to your array." I nod towards his chest littered with old knife wounds and bullet holes. There's a tattoo of a naked lady on his arm with her head blown off by a nasty bullet scar.

Jude stumbles into the room and plops down at the table next to me. He scratches his hand through his hair before

grabbing my mug. I glare at him and he grunts, placing his hand on my thigh as he takes a sip.

"So, we need to win a war..." I say, looking between the two of them. Jude glares at me and Gabe snorts over his cup. "Well, any suggestions on how we do that?"

"It's too early for this shit," Jude grumbles as he pushes up from the table and takes my mug to the coffee pot. I watch him grab a second cup and fill both before bringing them back and sitting down at the table.

"I don't know about you guys, but I'd rather Cayla," I look at Gabe, "and Camilla, weren't in Russia any longer than they need to be. So, we start now. Today."

"It's not fucking rocket science, Tor," Jude says. "Fuck."

Gabe snickers and I shoot a nasty glare at him. "If it's so bloody easy, then tell me why the Sinaloa run Juarez, Gabriel, and not you."

He stares at me before shooting me the bird. "I'm too lazy to run Juarez..." he mumbles.

"Bullshit."

"We have to be smart," Jude interrupts. "Take out their supply. Weaken the chain...inbetweeners, suppliers..." Jude takes a sip of coffee before lighting a cigarette. Small wisps of smoke seep between his lips. "We bring them to their knees. And it's best if we get them while whoever the fuck is in charge now is scrambling to maintain their reign."

"Who's in charge? Michael?" Gabe asks, looking at me.

I shake my head. "Jésus shot Michael when I came home with a bullet in my leg. I don't know who will step up now. I never saw the inner circle beyond Jésus and Michael."

Gabe drags a hand down his face.

"I had a list, before I knew you were alive," Jude says, taking another slow drag from his smoke, "of all the little fucks that worked with them. There was one guy...fuck, what was his name. De Costa—"

"Daniel De Costa?" I narrow my eyes.

Jude grins. "Yes. Dirty ass cop. I think he's the ringleader to all those little shit cops that turn their heads when their coke shipments cross the border. Taking his ass out would make it a hellava lot harder to get that stuff over the border."

I tap my nails over the marble work top. "I know how to get to him," I say, looking at Jude with a smirk. "But he's always with his police buddies. Take one and you'll have to take them all."

"Fuck the cops," Gabe says.

"They go to a bar in Juarez every Tuesday to pick up their money from the Sinaloa," I say.

"So we just go in and shoot everyone." Gabe claps his hands together. "Perfect."

"Yeah," I say, "if we want to die." Gabe huffs before I continue, "It's where all the Sinaloa cartel members hang out. Dirty cops, gang bangers, sicario's...walk in there and we aren't walking out."

"Fine," Gabe says. "We'll blow it up."

I shake my head. "You couldn't get close enough." I tap my finger over my bottom lip. "We need to draw them out."

"No," Jude says, already shaking his head. "I know what you're thinking, Tor, and abso-fucking-lutely not."

I fold my arms over my chest. "I haven't even said shit yet."

He shoots a condescending look in my direction. "You don't have to. You're predictable as fuck."

I roll my eyes and sigh. "I am not." He glares at me. "But I killed their boss, they want me. I'm distinctive. If they see me, they'll follow and—"

"They'll shoot you," Gabe says. "They want you dead."

"Well, I'll just have to be quick then won't I?"

"Nope." Jude pushes up from the table.

"I'll bring them to you," I say with a smile. "You guys kill them all. Done. I even have Jesus' bullet proof car! I'm like a flashing beacon for them, Jude."

"Don't give a shit." He points at me when I open my mouth to protest. "Don't start with me, woman. I'm not in the mood."

"We made a deal," I say, locking eyes with him.

"Yeah, but we have to fucking finish the job first." He stares angrily at me.

"What deal is this, ese?" Gabe asks, lifting a brow.

"Stay out of it Gabe," Jude snaps.

"Gabe, tell him he's being sentimental and fucking emotional," I say.

Gabe stands and makes his way to the door. "Why don't we go to my office, Jude?" And with that, Jude and Gabe head out into the foyer.

"Oh, it's like that, is it?" I huff a laugh. "I swear, I have bigger balls than the pair of you." I push away from the table and storm after them.

By the time I get to the top of the stairs, the door slams in my face and I hear the lock click. Fuck them. I press my ear to the door but all I can hear is muted murmurs. My temper is bubbling just below the surface and I swear, I'm going to kill them. I walk back to our room and take my gun from the bedside table along with a couple of spare clips before I head back downstairs and outside.

Gabriel's house is surrounded by gardens outlined with olive and avocado trees. I march right over to the tree line. I lift my gun, release the safety, and shoot at the narrow trunk of an avocado tree over and over until the clip is empty. I reload and keep firing until the small tree is splintered and leaning at a strange angle, its branches touching the neatly trimmed lawn.

"Now, what are you out here doing?" Marney startles me when he walks up behind me.

"Jesus, Marney. Don't creep up on a girl with a gun."

"Out here killin' nature like a hoodlum." He chuckles. "What's got your panties in a bunch?" He wraps his arm around me and squeezes.

I fire off another shot. "Who do you think?"

"Yeah, well. You're both under a lot of stress..." He squeezes me a little harder. "Why don't you just come on back inside."

I pop the clip out and reload. "Marney, it's this tree or him right now."

He mumbles something and scrapes the toe of his boot along the ground, waiting while I unload another round of bullets. The tree creaks, the wood splits loudly, and then it topples over, snapping in two.

"Well, hell," he huffs. "God rest its soul."

I turn and glare at him, and he tosses his hands in the air. "Fine, fine. I'll just let you be." With a chuckle he turns and shuffles back towards the house.

I load the gun again and fire, my anger growing with each pull of the trigger. If Jude Pearson thinks I'm going to let him treat me like some delicate wall flower, he's got another thing coming.

JUDE

Tor wouldn't talk to me last night... or this morning. She's royally pissed, which is par for the fucking course by now.

The sun's just set behind the mountains and Gabe's at the table with a bottle of brandy. "My god, ese," he groans. "How you are not a drunk by now?" He shakes his head and takes another sip. "She holds a grudge..."

"Tell me about it," I say.

"She came in a minute ago and snatched my brandy up, tossed it in the trash." He shakes his head. "That was an expensive bottle and she just tossed it in with rotten meat."

I'm sure she's on rare form. I glance at my watch. We need to be leaving in half an hour and I know Tor's going to make an ordeal about it. I don't have the patience for it right now. "Where'd she go?"

"Away. That's all I care about." He leans back in his chair. "How are we going to get out of here, ese, without her knowing?" he whispers.

"I guess I'll just tie her ass up."

His eyes go wide and he sighs. "Ai, ai, ai. That's probably a bad idea. She's the kind that would pretend she's going to suck you off and bite your ball bag off instead."

"I can handle her."

He snorts. "Yes, sure seems like it."

I shoot a glare at him just as Tor walks into the kitchen wearing a pair of shorts that barely cover her ass and a white tank with no bra, her fucking nipples clear as day. Gabe does a double take and I smack him in the back of the head.

"Ow," he groans, rubbing over the spot I just whacked.

"Evening, doll." I smile.

"Fuck off," she says, ignoring me and heading for the liquor cabinet.

I grab onto her waist and tug her against me, nuzzling my chin in the crook of her neck. "You know it makes me horny when you talk like that." I nip at her neck.

She smiles and faces me, brushing her lips over mine as she presses her body flush against me. "Well, why don't you and Gabe go and lock yourselves in his office. Perhaps he can fix it for you." She shoves out of my grasp and goes over to the cabinet, taking a bottle before she turns to look at me again. "You don't get to exclude me when it comes to saving our daughter." And then she walks out.

Shit.

My mind goes straight to Cayla, to the place I've tried to keep it from since we left Russia because I can't think straight if I let that realization set in. It's grieve or go on the warpath...and those two just don't mix. Closing my eyes, I let my mind drift for just a second. The way she cried, those big tears. How I didn't want to let her go...I grit my teeth, taking that sadness eating away at me and redirecting it. I think of Jésus. I think of Ronan, and I let that anger set in. I know sitting here, not doing a damn thing will do nothing but grind away at Tor, but this is too much of a risk right now. And I'm not ready to lose her. I know this is a suicide mission, but I want every last minute possible with her.

I take a deep breath. Gabe lifts a brow. "Go get Marney and load the Hummer up," I say. "Give me fifteen minutes."

"Oh, I can't wait to see how this works out."

I walk out of the kitchen and up the stairs to my room. The door is barely cracked and I push it open. She's standing in front of the open balcony doors. "I'm sorry," I say, but she doesn't move. I step behind her and brush her hair from her neck before I gently kiss her throat. "Go if you want."

"You're full of shit, Jude," she says without looking at me.

"I'm only halfway full of shit." I smirk against her neck.

Sighing, she turns to face me. "You're full of promises, making deals when it suits you." She narrows her eyes at me, stabbing her finger against my chest. "It's this that drove me to Jésus in the first place."

My heart rate steadily rises at her words, a slow burn heating my skin. I close my eyes because I have to do this just right or I'm fucked...I take a slow breath to release the mounting tension. "I'm sorry." Those words are like acid on my tongue.

She tilts her head to the side, studying me. "What's going on?"

"I'm just..." I take a step back and pace behind her. "I don't know. I just don't know what to do." *I don't know what to do to get you off my ass. Fuck my life.* "You have every right to go. I shouldn't have said you couldn't." *God, this is so damn hard.* I smile because that seems like it will make it more genuine.

"Are you drunk?"

I furrow my brow. "No," I groan. "See... *this* is why I can't be nice to you."

"Nice?" She raises her eyebrows. "Are you fucking serious? There's nothing nice about you, Jude."

I stare blankly at her. Why is she so fucking stubborn? I trail my hand down her side, around to her ass, and squeeze before I kiss her neck. "I'll show you fucking nice."

I quickly slide my hand between her legs and she wraps her fingers around my wrist halting me.

"You can't seduce your way out of this one, Jude."

I laugh against the side of her neck and she shivers. "Wanna bet?" I slip my fingers under the leg of those short fucking shorts she's wearing and ram my finger inside her. Her breath catches, her nails dig into my skin, and I smile. I can feel her fighting it, but...two more thrusts and she gives in.

"I hate you," she whispers.

"I know you do." I slam my lips over hers and peek with one eye over my shoulder at my watch as I back her toward the bathroom. I kiss down her neck until she's panting and clawing at my jeans. Her warm fingers skim over my cock, and I groan before I rip that little tank top over her head. My gaze falls to her tits and I glance back at my watch. I could fuck her real quick—shit.

She grabs my hair, pulling hard enough to make my scalp burn before she kisses me, brushing her tongue over my bottom lip. "Fuck, I want you," I say as I spin her around and tear her shorts down her legs. I slap my hand over her ass before I place my palm on her shoulders and push her forward. "Don't fucking move," I say.

I sink one finger inside her before I back away, unzipping my fly and then—I yank the door open and kick the handle so hard it goes flying off. Tor stands up, spinning around, and I can just make out the absolute rage on her face before I slam the door closed on my way out. She shouts and bangs over the door, but I'm already into the hall and halfway down the stairs trying to shove this raging hard on back inside my jeans.

I nearly bust my ass running out the front door. I round the corner and run into a bush. "Gabe, let's fucking go," I shout, swatting the leaves out from in front of my face.

He glances up. "You said fifteen minutes, ese. It's only been ten."

"Let's go," I shout again as I look around. "Where the fuck is Marney?"

"Getting supplies."

"Ain't got a missile launcher in this fucking shed?" Marney shouts from the garage.

"What the... I'm not the fucking Russian," Gabe shouts back, and then spits. He tosses a rifle in the back of the Hummer. "What did you do with her?"

"I locked her in the bathroom."

He looks at me like I'm a fucking idiot. "Locked her in the bathroom. Wow, ese."

"Don't question me." I glance at my watch, it's nine and I just want to hurry the hell up. "Let's fucking go. We don't need any damn missiles, Marney."

Gabe steps around the back of Jésus' Hummer and cracks a smile. "Afraid your woman's going to break out" He wiggles his thick eyebrows.

"Look, you have no idea... she'll scale a fucking wall if she has to. And the last time we did some shit like this, she nailed a guy's nuts to a chair."

Gabe wrinkles his brow. "That's just crossing a line, even for me."

"That's exactly what I fucking said to her." I go to the driver's side and climb in.

Marney chuckles. "She's a lil' spitfire. Bless her heart."

Gabe climbs into the passenger seat and Marney files into the back.

"Jude Pearson!" Tor shouts and I freeze. Gabe claps his hands and laughs.

"Fuck. What?" I huff, gripping the steering wheel.

"This is low, even for you." She folds her arms over her chest and actually taps her fucking foot. Oh, she's mad alright.

"For the love of..." I breathe, cranking the engine. I shut the door and put the car in reverse, but here she comes, storming over to the damn car.

"Oh, ese," Gabe laughs, "you are in trouble."

She grabs the roof bar and steps up on the running board to lean through the open window. She snatches the key from the dashboard and jumps back with a smirk on her face.

"Here we fucking go." I roll my neck and groan. "Give the keys back, Tor."

"My keys, my car."

"It's not your fucking car."

"I stole it, so it's mine!"

I glance at Gabe. "You see what the actual fuck I deal with?" I look back out the window. "So, we're five now?"

"Me? You locked me in a bathroom," she says.

"Yes, I did." I hold my hand out. "Keys."

"Marney has an AK strapped to his back, Jude." She points to the back seat. "What the hell is Marney going to do with a AK?"

I glance at Marney in the rearview. He shrugs. "I like 'em..." he chuckles.

"We're going hunting." I smirk.

"For el chupacabra," Gabe says.

She slaps her hand over her forehead, grunts, and shakes her head before she turns around, walking back toward the house. "Most idiotic bunch of twats..."

