

no place
for
devils

Diablos Locos Motorcycle Club
Book One

SANTANA KNOX
AMY OLIVEIRA

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Contents

Things to know

Officers

Content warnings

Author note:

Glossary

PROLOGUE

Emory

César

César

Emory

César

Emory

Emory

Emory

César

Emory

Emory

César

Emory

César

Emory

Emory

César

César

Emory

Emory

César

Emory

César

Emory

César

Emory

César

Emory

Emory

César

Emory

Epilogue

Lupe's Sancocho

Lupe's Sancocho

About the authors

Acknowledgements



THINGS TO KNOW

COMPOUND - Area of land the clubhouse sits on. Diablos
Locos property.

GRIMM'S REACH - Deserted city – population: Diablos

CHURCH - Club meeting, members only.

PERRITA - Girl who hangs out/lives at the compound,
sleeps with bikers for room and board in hopes of becoming an
ol' lady.

OL' LADY - A club member's significant other.
Transcends 'wife'. A Diablo can have multiple wives, but only
one ol' lady his entire life.

CUT - A sleeveless leather jacket with the club & biker's
name, as well as other patches.

MC – Short for motorcycle club



LOS DIABLOS LOCOS - OFFICERS:

CÉSAR/LOBO - PRESIDENT

MALUCO - VICE PRESIDENT - STATUS: MIA

CALAVERAS - ENFORCER

COYOTE - SECRETARY

LADRÓN - TREASURER

SANGUINERO - ROAD CAPTAIN

VENENO - SECURITY/TECH

LUPE – HEAD MAMA/MATRIARCH OF THE CLUB



Content Warnings

torture, gory and detailed deaths, illness/virus, human trafficking, flaying, mentions of immigration/legal issues, seizures, vomiting, light degradation, dubious consent, weapons, kidnapping, gun violence, car accident, mentions of family death, captivity, misogyny



Note from the authors:

The illness featured in this story is not Covid; it is an unknown virus. This club is a mixture of many Latin American identities. Spanish is not the default language, English is since club members speak a mixture of English, Spanish, Portuguese, and, at times, French.

The fever known as The Sinner's Sickness spread all over the country in less than two years killing half of the population.

This is how it began.



Glossary

1. Amor (Spanish and Portuguese) - Love
2. Blanca - (Spanish) Nickname for someone with fair skin
3. Bród agus fuil -(Irish Gaelic) Pride and Blood
4. Cabrón - (Spanish) Asshole/fucker
5. Cachaça - Brazilian alcohol
6. ¿Como? – What? Come again?
7. Compadres- (Portuguese and Spanish) Comrads
8. Corazón - (Spanish) Heart
9. Cu de bêbado não tem dono - (Portuguese) A drunk ‘s asshole has no owner
10. ¿Entiendes? - (Spanish) Understand?
11. ¿Estás loco? – (Spanish) Are you crazy?
12. Gigante- (Spanish and Portuguese) Giant
13. Hermanos (Spanish) Brothers
14. Hijo de puta – (Spanish) Son of a bitch
15. La Pelirroja es mia. – (Spanish) The redhead is mine
16. Maldición – (Spanish) damn
17. Mami – (Spanish) Mom
18. Mandioca/yuca- (Portuguese/Spanish) Vegetable root known as cassava

19. Médico - (Spanish and Portuguese) Doctor
20. Miramé - (Spanish) Look at me
21. Mortos - (Portuguese) Dead
22. Muerte - (Spanish) Death
23. Orgulho e Sangue - (Portuguese) Pride and blood
24. Orgullo y Sangre - (Spanish) Pride and blood
25. Papi- (Spanish) Daddy
26. Payaso - (Spanish) Clown
27. Pelirroja (Spanish) redhead
28. Pendejo - (Spanish) Idiot
29. Pero – (Spanish) But
30. Pinche madre - (Spanish) Motherfucker
31. Puta madre – (Spanish) Motherfucker
32. ¿Que chingados? - (Spanish) What the fuck?
33. ¿Qué fue? - (Spanish) What is it?
34. ¿Qué quieres? - (Spanish) What do you want?
35. Que vives para servirte - (Spanish) That lives to serve
you
36. Respira - (Spanish and Portuguese) Breathe
37. Roscas – (Portuguese) Brazilian sweet bread
38. Sláinte - (Gaelic/Irish) Cheers/to health
39. Ven- (Spanish) Come



PROLOGUE

With her ass firmly planted on my lap, I squeezed Alma's hip, forcing her to grind over my cock as she tipped my beer back into my mouth. She got up to toss the empty bottle into the trash, and my eyes followed, watching every step she took towards the bar.

My enforcer cleared his throat, reminding me that I'd been in the middle of a conversation before the distraction.

My attention span usually plummeted around the sixth bottle.

This was my seventh.

“I’m just sayin’. If it wasn’t for Caipira’s weird superstitions, things would be a lot different around—” The words died on my tongue, my train of thought derailed by the burning pain of a bullet piercing my shoulder.

I felt it before I heard it. Warm blood seeped through my fingers as I grasped my shoulder, but before I could give my men orders, another bullet tore through my leg.

The room exploded with the sound of frantic yelling, my brothers scrambling to arm themselves and turn their attention to the threat. All eyes diverted to my sister, the queen of the Flores Cártel, standing at the door, the gun that once housed the bullets that just ripped through me in her hand. Two gringos stood behind her like guard dogs, ready to lay down their lives at her command, their guns already pulled and aimed my way.

“Stand the fuck down!” I yelled, clutching my leg with a pained rasp, the room wild with chaos and screams for retaliation.

I whistled through two fingers, silencing the room. My hermanos, my club, turned my way, and Celia Flores allowed the corner of her lip to turn up, a semblance of a smile gracing her hardened features.

“I came to collect, pendejo.” Her voice was nearly as cold as her stare.

No fucking shit.

It had been fifteen years since I'd seen my little sister, and considering the way I'd left her, I'd say this reunion was well deserved. I was still practically a kid back then, twenty-five years old and the lieutenant to a *cártel* I'd never asked to be a part of. Her father, the man who raised me, spent every day from the moment she was born preparing his kingdom for his little girl to one day lead, branding her with the strength she'd need to succeed.

In his mind, the only way to do that was to physically break her down to nothing, but as father-of-the-year, he couldn't deal with the misery himself.

No.

He could only bark orders, and I, his second in command, his yes-man, was forced to do the dirty work.

I destroyed her, once upon a time.

“Back off, little girl. I can't let you keep pointing a gun at my prez.” My enforcer stood, a six-foot-six giant, tattoos resembling a human skull over his own face and the word *muerte* stamped across his throat.

What he didn't know was that she had the right, that I owed her blood and loyalty. I was frozen, paralyzed; not because of the pain, but from the memories that haunted me. The man I used to be. The man I ran away from. She stood there not because of the shit I put her through under our father's fist, but because I'd left her once he died.

Saying he died was a kind way to spin the lie. No one *died* in the *cártel*.

Rafael Flores was brutally murdered in his driveway, eighty-six bullet holes plugged inside his body, his wife and youngest daughter caught in the crossfire. Celia and I were the only ones lucky enough to escape.

She placed her gun under my enforcer's chin, and, with no fear for his size or regard for her own life, she pushed him towards the couch until he had no choice but to sit his ass down.

“Take a seat, gigante. This is your president's comeuppance. You can either be a good little grunt and listen to him, or I'll shoot him dead right here, and you can bet your ass he'll let me. That pendejo owes me his life.” Her eyes darkened with a bloodthirst I remembered cultivating in her myself.

I shaped her in that *cártel* dungeon.

I was the one who shredded her to nothing so that he could remain her father in her eyes.

Then, just as easily, I abandoned her.

After that I swore that If I let anyone else in again, if I called anyone else family, I'd protect them with my life.

Voices barked over each other as Celia and her gringos argued back and forth with my club, my enforcer and my road captain taking turns challenging my sister's authority. They didn't understand; they knew my past, they knew what I came from and what made me, but they had yet to realize there was

no escaping this life. I had taught her that myself. It was I who made *her*. If she wanted my death, here and now, for leaving her, it was hers to take.

She had earned it.

Sweat dripped down the side of my face, the burn of my injury radiating into a throbbing pain.

“There’s a reason why he’s not talking right now, chicos. It’s because I’m in the room, which means unless I ask him to bark, your Lobito will stay quiet like the good little dog he is.” A challenge laced her tone.

Her eyes met mine, and I held her stare.

We both knew the truth.

The symbol of our family, the five-petal flower scarred into my chest, was a constant reminder that my life would always, somehow, be intertwined with the Flores Cártel.

I could have chalked it up to shock, the way the voices drowned out and I couldn’t focus, but the reality was, I was likely losing blood too quickly, my veins too laden with alcohol to properly coagulate.

Another shot rang out from Celia’s gun, hitting Rico in the kneecap.

Chaos erupted once more.

“I said, stand down!” I yelled.

My sister smirked like she’d won, and Calaveras deflated. It was almost amusing to see a man so large be conquered by

such a small woman. The two argued semantics for a few more seconds before she turned her attention to me again.

“You lost this, payaso.” She tossed a golden coin, stamped with the five-petal flower crest, at my feet.

I’d given it to her the day I left, the day I told her I was out.

“I didn’t want it back.” I looked away.

I heard stomping as she marched over to me, the pressure of her fingers and the sharpness of her nails cutting into my face as she grabbed my chin, forcing me to look into her eyes.

“We both know this is scarred into us deeper than a fucking coin.” She let me go, strutting away like she owned the place.

She owned *me*, and by association, she’d decided she owned Los Diablos Locos Motorcycle Club. These fuckers were too stubborn and stupid to realize they should drop dead weight when it was no longer serving them, so now they’d be involved in *cártel* shit, too.