Sighing, I glance at Gabe. "See what the fuck I'm talking about?"

"Women, ese, women..."

I open the car door and step out. "Tor!" I shout, but she goes right back inside Gabe's house. I storm up the sidewalk and sling the front door open then go down the hall. "Tor!" When I round the corner, I find her sitting at the breakfast bar with the bottle of brandy in front of her.

"You realize that we have to take down the Sinaloa cartel?" She glares at me. "Like, actually annihilate the entire thing..."

"Yep." I smile and hold out my hand. "Keys."

She rolls her eyes. "Get those dick heads out of the car. You need a plan. You have no plan. I mean shit, is Gabe even sober at this time?"

"We have a plan, that you are interfering with, woman. Don't fucking push me." I step toward her, palm up as I wiggle my fingers. "Give me the fucking keys." And I arch a single brow.

She pushes off her stool and walks over to me, standing so damn close I can smell her perfume. Her gaze slides down my body before lifting back to my face. "I make the perfect bait because I look vulnerable. They'll do what men always do when it comes to a woman and underestimate me. You on the other hand...." She rolls her eyes. "You're too pretty to die for no bloody reason, Jude."

"I'm not fucking dying!" I glance her over and notice a small bulge on her left tit. Without warning, I shove my hand down the neck of her shirt and inside her bra. She punches me in the gut and I grunt, but I still grab the keys and yank them out. "Stay the fuck here," I say, pointing my finger in her face. I swear, we've had this conversation before.

"Jesus Christ," she sighs as she storms out of the kitchen. I follow her through the house and out the front door. She walks straight up to one of the black motorcycles parked by the drive and swings her leg over it, flipping me the bird. The keys are always in the fucking ignition for some reason around here, so she starts it up, revving the noisy engine. The bike growls and spits, drowning out everything else.

"Tor!" I grit my teeth.

She kicks up the stand and peels off.

"Fuck." I head to the Hummer and open the door.

"What the hell is she doing, ese?" Gabe says, wide eyed.

"What Tor fucking does best, annoying the ever-loving shit out of me." I crank the engine and back out of the

drive, gravel flying everywhere. "I know where she's going, but fuck me, on a goddamn motorcycle."

"She wasn't wearing a helmet, ese." Gabe tsks.

I glare at him as I turn onto the street. "A fucking helmet? Are you serious, Gabe?"

Gabe shrugs. "At least she's wearing a bra..."

I drive down the road, fuming mad. That woman is going to give me a fucking coronary before the cartel can take me down.

I finally catch up to her when we enter Juarez, and she's driving like a bat out of hell. "What is she doing?" Gabe asks.

I see the bar up ahead on the right-hand corner, and there are a shitload of guys outside. I hang back, watching to see what she's going to do.

"Ese, what the hell are you doing? You better drive up there. That's the Sinaloa bar that she is driving up to with her gringo hair."

She slows the bike, pulls a gun, and pops a few rounds into the crowd outside the bar. "What the hell, Tor..." I mumble, watching as she speeds off.

"Oh, that makes my dick hard," Gabe says.

She turns and skids onto a side street. There's gunfire from the bar and within seconds the men are on bikes chasing right behind her. "Fucking hell, Tor." I floor the accelerator and head down an alleyway that cuts through one of the back roads. I turn a corner and slam the brakes on, screeching to a halt. "Where the hell did she go?" I watch the street, waiting with my heart hammering against my fucking ribs.

The ping of gunshots bounce down the narrow alleyway followed by the rumbling of the motorcycle's engine. Tor comes flying around the corner of the building and into the alley. The bike loses traction when she swings it around. My grip on the steering wheel tenses and my heart palpitates for a second, but she somehow manages to

regain her balance and revs the engine. The tires squeal as she guns it down the alley straight at us, her hair a golden blaze behind her.

"She's going to hit us, shit, she's going to hit us," Gabe says.

She squeezes the bike between the Hummer and the wall of the alley, the noise from the engine causing my ears to ring. As soon as she's past I pull forward and angle the vehicle so that it completely blocks the street. The vibrations from the approaching bikes come through my seat, the noise they're making reminds me of a swarm of angry hornets. The back door to the Hummer clicks open and Tor jumps in, panting.

"Damn, ese...she's a keeper," Gabe says before he climbs out of the open window, propping one foot on the ledge. I hear the clang of him placing the AK on the hood of the car. Marney aims his gun through the cracked window, and I load the rifle before slipping the barrel through the door. The army of bikes turn into the alley before they see us. One bike slams into the other and the men face plant into the concrete wall, blood spatter flying everywhere.

"See, helmets!" Gabe shouts before a mass of gunfire rings out.

Bullets spark off the building, ping from the metal of the bikes. I pull back on the trigger and watch the first guy's body jerk back before falling to the ground. A few get in shots at us, but we took them by such surprise, they weren't prepared. After only a few seconds, silence rings out, smoke billowing from our guns. About fifteen of Jesús' men lie dead on the filthy ground of the alley.

"Esto es una mierda," Gabe says before hopping out of the car and walking over to the pile of bodies. He holds the gun against his hip as he pulls a cigarette and lights it. "I hate the fucking Sinaloa," he says, aiming and shooting at one of the men.

"They're dead, Gabe," I say, and he shrugs.

"Don't ruin my fun, ese."

I sit staring at the massacre in front of me. Did we kill them? Sure, but that was stupid of Tor. I drop my gun in my lap and grab a cigarette, light it, and take a long drag as I glare in the review mirror at her. I take the steering wheel in my hand and squeeze it, trying to release some of this bubbling, boiling tension that's working its way through me. "Fucking really, Tor?"

She meets my eyes in the mirror, her expression giving away nothing. "It needed to be done, so I did it. They're dead, so we're good. We need to get out of here though." Her gaze goes to the front of the car and she groans as she jerks her head towards the windshield. "Really, Jude? Really?"

I turn and look, shaking my head. Gabe is standing in the middle of the damn street, dick in hand, taking a piss on a dead guy. "Fuck me...Gabe," I shout out the window, "stop pissing on that cartel fuck and get in the car."

"That's your best friend and you're trying to tell me *I'm* out of line," Tor says.

I turn and glare at her, pointing a finger in her face. "You are out of line. On every fucking level." I turn back just in time to catch Gabe jiggle. He grins as he saunters toward the car, his AK strapped to his back.

He yanks open the door and climbs in.

"Now you're done urinating on the dead, can we go?" Tor asks, annoyance lacing her voice. "I don't fancy spending time in a Mexican prison."

"When you have to go, you have to go. I'm sure Lupe didn't mind me pissing on his face."

"And you wonder why we're balls deep in this shit, Jude. Fuck me," Tor bitches, pointing at Gabe. I pull off, the tires bumping over the bodies. Gabe and Marney chuckle. Tor shuffles forward until her face is by my shoulder. "Don't be running over dead bodies in my car!"

Groaning, I place my hand on her forehead and shove her back in her seat. "Woman..." I turn out onto the main road. "I will deal with you later."

She snorts, and Marney chuckles. "Good to have you two love birds back at it again," he murmurs.

"Fuck off, old man."

TOR

Jude is seething mad. Of course. I lie on the bed with my eyes closed, listening to him pace back and forth across the room.

"Do you know how fucking stupid that was? Huh? Do you?" He stops his Neanderthal waltz long enough to stare at me. "Words, Tor. I want a fucking answer."

I sigh and prop up on my elbows, blowing a strand of hair out of my face. "Yes, Jude. All the words." I sigh. "I'm alive. They're dead. I'm pretty sure it's me that should be mad at you right now, so calm your shit."

His eyes pop wide and I see that tick in his jaw, the vein bulging from his temple. "Calm my..." His jaw clenches so hard he can't even finish his sentence. The next thing I know, he's charging me, grunting like an animal before his fingers wrap around my throat and he pins me to the bed. His face is right in mine, his eye twitching. "Do *not* patronize me."

Glaring at him, I shove at his chest. But, of course, it does nothing. "Fuck you, Jude." His grip tightens, and I rake my nails down his forearm hard enough that I hope I've drawn blood. "What the hell do you want me to do? Sit here twiddling my thumbs?" I buck my body, trying to

throw him off, but he presses his body harder over me, sliding between my thighs until I'm consumed by him.

"I'll tell you what I *want* you to do," his grip on me tightens and I revel in it, the dominance, the anger, I let it sweep me up, because on some level I need it right now. "I want you to not be so goddamn reckless, how about? Shit, is it that hard to just let someone else handle something? For once, Tor. It's the cartel. It is the fucking cartel."

"I'm well aware! Not like I didn't spend the last three months in that cartel or anything," I say with a snarl. "You don't get to do this anymore, Jude. This isn't about me. We agreed—"

"I *never* agreed for you to go on a suicide mission. A fucking motorcycle, Tor. A fucking motorcycle!"

"I'm not...I'm not suicidal," I say, my voice quietening. I squeeze my eyes shut and swallow around my constricting throat. When I open my eyes again, he's staring at me. Hard, angry, desperate. "I just can't afford to be weak anymore."

He shakes his head. "When have you ever been fucking weak?"

My fingers relax, and I gently wrap them around his wrist. *I became weak the moment I handed Cayla over to a stranger.* "What greater failure is there than a mother who cannot protect her child?" I ask, turning my face away from him as I fight back that sense of complete helplessness.

He sighs heavily, dropping his chin to his chest and completely releasing me from his hold. "Some things are beyond our control. One thing you are not, is weak." He grabs my jaw, forcing me to look at him. "You are the best mother, and you did everything humanly possible. In that regard, Tor, you have been stronger than me."

I hate that we keep riding this rollercoaster from pain and despair to anger and revenge and back again. I hate his pain, and I hate that I've made him think that he didn't

do enough. My beautiful man who has always been so unbreakably strong. Now we're both breaking, and all we can do is hold onto each other as we do. I cup his jaw, stroking my thumb over the stubble of his face. I wind my hand around the back of his neck, I pull him down until his cheek is pressed to my chest. He releases a heavy breath and winds his arms around me as I stroke my fingers through his hair. "I'm sorry," I say. Yes, all we can do is hold on and hope that we can remain whole long enough to finish this.

He lifts his face, his eyes locking with mine before he kisses me. Soft at first, then hard, desperately unsure then so certain, like a tidal wave of emotions ebbing and flowing. I allow him to bleed into me until our pain, our love, our loss, it all becomes one. He rolls over, dragging me on top of him until I'm straddling his body. His hands cup my face and he strokes over my throat almost reverently. The truth is, all we have is this, right here, right now. The path we're on, we don't know how much time we have. We could die tomorrow, and I need him to know that I love him, that he gave me a life so extraordinary, so full of love, that it was too perfect to last. And despite all of it, I would never change loving him. I couldn't. Even though being apart from Cayla is eating me alive, I don't want to waste a second that we have left fighting with him. I just need him in every sense of the word.

I sit up and reach for the hem of his shirt that I'm wearing, pulling it over my head. His eyes trace my body as he glides his palms up my stomach, pausing over the scar below my right breast. His brows pull together as he stares at it. "I thought I lost you," he whispers, his finger trailing over the scar. "And that—thinking I'd have to find a way to live without you—it destroyed me."

I take his hand and lift it to my face, kissing over his scarred knuckles, his calloused palms. "I'm right here."

He sits up and grabs my face, kissing me hard. I kiss him back, reaching for his shirt and tugging it over his head. I just want to feel him. When everything around us is going to shit, and the clock is constantly ticking in my ear, I just want to love him and to feel his love in return. It's all I have to cling onto, the only thing I can offer anymore.

The warm skin of his chest presses against me and I shiver. This is the only thing in my world that has ever been right. Him. Us. This. I wrap my arms around his neck and he grips my hips, his fingers digging into my flesh, dominating and possessive. His hand slides between my legs, brushing over my underwear. His warm lips slowly kiss down the side of my neck, and I drag desperate breaths into my lungs. He makes me burn for him with only the slightest touch until my entire body feels like it's going to explode.

"I love you, Tor," he says, his eyes locked on mine as he pushes my underwear to the side and slides two fingers inside me.

I gasp, my entire body both tightening and relaxing at the invasion. My nails dig into his back and he hisses out a breath. He presses between my legs, working his fingers deep inside me. I throw my head back, a long moan falling from my lips. No one can make me feel the way Jude does. He plays me perfectly, like a master pianist, perfecting every single note.

Within seconds, I'm falling apart, begging him for more. I just want this, to feel everything, to experience him while I still can. When you're on borrowed time, everything seems more precious. I reach for his belt, yanking it open. I undo the button of his jeans and shove them down his thighs. The moment my fingers wrap around him, his chin drops to his chest on a deep groan.

"I want you, Jude. Always."

His fingers wrap around my throat and my heart beats harder sending blood rushing through my veins, that rush

of adrenaline pounding away at my eardrums in a beautiful crescendo. I feel the head of his cock press against me, and then he slides home in one thrust. My breath leaves me in a rush, and he growls against my lips. His forehead rests against mine and his fingers tighten around my throat as he drives into me. God, he feels so good, so perfect. I wrap my arms around him, trying to pull him closer. I need to touch him, to feel as much of him as possible.

He fucks me deep and slow, his fingers flinching into my neck with every thrust. It's that fine line between love and hate, need and desperation. We're both so far from the people we once were and yet, nothing has changed because we will always have this. We will always feel this burning passion, an insatiable need to connect with each other. I wrap my hand around the back of his neck, breathing him in. His lips brush across mine and I scrape my teeth over his bottom lip, pulling a growl from him.

His grip on my throat tightens so much that my vision dots and my head spins, pleasure tightens my body and I moan against his mouth. A long groan slips from his lips and he stiffens before collapsing on top of me. He releases me and I drag in a deep breath, allowing the oxygen to fill my lungs. Jude's heavy, sweat slicked body presses over me, his rapid breaths washing over my neck.

"I love you, too," I say through ragged breaths.

JUDE

I wake up with my dick pressed against Tor's ass. Smiling, I work my arm around her waist and tug her closer because, damn, I've missed her. I press a kiss to her neck. She shifts, rolling onto her back and smiling softly without opening her eyes. Just as I cover her mouth with mine, the bedroom door bangs open.

"Bullshit!" Gabe shouts.

I sit up in bed and Tor yanks the covers over her chest. "What the hell, Gabe?"

"Look, look out the window." He drops his chin to his chest and sighs, mumbling something under his breath.

I climb out of bed, go straight to the window, and pull the heavy curtains back. "What am I looking—Oh..." There's a body hung over the side of Gabe's garden wall, birds tearing at the exposed entrails. "Shit."

Tor comes to stand next to me with the sheets wrapped around her.

"Roberta," Gabe says, "my best hooker, and they gutted her. I wonder what that arctic fuck would think if it was his best whore with her guts hanging out." He paces as he lights a cigarette and begins puffing on it like a chimney. "That's it! The Sinaloa chlamydia-riddled whorehouse is

going up in flames right along with their shitty cocaine." He takes a long drag, his eyes bulging.

"Calm down," I say.

He angrily points at the window. "They gutted my best whore, that's like taking a steaming shit right on my forehead."

"You pissed on one of their dead men," I say.

"And I'll piss on every last one of them. Hell, I'll take a shit on their chests if I get a chance."

"Oh my god. You have a strange obsession with shitting on people," Tor says, rolling her eyes. "I'm going to go change." She shakes her head as she walks past us. The sheet drops almost to her ass, exposing her bare back. Gabe turns around, watching her go, and I punch him in the arm.

Gabe looks at me as he flicks the ash from his cigarette to the floor. "I'm blowing up their whore house."

"That's not constructive."

His eye twitches. "Do you think I give a shit?" He points angrily out the window. "Look at Roberta!"

"Fine, blow up a whore house if it will make you feel better, but it won't get you anywhere."

Gabe glares at me, taking another long drag from his smoke. "So, suddenly you are an expert at the cartel?" Aggravation is evident in the slight tick of his jaw.

"You don't have to go around spilling everyone's fucking blood."

His eyes narrow and one side of his lips curl up. "But the blood is where the fun's at, ese."

"Fuck, you're demented."

He grins and takes a small bow. "Gracias."

I swipe my hand over my jaw and shake my head. This has to be done right because we need to get Cayla, and the Russian doesn't seem to be one for much patience.

Tor comes out from the bathroom wearing a pair of shorts and one of my t-shirts. She huffs when she sits on

the edge of the bed and crosses her legs. "So, what's the plan?"

I stare at her. Of course she thinks she needs to be involved. Of course she does. "Tor," I start.

"How about you don't waste your breath on whatever bullshit you're about to say, Jude. We made a deal."

Sighing, I drag my hand down my face and look at Gabe. He just shrugs. "We could get her to pose as a whore." He smiles.

"The fuck no!" I shout.

"Great idea," she says.

"Of course you'd think it is. No!" There is no way in all fuck Tor is dressing up like some Mexican hooker and strutting into some shitty cartel crack house.

Gabe steps over and thumps the side of my head. I have a visceral reaction where all I can think about is knocking his goddamn teeth down his throat, but I rein it in and clench my fist. He shrugs. "They have money that comes in from the gringos. Crosses the border every Thursday. The trucks are bullet proof and the drivers shoot first, ask questions later. But all men have one weakness, eh, ese." He snickers as his gaze drifts back to Tor.

I shove him back a step. "You've got plenty of fucking whores. Call one of them up and tell them to do this shit. Tor's not doing anything, you fucking idiot."

"What would you need me to do?" Tor asks Gabe.

"Stay your ass right there," I say, glaring at her.

Ignoring me, he glances around me at Tor and rolls his eyes. "This is the cartel. Some lines you don't cross. I'll blow people up, gut people, but stealing people's money sets a bad precedent. I steal Sinaloa money, they steal mine. And money's harder to replace than Roberta." Gabe crosses his chest. "God rest her soul." He sniffs.

Tor huffs. "What would I need to do?"

"Are you fucking deaf?" I ask, leaning down in front of her face. "I said fucking no."

"Well," Gabe pushes me out of the way, and I punch him in the face.

His head jerks to the side and he moves his jaw from side to side. He glares at me, nostrils flaring. I don't give a flying shit. "Gabe, stay out of this."

He lifts a finger, grating his teeth. "I'm going to blame that on your shitty temper." He takes a breath. "Now, do you want your daughter back from the fucking Russian or not?"

Groaning, I tilt my head back and step to the side.

"As I was saying before Neanderthal here punched me—you know, you really need anger management classes, ese,"—he shakes his head, "they always stop at Aqua Basal Truck Stop, so you just dress the part of a dirty cholita and seduce the driver. Get in the cab like you're going to ram his dirty little dick down your throat—" I grip his shoulder hard and clear my throat. Gabe huffs. "He's so moody. Anyway, just, you know, pretend like you're going to..." He makes some flourish movement with his hand, eyeing me, "and when you get inside, blow his fucking head off." He grins. "With a gun, not your—"

"Yeah, yeah, I get the point, Gabe." Tor rolls her eyes and places her hands on her hips.

"And you expect them to just let her waltz the fuck in there?" I groan.

He leans back, grabbing his chin with his hand as his eyes skate over Tor's body. "Ese...come on, now. Look at her." He growls. "Pretty gringo's like her—"

"I'm *not* American," Tor sighs.

"Yeah, yeah, pretty blondes like her." He blows a kiss. "Those dirty Sanchez fucks will cut off their balls to have a go with her."

I grit my teeth, trying to force myself to breathe. It's just Gabe. *Just fucking Gabe...* Tor moves to my side, placing her hand gently on my forearm. "Gabe, can you give us a

minute? You're not exactly helping the situation," she says, staring at him.

"Oh, of course." He steps into the hall, closing the door behind him.

I pace in front of the bed. She's fucking insane. *He's* fucking insane. I'm the only sane fucker around here, and that's not good. I spin on my heel and face her, narrowing my gaze. "You are not fucking doing that shit."

She steps toward me and sighs, placing her hand on my chest. She looks up at me all innocently through her lashes. "Jude—"

"Ah, hell no." I slap her hand away from me. "Don't even start with that shit, Tor."

She sighs and folds her arms over her chest. "Look, unless you're going to put on a dress and seduce some sweaty truck driver, I suggest you roll with it."

"There are ten-fucking-thousand whores in Juarez..."

"Be serious, Jude. A whore might sell her pussy for money, but her life? They'd have to be suicidal to rip off the Sinaloa."

I drag my hands down my face and grunt. I don't want her doing this. At fucking all. She pushes up on her tiptoes, presses a soft kiss to my cheek, and wraps her arms around my waist. "Not like we expect to get out alive anyway. What do we have to lose?"

And she's right. We won't get out of this alive.

This is about Cayla...but I fucking love Tor and it's an animal instinct to protect her. Closing my eyes, I huff. "Fine, Tor. If you fucking feel it's best. Fucking fine."

And I turn, walking out of the room and passing Gabe in the hall. "The two of you figure that shit out," I say. "I'm just along for the goddamn ride."

TOR

I step into the kitchen wearing the shortest dress I could find. I'm pretty sure it's supposed to be a top, but it works, riding up dangerously high. My heels click over the tile floor and I avoid looking at the three men seated at the breakfast bar. Gabe lets out a low whistle.

"And what the hell is that?" Jude says, eyeing the bottom of my skirt...shirt...whatever it is.

"A dress, Jude." I sigh and look up at him. "A hooker dress."

"You're not leaving this fucking house wearing that." His eyes flick from my legs to my cleavage, his lips pressed into a tight line. He readjusts himself, and I roll my eyes.

"It's got you hard, so I'd say it's the perfect outfit."

Marney chuckles before he goes into a coughing fit. "Ah, come on now, Jude. She's gotta look the part."

He shakes his head at Marney. "You're okay with this shit?"

Marney holds his hands up. "I didn't say that now, don't go shovin' words in my mouth, boy. I'm just a'saying, she's gotta look the damn part if it's gonna work."

Jude groans. "This is fucking ridiculous."

"It's Mexico, everything's ridiculous," Marney cackles.

I cross my arms. "Look, last time I checked, neither of you were my father, so quiet."

Jude glares at me, and Marney just pulls a cigarette from his pocket.

Gabe checks his watch. "We need to go."

"We?" Jude says, eyes wide.

"Yes, I will drop her at the border." He takes a cigarette from his pocket. "My men will take her to the truck stop and bring the truck back. Gustavo is good people, ese. And technically, he's not one of mine." He winks and places a cigarette in his mouth.

When Jude's gaze trails back over to me, I can see the caveman inside him, bashing his club on the ground and grunting. "Nope," Jude says. "Not good enough. Give me the address of this shithole."

"Jude..." Gabe starts.

"Just fucking give it to me, dick. I'll bring your fucking truck back."

Gabe sighs. "Whatever makes you feel better, *princess*." He grins and Jude goes to whack him, but stops himself.

"I swear to God, Gabe..." Jude grunts as he grabs the keys and heads out the house.

He's wound so tight I'm sure he's about to physically snap. Marney shrugs as he pushes up from the table and heads out the door. I totter after them in these stupid heels. Jude angrily opens the passenger door to one of Gabriel's cars and waits impatiently as I get in, trying not to let this dress show him everything. God knows if I flash him now he'll drag me back to the house by my hair and make me wear a jump suit. He slams the door so hard that the car rocks slightly. Marney climbs into the backseat, already lighting a cigarette before he's even closed the door. That man smokes more than any man I've seen.

Jude's grumbling when he climbs into the car and cranks it. He takes one last look at me and shakes his head,

huffing as he backs out of the drive.

I open the glove box and take out the gun that I know Gabe left for me. It's tucked into a leather holster with a strap. I yank my dress up and strap the holster to my thigh, keeping the gun on the inside.

"You get in the damn truck and the very second that door slams shut, you shoot the worthless shit in the head because I swear to God, if he so much as touches you, Tor..." Jude's face turns red and his jaw starts ticking. He can't even finish his sentence, so he just lets out a hard breath as he taps his hands over the steering wheel. "Goddamn Mexico..."

"Goddamn Mexico is right, boy," Marney chimes in from the back.

"Jude," I place my hand on his thigh, his muscles tensing under my touch. I trail my hand higher. "I won't let him touch me."

"Better fucking not."

I smirk. He's a total Neanderthal, but I love him for it.

"Ah, hell, Jude," Marney mumbles. "Gotta have a little more faith in your woman, you know?"

"Marney..." Jude sighs.

"Fine. I'll just sit back here and smoke my cigarette and keep my trap shut, how 'bout."

"Sounds good to me." Jude glances over at me from the corner of his eye as we barrel over the desert road. Another quick glance and he adjusts his dick.

"Really?" I lift an eyebrow at him.

"Look, you're packing heat...between your thighs. Don't judge me."

"You know, you are the most temperamental fucker I've ever met."

He smirks. "Look whose fucking talking. Gave me a fucking wedgie when I tried to give you a bath. You smelled like shit. Ungrateful..." he shakes his head. "And angry as a hornet."

"You both got a temper," Marney grumbles, and we both ignore him.

"You tried to give the captive, innocent girl a bath...that's *not* fucking creepy." I shake my head.

"I just said, you smelled like shit, and it's not like *I* fucking kidnapped you. What was I supposed to do in that situation?" He takes a hard right and I slam against the door.

"Um, let me go..."

His eyes dart over to me and he smirks. "I did...you came back."

I glance at him, his square jaw covered in stubble, those lips that could lead any woman into hell. "You were pretty." I smile and shrug one shoulder. "And charming in a murderous, grouchy sort of way."

"Mm-hmm."

And then...silence. I can tell he's tense as we drive along the deserted road, so I leave him be, watching the barren landscape whisk past the window. The hour it takes us to reach the border seems endless, and my nerves are wound tight by the time we get there. The border security wave us straight through, and I guess being in Gabe's car has something to do with that. He probably has half the border patrol on his pay roll.

We drive another forty minutes into America before we find the truck stop Gabriel spoke of. Jude sighs as he parks beside the ice bin and turns the ignition off. I don't even want to look at him, but he grabs my chin, turning my face towards him, giving me no choice.

"I am giving you two fucking seconds after I hear a gunshot before I come in there." He hangs his head and groans. "This is fucking stupid. I could just as easily fucking walk up to him and put a bullet in his head. In fact..." Jude grabs the gun from the console and reaches for the door.

"Jude, no!" He pauses. I place a hand on his chest and feel the strong pounding of his heart against my palm. "This isn't Juarez, it's America. You shoot a guy in a packed bar and someone's going to care. It'll draw too much attention."

"Just calm your horses there, boy. She'll be fine, won't you, little darlin'?" Marney winks at me and pats my shoulder.

Jude glares at Marney before switching his attention back to me, his jaw twitching.

"So grouchy," I say on a smirk, and kiss him quickly before I throw the door open and get out.

I walk across the gravel car park. The wind kicks up a whirlwind of dust that swirls around me. The sound of old school rock music comes from the run-down building in front of me. The front is lit up with a bright red neon sign that glows: 'Big Teds'.

Trucks are parked up, and I wind between them, making sure to pop a little sway into my hips when I walk through the open doorway. A meek attempt at air conditioning blows a stream of warm air at me. The bar is full of middle-aged, overweight men, all perched on bar stools drinking beer. I scan the bar until I spot the guy on the end, tanned skin, black hair, and a snake tattoo winding around his forearm. I look at his face, but his eyes are fixed on my chest. He takes a long swig of his beer, shamelessly staring at every inch of me.

This will be easy.

I saunter over to the bar, taking up residence next to him. I lean on the counter, ignoring him as I wait for the bartender.

"What can I get ya, sweet cheeks?" the wrinkled man behind the bar asks as he hoists his belt up.

"Whisky on the rocks," I say, channeling Marney and putting on my very best redneck accent.