“We’re a family. We ride or die for each other. If he’s got business with you, then it’s our business too,” I heard my enforcer say.

Like I said, stupid motherfuckers.

It would have been smarter to let her kill me and elect a new president. It wasn’t as if we were doing things by the normal law MCs rode by. We didn’t pass a throne down to our unwilling and traumatized children, damaged by their upbringing. No, we elected the best man for the job.

For twelve years, that had been me.

Though, now, with my ghosts coming back from the dead, I wasn't so sure.

“Where the fuck is your doctor? My brother is bleeding all over the place,” she spat out in Calaveras' direction as if she wasn't the one who just shot me.

We had a club doctor, but Méd would be leaving us soon for a program abroad to finish his degree. I was hoping for the best for him. Aside from the occasional scuffle, we didn't really have beef with other motorcycle clubs. Shit still happened, though, and it was important to be well equipped with someone who understood basic anatomy, even if sometimes it was just the standard brother accidentally shooting someone's knee out.

Or a *cártel* queen deciding to pop in for a surprise visit, guns blazing.

When he finally arrived, and Celia realized our doctor was merely a medical student, she demanded someone call a *real* doctor to look over our *médico*'s patch job. His skills were nothing to boast about, and it was impossible to tell if he'd gotten everything out. Only time would tell, apparently.

My sister had someone better in mind, a doctor who'd been working for the very men who stood behind her—The Black Crow Brotherhood.

I wasn't sure how to feel that she may need me alive more than she wanted me dead.

Maybe she wanted to wrap a collar around my neck until I repented for my betrayal. Fair enough. I needed three-hundred miles between the two of us again, but you couldn't always get what you wanted.

While we waited, I sat there, half-drunk, though mostly alert. The knock at the door came an hour or so later, and a prospect rushed to open it. The Black Crow Brotherhood's doctor gripped her bag as she walked through, chin held high, eyes scanning the room for someone deserving of her time.

She was different from the slew of miscreants around me: red hair down to her waist, bright green eyes, and pale skin that reminded me of one of those early 2000's vampire movies. It somehow suited her. She wore a pristine suit skirt paired with a matching jacket and red high heels.

Every hair on my arm stood on end, and my cock followed suit.

"I assume the old dying man is who I'm here for?" The sarcasm dripped from her lips, and if I hadn't been bleeding to death, I would have choked on my own tongue.

"Old man?" I rasped out. "Blanca, I can promise I'd run circles around you if it wasn't for the bullet through my leg," I assured her with a smirk. "Unless that's your thing. Then I'll gladly let you call me Papi, eh?" My men laughed, and she rolled her eyes as she made her way over to me.

She pressed her lips into a fine line. "Unless you want a roll of gauze sewn inside your mouth, I'd be quiet. It'll be much easier to save your life if you don't talk." It was the kind of

snark that could kill me if the bullets hadn't already been doing the job.

My heart raced; was this what love felt like?



8 months later

“You know why I’m here, don’t you, ‘mano?’” I asked one of the men who dared to wear the same cut as the rest of my family.

He wasn’t family anymore. He was a traitor.

“Lobo—Prez...” he choked out, sweat dripping from his forehead as he fought to remain conscious through the pain.

Calaveras, my enforcer, was a big man; he didn’t need weapons to make people hurt in ways that made them cry for their mamás. When he did use them... it made watching the torture all the more worthwhile.

This asshole didn’t owe me pain anymore. No, he owed me his life, his patch, and the tattoo on his flesh.

“I’m not your president anymore, traitor.” I pulled my switchblade out, eyeing the tip and watching his expression fill up with fear.

“Please, don’t do this Prez... I can fix this!” he begged.

“There’s no fixing this, pendejo. You opened your mouth to the wrong people, and you betrayed your club, your brothers.” I stepped closer, practically vibrating with excitement.

I could smell his fear; the stank permeated the air. He’d been locked in my cellar for days, and piss pooled between his legs, the stain on his jeans never getting a chance to dry.

He thrashed, the chains around his wrists rattling with what little leeway he had. “No, no, no,” he begged again, shaking his head from side to side as he pulled against the restraints.

I palmed the knife, dragging the serrated edge along the Diablos Locos tattoo marking his chest, a symbol that he was one of us. I pressed the sharp point down into his flesh, the blood pooling quickly against it as I sliced around the image. He shook violently, so much so that Calaveras had to pin him to the wall so I could finish the job.

His eyes rolled to the back of his head as he succumbed to the inevitable shock.

“Wake him up. I want him to feel this,” I gritted out, waiting for my enforcer to pull out the smelling salts.

The traitor’s head lifted, eyes jarred wide before his mouth opened to wail in pain as I dug my knife under his flesh and sliced the patch off his chest.

He screeched, a foul stench filling up the room.

“Oh, fuck.” Calaveras waved his hand in front of his nose in disgust.

I chuckled.

“You’re lucky there are people up there who care about you. Otherwise, I’d make this a public spectacle, make it last longer. Alas, I don’t want to hurt *them*. They deserve better, so I guess you get to die, ‘mano,” I taunted him.

“Lobo, please,” he blubbered, snot dripping into his mouth as he begged for mercy. When they reached the crying phase,

it let me know the fun was almost over.

My enforcer eyed me, watching but never judging when I surrendered to the abyss inside myself. I didn't cultivate this darkness inside the club; no, I brought that with me, from my past.

In the cártel, where I was shaped by a cruel man to become a reflection of himself. Cruel, cold, and ruthless down to the core.

When he died, I was liberated.

I had nothing in my pocket but my name, but I took off, burying my past in a deep grave so I could start anew, stumbling my way to the gates of this very compound fifteen years ago. That's when Caipira took me in.

I was a prospect for less than a year. My hard work, dedication to the club, and my desperate desire for a family were everything Caipira had been looking for in a vice president. His former VP had been in the hospital with cancer for two years, Santa Muerte knocking on his door.

He died a few months later, and I accidentally became the stand-in vice president of Los Diablos Locos. Two years later, Caipira got in a brutal wreck on a solo ride, leaving me to care for his club.

For twelve years, I've been king of Grimm's Reach.

Though I still don't believe I was the one for the job, none of my brothers wanted it any other way. This club saved my

life; it showed me the true meaning of family, one I was never shown before.

So, I decided I'd bleed for them, and anyone who threatened our safety, I'd put six feet under. I stuffed the barrel of my gun inside his mouth and pulled back the safety.

"No cryin' now," I sneered as he whined into my Glock. "Orgullo y Sangre."

His eyes widened before I pulled the trigger, his brain splattering onto the wall and ricocheting onto my face. I looked back to see if that'd earned me a reaction from my enforcer, but he wasn't phased.

Nothing phased a man who considered himself a vessel for death.

Just as I stepped back from the cell, the prospect came tumbling down the stairs at record speed, his lanky limbs waving through the air like they could propel him if he flapped any harder.

"There's a redhead at the door for you, Prez," he gasped out, his hands on his knees as he hunched over.

Calaveras side-eyed me, but I simply grabbed a nearby towel, cleaning the blood off my hands as best as possible before walking up the basement steps back into the farmhouse. I opened the door to see her standing there, just as the prospect had said. I didn't have to come all the way up here to know who'd be waiting on the other side of the door. I knew.

Emory fucking O'Connor.

The only redhead who'd crossed my mind in the last few months. Better yet, the only woman who *hadn't* left my mind since the moment I first saw her.

The minute she stitched me up, a thunderbolt seared through my body, letting me know that if I didn't pursue her, I'd be missing out on the greatest thing this world could offer me.

My cock and its delusions of grandeur.

She'd waved off every advance, yet now...here she was. It was like fate herself knew the woman was so stubborn, she'd not only miss her soulmate staring back at her, but she'd go out of her way to pretend they weren't.

I could be patient.

"Blanca, what brings you to my neck of the woods?" I asked her, knowing damn well someone of her caliber had no business mixing herself with my people.

Emory was a doctor. Though known in certain circles to mix herself with the more *felony-inclined* type of folks, she still held herself like she was above it all.

I watched as she gulped.

"I need your help, César."



I never met a good man. Their faces blurred together, and their actions left me with a lifetime of scars. I was too smart to trust, and too strong to need to. Still, like prey waiting to be caught, I stood in a chapel looking into the eyes of yet another man I knew I had no feelings for.

I was born in the Mourne Mountains, overlooking Carlingford Lough, and like everything decent in this world, it was desecrated. Not the mountains—they were still there, somewhere in Northern Ireland, the place I could never return—but the good memories were gone, and with that went the sense of belonging to my own land.

Like I said, I never met a good man, not here or there and certainly not the one who stood in front of me now.

They called him by different names, some with respect, others with fear.

Lobo.

President.

He smirked at me before flashing a look to the officiant, who stumbled through his words, compelled to finish the ceremony as quickly as he could.

Crossing César Villalobos wasn't a wise decision.

Yet, here I stood in front of my future husband, wishing I could do just that. He was a criminal, the president of a one percenter motorcycle club, a dangerous man born into violence who wasn't interested in changing his ways.

I squeezed my eyes shut, thinking about the mountains, the icy wind, the salty air. A gasp flew out of my mouth when I felt his ring-clad fingers close over my chin, tilting my head up.

“Mírame, blanca.” he ordered.

I didn't even know what that meant, but my eyes froze on him.

As a doctor, I knew a million inventive ways to kill a man that wouldn't draw suspicion. Unfortunately for me, I needed the bastard. To be fair, I wasn't even sure people like Villalobos *could* die. Their rotten roots gripped deep into the soil, poisoning the land, ensuring nothing would ever grow again.

Someone who invoked that much carnage could never truly die.