The bartender nods and walks off, grabbing a glass and placing it in front of me. I watch as he throws some ice in it and then pours in the amber liquid. The ice cracks and pops. I dig around in my bra and pull out a ten-dollar bill.

"Thanks, sugar," I say on a wink, handing it to him.

"Allow me," a heavily accented voice says. I turn to the driver with the snake tattoo and smile. "Put it on my tab," he says.

The bar tender slides my money back and disappears. "That sure was mighty kind of you," I say, running my finger around the edge of my glass. His eyes track the movement and a smirk pulls at his lips. He stands and walks over to me, stopping right beside me. I force a smile as my gaze slips over the gut protruding from his food stained, white wife beater. His black hair is greased back, and he smells like cigarettes, but not in the good way that Jude does. This man is just dirty and gross.

"A pretty lady should not buy her own drink."

I giggle like the bimbo I'm supposed to be. "Where you headed, hun?" I ask.

"Me-he-co," he says, his eyes dropping to my chest once more.

"Oh, you are?" I ask excitedly. "I really need a ride to El Paso. I got the bus here from Alabama, but I only had enough money to get this far. You couldn't help a girl out, could ya?" I drag out the words in my feigned southern drawl, and wink.

His smile widens. "Sure I can, sweetheart. But...what are going to offer me in return?" He bites his bottom lip and drags his eyes over me until I feel violated just standing near him.

I plaster a smile on my face. "Oh, I'm sure I can think of something." I wink and down my whisky. God knows I might need it to get through the next few minutes,

especially if Jude sees him looking at me like that. *Jesus Christ.*

He downs his beer, belches before he pushes off the bar stool, then slaps some cash on the counter. God, this man can't possibly have been laid anytime in the last ten years. With any luck, he'll be so excited by the thought I won't have to do a damn thing. I walk out of the bar, and I know he's staring at my arse the entire time.

"Which is your truck, sugar?" I ask, and he points to a matte black, brand new truck at the back of the lot.

I sidle over to it, my ankles straining in these stupid shoes. The locks chirp and he opens the door, holding it for me. Of course he wants me to walk up the steps in front of him so he can look up my dress...And then he'll see the gun.

"After you," I say, raising an eyebrow. "What kinda lady would I be if I let ya look up my dress?"

Laughing, he shakes his head as he grabs the railing and hoists himself up into the cab. He offers me his hand and pulls me up with him. The second the door closes; his hands are on my breasts pawing and pulling at the material. *Oh god, he smells even worse this close.* He tries to kiss my neck and I swallow back bile, reaching for the hem of my dress. He grins wide and I smile back at him as I grab the gun, yank it free, and point it at his head. His eyes widen for a second before I pull the trigger twice.

Bang. Bang.

And just like that, he's dead.

JUDE

I'm leaned against the side of the building, staring at that truck. The bang from the gun firing sounds, and Marney leans out the window of the car. "Welp," he chuckles, "guess that's that."

One shot. That was it. The noise could have easily been a car backfiring, a firework. I glance around, to see if anyone seems alarmed. The only people around are old truckers eating burgers at a raggedy picnic table to the side of the bar. They just keep shoving the food in their mouths.

I push off the building and quickly walk toward the truck, rounding the side of the trailer. As soon as I go to place my foot on the stair, the door flies open. Tor's still gripping the gun in her hand. Blood splatter is all over her chest and face. I glance behind her at the dead guy sprawled out on the massive center console, then look back at Marney and nod.

He cranks the engine and pulls off.

"You called him sugar..." I slam the door shut and take a seat in the driver's chair, staring at her as I feel around for the keys.

She crawls over the dead body and reaches in his pocket, pulling out a key fob and handing it to me. "Yeah, I

was channeling Marney. Like," she says, "if Marney were a girl."

I just shake my head and crank the engine. The truck rumbles and jumps, the hood shaking. "It smells like sweaty balls in here," I mumble as I put the gear in drive.

"Yeah, because *he* smells like sweaty balls." She wrinkles her nose. "Can't we just kick him out in a ditch somewhere?"

"I thought maybe you'd want to hang onto *sugar* for a bit longer," I smirk at her.

She flips me off. "Sugar had wandering hands. A ditch is just fine for him." She starts shoving at the body, trying to push him into the back.

"If only Gabe were here," I sigh as I pull onto the highway.

She stops shoving and looks at me. "You know, you really shouldn't encourage him." She positions her back against the dashboard and places her feet on the man's side. The hem of her skirt inches up her thighs until I can see that fucking gun strapped to her leg. Blood rushes to my dick. She grunts when she finally kicks the guy into the back part of the truck. Something about her and guns and dead bodies just does it for me. I'm a sick fuck, what can I say?

My eyes are glued to that holster on her thigh and I forget to shift gears. The truck lurches, slamming Tor back against the dashboard. She glares at me as I shove it into 3rd.

"Honey, if you could keep your eyes on the road, that'd be great," she smirks, making a slow show of removing the gun from the holster and putting it on the dashboard.

"Stop showing me your shit, and it won't be a problem," I grumble.

She crawls across to the passenger seat on her knees with her ass on show. The tires bump over the shoulder as

the truck veers from the road, and she plops down with a scowl as she yanks the dress down and sits.

I drive about ten miles down the road before I pull off to the side. I glance at the back floorboard and groan. "Fuck, just had to go shoving him in the back." He's a fat fuck and hoisting his ass back into the front to shove him out is going to be a pain in the ass.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sure if we get pulled over they'll excuse the dead guy just chilling out on the center console."

"Well," I shrug, "you want the arms or legs?" I grin.

She folds her arms over her chest. "No. I am not hauling a dead body out of this truck, Jude."

"Oh yes you are. You can't start something you won't finish, doll. You should know that." I wink at her as I climb into the bunk part of the truck.

"You know, I'm starting to feel like this relationship is really one sided. 'Seduce the fat man, Tor. Kill the guy, Tor. Haul a fucking body around, Tor.' "

"I didn't ask you to seduce him or kill him, if you remember, I was actually fucking against it. That's on you. Now get your ass back here and grab his legs."

She turns in the seat to face me. "Fine, but the next time someone needs luring to their death, it's on you. Have fun with that. I hear a lot of the gang bangers are partial to the pretty ones, what with all their prison time."

I shake my head at her. "Now you're just being ridiculous." I bend over and grab his arms, pulling and she's still just fucking sitting there. "Tor!" I shout.

"I'm not dressed for this shit, Jude." She grabs those godawful hooker shoes and yanks them off, throwing them onto the floorboard.

Dropping his arms, I slam my palm over my face on a groan. "You're working my nerves, woman. You really are."

She rolls her eyes and climbs into the back, cursing and bitching under her breath.

"Ready," I grab his wrists again and she takes hold of his ankles.

She glares at me as we lift. I shuffle my way over the console, dragging his body because she's not doing much of shit to help. I'm about to reach for the handle when I hear a long, wet bubbling sound. Tor's eyes widen and she drops his legs, backing across the truck until she's against the bunk, gagging.

"He only just died!" she cries. "How can he smell like death already?" She gags again.

"Trucker diet," I say, laughing. "He may have shit himself, watch it when you grab his legs again." I smile so fucking wide.

"Nope. That's it." She tosses herself onto the front seat faster than I've ever seen her move. Throwing the door open, she practically falls out of the truck, coughing and dry heaving on the side of the road.

"And you call yourself a criminal," I shout out the open door as I manage to drag the fucker's body over to the seat.

"Jude, I was a doctor. I have seen plenty of people shit themselves, but *that* is just not fucking right. That man was unwell."

I glance around the man's body and out the door at her. "Would you get out of the fucking way, I'm about to drop his ass." She backs up, wiping tears from her eyes, and still gagging. I give him one final shove and he lands face first on the desert ground with a thud. "Get back in the truck."

She glares at me as she grabs onto the handle and hoists herself up the stairs, casting one last disgusted glance at the dead man. Her dress rides back up her damn thighs, underwear on full display. Grumbling, I pull my shirt over my head. She lifts a brow as she shuts the door and climbs over my lap to the seat.

"Dead bodies really do it for you?" She wrinkles her nose, but her eyes fix on my chest.

"No." I shove my shirt over her head and tug it down. "Cover your shit up."

She lifts the shirt and sniffs it. "This smells of dead man's shit and your sweat, Jude."

"I don't give a shit what it smells like, I don't want anyone else seeing your ass."

A small smirk pulls at her lips. "Not even you?"

"There is a dead body beside the truck, Tor, don't tempt me..."

"Okay, fine." She sits back in the passenger seat. "Shouldn't we check that we have the money before we go?"

"Again, Tor, there is a *dead* man in the sand outside the door of the truck." I shove the gear into drive and pull off as she huffs.

Once we reach El Paso, I pull over at an abandoned gas station where another 18-wheeler is waiting for us. Tor glances at me. "So, I guess we have to move whatever is in the back of this truck into that one?" She rolls her eyes. "Great. More lifting."

"Stop your bitching." I shove the door open and hop out, eyeing the idle truck. The door to the cab swings open and a man in a black suit slowly lowers himself to the ground. He approaches us and stops a few feet away. My eyes fall to his pointed alligator shoes.

"I am Gustavo." His brow wrinkles as he stares at my bare chest. "Do you need a shirt?"

"I'm fine."

He shrugs and heads toward the back of the truck.

"I half expected to him to be wearing a mask or something," Tor mumbles.

He snaps his fingers and I bristle. He takes some tool from his pocket and, with one swift movement, pops the

trailer open. The doors groan as they slowly part. I step around the metal door and a waft of cold air hits me, a fine mist rolling out into the desert heat. Gustavo hoist himself up into the back of the truck.

"What the fuck is this?" I ask, peering in at stacks of frozen...sharks.

Tor peers around me. "Oh my god. I killed the wrong guy."

I'm confused as shit right now. "That's fucking sharks..." I say, pointing at the load of carcasses.

"Yes, very good, gringo. Sharks." He laughs as he walks up and down the row of fish. He stops and pulls a knife from his pocket, jabbing the blade into one of the shark's abdomen and cutting a clean line down it before he shoves his hand inside.

"Oh, that's gross," Tor says.

"Really? *That* is gross?" I whisper.

"He just went elbow deep inside a shark. No one should be elbow deep in anything dead *or* alive."

Gustavo pulls out a plastic bag full of money. "Si, sharks." He grins wide as he heads back to the exit and hops down. He tosses the bag to me and I catch it. It's cold and slimy. Tor snarls her lips at it.

Gustavo makes his way back toward his truck and snaps his fingers. The doors to that truck fly open and several men file out. They don't say a word as they pass us by. They simply climb into the truck and start unloading the shipment, carting the sharks over to the back of the other truck.

"You know, since we stole this money, surely we should keep it?" Tor whispers to me, her eyes dropping to the gut covered bag in my hand.

I drag a palm down my face and shake my head. "Who are you?"

"Look, I didn't see Gabe having his tits groped for this shit." I look at her and she shrugs one shoulder. "Finders keepers and all that."

"Jesus, woman. *Jésus'* Hummer's yours. Now, this money."

She's silent for a moment. "I mean, I had to kill for that Hummer, *and* the money, so..."

"Wow, and here I thought *I* ruined your innocent ass..."

"You know, sometimes you really disappoint me," she says. All I can do is stare at her.

Gravel crunches behind us and I turn around to see Marney pull into the lot. He hangs his head out the window and grins. "You two love birds need a ride?"

Tor snatches the bag from my hand and walks off, climbing into the passenger side of Marney's car.

Marney scowls at me as I walk toward the car. "Why ain't you got no shirt on, boy?"

"Did you *see* what she was wearing?" I ask as I yank the door open. "Ass on full fucking display!"

"No need to be so damn grumpy, Romeo," he chuckles.

"No chance of that," Tor mumbles.

I settle into the backseat and light a cigarette. Marney pulls off and I stare out the window. How much money did we just take? How much of a hit will that be for the Sinaloa? How fucking long, how many raids will it take until we can overthrow them and make Ronan happy?

How much longer until my little girl is out of danger? Danger from the f Russian and the danger being related to me causes...

TOR

I sit on the massive guest bed at Gabe's house, drying my hair. I felt like the stench of death was clinging to me after today's events. Something starts rattling in the bedside table and I open it to see the burner phone Ronan gave me vibrating. I snatch it out of the drawer and answer it. "Hello?"

"Ah, Victoria. How are you?" As soon as I hear Ronan's voice, anger washes over me.

"Fuck you, Ronan."

He laughs. "Feisty as ever I see. I have a weakness for feisty women, Victoria." I say nothing because the only words I want to say to him aren't particularly pleasant. "You and the American have been doing well. I think you may truly be able to destroy the Sinaloa," he says like an excited child.

"I want to talk to Cayla," I say on a growl.

"That is why I called." He sighs. "To let you know that I am pleased with your progress and the little one is safe."

"She's with you, Ronan. She's not safe."

"I would not hurt a child," he says, his voice laced with disgust. "Here..." There's a rustling.

"Ronan?" More rustling. "Ronan?"

"Tor?" A female voice comes over the line.

"Camilla?"

"I have Cayla. Say hello bonita ángel. It's your Madre." My chest squeezes tight and a lump lodges in my throat.

"Momma," Cayla says, and I swallow back the rush of tears that sting my eyes.

"Hey, baby," I say through my tightening throat. "I miss you."

"Miss you," she says. I press my hand over my chest, rubbing at the deep-seated ache there. God, this is hard and horrible. I have done things and become a person I don't want to be, all to protect her, but when I hear her voice, I know I'd do it all ten times over just to hear those innocent words.

"Are you having fun with Miss Camilla?" I don't want her to be scared, to think that we left her. It's best if she just thinks she's staying with Camilla, her friend.

"Mm-hmm, we play Barbies, and...and...dollies."

I press my hand over my mouth. "That's nice."

"I miss you, Momma..." I hear the waiver in her voice. "I want you. I want you, Momma."

I sniff back tears and walk out of the bedroom. "I miss you too, so much." I walk along the hall and down the stairs, looking for Jude. "What are you doing today?"

"Don't know."

I glance into Gabe's office and see Jude and Gabe both bent over the desk. "Do you want to talk to Daddy?" I ask. Jude's head snaps up, his eyes landing on me then the phone.

"Uh-huh."

"Okay. I love you, baby girl."

Jude walks over, holding his hand out.

"Love you," she says, her little voice barely wrapping around the words. I swipe at my tears and force myself to let go because I don't know how long it will be before Ronan takes the phone off her.

I hand the phone to Jude and he presses it to his ear. "Hey, little doll," he says, squeezing his eyes shut. I watch his face, the raw emotion wrinkling across his brow, and it breaks me.

"You have?" He pauses and lets out a hard breath. "I miss you, too, and I love you so much, Cayla. Daddy loves you so, so much." His eyes open and lock on me. "I promise, we'll get you really soon." He covers his mouth with his hand, fighting the emotion. Jude has always been a hard man, but for Cayla he's completely weak. "I love you, baby." He waits before he hangs up the phone and walks to me, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me in for a hard embrace.

His muscles are tense and he's holding me like he's afraid if he lets me go, he'll lose me. I bury my face in his chest and let my tears soak his shirt. He rests his chin in the crook of my neck and takes a shuddering breath. Loss and desperation swirl around us like an angry storm, and if it weren't for the possibility that we may be able to get her out of this, I'm certain we would just give up. But we can't.

I hear Gabe quietly walk past us and close the door. Jude strokes his hand over my hair and presses his lips against my forehead. Tears silently track down my cheeks. It just hurts so much.

"Sorry," I whisper, pulling away from him. He swipes his thumbs under my eyes and stares down at me, his brows pulled together on a frown.

"She'll be okay," he breathes against my hair.

"Promise?"

He takes a deep breath. "I can't promise anything anymore, doll."

I nod, resigned to the helplessness that has been drowning us ever since Cayla was first taken. "What do we do now?"

"Keep going until they break."

I stare into the murky green depths of his eyes. "How many trucks of money do they have to lose before they break?"

"I don't know."

"It will take too long, Jude." I sigh and drag a hand through my hair. "We don't have enough man power for this."

There's a moment of silence, a moment where I feel him tense. "What the fuck else do you want me to do, Tor?"

I close my eyes. Gabe won't get involved in stealing money. Shoot everyone and piss on their bodies; sure, but taking money... Apparently there is honour amongst thieves. "Why does it always feel like the entire world wants to take a shit on us?" I press my forehead to his chest. Ever since I met Jude, life has always been this fight. Even when we had peace, there was that looming sense of danger that everything could come crashing down at any time, and it did. Only this time, I wasn't Jude's only weakness.

JUDE

THREE WEEKS LATER

The tires squeal and lose traction as I take a hard turn. Three weeks of this shit. Three weeks of setting traps, of sneaking in and stealing money, drugs. Killing people. And I think this last raid may just bring the Sinaloa to their breaking point. If this doesn't make them willing to discuss terms, I don't know what will.

Marney holds his hand over his ear. Blood trickles through his fingers. "Fucking hell, took a chunk outta my lobe." He cackles. "What a piss poor shot."

"You're lucky he didn't blow your head off."

"Meh..." He pulls his blood-covered hand away from his ear and stares at it.

I check the rearview and see one last car come out of nowhere, the engine growling. "Aw, hell. Come on now, boys," Marney says as he loads his gun and turns in his seat. "Go fuck yourselves." He pulls the trigger, and the explosions from the gun vibrate through my skull. Tires squeal. I watch in the mirror as the car veers off the road and slams into the side of an abandoned building before it explodes into a ball of fire. "They sure got some pussies enlisted in their regime."

I glance at him. "Regime?"

"What the hell else do you call this shit?"

"It's the cartel, Marney."

He grumbles something as he pulls a cigarette from his pocket and lights it. The windows are all smashed, the hood is riddled with bullet holes. The fact that Marney only had a bullet graze his ear is a fucking miracle. I floor the accelerator and speed down the road, the wind blowing through the inside of the car. Money flies lose from the bags piled in the back, swirling around the inside of the car before escaping out the windows. "Now," Marney says, "this makes me feel like a *real* criminal."

"You're fucked up old man."

He shrugs, and I turn down the road that leads to Gabe's drive. The car bumps over a pothole and I hear something fall from the back followed by a scrapping sound.

"Well, there goes the bumper," Marney says.

We pull through the gate and park the car, and as soon as I'm in the door, Tor's there.

"How did it go?" she asks, frowning when her gaze drifts over to Marney. She grabs his chin, tilts his head, and inspects his ear before he yanks away and walks off grumbling.

"Fine."

"So when are we leaving for New Mexico?" she says to me.

"I'm leaving tonight."

"Jude..."

Dear god, give me strength. I've set up a meeting with Blowback, one of the biggest American coke suppliers the Sinaloa have. And I'm going to make him a deal he can't resist, leaving the Sinaloa without any product to push through. Tor is not going with me to meet a guy named Blowback.

I walk past her, heading straight for the stairs. Of course she follows me, and then I think, do I really want to leave her here without me? I don't want her out of my sight, out

of my protection. Sighing, I walk down the hall and into the bedroom.

She sits on the edge of the bed and scowls at me as I pull my shirt over my head. Her eyes drop to my chest for a moment. "Jude..." she starts.

"Tor..." I crack a smile before I toss my shirt at her.

"Gross. You smell of sweat and blood," she says, throwing the shirt to the side.

"You like it." I stalk toward her, grabbing her waist before I lean down and scrape my teeth over her neck. She tilts her head to the side, pulling at my hair and tugging me closer. I nip at her ear, tracing my tongue over her skin.

"I love you," I whisper.

"I love you, too." She turns her head, pressing her lips over mine before pulling back. "But I'm still coming with you." She kisses me once more before she pushes off the bed with a smug fucking smile on her face.

"Jesus, woman."

She walks into the bathroom, dropping clothes on her way. "Are you coming?" she calls from the doorway. I get up and follow her inside.

"I guess I better get all nice and clean for Mr. Blowback, huh?" I watch her ass when she steps into the shower and turns the water on.

"Yeah, I'm so thrilled about you going off on your own to meet a guy called 'Blowback'."

"Aw," I wink at her when I drop my pants, "you're jealous?"

She rolls her eyes. "Yeah, that's it, Jude. Like I said, the gang bangers will love you, and with a name like Blowback..."

I step into the shower and close the glass door. "Fine, you can go, but only because I don't want to leave you here by yourself."

She rolls her eyes before throwing her head back to wet her hair. "You're so romantic."

"But you aren't going to the meeting with me." I step into the stream of hot water and lean my head back. When I look back at her, she's got her arms crossed over her chest, glaring at me. "What?"

"Always with the underestimating." Shaking her head, she shoves me out of the spray.

"Look, he's a huge supplier to the Sinaloa and his name is fucking Blowback."

"And?" She shrugs, her full tits slightly bouncing and giving me a soft long.

"Jesus, woman. He said I had to come alone."

"Oh, real smart, Jude. I'll be sure to check the morgue for random bodies chunked in a dumpster."

I grab her damp hair and fist it, yanking her head back as I lean down by her ear, trailing my tongue along the side of her neck. "You aren't going to win this one, doll. You can go, but you stay in the hotel." I slam my lips over her mouth and her body relaxes in my hold, just when I have her clawing at my chest, I push her away and back under the heavy stream of water. "We gotta be ready in an hour."

break

The plane ride was short and shitty, and Tor bitched about being left in a hotel the entire way. As soon as we touch down, I'm shoving an angry Tor in a rental car. We drive straight to the hotel and I can feel her silently seething next to me. When we pull up to the hotel, she gets out, grabs her bag, and struts inside, standing to the side of the concierge desk as I check in.

On the way to the room, I prepare myself for World War fucking Three. I know she's going to try and talk me into letting her go even though we've been over this five hundred times already. We walk in. She drops her bag and looks at me. "Have fun with Blowback," she says, and gives me a quick kiss.

I stand, staring at her, waiting, but she turns around and flops down on the bed. "Okay..." I slowly back toward the

door, glaring at her because I don't trust her for shit. "Stay here."

She rolls her eyes and huffs. "Yes, Jude, I understand. You go play with Blowjob."

"I mean it, Tor."

She grabs the remote and turns the TV on, but I still don't close the door. I'm in shock that she is just...lying there. "Please," I say, "don't make me comb through half of New Mexico looking for you."

She shakes her head and flips the channel, and I close the door.

I'm uneasy as shit about this. She never, never gives in but I sure as shit can't take her to Blowjob's. I leave the hotel, climb into the rental, and thirty minutes later I'm pulling up to an iron gate with a "B" in script across the front. "Well, isn't that fancy," I mumble under my breath as roll the window down. There's a keypad in front of the gate, and I reach through the window to press the buzzer.

Static comes over the speaker. "Yes?"

"I have a meeting at three."

"Your name?"

"J.P."

There's an electronic click before the large gate swings open. I drive through, parking right in front of the large marble steps. I grab the duffel bag I brought with me, open the car door, and as soon as I step out, three men in black shirts and gray slacks approach me.

The tallest one smiles. "I need to check your bag." He motions with his hand for the bag. I pause before handing it over. While he searches it, the other men pat me down. Good thing I left my gun in the fucking glovebox.

The two men nod when they find no weapons on me, and the other guy tosses the duffel bag back to me. "This way," he says, nodding his head toward the side of the house.

I follow him along a gravel walkway beside the house, through a gate, and out onto an empty pool deck that looks

like it belongs to the Ritz-Carlton.

"Mr. Blowback will meet with you shortly," he says before turning and heading back toward the house.

I'm literally left standing alone on the deck, which for some reason, makes me very uneasy. There's a waterfall at the end of the pool and behind it is a wrought iron table and chairs so I make my way over to it. The chair scrapes the stone pavers when I pull it out to take a seat. I tuck the duffel bag under my chair, and I wait.

And I wait.

The sun beats down on me, causing sweat to roll down my temples. I take a cigarette and light.

"Smoking is not healthy," a man says from the other side of the deck.

I squint against the sun at the man crossing the deck. He's dressed in a crisp white shirt and linen pants, and looks much younger than I would have expected. Late twenties, early thirties maybe.

"J.P.," he says, holding out his hand.

I grab his hand and shake it. "Blowback."

"Yes, I am." He takes a seat next to me and smiles, his gold tooth glinting in the sun. Seconds later, a server crosses the pool deck and hands both of us a cold glass of whisky. The heat's already causing condensation to trickle down the sides.

"What's the matter?" he asks. "You don't like whisky?"

I set the glass on the patio table. "It's not good business practice to drink before a deal is made."

He smirks and scrubs his hand over his chin. "Who says I'm going to make a deal with you?"

"I know the Sinaloa fucks are late on their payment. And, correct me if I'm wrong, but you need money to make money."

Narrowing his eyes, he leans forward and braces his elbows on his knees. "I'm listening."

"I'll pay you twice as much as they did for each shipment." His eyes widen just a touch. It's a ridiculous offer, but, after all, I'm not buying this shit with my money. "But the catch is," I say, "you can't sell to both the Sinaloa and me."

He looks me up and down. "No one offers twice the asking price." He lifts a brow. "It's bad business. Unless you're a cop..."

"Is it bad business if I'm able to cut the supply of my competitor?" I arch a brow. "Besides, I have a personal vendetta against the Sinaloa. So, if I can make a little money *and* I hurt them, win-win for me."

He eyes me for a moment. "I want cash up front," he says.

"Of course." I reach for the bag and toss it to him. He catches it, eagerly unzipping it and smiling when he sees the money inside.

"Well then, J.P., it's a pleasure doing business with you."

TOR

We've barely been back from New Mexico for five minutes when the front door to Gabe's villa slams open so hard that it smashes against the wall. Gabe storms into the kitchen a few seconds later with a face like thunder. "Putas, all of them!" He swipes a hand over his face before he kicks at a chair.

I drop my gaze to my phone in front of me. "Everything okay?"

"Oh, si. If having one of your moles feeding you false information like it's a pile of sugar-coated shit is okay, then I'm bueno." He kicks the chair again.

I sigh and look up at him. "Gabe, calm down. Sit." I get up and go to the liquor cabinet, taking out his favourite bottle of brandy and a glass. I place it on the breakfast bar and sit again.

"Now, I'm truly sorry about your fence post," he says grabbing the bottle and twisting off the top. He doesn't use the glass; he just places the rim to his mouth and gulps it back. He finally sits at the bar and hangs his head, tapping his fingers over the countertop. "We've looked everywhere and we can't find their filthy drugs." He shakes his head. "We need the fucking drugs so they don't have any more money. Putas..." While Jude has been making deals to cut

supply from the American side, Gabe and his guys have started working on stealing drugs shipped from this side of the border. It makes sense, take their money *and* their means of making more money.

"They must know who your moles are, so we can't use them. Blowback is handling the American side of things; you blew up their factories...."

He lifts the bottle again and wipes his mouth before he sets it down. "I blew up their factories more as a shit on their face. It only takes a few days to get new one's up and running."

"But they have to ship it..." I tap my nails over the worktop. "It has to cross the border."

"My men have pulled over trucks of fertilizer, shaving cream, avocados, poultry." He slams his fist down. "Nada. I don't know where they're hiding it in. Next I guess we'll need to do cavity searches on their whores." He shakes his head.

I sigh, frowning down at a coffee ring stain on the white marble. Cavity search. Carrying drugs in the body of a human...or animal... I can't help but smile. "Gabe, why would a drug lord buy a ranch?"

His gaze drifts over to me. "Oh, the sneaky fuck."

"I was with Jesús when he bought a ranch about an hour outside of Juarez. I asked him about it at the time and he simply said that he was a business man."

"Do you remember where the ranch is?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Where's Jude?" He pushes up from the stool, a wide grin set on his face.

"In your office," I say, jerking my head towards the door.