I narrowed my gaze, and he chuckled under his breath. His voice was deep and assertive, his laugh menacing. I let my eyes wander, taking in the large, tattooed arms hidden under a black shirt. His jaw set while the officiant talked, his voice now rushed and high.

“Faster,” César threatened, clearly amused by the man’s discomfort.

I watched the priest’s throat bob, his eyes cast downwards, looking at the book while he turned its pages quickly, making sure to skip whatever wasn’t necessary. His words jumbled together while César looked at peace, as if he wasn’t the devil himself.

I only came for his help because I had nowhere else to go. We’d met a few times, but I knew better than to trust him. I felt uneasy when his eyes wouldn’t leave mine. Of all the things I disliked about César Villalobos, I hated the most when he watched me. Under his gaze, my skin burned, nothing but raw need licking up my spine. I felt more from one of his smirks than I had from any person before him, and that made me deeply uncomfortable.

Feeling was dangerous.

César made me feel everything at once, hatred and desire alike. My head was never in the right place when he was concerned, and now, I was tying my life to his.

“Do you, Emory O’Connor, take César Villalobos...”

That wasn’t even my real name. How ridiculous was it to stand here in front of a man I didn’t love, hearing a name I invented, in a place I didn’t belong?

“To love, comfort, honor...”

It was a joke. It was all a cruel joke.

“In sickness and in health, in sorrow and in joy...”

César’s gaze burned into mine, his presence even larger than before. Every word sealed my fate, freedom seeping through my fingers.

“...as long as you both shall live?”

As long as I lived, I’d belong to him, my life in his hands.

Leashed.

The very thing I’d been running from.

Eight years ago, I’d been put in a cell and called someone’s property. Something like that left a permanent mark at the very core of who a person was. I still repeated the names of my captors under my breath when I needed to remind myself of why I kept going.

The Black Crow Brotherhood eventually saved me, and to pay them back, I became a doctor and treated their men no questions asked. Even now, years later, when I hit my head on my pillow, I dreamt about the time I belonged to a monster.

I promised to never get married, to never let a friend get too close. I broke my promises when I ran to César Villalobos and

asked for his help. Even though I hid my past from him, I could hear the clock ticking.

He wasn't one to willingly let me keep him in the dark, but I couldn't ever tell him. Men like him weren't deterred so easily, but I wasn't giving him an inch more. Yet, even when I thought about how much I couldn't trust him, I whispered, *'I do'* under my breath.

The same array of nonsense was repeated to César. His eyes were still burning into my soul, and I, unable to look away, let him. I was good at hiding my emotions, but everyone showed their cards on their wedding day.

"I do," he said, so certain, his eyes full of satisfaction.

It was too late for me to back out; he had won.

I breathed out slowly, trying to get a grip on my anxiety. My life had not been mine for a long time now; giving it to the president of the Diablos Locos MC meant nothing in the grand scheme of things. It would buy time, hope, and whatever other lie I wanted to tell myself. The price tag was just my freedom.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife."

Husband and wife.

He took a step forward, and I stepped back. Unbothered, he did it again, this time making sure to loop his arm around my waist, keeping my body flushed against his.

"We don't need to kiss. It's done," I tried to argue.

César's smile forced a chill up my spine, the diamond on his canine tooth sparkling under the chapel lights. His eyes danced over to the cross hanging behind the officiant, and his mouth lowered to mine before he spoke, "God's watching, blanca."

"God never watches when you're around," I whispered back.

His hand closed around my neck, and he pulled my face to his, examining my eyes as if he was trying to look past all the lies and secrets I'd been using as mortar for my walls. I hardened my stare.

His exhale was hot against my skin. My heart hammered in anticipation, and just as I thought I might explode, it wasn't his lips that met mine, but his thumb. He smeared my bright red lipstick roughly over my bottom lip, making a mess of my makeup.

Then, he turned away, leaving me breathless and confused.

"Let's go. My men need their new doctor," he said, reminding me of the only reason he agreed to keep me around.

He was out of a club doctor. He'd be my husband, and in exchange, I would treat his men, his club.

He was looking at me like I might have promised him more.

I followed him out of the roadside chapel, throwing my bouquet into the first trashcan I could find. Fucking roses; I despised them. Whatever idiot decided they symbolized love and devotion certainly hadn't spent enough time around flowers to know that nearly anything else was considerably

more romantic. I looked up from the bin to find him just a few feet away from me, his eyes on the red flowers. I flexed my hands, pretending the very air in my lungs wasn't frozen when I felt the heat of his stare.

Draped in tattoos down to his knuckles and peaking above his collar, he looked dangerous. They even decorated his face: a skull on his temple and a few markings threatening to travel up from his jawline. My gaze wandered to his eyes, pitch black and focused on me.

César was a warning. From head to toe, he was telling the world to stay away, and yet, I didn't listen.

Words I reserved only for him were begging to come out. I opened my mouth, but he was quicker, swiping a look over my body before he moved away from me. "Car."

Just one word. *Car*.

He was the president of a motorcycle club, but this morning when he picked me up from my apartment and I asked why we weren't riding, he looked at me in disbelief. The corner of his mouth twitched before he shook his head, grabbed the keys, and said exactly that.

Car.

"I'm not following you around, you know?" I raised an eyebrow.

Technically, I had to. We came together, and I needed him to drive me back, but I straightened my spine and refused to be ordered around with one-word commands. When I told him I

needed his help, he gave me exactly one night before he showed up at my apartment, ready to walk down the aisle with me. Aside from the dress and that horrid bouquet, I had nothing on me. Even my phone stayed behind.

He swung open the door, pinning me with a look, his dangerous voice low, leaving no room for discussion. “Get in the car, Emory.”

My feet moved from his tone alone, and I swallowed the protests. Some wars were not worth waging, and in that moment, I wasn’t so sure César would care to ask again.

He was folding the sleeves of his black shirt up his elbows when I got in, the veins on his forearm straining against those hard-earned muscles. I looked away as he pulled out of the church parking lot before my face could go red.

“I need to go home,” I told him, still staring out the window.

“Your home is with the Diablos,” he replied in a flat tone.

I forced a sarcastic laugh. “As much as *I* think this outfit goes with everything,” I looked down to my wedding dress, “I think I prefer working in something else.”

He sighed, his eyes on the road. “Your bags are at the compound. Your apartment’s lease was bought out.”

For a second, I thought he was joking, but there was no smirk painting his lips this time. “Wh—What?” I couldn’t believe him.

He flashed me a sharp look. “You’re welcome.”

I shook my head, “For going through my things? Getting rid of my home?”

He tsked. “I paid for a month’s rent and sent the prospect to pack it up for you while we were solving your little problem. Say thank you.”

I huffed a laugh, rubbing my hands over my face, ignoring the makeup I applied this morning. “You can’t just take my things, César! You don’t have the right—”

“You aren’t going back there, blanca. You’re my wife. You live with me now.”

A chill ran down my spine at his words, fear gripping me by the throat. We were driving down an empty road, he was taking me away from everything I knew. I turned, gaping at him, not sure what else I could say. Then, like a nightmare, the world slowed down, and I watched in shock as a black SUV came our way at an alarming speed.

It was going too fast. Before I could warn César, it hammered straight into his side of the car. The scream finally dislodged from my throat, the seat belt cutting into the skin of my neck. My stomach lifted into my mouth just as the airbag went off and slammed into my chest and face. For a terrifying moment, the only thing I felt was the SUV scraping against us as it pushed the car off the road.

César’s voice broke through the high-pitched ringing in my ears as he pushed the airbag off me. “Blanca, you with me?”

I blinked heavily, my head foggy from the crash. I reached up to the throbbing ache at my head, only to feel warm liquid gathering around a small cut.

“Emory?” César shook me, and I nodded.

He climbed through the backseat and exited onto the road. His door was crushed in, the window completely obliterated. He helped me out, a deep frown decorating his face when a single droplet of blood marred my white dress.

“César...” I called, trying to get his attention off the blood.

He shook his head, nostrils flaring as he turned away from me. “They’re gone! Pinche madre!” He spat the curse like a bitter poison.

“Should we look for them?” I asked uncertainly.

He huffed out a breath, “We need to be gone, too, before they come back.”

They who? I only realized I said it out loud when César shook his head. “I don’t know yet.”

He climbed back up front and turned the key, the engine struggling to start. I stood outside the car, still shaking as the pain settled into my body. “I don’t think we should drive that.”

He came to the same decision, apparently, slamming a hand into the wheel in frustration before he joined me on the side of the road.

“Come on. We need to walk.” His voice sounded rougher than usual, and I nodded as I followed him down the road.

“Are you hurt?” I asked after a while.

“No.”

Bruises had formed on my skin, and my head pounded painfully. The impact came mostly from his side; if I had to guess, he was just as hurt, if not more, but I didn't press.

“Do you think they'll come back?” I loathed the fear in my own voice.

He just looked at me and sighed. Reaching over with his thumb, he swiped away the blood trickling out of my nose. “Either this was an accident, or it wasn't.”

I hugged myself and thought about the life that led me here. Normal people had a reception after their wedding. I got into a car crash that was probably intentional.

“I'll call a cage.” He typed on his phone as I frowned. “A car,” he clarified when he noticed my confused expression.

I felt numb. This morning, I had an apartment, I worked in a hospital, and my life was my own. Now, I had bruises decorating my skin, no place of my own, and a job as a doctor for people who were decidedly *not* on the right side of the law.

But I was safe again. I had to be.

After walking for forty minutes, every muscle on my body screamed for a break. César's cab finally caught up to us with the ride we'd called for. Settling into the backseat, I rested my head on the window and watched the cars pass by, wondering how many of them would also try to kill us.

The driver left us at a sideroad motel. A cold laugh escaped my throat when I saw the seedy, old, cracked paint on the walls and a bright *vacancy* neon sign, both As flickering.

A fitting honeymoon for a woman who just married a criminal.



“**W**hy can’t we go straight to the compound?” Emory asked as I walked towards the lobby.

“I don’t lead strangers to my brothers,” I answered, stopping only when I noticed she was no longer following me. “Emory.” I didn’t hide the sternness in my voice, but she narrowed her eyes, challenging me to push her. “Either you walk, or I drag you.”

“Let’s go.” She rolled her eyes, marching silently forward without looking back at me.

Emory was acting like she had the upper hand. It was impossible to get something from her the easy way, and while I liked the challenge, I would have preferred if she just did what she was told.

Maybe that was the fun of it. I hadn’t decided yet.

From the minute she appeared in my life, she fought against every word out of my mouth, and for some reason I couldn't explain—I enjoyed it.

No. I fucking craved it.

“One room,” I told the receptionist, taking a few folded notes out of my pocket.

“Actually—” Emory started, but I interrupted.

“One room,” I repeated without giving her a chance to say another word.

She huffed under her breath, but followed me to the room once I got the keys all the same. I hid my smile as I opened the door. “If you want out of your little jam, it's gonna need to be believable, blanca. That means this is the first night of many you get to spend next to me.”

I shut the motel door behind me and clicked the lock, pulling my belt off in one quick movement, the leather snapping against itself and echoing through the room.

“We have photos. I'm in a wedding dress. We don't need to sleep together,” she said in a flat tone as she bounced down onto the bed, looking around the sad motel room.

I doubted this was anyone's choice destination for their wedding night, and if so, that was a sad fucking thought.

Fuck.

It was *my* wedding night.

Forty fucking years old, and the first woman who agreed to say yes only did it to save her own ass. Actually, it was Emory who came to *me* with the proposal. Something about *if you're going to commit a crime, you might as well ask a criminal to do it with you.*

Fucking typical.

She'd been dirtying her hands for the biggest syndicate operation in Cove City for years, The Black Crow Brotherhood, and now they were disbanded. In the ruins lay a slew of wingless birds looking for a new nest, her included.

I had to have her.

She was a one-of-a-kind doctor, and I knew we'd be more than lucky to call her our club medic. Lucky for me, she was desperate for help, regardless of who gave it. She could pretend to be above the outlaw life to anyone else. She'd been hanging around criminals too long, and she blended in seamlessly. We both knew it.

I looked over, that red hair cascading down her pale shoulders, accentuating the soft look of her skin. I ached to reach out and touch her, to wrap her hair around my fingers and tug.

“Once we get to Grimm's Reach, you better make it believable. I won't risk any of my guys going down if La Migra starts fucking with them over *your* immigration status. They need to think this is real,” I warned her.

I refused to make her problem the reason any of my people ended up in the trenches of the American immigration system.

“Undress, Emory.” I hid all the playfulness from my voice, burying it deep down beside the seed of resentment that only grew every time she denied me.

“Not even a drink first?” she mocked.

“You think you’re better than me, and yet you still beg me to save your ass?” I opened the mini fridge and pulled out a pint of whiskey before tossing it her way.

She caught it with her left hand without blinking. Twisting the cap, she didn’t bother looking away, downing a third of the Jim Beam bottle without so much as a wince.

I watched her, letting my mind wander about how she ended up as my wife. It wasn’t a beautiful story, a perfect match for the rest of my miserable life. Emory got a call from immigration that her visa had expired, and the good doctor finally knew what it was like to be on the wrong side of the law. The thought of her dealing with deportation almost made me chuckle.

She was risking her medical license, years of hard work, and a life in the country she now called home. I, well... I was in need of a club doctor, and I was fucking tired of the red-headed seductress acting like she was too good for my advances.

She was all alone and stuck with me. No family to claim her. She’d realize soon enough I wasn’t the worst thing out

there.

By the time I pulled my cut off and removed the shirt underneath, she'd drunk nearly half the bottle. Without looking my way, she stood from the bed and walked towards the bathroom, still playing her fucking games.

"I'm not fucking you," she asserted.

"Who said I was fucking *you*?" I snarked back, unable to hide the bite in my tone. I followed her inside the bathroom, and she turned to face me, determination stamped all over her face. "Undress," I ordered again.

Getting up in my face, she tipped her head back, our chests almost brushing against one another. "You aren't going to touch me, César. It's not happening."

She kept saying that. Her eyes darted around nervously as I stood there, bored, while she repeated herself, as if it would keep me away.

Nice try, blanca.

I pulled my switchblade out before I grabbed her by the front of her thrift store wedding dress, a gasp ripping from her throat as the sharp edge cut through the fabric. It pooled down at her feet, leaving her in nothing but black underwear.

I knew what I'd find, but I still clenched down on my molars at the sight.

She was already covered in bruises, red and blue painted over her chest and collarbone, but she showed no evidence that

she felt anything at all. She didn't even bother to cover herself or allude to modesty.

I had a feeling the accident wasn't a coincidence, but I wasn't going to tell her that. If I wasn't a safe place for her, then what the fuck was I even good for? We had so many enemies, there were at least six different possibilities as to who'd been after me, waiting for us to leave that chapel.

I needed to find out who was after me before it became her problem as well.

Before she found out how dangerous Diablos really were.

She pushed me off her, clucking her tongue. "I'm fine. I've been through worse."

I scoffed. "Sure you have." She was dead set on keeping the tough girl act up around me, so I sure as shit wasn't going to baby her. "You need stitches," I declared, running my fingers over the gash close to her hairline.

She winced, hissing at me and swatting my hand off her face. "I'm a doctor, I can do it myself."

She turned, rummaging in the bathroom drawers for the first aid kit. She pulled the small plastic case out of the drawer, moving to wash her hands before she opened the pre-packaged needle and medical thread. Looking at me through the reflection in the mirror, she raised her eyebrow again.

"What?"

"Can't I watch *my wife*?" I taunted her, grabbing the pint of whiskey from the counter and taking a swig.

I couldn't help but admire as she stitched herself up without so much as a hint of pain or discomfort. My throat dried up at the sight, my cock throbbing in need. Something about that was really doing it for me.

She rolled her eyes when she caught me. "Stop looking at me like that."

I smirked. "You're mine to look at, doc."

Bringing my hand to her hip, I slowly appreciated the softness I knew I'd find with small circles. She bit her lip each time the needle punctured her skin, and I pressed my fingers down on her flesh as a distraction. She dragged the thread all the way though before repeating the action again. A whimper escaped her perfect lips, but something told me it wasn't from the pain.

"I don't belong to you," she warned.

I tsked. "I've got some nice, official papers, blanca..."

"You know that's a farce."

She kept at her work while I made my way from her hips to her stomach, the rough pads of my fingers grazing her skin. I looked over her shoulder, watching our reflection in the mirror. She looked too perfect to belong in my arms.

It was exactly why I needed to have her.

"It's not a joke," I hummed, pressing my front to her ass. "Nothing about us is."

My finger slid close to the edge of her underwear, and she sucked in a breath, trembling under my touch. Still, she hadn't stopped me.

"I don't belong to anyone," she croaked, my eyes returning to hers.

I had a feeling my new wife collected secrets. She was a vessel for the lies that slipped through her teeth with so little effort. I watched as she finished mending her temple, and then threw the scraps of trash away.

She turned to face me, gulping. "Out of my way."

Instead of stepping back, I placed my leg between hers. She gripped the edge of the sink, her knuckles white.

"Stop," she demanded.

I bent my head, lowering to her height, our noses almost touching.

"This will never be real," she said with intent to wound.

That was the thing about her: every action was calculated, every word planned. Of all the lies Emory O'Connor spun, though, that was my favorite one.

"Are you telling me, or yourself?"

Her breathing hitched, her eyes dropping to my mouth, like she was waiting for the kiss I owed her as her husband. Suddenly, as if she'd been pulled from a daze, she shook her head, her cheeks red, her breathing changed. "It's the truth."

She was a bad liar.

“If I bend you over,” I said, nodding to the faux marble, “am I going to find you wet?”

She licked her lips, working down a lump her throat. “No.”

I fought the corner of my lip from curling up. I was addicted to that treacherous mouth of hers. Flipping her around, I folded her in half, pushing her dead center in the back until her chest was all the way down onto the cold counter.

Turning her head to the side, she looked at me, anger painted over her expression, along with something else I couldn't discern. Desire? Fear? Impossible to tell from the walls she'd built. I watched her, waiting for another false fabrication she'd conjure to hurt me, but she remained silent.

I slid my hands up her thighs, feeling her shudder at my touch. Once my knuckle grazed over her thong, she gasped, the fabric drenched from her arousal.

I smirked. “One day, you'll run out of lies.”

“I'm not lying,” she exhaled out.

Slipping my fingers in around the side of her panties, a quiet pant fell from her lips as I made contact with her dripping cunt. I used her slickness to coat my fingers, dragging them over her clit, raking back and forth while she squirmed under my hold.

“Would you rather we pretend you won't enjoy it?” I taunted, slipping two fingers inside her and forcing a moan from her lips.

“I’d prefer it,” she grunted out, “if men stopped treating me like something they can own.” She threw her leg behind her, hitting me right in the balls.

I curled over instinctively to brace myself from the sharp pain, only to be knocked back by the intensity of my injuries from the crash. She stood there, fixing her hair against the sink, watching with a satisfied smirk as I writhed in pain.

“It’s just you and me now. You can stop biting at me, little viper.” I forced myself up, masking my discomfort as I stepped toward her.

Without warning, she smashed the whiskey bottle on the lip of the counter, raising the jagged edges toward me, not a threat but a promise.

My lip turned up in a sly smile.