"Bookie!" he shouts. "Get your redneck ass out here, we're going to a ranch."

****break****

I bat at my leg when I feel something crawling up it. "Fucking. Bugs!" I shudder. "If I get a tick from this grass..." The thought makes me want to gag.

"You are something..." Jude mumbles.

"Jude, I swear to god." I slap at something else on the back of my neck.

We walk through shoulder high grass as we approach the iron barn. It's the only building for miles around. Gabe's men file around us, clutching their rifles as we stalk towards it. Jude is right behind me breathing down my neck, of course. If he had it his way, I'd have been bound and gagged in one of the trucks the second I showed them where this place was. I told him: dogs die in hot cars.

Gabe holds up his hand and everyone ducks down. Jude grabs my arm and wrenches me down so hard I end up sprawled between his thighs. "Really?" I hiss. He quirks a brow.

"Look at those sick bastards," Gabe whispers, pointing at the guards standing on the other side of the barn. He nods at Jude and they both raise their guns, aim, and fire. There a small pop from the silencer, and seconds later both men fall to the ground.

Jude grabs me, dragging me behind him as he sprints towards the barn. He throws me up against the side and turns his back on me, shielding me with his body. I have to roll my eyes. Reaching for my gun, I pull it from the waist of my jeans and flick the safety off. The next few seconds are a blur. Bullets chink off the metal side of the barn, whizzing past in all directions. I have no idea where Gabe is, so I simply stay with Jude. Out of the corner of my eye I see a guy round the corner to my right. Jude is facing the other way, so I press my back against his, lift my gun, and shoot the guy between the eyes. Jude whirls around, placing his arm around my waist as though he's about to yank me out of the way.

Silence. The shooting has stopped, and we're both still standing, which is all that matters.

"Ese, come look at this shit." I turn around and catch Gabe jog back around the corner of the barn. I move around Jude and follow Gabe, stepping over the bodies of fallen Sinaloa men. The barn doors hang open, and as soon as I step inside, I'm assaulted by the smell of cow shit. There are boxes and boxes filled with what look like little rubber bullets piled around the room. I pick one up and inspect it.

"Genius," Gabe says, grinning. "It's genius." He takes the bullet from me and holds it up. "Using cows as drug mules...would have been better had it actually been mules used as drug mules, but..." he chuckles to himself.

"*That's* the drugs?" I point at the stack of boxes.

"Not enough," Jude says.

I glance over to the side of the room. Two of Gabe's men stand either side of a guy on his knees, the tell-tale snake tattoo of the Sinaloa covering his forearm.

Jude sighs as he walks up to the guy and crouches in front of him. "Where's the rest of the coke?"

The Sinaloa member grins, showing blood stained teeth before he spits on the dirt floor and curses in Spanish.

"Alright," Jude grabs his chin and forces the guy to look at him, "you're going to die..." He glances up at me. "I feel like a broken record sometimes, you know..." His attention goes back to the guy. "Like I was saying, you're going to die, but I can make it quick or I can drag it out because I've got all fucking day." He grins, and the way his dimples pop makes me swoon a little.

The guy remains silent. Throwing my head back, I groan. "He's not going to say shit, Jude. Just kill him already."

"Woman, would you let me work." He grabs the guys face and shoves fingers in the man's eyes which causes him

to scream and writhe. "Tell me where the drugs are you piece of shit."

Again, the guy says nothing, just cries out in pain. They're tough, these cartel members, but it's not like we haven't done this before. "Look, Jude, I have mosquito bites in places only you will ever know about. It's hot, it smells like shit in here. Kill him!"

He glares at me, but I spot the slight curling of his lip, the shadow of a smile. "Don't test me, Tor. Not now."

"You really shouldn't," Gabe whispers. "Besides, I like to watch a good torture every once in a while."

I huff out a breath and bend down, yanking a knife from the inside of my boot. Moving behind the guy, I grab a fistful of his hair and yank his head back. I smile and wink at Jude, ramming the blade up against the guy's throat and drawing a line of crimson blood across his skin. He starts begging and pleading with Jude to save him from the crazy puta.

Jude shrugs. "I have no control over her. Come on now, just tell us. Maybe I can talk the crazy lady down."

He hesitates. "Waste of my fucking time," I say, lifting the blade high in the air, aiming for the soft spot between his shoulder and throat. He blurts something in Spanish and Gabe holds his hand up, halting me.

Jude stands up with a smile. "Now, was that so hard?" He lifts the gun and shoots the guy right between the eyes. He falls to the side, his face landing in a pile of cow shit. I glance down at the blood splatter all over my white tank.

"You can't just wait for me to get out of the way?" I shake my head and walk off. The scent of blood and cow shit is all but choking me.

"Working my nerves, woman," he shouts. "Working my damn nerves."

I flip him off and I walk outside, dragging in a lungful of the dusty, desert air. At least we know where the drugs are now, and that means we're one step closer to destroying

the Sinaloa. One step closer to the end, and one step closer to freeing Cayla.

JUDE

Atake the last drag from my cigarette before flicking it out the window. Gabe's hunched over the steering wheel, staring through the windshield of the parked car.

"I'm kind of upset, ese, you know?" he says, his eyes never leaving the road.

"About..."

"I wish I'd thought to use cows." Sighing, he shakes his head. "So smart."

I stare at him for a second. There's actual disappointment on his face because he didn't think of ramming coke down a cow's throat. I pat his back. "Well, you can't always win." I mean, what the hell do I say to that?

In the distance, a cloud of smoke drifts into the blue sky. Gabe straightens up. "Ah, that's our truck, ese." He almost sounds giddy. I grab my gun, check that it's fully loaded, and cock it before I open the door and climb out into the miserable heat.

Gabe pushes his door open and rounds the front of his car with his gun in hand. The truck comes barreling down the road and we both raise our guns and fire. The windshield shatters and the tires screech as the truck jack-knifes across the road. It runs off onto the shoulder, a cloud

of dust kicking up around it before it comes to a complete stop.

We both sprint across the road toward the truck. I step up on the ladder with my gun raised, peeking in to make sure the driver is dead. He's dead all right. Two bullet holes in his head, one in his chest and his eyes wide open in that thousand-yard death stare. I jump down and make my way to the back.

Gabe's kicking at the lock, his face red. He gives it one more kick and the latch flies off before the back ramp falls, hitting the ground and kicking up a flurry of dust. He grins as he peers inside. "Ah, ese..." he rubs his hands together like a mad scientist before he walks up the ramp and yanks open the metal gate. Cows moo, and I shake my head as I follow him into the trailer, closing the gate behind me.

"What are you..." I stop midsentence and stare at Gabe. He's circling a cow with a syringe in his hand. He plunges it into the cow's neck and jumps back. It kicks and shoves around for a few seconds before it staggers to the side and topples over. The other cows scatter to the back of the trailer, bumping and jostling each other to get out of the way. Gabe smiles and drops to his knees before pulling a glove from his back pocket and snapping it onto his hand. He grabs the cow's tail and lifts it up.

"Gabe," I say. "That's a surgical glove."

"And?"

I hold my hands up and take a step back. I know damn well those drugs aren't going to be anywhere near that cow's asshole yet, but he wants to get cow shit all over his arm, that's his business. He stares at the cow for a second before glancing back at me. "How do you shove your arm up a cow's ass, ese?"

"Why the hell do you think I know anything about this?"

"You're American. From Alabama..."

I roll my eyes. "Just shove your hand up in there."

He takes a breath, crosses himself, then rams his hand up the cow's asshole. "Oh, ese..." He takes a deep breath. "This is..." He moves in a little deeper, "this is disgusting. It's warm and..." He freezes for a second to compose himself.

"Want to throw up?" I ask.

"Where is the coke?"

"Probably in a little deeper." I check my watch. "I mean, probably wasn't ready to shit it out for at least twelve more hours."

Gabe uses his free hand to tug his sleeve up. He's elbow deep now, a sweat breaking out on his brow. He growls and removes his hand, yanking the glove off. I eye his forearm. "You got shit on your arm."

He throws the glove to the ground and paces. The cows scatter again. "How the hell am I supposed to get the coke out?"

"Shoot the cow and cut it open?"

He snarls his lip and shakes his head. "I'm not shooting a cow."

"What the..." I slam my palm over my face. I cannot, for the life of me, understand this fucker's reasoning. "Then get in the truck, drive it to your fucking house, and wait on Blue Bell here to shit it out."

He pats the cow on the hide. "Her name's Daisy."

"Whatever."

"Then I'll have the cow mules." He grins. "Fuck the Sinaloa."

How in the hell do I end up with all these insane fuckers?

TOR

I'm leaned over the balcony watching a gardener parade one of Gabe's new cows through the courtyard. Gabe watches on, tapping his finger over his lip with concentration. Jude walks out onto the balcony and wraps his arms around my waist, resting his chin on my shoulder. "What is he doing?" he asks me, pointing down to the courtyard.

I laugh. "I have no idea."

"I worry about him sometimes."

"Any reason why that particular cow seems to be favourite?" I ask. He has three truckloads of cows now, but this one has a bloody stable up at the house.

"Well, I think he feels bad for shoving his arm up its ass."

I laugh and turn to face him. "Your friend is crazy."

"I evidently attract crazy." He pinches my side, and I squirm in his hold.

"Ese!" Gabe shouts. I glance down and see him hopping up and down beneath the balcony. "Ese, they called for a meeting. Little pussy Sinaloa fucks."

Jude's eyes lock with mine, his expression triumphant yet full of apprehension. As hard as we've worked for this, it's the end of the road. We aren't making it out alive, we

know that. We've planned for this. Jude brushes his knuckles over my cheek, and I close my eyes because I don't want him to see my turmoil.

"It's gonna be fine, doll. We're doing this for Cayla." He presses a soft kiss to my lips that makes me want to crumble.

I nod. "I know." I force a small smile onto my face.

I should be happy. We did it. We took the Sinaloa's money and their drugs. We killed half the dirty cops they had on their pay roll, we've stolen their main supplier, their clients. In a matter of a month, the Sinaloa cartel has gone from an empire to a shit show, but the fact remains: their leaders are still in play. There are still many who are loyal to them, and that means they can get up off their knees. We need them down and out permanently. And that is where Jude and I come in. That is why this meeting is so important.

"I'll get the details off Gabe," Jude says.

"Okay." He starts to move away, but I grab his arm and stop him. His eyes lock with mine. "I love you."

He pulls me close and kisses me long and deep, the kind of kiss that bleeds through your very soul and makes everything else fall into the background. "I fucking love you, doll," he murmurs against my lips before he pulls away and leaves the room.

JUDE

The sun is quickly setting behind the desert when I walk out of the warehouse and bolt the door. This is basically my tomb, the place where I will die. And that's a strange fucking feeling. We've arranged to meet with the Sinaloa, in theory, to discuss their surrender. I know they aren't surrendering shit and I'm not relying on that bullshit. Gabe and I both know this is a trap, but I have a trap of my own.

It takes me thirty minutes to get back to Gabe's which means I don't have much time.

Making my way to the front door, I dial Ronan's number and listen to the phone ring, the line click.

"Yes," Ronan says.

"I don't fucking trust you."

"Again," he sighs, "you wound me."

"I'm going to die. I'm going to die so you can get whatever the hell it is you want—"

"Power," he says. "And what greater cause is there to die for, American?" He laughs. "Let me guess, you would say love."

"I need to know that you will hold up your word."

"Of course I will."

"Send her to Gabe."

"You want me to send your daughter to the Juarez cartel?" He laughs.

"Gabe will make sure she gets to the people who will care for her. Again, I don't fucking trust you and I know damn well you want Gabe to run Juarez for you." I sigh. "If he doesn't get Cayla, you will never have Juarez."

"Well, that seems a bit rash, but whatever you want."

"Send her to Gabriel." And I hang up the call. It's not in my nature to trust people, especially slimy shits like Ronan, but in the situation I now find myself in, it's all I can do. Now, I just need to talk to Gabe.

I open the front door and make my way through the house and out onto the back patio. The sun's disappeared and the sky is fading from pink to light blue as night sets in. Gabe's sitting on the retaining wall, leaned over his knees and smoking as he stares out at the horizon. He glances up at me.

"If something happens to me and Tor," I say. "I need you to promise me you'll get Cayla."

He straightens up and takes a deep drag from the cigarette, the glowing end casting shadows over his face. "Si."

"You got the papers Tor asked for?"

He glances at me and sighs. "Of course."

"Do not do business with Ronan until you have her, and then you give her to Marney. He'll get her to Lizzie, and then they'll disappear."

A stern scowl sets on his face. "You have my word." He crosses himself. "On my Madre's grave, I promise you, I will get your little girl to safety if anything happens to you."

"Thank you." Sighing, I sit down.

"You ever wonder what it's like for normal people, ese?" he asks.

"What do you mean?"

"All those people," he points at the city lights in the distance. "The people who go to work and come home. The

ones who are oblivious to this shit we live in?"

I scrub a hand over the back of my neck. "I never did until Cayla." My chest tightens. I miss her and hope that everything works out like it needs to. I just want to know she's safe. No matter what.

"I hope that fucking Russian is pleased with himself." He pushes up from the chair. "I have to get the men together. You coming?"

"Yep."

This where the real plan comes into play. One mistake and it all goes to hell.

TOR

I'm sitting at the dining table, my mind a million miles away, when I hear the roar of several engines pulling up outside. Brakes squeal and gravel skitters off the brick work of the house. The front door slams open and through the open door I see several men burst through, a couple of them covered in blood. I jump up, my heart beating in my throat for a moment.

My body relaxes the second I see Jude. A deep-set frown masks his features as he walks into the room. "What happened?" I ask.

Aggravation clings to him as he drags a hand down his face. "Some fucker shot Gabe."

I press my hand against my chest. Gabe's a pain in the arse ninety-nine percent of the time, but he's also like family now. "Is he...?" I can't even finish the sentence. We're so close, so bloody close, and they take him out now? The day after they agreed to a deal.