At first, when she asked me for my help, I considered myself a lucky man. Emory O’Connor was a beautiful woman, a doctor; she was incredible in every sense of the word. Now that I was standing here, though, in front of the coldest woman I’d ever met, I had to wonder if it might have been a curse. Despite her needing me in every possible way, I was still nothing but gum on her shoe.

“I’m not crazy—we *are* perfect for each other. Tell me you feel this too.” I dropped my resolve, the sound of begging so foreign coming from my throat.

“I feel nothing,” she whispered as I took another step, closing the distance between us.

She raised the bottle to my neck, and I tilted my chin, exposing it to her in offering. She pushed the bottle closer, the sharp end tearing my skin with the smallest of movements.

“I can fix that,” I hummed, accepting the challenge.

Her nose twitched angrily as she gripped the bottle tighter, but when I moved forward, she leaned against the sink, her legs falling open. My fingers danced along the edges of her panties again as I asked, “Are you gonna tell me to stop?”

I brought my fingertips to her entrance and held them there as she blinked up at me, another expression I couldn’t decipher on her face. I stayed frozen until she finally gave in and sank her hips down. Lowering herself onto my fingers, she turned her cheek away from me as she bit down on her lip.

I pulled her chin back in my direction. “You don’t get to look away from this.” I angled her face down so she’d see my fingers deep inside her as she choked back a whimper.

“You gonna tell me I don’t deserve you?” I chuckled, lifting her up to sit on the sink, pumping in and out of her at a slow pace.

“You don’t,” she breathed, closing her eyes as I kept up my lazy thrusts.

“What else?” I gritted out, rubbing my fingers against her walls while my thumb pressed hard into her swollen clit.

“You’re nothing to me.” It would have stung more had her cunt not been gripping my fingers like a vise, her voice hoarse, like she was holding back something big.

“You can spit your venom, but look at you now, unraveling like you were made for me, little viper.”

Opening her eyes, we both watched my fingers disappear inside her cunt. Emory moaned, still holding that bottle against my neck like a lifeline, and the sound alone was enough to make me forget the pain of the wreck.

“I’ll never want you,” she spat. *Another lie.*

I curved my fingers to prove her wrong, hitting the spot inside that made her crumble with a hearty sob. Her free hand found my arm, and she gripped tight as she unleashed the very thing she’d been holding back.

I hummed in victory, pumping her through her orgasm.

My cock was hard, pressing against my zipper, but before I stepped away from her, I rasped, “Look at me, Emory.”

That cold exterior was just an act. The toughness wasn’t real. I wanted to find out who she was under the ice—I needed to be the one who melted it away. Her eyes locked onto mine, and for just a second, she looked more scared than she’d ever allowed before. She removed the bottle from my neck, the shattering of the glass almost as loud as her disappointment.

“You said you could fix it,” she whispered icily.

“Fix what?” I asked, confused.

Her jaw was set, but I saw more in her eyes than she was willing to show. Understanding washed over me, and I nodded. I promised to make her feel, but maybe she had already felt enough.

“Not all feelings are good.” I wiped away the droplets of blood that beaded around the broken flesh on my throat.

Taking Emory for myself wasn't a smart decision. She was wild, secretive, difficult. I couldn't get her out of my head, so when she came to me, I thought Santa Muerte had been on my side, granting my prayers.

Now, I was bringing her to my brothers, making my problem theirs.

How was I going to explain to the club that our new doctor was also my wife? That was a problem for another day. I texted the prospect the motel's address, telling him to pick us up in the morning. It gave me time to come up with a reason why the medic position, which traditionally belonged to an officer on my council, was now being held by Emory O'Connor.

A stranger.

She stepped around me, leaving me to deal with my own reflection. I unbuttoned the shirt, wincing as I rolled the sleeves off my arms and examined my body underneath. Pain was an old friend; I welcomed it. Like Emory, I understood the need to feel something. It didn't matter what *it* was, as long as it was *something*.

My entire left side was already purple, having taken the brunt of the impact, my ribs no doubt broken, the splitting ache nearly unbearable. I removed my pants, turning on the shower and letting the steam fill the room before stepping

inside. The water pounded against my injuries, but I let the heat of it sink deep, effectively numbing me.

My cock shouted against the stream of water, and no matter how much I tried to ignore it, I wasn't going to be able to will this one away. Not when the redhead of my dreams had just come all over my fingers.

Bringing them to my lips, I tasted her flavor still on the tips of them.

My dick twitched in response. A *thank you* of sorts.

With my free hand, I grabbed at the base, slowly stroking up and down, the sound of her coming still stamped vividly into my brain, giving me the visuals I needed to get me where I needed to go.

I turned my back to the water with one hand against the wall for support. Precum beaded at the tip as I slid my fist up and down, using it to help me glide back and forth, each stroke pushing me closer to my goal.

I opened my eyes to find her staring directly at me, not at my cock. Mouth agape and a dumbstruck look at her face as she stood there. Paralyzed by the sight of me fisting myself

“Are you here to return the favor?” I squeezed the tip, knowing her eyes had not yet had a chance to lift up yet.

She blinked heavily as if trying to snap out of a trance. “I-I... u-um...” She stammered, turning quickly and grabbing a small washcloth from the sink before walking out at rapid speed.

I hummed appreciatively, closing my eyes and imagining she had joined me. I was desperate to know what she felt like, how warm she'd be, just how tight that pussy could wrap itself around me.

I could still hear the way her voice changed, breathy and high-pitched when she was right on the edge of oblivion.

I came at the thought, ropes of cum splattering against the tile floor and washing down with the rest of my shame.

I sighed, leaning against the cold wall. Was I ever going to be good enough for this woman, or was I walking myself straight to the slaughterhouse?



She sat quietly through the entire goddamn car ride.

Dark sunglasses perched on her nose as she gazed out the window. She'd requested them specifically, along with a new outfit, since I cut her dress off the previous night. The prospect had no choice but to oblige once he came to pick us up.

She came around my fingers, but by the time I'd gotten out of the shower, she was already in bed, facing away from me. I slept on the chair next to what should have been my side of the bed. Now, my neck hurt like a motherfucker, doubling the pain in my already-aching body. Her sour mood had rolled over into today, keeping her quiet without even an effort to fight me on my music.

We pulled off the main road onto a dirt path, and I slid up the windows before the dust found its way into the car and upset the good doctor by ruining her new outfit. She was wearing her classic look: a pale combo that matched from head to toe, along with crimson heels that brought out the red in her hair. It flowed loosely down her back, radiant against the light.

It reminded me of what she'd worn the first time I'd ever seen her, just a few months ago when she'd been called to my club to patch me up. The minute she opened that smart mouth to insult me, I knew I was fucked. Obsessed wasn't the word. No, I was a dog, itching for her like she was a bone I could never have.

She knew it, too.

"I don't fuck criminals." She'd said it that very first night, but I followed her around despite the warning, praying for a chance to offer her something that would make me worthy.

Good things came to those who waited.

Which was a fucked thing to say, considering I was sympathetic to her plight. Sure, it was a little funny to see a gringa struggle with the legalities of immigration, but my heart softened at the thought of her going through what most of me and mine did.

There was something behind that wall she put up, telling me she'd already gone through plenty. She didn't need to go through anymore.

Grimm's Reach was Diablos territory, there was no way around it. It was a ten-mile stretch of dirt that didn't belong to any of the cities surrounding it. It bordered Cove City, and we reaped the benefits of being close to the action, while still being far away enough to keep us protected in our little corner.

A resting place for the wicked.

After rolling a few miles down the dirt path, the metal fencing of the compound came into view. Veneno was already pulling back the gate at the sight of the car. The fencing wasn't enough, and the gate was weak as fuck. We needed reinforcements. If someone was bold enough to come after me in public, they sure as shit wouldn't hesitate to bring the fire down on our very doorstep.

I pulled the sedan up to where the bikes were parked, tossing the keys to Coyote as I got out of the car.

"Take the prospect and bring back the wrecked car. We don't need the cops showing up here about a crash."

He gave me a two-finger salute and proceeded to follow the steps I'd laid out. I walked around the car to let out my new bride, only to find she was already slamming the door shut and walking towards the farmhouse, one foot crossing over the other as those long, pale legs stepped up to the porch.

She halted, stopping at the sight of Lupe's dahlia garden. That thing was county fair prize worthy, and the old crone would slit throats over it. She admired it for longer than most and I thought back to the red rose bouquet and its trashcan fate.

I hadn't even had time to warn her, give her a heads up about this life. The silence in the car was so damn intrusive, talking over it felt borderline violent. She hadn't spoken a word, so why the fuck should I have bothered to tell her that at any given time, three things could be said to always hold true for the Diablos Locos compound: there were always at least one pair of tits floating around freely, someone was guaranteed to be drunk, and another would always be bleeding.

Just because it was six at night on a Tuesday didn't mean there would be any exceptions. She was still frozen at the entrance as I pushed through the saloon-style double doors. Paralyzed, either from fear or from how extremely out of place she clearly looked, I didn't know. That pristine white suit didn't belong here; not among the leather, the cigarette butts, and the spilled booze.

A pool cue struck, and the crashing sound of the balls spreading out somehow silenced all the raucous chatter. I was garnished with the attention of every club member who'd been around the living space, and Chiqui was on me before I could react, legs wrapped around my waist as she planted a wet kiss on my cheek.

"Prez!" Sanguinero shouted, just as Ladrón made his way over to me with an open beer in hand to pass my way.

I took it gladly, taking a large swallow and wiping the excess that dripped from the corner of my lips with the back of my hand.

I looked to my side, noticing the scowl etched deeply into Emory's face. I placed Chiqui on the ground, clearing my throat uncomfortably as she adjusted her low-cut shorts at the sight of the doc.

“Who's the bitch?” Hálcon asked from the bar.

I hid my annoyance at the blatant disrespect. This wasn't the regular world, and if she was going to be my ol' lady, she'd need to endure a lot more than colorful language. She'd need to learn to dish it right back if she wanted their respect.

Regardless, Emory O'Connor wasn't some club whore hoping to wife up a Diablo and become an ol' lady. Not that there was anything wrong with our girls wanting to find a permanent place for themselves here; Emory just wasn't that.

Despite my need to be her knight in shining armor, I knew that if she wasn't here, she'd be somewhere else. She was a survivor. I could see that clearly, and women who survived were resourceful.

She didn't need me, not in the desperate way I'd been wishing for.

Turning her chin my way, she hardened her stare like she was waiting to see if I was going to punish Hálcon for the insult.

Maybe I should have, but there was a bitter part of me starting to think all this effort had been in vain. Maybe she wasn't lying when she said she'd never want me.

“This is our new doc,” I explained, and just as I expected, I was bombarded with voices talking over each other as they complained and tried to bargain their way out of a decision I had already made. “And my wife,” I said even louder, breaking the chaotic chatter.

I was suddenly met with silence, a few of my officers’ jaws practically in hell from how far down they’d dropped. The sound of Chiqui’s heels clicking across the wooden floors echoed as she ran towards the kitchen, likely to cry.

She was cute, too kind, breakable. She was a good time and understood a man like me wouldn’t be tied down by societal expectations, so she never pushed, never asked for more than what I could give. Except now I was, and it wasn’t her wearing my ring.

“Never thought I’d see the day our Prez would be chained to an ol’ lady!” Ladrón cheered, raising his beer in congratulations.

“I’m not,” Emory spoke loudly, cutting through the room’s momentary joy. “I’m not his ol’ lady.”

Whether or not she knew the ins and outs of our world was information I’d yet to be privy to. I wanted to think maybe she’d said it on a whim, confused about the term, not knowing what it meant and what kind of insult it was to refuse the title, but Emory O’Connor shot to kill. She cut to wound, and every word out of her mouth was a calculated move on a chess board.

“Change of plans, prospect,” I said as the kid walked into the clubhouse with the doc’s bags in tow. “Take her bags down to the basement. I’ll be showing her the hospital first,” I gritted out.

Grabbing her bicep, I dragged her through the crowd against her will, ignoring the searing pain across my ribs from every breath I took.

She wanted to disrespect me in front of my men? I would show her what the basic protection plan earned her. I would show her that out here, I made the law, and without giving, there wouldn’t be any take.

I was done with her games.

With the same lips she spilled nothing but hate, she drew blood biting back her desire for me. If I was around, her eyes found me. Yet, when I came to her, she turned me away.

When she’d found herself all alone again, I was there, picking up the pieces of her broken life, but she couldn’t even give me the decency of gratitude.

Now, she could play my games.



César's hand closed around my upper arm as he yanked me from the room.

"César! What the—"

"Walk," he rasped. He was so fast, my feet couldn't keep up. I stumbled, letting out an outraged scream right when he decided to completely drag me, ignoring my protests.

"Let me go!"

He grunted, clearly not interested in what I had to say. My eyes darted from his face to my feet, trying to keep up with him. Club members jumped out of his way as we passed by, no one asking why he was dragging me by the arm like a doll.

"César, let me go!" I yelled at him, trying to remove my arm from his grip. "You're hurting me."

He finally stopped, and for a second, I thought I'd get my way. Instead, he threw me over his shoulder, a gasp escaping my lips when he resumed walking, his shoulder carving into my stomach with every step.

“Let me fucking go!” I raged, punching that stupid Diablos' emblem on his cut.

“I'm tired of playing nice. You need to learn your place, blanca.”

I slammed my fist over his back again and again. “Let me go, you psycho!”

It didn't matter how many times I asked, or how much I screamed. My fist made no difference, and none of the Diablos were interested in saving me from their president. When there was no air left in my lungs, he finally stopped, and I heard a lock twisting. I used his back to prop myself up, trying to see where we were.

It would look like a basement if it wasn't for the three sad cots separated by tattered curtains and the metal trays with medical equipment to the side.

Was this the hospital?

“No...” I was shaking my head before the word made its way out of my mouth.

Before I could ask him, I was dropped unceremoniously on the ground. Trying to regain my balance, I fell on my ass, glaring at the man in front of me.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I hissed behind clenched teeth.

“Showing you around.” He smirked like he’d already won.

My eyes stayed glued to him, and when I made my way to stand up, he caught me mid-action, his hand between us stopping me. “You’ll have time to check out your new hospital.”

“This is not a hospital, César. It’s an infection waiting to happen.”

He smiled, no response urging its way out. When I opened my mouth to complain once again, he stepped back to the other side of the bars. I only realized my mistake when it was already too late. Scrambling to my feet, I tried to make it, but he was slamming the gate closed before I could reach it.

He had dragged me into a cell.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” I spat.

“Well, if you’re not mine...” he bit out, watching me from between the bars.

I scoffed at his audacity. “You’re keeping me locked up?”

“Seems like the best option until you learn to be grateful.”

I arched an eyebrow. “This is how you treat your wife?”

“Let me know when you’re ready to act like my wife,” he sneered as he stepped away, making his way out.

“César...” I called out at his back, losing all hope.

“Your place is here until you deserve my bed,” he declared.

I shook my head. “I deserve my own bed, you asshole!” I slapped the bars, finally getting his attention.

He walked back slowly, deliberately, watching me with narrowed eyes. “You agreed to marry me, blanca. Me. It’s my bed you’re sleeping in, my cock you’re riding.” My lips parted to protest, but he shut me up with a look. “You deserve neither yet. Have a nice night, Emory.”

The fucker left me there, in a fucking cage inside his laughable, makeshift hospital. I screamed from the tops of my lungs until my voice gave out, refusing to go down easily. If he thought he could lock me up, he had another thing coming. I shook the bars like they’d move, calling his name like he gave a crap.

I only realized I was crying when the fat tears began to soak the collar of my shirt.

I coughed through my words, having to bend, hands on my knees to bring my breathing back to normal, but I couldn’t. I closed my eyes and I saw the *other* cage.

I shook my head, moving to the back, where the saddest cot waited for me. I dropped my weight onto it, a hand over my heart, willing it to stop racing. More tears spilled from the corners of my eyes, the fucking bars mocking me and my so-called freedom.

I sold myself to the devil, thinking a man as dangerous as him could shield me from danger. I should’ve known nothing could keep me safe; not from my past, and not from my new husband.

The edges of my vision turned dark as past bled into present and I was back there, smelling stale piss from the girls caged in with me, their voices echoing inside my head.

I squeezed my eyes shut, counting to ten under my breath, but the images were tattooed behind my eyelids—never truly gone, just sometimes dormant.

I felt their eyes on me, waiting for me to crack. They told me that, in the end, all the girls gave up their fight, and soon, I would too. The same dread took over my body, coursing through my veins. I wasn't born to be a victim. I wasn't born to give up.

Young, dumb, and hopeful; before that cage, I was all those things. I had friends, and I laughed without worrying if someone would find my weaknesses.

I used to speak freely.

I didn't always know how to lie so effortlessly.

I barely remember her. Emer Fitzroy was a normal girl with a future, but she died in that cage, and Emory O'Connor took over.

The memories danced in front of my eyes, the sounds permeating my mind again. It was all too real.

“Doc?”

I reminded myself I wasn't there anymore, but bile rose anyway, threatening to spill from my throat.

“Doc! Fuck.”

My fingernails dug into my arm, holding me back from reacting, keeping me in check. They made ugly, half-moon marks, but I was used to it—they used to be practically carved into my skin. Like the only friends I could trust, they were back, with that the undying fear that plagued my entire life.

“Doc!”

I finally snapped out of the flashback with the rattling of metal, turning my head to follow the noise. Calaveras stood on the other side of the bars, his chest heaving, an unreadable expression on his face.

“Breathe,” he instructed me, his tone soft but firm.

My throat scratched as I tried to speak, licking my dry lips before croaking, “I’m okay.”

“You’re not.”

I brushed the hair from my face. “Don’t tell César, ok, big guy?”

I didn’t bother to look at him. He’d do what his president wanted him to do; that was how things went—I was just entertainment. No one owed me loyalty, most certainly not that mountain of a man. I could see the blood staining Calaveras’ hands. I knew, just like the rest of them, that he left a trail of horror wherever he went. I couldn’t trust him just the same.

When I raised my chin, his expression turned dark, suspicious. I waited for him to curse me out, to say I disrespected his president, the fucking club, to tell me I deserved everything that came to me and whatever else.

“You were trapped,” he said instead, surprising me.

“Are you a doctor now?” I arched an eyebrow.

“I’ve got demons, too,” he told me, clearly unafraid.

I wanted to reach the metal sink at the opposite wall, but I was afraid to move my legs and fall. The flashbacks didn’t matter; I wasn’t letting César win. He already had too much of me. They all did. I wasn’t giving him an inch more.

“Leave me alone, Calaveras,” I breathed out.

I never thought he’d listen, but he actually stepped away and left me to my personal hell.

With him out of the way, I dragged my feet to the sink. The cold water was an alarming but grounding sensation, keeping me tethered to the present as I washed my face and wrists. This time, when the bile rose, I bent over the metal toilet and spilled the little food I had in my stomach. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and slumped against the cold wall. Elbows on my knees, I waited.

I waited for César to come back and tell me what else he wanted.

I waited for him to ask me why I was so scared of being locked up.

I waited for something.

Anything.

Eventually, the lights went out, and I waited in the dark.



“Church,” I barked, slamming the basement door shut and walking past the curious club members who knew better than to pry.

My officers followed me through the beautifully remodeled farmhouse, past the bar, and into the room we held club meetings in. Ironically enough, Calaveras had hung an upside-down crucifix on the back wall as a statement nearly twelve years ago. I never took it down; it fit, just like we all did, in our broken, fucked-up little family.