"No, it was shitty shot, but he's sure as shit not going to be in any shape to go to that meeting."

I narrow my eyes at him, and then Marney comes through the door, whistling. "Where have you been?" I ask, folding my arms over my chest.

He holds up his paper and a packet of cigarettes. "Can't a man get the paper?" He glances around. "What the hell's going on?"

"Gabe got shot," I say.

He looks at Jude. "Well, ain't that some shit?" He shuffles off, placing a cigarette between his lips as he goes. Those two are up to something, I know they are, but I say nothing.

I grab Jude's arm and pull him to the side, away from everyone. "So, what now? We just go to that meeting without Gabe?"

"Yeah." He grabs a cigarette from his pocket and lights it, staring off into the nothing.

I chew on my thumbnail. "Jude, we can't do this without him."

"Oh, Jesus Christ." He turns and glares at me. "What the hell do we need Gabe for, huh? We just need his men."

"I don't know! It just seems like shitty cartel etiquette for a boss not to be at a meeting between two rival cartels. We aren't the Juarez cartel, Jude. We're nobody, bloody gringos as far as they're concerned."

He takes a step toward me, his jaw clenching. "Do you think I give a fuck about their goddamn etiquette?" He leans down closer to my ear. "We're going in there to die, remember?"

I rake my fingers through my hair, dropping my gaze to the floor before I glance back up at him. Those dark green eyes lock with mine, swirling with turmoil and rage. "Just make sure we take them with us."

"No one will be getting out of that building," he says. "Don't worry."

I snort. "Those might be the most pointless words ever spoken."

He smirks, wrapping his hand around the nape of my neck. "Maybe."

My hands tremble as I place my fingers around his wrist. I'm scared. I can admit that to myself. No one wants to walk to their own death, and there's something horrible in knowing you're going to die. It's the brutal truth of humanity. We're born, we live, we die, but I'd just rather not know when, even if the cause is just. I just don't want to admit that to Jude.

He sweeps a finger over my cheek. "It's okay to be scared, doll," he whispers.

I can't help but smile because he always knows. "It's for Cayla. I would do anything for her." I shake my head, unable to find the words because there's a 'but' in there, I'm just too proud to speak.

"I'd be worried if you weren't," he says before he gently kisses my lips.

For the first time since we started this, I realise that Jude will die. My strong, angry, beautiful man will cease to exist, and that hurts far more than my own death. A world without Jude just seems...wrong.

I grip the front of his shirt and kiss him back, my heart squeezing out desperate, broken beats inside my chest. A wall of emotions assault me in a barrage, and I pull away from him, turning my back. I can't do this to him right now. He needs to be focused on the meeting, on destroying the Sinaloa, on freeing Cayla. Nothing else matters. Nothing else can matter.

"Tor." His arm slips around my waist and I rest my head against his shoulder. I bite my bottom lip, fighting a sob as I wind my fingers through his. I lift our entwined hands and kiss over his knuckles.

"You should go and handle Gabe's men," I say.

He exhales a deep breath and presses his cheek against mine, brushing his lips over my jaw. He slowly pulls away. I listen to his heavy footfalls as he leaves the room. I just can't be around all of this right now, so I grab a bottle of

tequila from the kitchen and disappear into our bedroom. Might as well die with a hangover.

Hours pass and the sun dips below the horizon, painting the sky in hues of orange and pink. I sip the bottle of tequila as I sit on the balcony, my back against the wall and my knees pulled up to my chest. Fireflies lazily drift past me and I reach out, stirring the air around them. I feel everything and yet nothing. It's as though my head is just an angry swarm of emotions so loud that I can't grab onto anything through the deafening buzz. I hear the bedroom door open and, a few seconds later, Jude appear in my periphery. I wordlessly lift my bottle of tequila. He takes it from me, tipping it back.

I can see it written all over his face. He's afraid. Jude Pearson is afraid. He crouches next to me, placing his warm hand on my knee. "The sky's pretty, huh?"

I smile and glance at him. "Jude Pearson commenting on pretty things. Now I know the world is ending."

A soft smirk works its way over his lips, and he laughs. "Only for us, doll." He sweeps his hand along my jaw, cupping my cheek. "But you know what? " he kisses my lips so sweetly. "I regret nothing when it comes to loving you."

My heart flutters in my chest as tears prick my eyes. When you have a love like this, it's so hard to let go of, even if you know you're taking it with you to the grave. I reach for him, winding my fingers through his thick hair. Those deep green eyes meet mine, his gaze so unbreakably strong. "God, I love you," I say, my voice breaking slightly.

"And I love you." He kisses me again before pulling back and staring into my eyes. "Thank you for giving me reason." I watch his nostrils flare. "For Cayla...for loving a man who is unredeemable."

The tears break free and I shake my head. I can't talk. I pull him to me and kiss him, holding him as tightly as I can. For the last three and a half years, Jude Pearson has been like oxygen to me. It seems only fitting that without my

oxygen, I should cease to exist. His hand glides up the side of my face and his thumb strokes over my jaw. Our kisses are painful and sweet, full of desperation and a cloying need.

"I want you. One last time." I reach for his shirt and yank it over his head, exposing tanned, tattooed skin over chiseled muscles. He has always been so beautiful and dangerous, like forbidden fruit. He has been my love, my addiction, but I'd rather live a short time feeling Jude's brand of high than a lifetime without it. He shifts, cupping the back of my head as he pushes me down on the tiled floor of the balcony.

"Promise me you'll never forget the way I loved you." His hands glide beneath my shirt, pushing it up until he pulls it over my head.

"Never."

His lips brush my neck, and he places slow, drugging kisses over my skin until my head swims and my breaths become erratic. The warm evening breeze touches my exposed body.

His hands slide over my thighs, up to my hips, and he grabs my shorts, yanking them down with my underwear. His hand immediately finds its way back between my legs, his finger sliding over me. "God, I'll miss this," he whispers next to my neck as he slides his fingers deep inside me.

I grip the back of his neck, pulling him down to me. "You won't though," I breathe against his lips. His tongue grazes mine as his fingers move, pushing and twisting inside me. My fingers rake over his back, scratching across his hot skin. I breathe him in, wanting to touch him everywhere, commit him to memory, even if it is just to take to the grave with me. He's my soul mate, and for us, 'til death do us part seems fitting. What we have far exceeds any bond of marriage. He kisses me slowly, and as my body trembles and shatters for him, he watches me come, his eyes never leaving my face.

His takes his hand away from me before he lifts me from the floor. My legs part around his hips and the rough denim of his jeans brushes over my sensitive flesh. He lays me on the bed and kisses my cheek, the corner of my mouth, my jaw.

"Fucking beautiful," he says. I watch as he strips out of his jeans and boxers. "I love watching you come, doll." I feel the blush hit my cheeks, and he laughs, dropping his naked body over mine. His thumb brushes my cheekbone and his expression grows serious. "I am sorry, Tor."

I press my finger to his lips and shake my head before I push up, forcing him onto his back. I straddle him, feeling his hard cock beneath me. "Not now. Not anymore." I lean forward and touch his lips gently before covering them with my own. His hands roam over my body, the heat of them causing me to break out in goosebumps. I fight the tears swimming in my eyes, I fight that tight feeling growing in my chest. I want this to just be us. One last time. Us. Our love—I want the rest of the world to fade away the way it always has when I'm with him. One last time before it fades away for good.

He slides inside me and I focus on each slow movement I make over him as I glide my hands over his muscular chest. His hands slide over my waist, up to my breasts.

"I fucking love you, Tor."

I slam my eyes shut as I bear down on him, burying him as deep inside me as I can. "I love you, too." And with that, the tears break free, streaming down my cheeks. I'm crying so hard I'm barely able to move, but Jude grips my hips, forcing me so slowly up and down on him.

"At least we have a chance to say goodbye," he says. I can hear the emotions choking him, I can feel his chest trembling underneath my palms, and it breaks me. What we have done to each other over the course of three years breaks me. He sits up, wrapping his arms around my body

and pulling me so tight against him, like he's afraid to let go. And I don't want him to.

I move over him and he rises to meet each subtle movement of my hips. His lips dance over my throat, along my jaw until his mouth is against mine. His hands find their way into my hair and he fists it as he deepens the kiss and buries himself hard inside me. The longer we kiss, the more desperate our movements grow, as though our souls are trying to express—to explain—the unexplainable, how deeply we love each other, how much we need each other, because some things just cannot be explained with words.

I grasp his face and touch my forehead to his, breathing him in. He grips my hips, forcing them to roll over him, slow and deep. "Let go, Tor," he whispers.

That small tremor of sensation works through me, building and rolling under his dominant hold. I can't help but break for him, and he kisses me, swallowing my moans as he stiffens beneath me. We still, and I stay here with him, chest to chest, him still buried inside me and his rapid breaths blowing over my face.

This is all we have, but we will always have it. Not even death can take this from us.

JUDE

Gabe grunts as he sits up in the bed. I can see the strain on his face when he shifts and I feel like shit for having him shot. But I can't let this get fucked up.

"Shit, ese. I feel like hell," he says, reaching for the glass of water by the bed.

"Yeah..."

"I trust you can do this." He looks at me with a sincerity I've not seen from many people in my life.

I nod just as there's a knock on the door. The door slowly swings open and Gabe's men file into the room, each with guns and strings of bullets strapped across their chest. It looks like we are going into a fucking zombie apocalypse. Shit.

"You know what you are doing," Gabe says to them. "Nothing has changed. You bomb your targets. He glances at a guy to my right. "And Daniel, you take your men with Jude to the warehouse. Protect him as if he were me. This," Gabe reaches over and places his hand on my shoulder, eyeing them all, "is who you follow today." He locks eyes with me and nods. "You take down the Sinaloa shitheads, ese. For your daughter, for my sister." His attention goes back to his men. "Do not question this gringo, si?"

They nod.

"Alright, go then," he says, and the men leave the room like a small army.

This is organized mass destruction. I'm taking out the leaders and these men are taking out what's left. Building by building. Business by business. By the time we're done, there will be nothing left of the Sinaloa cartel.

He takes a heavy breath as a soft smile works over his lips. "Be careful, ese, and I will see you later."

We shake hands and I leave the room knowing I will never see Gabriel Estrada again.

break

The desert is so fucking desolate and depressing. I watch the red sands whirl past the windows. Never in a million years did I think I would end up here. In cartel land, trying to save my little girl. This is where it all ends, and the stress bearing down on me at this very moment is suffocating as shit.

Tor's sitting next to me, her small hand in mine. We've barely said a word to each other on the long drive through the desert. What can you say when you know you are going somewhere to die? I've spent the last half hour playing out moments of my life like a movie. I guess trying to hold onto those things one last time because who really knows what awaits you in death? If heaven and hell are real things, I sure as shit know where I'm going.

The driver pulls up to the warehouse, the rusted metal door still bolted. Four black Hummers sit to the side of the building right next to the wire fencing. The doors open and men climb out, only two of them with visible guns, and Tor's hold on my hand tightens. "For Cayla," she whispers.

"Yes, for Cayla," I say and throw open the door. A handful of Gabe's men get out of the car behind us and follow me. I feel bad they're going to die with us, but it was unavoidable. I couldn't exactly turn up with just Tor. We wouldn't even make it out of the car.

A man wearing a fitted suit steps forward. When he goes to slick his hair back, the sun glints from his watch. We walk around the front of the car, and one of Gabe's men holds up his hand to halt us.

"I'm Pedro," the man in the suit says, "head of the Sinaloa cartel. So sorry Gabriel couldn't make it." He smirks. "But I do hope we can come to some agreement over Juarez."

I don't respond. Just glare at him.

The tension bristles from every guy here. Pedro looks the part, but I can smell his uncertainty like a shark smells blood. I shove my hand in my pocket and wrap my fingers around my cell phone, nervously checking that it's still there. One of Gabe's men goes to the rusted door of the warehouse and lifts the heavy bolt. He pulls on it and the large metal door creaks open.

There's a moment of hesitation before we all walk into the dark warehouse. The guy in front grabs the lever on the wall and flips the switch. The fluorescent lights buzz to life before I scan the room, taking note of the barrels of gasoline I placed by the far wall yesterday. Stacks of abandoned wooden boxes lay scattered about the space. Pedro walks over to one and leans against it before looking at his watch.

I motion Tor over to the side of the room, using my hand to guide her between me and an open doorway.

"Jude..." she whispers.

"Just wait, okay."

She huffs behind me. Pedro locks eyes with me and we stare each other down. One predator sizing up another, trying to work out who will end up as prey. The longer our gazes are locked, the thicker the tension grows, until it's almost a living breathing beast. Tor shifts uneasily behind me, making me hyperaware each short breath she takes. Every one of Pedro's men glare at us. After all, I'm the bookie and she's the woman who murdered their boss.

"It seems your friend's little cartel has caused quiet the problems for us over the past several weeks," Pedro finally says.

"No, that would be me," I say, lifting a brow at him. "Tell me, how does it feel to have lost the Sinaloa in the space of a month? Hell, you must be the shortest reigning boss they've ever had." I smirk. I have to bide my time here. I need them to make the first move because the second I go for Tor, they're going to shoot. "You run this city like shit," I say. The men with Pedro shift uneasily as they exchange glances.

He laughs. "Ah, but that is where you are wrong. Jesús ran the city like shit. Distracted by pretty things." His eyes flick to Tor, and he grins. "I, on the other hand, intend to be much more ruthless."

I can see a slight flicker in his eyes as a smile spreads over his lips, and, as if on cue, the doors bang open and swarms of Sinaloa pour in. Gabe's men expect it. The warehouse fills with the echoes of gunshots and shouts. It's the fucking distraction I need. I grab Tor and sling her through the open doorway behind us. When she attempts to fight me, I shove her as hard as I can. She falls back, grabbing the metal railing of the bomb shelter stairs just before she tumbles down the steps. "You go to your sister and you get Cayla, and don't ever let *anyone* besides her know you are alive." I go to shut the door and pause. "I love you, Tor. Always will."