It was different here in Grimm’s Reach, with the outcasts who came together under this roof. They called me president, but everything was done for the sake of our family, our club. That was more than any gang could claim.

“Where the fuck is Maluco?” I slammed my fist onto the table, the glass ashtray clinking loudly from the force.

Nobody answered, and I was met with shrugs of uncertainty.

My vice president had been missing for the last three weeks, and there were plenty of reasons for concern. I’d looked for him in his usual places, but I’d come up empty.

“What about Calaveras? Where the fuck is he?”

“He went down to the basement just after you came up,” Ladrón answered, a toothpick in his mouth as he leaned against the wall.

Of course he fucking would.

My enforcer, the biggest guy in this fucking building, was a soft, cuddly fucking teddy bear who couldn’t stand to see someone wronged. He had the moral compass of a toilet, but his sense of justice was loud as fuck.

“Catch him up. I don’t have time for this nonsense.” I brought a cigarette to my lips and lit it. “The word is out: war is over. Cove City is free for the taking.” I exhaled the smoke into the room.

Cove City was a massive fortress of sin, money, and debauchery, constantly embroiled in wars between the crime organizations that wanted to stick their hand in the pot for a chance to come out victorious. If a syndicate played their cards right, they could consider themselves the kings of the East Coast.

Voices jumbled as everyone spoke over one another. I just sat back in my chair, propping my feet up on the table and taking another drag of my cigarette. That's all it took; just the change in posture was enough for everyone to notice and quiet down, to give me their attention again.

"We're staying out of it," I clarified.

A few sighs of relief sounded, while some proclaimed disappointment.

"For now, at least," I amended. "Expect new players to pop up; better yet, old players reemerging now that the city belongs to no one. Once we know who they are and what they have behind them, we can make a move. A *smart* move."

Every man in the room voiced their agreement.

"So, what are we doing for money? No offense, Prez; the body shop does well, but not well enough to keep feeding us all," Ladrón chimed in.

If he was worried, then it was probably best I was too. Nobody knew the money like our treasurer, even if he was a fucking crook like the rest of us.

"I've brokered a deal with the Flores *cártel*. We're going to be running their guns this side of the country."

Madness broke out again.

"The fucking *cártel*? Prez, are you out of your mind?" Veneno stood over me, raking his fingers through his long hair.

“They’re gonna chain us for life. You make a deal with the cártel, and we’re nothing but dead men walking,” Halcón added.

Halcón was a longtime member from Caipira’s days. He stayed quiet during the change in leadership because he knew he was outnumbered; his opinion didn’t matter when they named me king. Now, he was older, comfortable voicing his distaste and eager to call me out on poor choices in front of the group.

Calaveras quietly joined us, but he didn’t bother to come all the way down to his place at my side. I narrowed my eyes, waiting for an explanation, but he just shrugged.

“It won’t be like that. I can promise you that our alliance with them will be on equal ground. They know we can make it worth their time. The cártel has no interest in owning us.”

“And if things change?” Ladrón asked.

“They won’t,” I assured him from behind gritted teeth.

It was a safe deal; my blood ties to the cártel guaranteed it. Though I had no desire to step back into that life again, that wasn’t being asked of me. “Run my guns northeast of the border,” the cártel queen had bartered. “I’ll pay you well.”

With the confirmation that we were close to broke, I had no choice but to accept the generous offer. Selling illegal weapons was risky, but the payout was well worth it.

“Is it safe?” Calaveras finally spoke up.

“As safe as a gun run can be.” I raised my eyebrows, letting them know the chance of prison or a bullet was just the same as any other run we’d done before. “As far as the people we’d be working with, yes. It’s safe.”

He nodded, and the room quieted down.

Ladrón sighed loudly. “We’re gonna need to talk about the doc.”

“What about her?” I gritted out, not able to go three full minutes without her crossing my thoughts if I tried.

“Well, club doctor is an official position. That would make her a member.” He scratched the back of his head, like he really wished he wasn’t the one saying it.

“What’s your fucking point?” I practically growled.

“Members have to be initiated,” Hálcon reminded me.

Maldición.

The room fell silent, everyone waiting for my answer.

“No.”

Conflicting chatter grew, and I pulled my gun out before shooting at the ceiling, debris falling over the desk.

Silence again.

“Let’s put it to a vote,” Coyote finally spoke. He was good at stomping through the bullshit and taking all the feelings out of decisions, something I was failing to do in this moment.

“If you think the doc needs to be initiated as a member to be our club doc, say aye.”

Every asshole in the room agreed, aside from myself and Calaveras, who raised an eyebrow like he was trying to piece together his thoughts.

There was no way out of this one. My wife or not, she was going to have to prove herself to my club before they'd consider her one of their own. The question was, would she even want to?

"It's settled," Coyote announced, writing something in his little planner.

"Give me some time... to explain it to her," I said, holding back my contempt.

I was president, but this wasn't a dictatorship.

I was a man with nothing when I first came here, and I gave this club my all. Caipira saw that in me; that's why he trusted me with his brothers.

His leather hung behind me now, just below the inverted crucifix on the wall, his patch sewn into my cut a long time ago.

Sure, I could pull the president card and outrank their decision, take it upon myself to give Emory the special privilege I knew damn well she deserved just for being mine, keep her from initiating.

But they were right.

She wouldn't be respected. Even the perritas went through a smaller version of our initiation if they wanted to live under

our protection. She wouldn't be granted the same mercy, not if she was going to be a full-fledged member.

The first female member in the history of fucking ever.

I needed to make her see that it was in her best interest, but knowing Emory O'Connor, that alone would be reason enough to resist it. I needed to guarantee she was safe here before she would embrace it.

“Ladrón, I want more cameras surrounding the property. Put them in the fucking trees if you have to,” I ordered, not bothering to explain my suspicious demand.

He nodded, and with that, I banged my gavel, concluding church so I could commiserate in private over the redhead who wanted nothing to do with me.

Every officer filed out of the room except Calaveras, who stayed sitting directly across from me at the opposite end.

“What?” I spat out once I realized he wasn't leaving with the rest of them.

“You sure?” He was a man of few words, and lately, it seemed like he had fewer of them for us. He didn't need to talk, though, because I knew he always had my back, no matter what.

Seemed like he already had hers, too.



I spent the next two days marinating in my anger, finding myself increasingly more upset the harder I tried to wipe her from my mind. She was a crimson witch, and she'd captivated the very core of my being.

“Let her out.” It was the only warning I received from Calaveras before he went silent again.

I didn't bother to argue, but I wouldn't be folding so easily. I had more important things to deal with than my wife's refusal to accept her fate.

I'd figure out a way to get it through her head somehow.

“I didn't realize you were seeing someone.” Chiqui's voice broke through the fog of my thoughts in the clubhouse kitchen.

I poured my coffee and let out an audible exhale. It was too early to be handling someone else's feelings.

“Chiqui, you know—”

“That you don't do relationships. I got it when you said it... I never asked more of you than you wanted to give me. That's

why I'm having trouble understanding." She looked up at me with tears welling up in her dark brown eyes.

I grabbed her cheek, giving her the most sympathetic smile I could conjure.

"Sometimes, we meet that person who turns our whole world upside down. They have us feeling things we never thought we would, have us changing every plan we've ever made."

"I'm sorry I couldn't be that for you." A tear fell down her cheek.

I wasn't sure whether I was supposed to wipe it. It felt too intimate, more than I'd ever given us the chance to be, so I left it.

"No, Chiqui. I'm sorry you thought you could be. You deserve more than this club can give you."

I stepped back from her, eyeing my enforcer, who stood at the doorway with a suspicious look on his face.

"What?" I snapped, walking past him towards the basement.

Everything was a burden lately.

Not bothering to turn on the lights before I stomped my way down the stairs, I found myself called to her den. In true Emory fashion, she didn't acknowledge my entrance.

I stuck the key in the lock and swung open the door.

She didn't move.

"I dragged you in, I'll drag you out," I warned.

She scoffed, her eyes finally shifting to mine, her arms crossed at her chest. “I thought you were teaching me a lesson?” she taunted, like her time here had been child’s play.

“It’s Sunday,” I informed her.

“So?” She laughed, like it meant nothing to her.

“Asado Sunday means the family eats together. It’s the only thing Lupe asks of us. Let’s go.” I tilted my chin toward the stairs.

“No,” she deadpanned, an icy coldness to her voice.

“¿Como?” I asked, shocked at her unwillingness to ever fucking comply.

“I said no. I have no reason to do anything for you.” She turned her face to me, her eyes glowing with the heat of her hatred.

“Fine,” I spat, slamming the door shut before turning back to the steps.

Lupe was gonna have my head for this one.



Metal scratched over the hard stone, waking me up. I didn't bother looking up; I knew it was the prospect leaving me breakfast and a spoon. It was better than eating with my hands, a luxury I couldn't afford to lose.

"No coffee again?" I rasped out.

I hadn't seen César since he tried to bring me to his family meal. I wanted nothing more than a shower and a chance to eat well, but I couldn't get over the hypocrisy of it all. He was treating me like a prisoner, so I wasn't about to play wife whenever he needed me.

I bet they didn't even have roasties. I'd only bend my morals for roasties.

Besides the lack of coffee, it wasn't so bad down here—not that I'd ever admit that to César. I was fed enough times to

assume they didn't want me dead. Still, I was locked away. I heard them whispering, calling me César's ol' lady; I always corrected them, knowing it would piss him off.

Silence followed my coffee request, but before I could open my eyes and check who was delivering my food, Spanish cursing rolled off a feminine tongue, throwing me off guard. I sat up quickly in bed, and judgmental brown eyes filled with anger met mine.