Before she has a chance to say anything, I slam the door closed and hold the handle, using all my weight to hold it shut. Tor pulls on the door, trying to get it open as bullets ricochet from the metal walls. Holding the door with one hand, I fish the phone from my pocket. She manages to get the door open about an inch, screaming my name, before it slams closed again. I struggle to type over the screen as she fights me. Did she really ever believe I would let her

die? The only job I have is to protect my girls, and what kind of man would I be if I led her to her death, allowing my daughter to grow up without her beautiful mother?

My finger hovers over the button that will detonate the bomb. In this moment, all the noise, all the chaos fades to static behind the pounding of my heart. This is it. There is no turning back.

There is nothing I wouldn't sacrifice for them because I know a life without either of them isn't worth living, and I can't imagine a world where they don't exist. I press the button, waiting. It seems like an eternity before I feel the pressure, the heat followed by the deafening boom that sends me flying across the room away from the door. I'm thrown against a wall, smoke and debris swirling in the air. There's an eerie quiet just before the metal rafters begin to creak and groan, and a sound like a crackling, falling tree echoes through the crumbling warehouse. I'm drowning in a cloud of dust when I watch the beam come crashing down.

I did this for love.

A heavy sensation crushes over me. Pain radiates throughout my body. My instincts beg me to fight, but some things you cannot hope to win against, so I think of Tor and Cayla one last time before I willingly succumb to the darkness with peace because I loved them.

TOR

The door slams shut as a loud boom ricochets on the other side of it. The door rattles on its hinges and I freeze with my hand on the handle. I hiss and let go when it burns my palm. My heart is pounding, tears pooling in my eyes. Why would he do this? We had a deal. Me and him. Ride or die. That was it. *Why* would he do this?

I pull my top over my head and use it to grab the handle. It doesn't budge. With a frustrated cry, I shove all my weight behind it. The door opens but bumps up against something. I slam my shoulder against it and it gives enough that I can peer through a small gap.

Sky. I see sky. The entire building is gone.

I shove my weight against the door over and over until it opens enough for me to squeeze through. I stand in the middle of utter destruction. Rubble and bodies. I frantically scan everywhere, looking for Jude. With each passing second my heart beats harder and tears pour down my cheeks. He's not dead. He can't be dead. *I would know. I would know.* My eyes land on a body ten feet away, and I stumble toward it. I recognise the tattoo on Jude's forearm, and a sob breaks from my throat. He's not moving. I shove

a piece of wood off his chest and drop to my knees beside him.

"Jude. Jude!" Nothing. With trembling hands, I feel his pulse. I think I can feel it, but I can't be sure with my own pulse hammering through every inch of my body. I stroke his hair away from his face and press my lips to his. "Please."

He's Jude Pearson. He can't be dead. Cayla needs him. I need him. My mind frantically scrambles through years of medical training only to falter. Hysteria clings to the edges of my consciousness and my vision blurs with tears as panic holds me in its clutches. "Jude!"

This isn't how it was supposed to go. He went against our agreement—I had prepared for both of us to die, not just him. I hadn't once thought that I may survive without him. I wasn't ready for this.

Hysteria rises in my throat, my heart banging against my chest. "You lied to me," I whisper, and just like a twig snapping, a bolt of anger jolts through me. I slap his chest hard enough that my palm stings from the impact. "You lied to me!" I repeat before I fall onto his chest. I breathe in the dust covering his body and cough.

His chest rises sharply before relaxing. "What kind of woman slaps a dead man," he says before he goes into a coughing fit.

"Oh my god." The relief is over-whelming. I crawl up his chest, resting my forehead against his cheek as my tears drench his shirt. His hand lands on the back of my head and he strokes my hair. When I glance up at him, he smirks through another cough. I lift my face from his chest and glare at him. "You're an asshole," I cry.

"Don't I know it?" He attempts to sit up but fails. "Not like I intended to live or something."

I sit up and swipe at the tears on my face. "Why would you do that to me? You promised we'd be together." I can't

help but feel hurt and betrayed. I should be happy we're both actually alive, but it's all I can focus on.

"Because I love you."

I sniff. "I really want to hate you right now."

"It's a thin line between love and hate doll. A thin fucking line."

"You could have just walked through that door with me," I say.

"Armor plated, doll. Phone signal won't get through it. Besides, dying was the plan."

I lean forward and grab his chin, kissing him hard. "You do that to me again, and you won't be waking up."

"Fine," he tries to sit up again, and groans. "We gotta get out of this shit though."

I throw his arm over my shoulder and help him up, staggering under his massive weight. "What now, Jude? Clearly you have some plan. Or was it just that you die and I have to figure it out?"

"God, give me a break." He shakes his head as we stumble over the rubble.

I help him through the remnants of the destroyed warehouse, glancing around the surrounding desert. "And was I just supposed to fucking walk through the desert? Nice, Jude. Real nice."

"Woman..."

I hear an engine in the distance, and I turn to stare out over the barren landscape. A cloud of dust swirls behind a truck speeding toward us. "That's Marney, isn't it?"

"Of course." Jude smiles.

I look at him, all beat up and covered in dust. And it really hits me. *We're alive!* I'm starting to think Jude Pearson truly can't be killed, and I'm grateful for it.

The beat-up truck sputters to a stop, the brakes screaming. Marney pinches his smoke between his lips as he reaches across and shoves the passenger door open.

"Come on in," he says before he takes a puff from the cigarette.

I go to pull myself into the cab of the truck and the door pops loose from the hinges. I glance back over my shoulder at Jude as I climb in. "You couldn't have gotten something made before 1972?"

"I mean, I *could* have..." He smiles as he gets in behind me and closes the door. "But where's the fun in that?"

"Well, you look like shit, boy," Marney says before he shoves the gear into drive. The engine grates before the truck lurches forward in the sand.

"Fuck you," Jude grumbles.

Marney laughs and digs around in his pocket. "Thatta boy." Seconds later, he hands Jude a smoke, and I sit back against the seat, encouraging him to lie down and put his head in my lap. Grumbling under his breath, he glares but does it. His head must be pounding. He inhales on his cigarette and I stroke my fingers through his hair as I watch the desert pass us by.

We survived. Against all the odds, we survived, and the air suddenly feels clearer in my lungs, the sun just a little warmer, and Jude's presence all the more vital.

JUDE

ONE MONTH LATER

The car sputters along the dirt road, whizzing past the cornfields. The top to the old convertible is down and Tor's hair blows in the wind. I glance over at her, and damn, she is gorgeous. Smiling, she turns to face me and takes my hand, clutching it in her lap.

We drive down the road for a while in silence before we come to a four-way stop. I take a deep breath and give her hand a little squeeze as I nod up to the street sign. This is it. All but one way leads us away from Cayla.

"This is it, doll."

Tor chews on her bottom lip, her eyes locked on the sign. "She's safer without us," she whispers.

"Sure..." For all intents and purposes, we are dead, but there will always be that lingering fear of what if. What if someone finds out? What if Ronan knows... what then? Can someone like me ever really step out of the fire?

Her eyes drop to her lap. "But how do you live without your heart, Jude?" She looks guilt riddled, and I know it's killing her.

"You can't. You can only exist." I wrap my hand around the back of her neck and pull her to me, pressing my lips to her forehead.

She places her hand on my jaw, and I feel a slight tremble. "Then what was the point in any of it?" She moves away just enough to look at me, like she's waiting for something. I think she needs this to be my decision, that way she can blame me for the guilt. All she wants is to keep Cayla safe, even if it means breaking her own damn heart every day.

"We had no choice, Tor. She was taken. We did what we had to do to get her back...to keep her safe."

I've thought about this every day. About whether we can really leave her. She'll never know any different. She'll grow up thinking we died in a car accident. It's the two of us who have to live with the truth, and the thing is, when you make a decision like this, there is no going back. We will never get those years back. A child is something you feel in the pit of your soul, and how do you really walk away from that? We could go get her. Leave the country. Vanish into thin air... but there is always that risk. And at what point would keeping her be selfish?

Tor's biting on her lip, her eyes watering. There is no worse pain than the pain of grieving the loss of someone who is not truly dead. She's fighting it. Trying to be strong. She can't do this. No matter how strong she, she can't do this. *I* can't do this I stare at the sign. Four roads but I always knew I would only take one. Maybe it makes me fucking selfish, but I'll admit that I'm weak when it comes to my girls. Taking a deep breath, I take a hard, left turn and floor the accelerator. "She's our baby," I say, and Tor smiles.

EPILOGUE

RONAN

There's a knock on my office door. "Enter," I call, glancing up. I watch as Dimitri walks in, an envelope in his hand. He silently drops it on my desk and leaves.

Picking it up, I slide my finger beneath the flap and a cluster of pictures spill out onto the desk. My lips twitch in the shadow of a smile as I stare at a picture of Jude and Victoria Pearson standing on the patio of a villa, the little one clutched in her father's arms. They look happy. Content. Safe.

Oh, sure the American thinks he outsmarted me by faking his death and making it out. But I know he's alive. What he did do was outsmart an entire cartel, took down the reigning royal family of Juarez, and for that...well, he has my respect. For *that*, I will allow the Pearson family to slip from existence, to live in the south of France in a tiny town under the names Mr. and Mrs. Veratau. They have earned that much.

I turn back to my computer and click the call button. It rings out and finally connects. Gabriel Estrada's face comes into view. He's sitting behind a desk, a cigarette in his mouth, and his elbows braced in front of him. I wonder if he knows of Pearson's deception or not. The American trusted

him. It's possible, but then, when you need to die, you can trust no one. I should know.

"Russian." Acid drips from his tone and I smile. He hates me. Of course he does. A lion hates the man that keeps him chained, and Gabriel Estrada is indeed a lion. Dangerous, unpredictable, and feral. But he does have one weakness, the chain in question. I glance across the room to the wall of monitors and hone in on the bottom right screen. Camilla Estrada paces a bedroom, her long dark hair spiraling down her back like black satin. She's wearing jeans and a sleeveless shirt, but neither do anything to hide those lethal curves. I'd say she's a rather *convenient* piece of collateral.

"Gabriel," I say with a smile, "I trust you are well."

He narrows his eyes. "You can go fuck yourself. I've doubled your drug supply, distributed your dirty Russian guns. I want my sister."

I pick up the smoldering cigar from the ashtray in front of me and take a slow drag. "Camilla chose to stay. You know this," I say on a smirk. A man must never reveal all his cards, but the simple fact is, without his chain, Gabriel Estrada would bite me. And Camilla is not all that she seems. She is not merely the pretty sister of a drug lord. Anyone who cares to look closely enough can see it. She will strengthen him, aid him, and I cannot have that, so when all was said and done, I made an offer: one of the hostages could leave. Camilla would never allow the child to stay here without her, and so I got to keep the fiery Latino. I can't say it upsets me. She's...intriguing.

I watch on the monitor as the door to her room opens and one of my men steps in. He moves towards her and she squares her shoulders. The second he touches her, she hits him. I fight a smile. *So feisty.*

"I hope that cold up in Narnia gives your shriveled little Russian dick gangrene."

I laugh. "So angry, Gabriel. I called to tell you that you have another shipment of guns coming this afternoon, oh, and some missiles. Some Cubans will be picking them up."

"What the fu—" I hang up, cutting him off.

I now have all of Russia at my feet, the strongest cartel in Mexico in my pocket, and a foothold to take America. Absolute, corrupt. Bad, dirty power. What higher calling can there be?

I inhale another stream of smoke before there's a knock at the door. "Enter."

The door opens and Camilla is shoved inside my office before the door closes again. She stares at me like a feral little animal wanting to pounce. I can almost see the bloodlust in her eyes. I push up from my desk, unable to keep my gaze from the smooth curves of her body. She lifts her chin and places her hands on her hips, daring. Always daring, that one.

"You've been a *guest* here a while," I smirk.

She glares. "Oh, yes, my stay has been so enjoyable," she says in that exotic accent. "Surrounded by filthy Russians."

"I'm so pleased to hear that you like the accommodations." I like to wind her up and watch her blow. And it is so very easy to wind up my little toy.

I take another puff from the cigar and blow the smoke in her face. Everything about her says she would slit my throat with a smile on her face, and that is something we have in common: smiling at death. She's so pretty. So dangerous, and so very easy to under estimate—a challenge. And what man doesn't live for a challenge?

"What do you want, *diablo*?"

"Ah," I laugh, "the devil." I arch a brow, circling behind her like a vulture. I lift a lock of her hair and inhale the scent of her shampoo. Being this close to her sends a

crackling awareness through me. I'd very much like to have her. "Pet names so soon, *krasivaya*?"

She turns her head, staring me straight in the eye. "I will kill you," she says quietly, one brow rising.

"Oh," I trail a single finger over her shoulder, "I know you would." I lean in close to her ear, close enough I know the heat of my breath will likely send goosebumps racing over her skin. "That's what makes it all so exciting." Her jaw ticks, her full lips pressing into a tight line.

I let my fingers drift down to the very top of her ample breasts, and she slaps me. My cheek stings from the hit and my cock twitches with excitement, but I must put her in her place. I must always hold the power. I draw my hand back and slap her across the face so hard she gasps before her hand flies to her reddening cheek. "Do not try to overthrow the king, *krasivaya*. I am a fire that will do nothing but burn you."

There's a small amount of blood trickling from her lip which she spits on the floor. And then she glances back up at me, a wild flame of darkness flickering in her eyes as she smiles like a beautiful little devil. "Careful, Russian. I don't mind standing in the flames to watch you become ash."

A shot of adrenaline courses through me and I smirk. "Great men are forged in fire and it is but the privilege of lesser men to light that fire." I grip her jaw and she growls. "Your brother is such a man, and I will use you until he gives me everything I want." She glares and I laugh, releasing her and walking back behind my desk. "You should make yourself at home. You'll be here a while."

THE END

Follow Ronan's story in Bad, releasing November 7th, 2017.
[Available for pre order.](#)



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