“Who the fuck do you think you're talking to, pendeja?” the short Latina scoffed.

She looked to be in her fifties, with a temper aimed right at me.

“I'm sorry. I thought—” She cut me off with a wave of her hand.

“You thought I was someone you could talk to like you got any say around here? Let me tell you somethin', princess. Right now, the prospect deserves more respect than you. Just because you sucked Lobo's cock doesn't mean anyone here owes you shit,” she spat.

My mouth opened and closed, my mind trying to make sense of her quick jabs. “I'm not sucking—”

She cut me off again. “I don't give a damn whose cock you suck. That man deserves better than some bitch who looks down on a property patch. You're right—you're not his ol' lady, cuz an ol' lady is something a wife will never be. Wives come and go in this compound, but an ol' lady is for life; there's

only ever one. You keep that in mind now, entiendes?” She looked me up and down again with a sneer.

“I understand.” I swallowed dryly. “Can I at least have a fork this time?”

She laughed. “No.”

She turned away, still chuckling, like the scolding she’d given me was the most fun she’d had in a long time.

Was I being ungrateful, or had César failed to fully inform everyone of the bargain we’d made? He was expecting me to play a part I had never agreed on.

He thought I belonged to him, that he could tell me to jump and I’d ask how high. The thing was, I belonged to no one.

Maybe not even to myself.

I grabbed my breakfast, eating my eggs with a spoon like a child, doing my best to shake off these feelings, but it was difficult not to get lost in my own thoughts with no distractions.

I wanted a book. Well, if I was wishing for things, I wanted out of this stupid cell, but that wasn’t the exercise. A book would be nice; coffee would be better. I could last longer if I had any type of entertainment other than scaring off prospects.

Watching the walls also gave me time to think about the car wreck. That SUV had come out of nowhere and left too quickly. I knew it wasn’t an accident. I had been in this life for far too long to think anything was a coincidence.

Someone had been waiting for us, which meant *they* knew I married César Villalobos.

I wasn't sure if that was good or bad. Sure, he was the big bad wolf around here, but only I knew what kind of horrors awaited me around every corner.

Of course, the Diablos had enemies, but that wasn't an attack on them. They were waiting for us at the chapel, not the compound. It was an attack meant for me; I wasn't hopeful enough to believe otherwise.

While César wasn't the man I would have chosen for myself—though I wasn't sure I would have chosen anyone—I refused to be responsible for his death. It wasn't up to me to decide who lived and who died. I told myself that every time I saved a criminal. I was a doctor; my job was to help people, regardless of who they were.

He didn't deserve to die for me. I groaned, shoving my breakfast to the side and sinking my head between my palms. All I ever did was save my own skin. All decisions that led me here, to a cell in the Diablos Locos compound, were only made in the name of survival.

I was so tired of running.

“Ready to kiss and make up?”

My head whipped towards the voice, finding my new husband taunting me with a smirk, the fucking keys in his hand.

He could fuck right off.

I shrugged, chuckling. “I’m comfortable.”

He eyed the cot and the metal toilet. “Are you?”

“Beats sleeping next to you.” I scoffed.

“You should feel how hard I get every time you run your mouth, blanca.”

My eyes went inadvertently to his pants, and by the time they’d made their way back up, he was licking his lips tauntingly, clearly happy he’d caught me.

“What do you want?” I sighed. It was only the morning, and I was already exhausted.

“From you? All I can get.”

That was laughable. I didn’t have much to give, but César didn’t give a fuck. The world was black and white to him. If he hated you, you’d be dead. If he respected you, he’d show it. There was no room for gray. He told the world what he wanted and took, and apparently, he wanted me.

I brushed my hair back, moving to the bars that separated us. “Don’t you have enough?”

He slowly shook his head. “Not even close.”

I turned away, unable to keep up with the intensity in his eyes. “I won’t sleep in your bed, César, if that’s why you came back. I won’t let you call me a bitch or your fucking ol’ lady ___”

“You spit on the very soil you’re standing on. I might want that mouth around my cock, blanca, but I think I need to show

you what I do to those who cross me.”

I winced at his words. “I’m grateful for your help, but—”

“You made yourself property of Los Diablos Locos the moment you signed that marriage license.” He pinned me with his hard stare. “My brothers would die protecting you, and you still think you’re above them. They think you’ll initiate, and I won’t let them die for someone who looks down on them, I promise you that.”

I had no time to ask what he meant by initiating. Shame took over my face, even my ears warming from the flush. I didn’t think I was better than anyone; that wasn’t the type of person I wanted to be. I came here to be the club’s doctor, and I wanted to fulfill my end of my bargain, but like everything that came from César Villalobos’ mouth, it wasn’t that straightforward.

“I never asked anyone to die for me,” I managed to croak. It was better if they didn’t, honestly. I wasn’t stable enough to carry death on my conscience.

“You should’ve thought about that before asking me to marry you.”

I came closer to him, my hands on the bars separating us. “I’m not asking anyone to die for me. I just needed protection...for my visa.”

The lies spilled out of me easily; years of practice would do that to someone. I didn’t even know what was real and what was false anymore.

“Loyalty is why we wear this cut. You don’t understand that yet, but maybe you will someday.”

He turned his back, and I slammed my hands against the bars. “So, what? You’ll keep me locked up until I learn loyalty?”

He didn’t look back, didn’t care to reply. I thought this was about me saying no to him, but maybe it was more than that. Maybe I cut him deeper than I’d ever planned.

What César didn’t understand was that I couldn’t be anyone’s anything. Survival was easier when it was done alone. People acted on impulse. They changed sides on a whim and stabbed you in the back. They had their own agenda, and I was done being someone’s pawn.

Even worse: somebody’s reason. César already looked at me like I was capable of holding up his entire world. What was he going to do when he realized I wasn’t even strong enough to hold up my own?

No. In a way, I was protecting him too: from myself and the ever lingering disappointment from loving someone like me.

Swallowing those words was harder than I imagined. Something inside me roared to rebel, to prove to him I couldn’t be tamed, but in my head, I knew that wasn’t true. I wasn’t sure if after all I’d been through, I had any fight left in me.

Wearing the same clothes for days, unable to wash myself properly, and eating whatever they slid across the hard floor;

those were my days.

Calaveras visited often, and unlike César, he didn't bother talking to me. He mostly watched, grumbled under his breath, and left again. He was a man of a few words, and I was a woman with no time to waste.

Even though in a cell, time was all I had. I spent the majority of it in bed, though the cot was horrible. I slept, trying to ignore the bars in front of me. That was all I seemed to do now.

I dreamt about Ireland, of all fucking things. It was funny—if not tragic—that my mind went back to that place after all I'd been through. I didn't belong there anymore, I knew that. Not after years of being someone else, not now, when my accent was only an echo of what it used to be. Thinking about home was about comfort, though.

In my dreams, I chased away the bad memories. I dreamt of the cold, salty air tangling my hair, about the Irish sea and the musical quality in the way I once spoke. There was just as much fear in knowing where you came from as there was in knowing you could never go back.



“Take him down!”

I woke with a start, the unmistakable smell of blood infiltrating my nose. I sat up, rubbing my eyes, trying to make something of the scene beyond the bars of the cell.

They rushed in, first a man holding a bloody cloth to his shoulder, followed by another who barked at him to sit down on a cot. The first one sneered, but he followed instructions. Then, another one strolled in, looking even less bothered than the first two, also with blood on his clothes.

Calaveras appeared with someone leaning over his shoulder. He was a tank, but the guy he was carrying wasn't exactly small. Not even making a face, Calaveras brought him to the last cot.

I went up on my tiptoes, trying to assess their injuries from afar. I swore under my breath when I watched the blood dripping from one of their legs. My eyes darted to the other two, trying to see what else had happened.

An uninjured Diablo strolled to a cabinet, grabbing a roll of gauze from the shelf. He looked like he was getting ready to patch someone up without even cleaning it.

“Hey! Don’t do that!” I couldn’t stop myself from shouting. “What happened?” I asked next, but it went ignored.

Calaveras and the other man worked on the injuries without sparing me a glance, and that was all I could take. I slammed my hands over the bars, trying to get their attention. “Calaveras, let me out.”

He looked at me over his shoulder, his narrowed eyes giving nothing away. I made a face, making it clear I wasn’t in the mood to ask again, but he shook his head and turned back to work.

“Open this right now!” I called again. “What the fuck, Calaveras? I’m a doctor!”

The man with his leg drenched in blood hissed in pain, and Calaveras winced. I knew he was holding back because of César’s orders, but were they prepared to put someone’s life at risk because César was stubborn?

“Is that a bullet wound?” I urged. “Let me out!”

“I can only imagine how gentle your giant hands are, brother,” the one who wasn’t being held up said. “But I’d love

to have hers on me instead.”

That sealed the big guy’s decision. He turned to me, pinning me with a look while he marched my way. “You patch them up and then go back inside.”

“Where’s César?”

“Busy,” he replied, taking the key from his front pocket to open the cell.

“You had a key this whole time?” I arched an eyebrow.

He never bothered to reply. “Three brothers got shot. Veneno on the leg, Cruz on the shoulder, and ‘Mor is probably faking.”

I flashed him a look, and he shrugged. Before I touched anyone, I moved to the sink against the opposite wall, carefully washing my hands up to my elbows.

“What happened?” I tried again, but Calaveras didn’t bother shifting his gaze around the room. He didn’t answer, a hardened look carved into his face that told me I wasn’t going to be getting anything from him.

“Gloves?” I asked instead.

He brought me an open box, three sizes too large and off-brand. I tried not to turn my nose up at the supplies he was providing.

Eyeballing the injuries, it was clear Veneno, who had a leg injury, was having the worst time. I rushed to his side first, snapping the gloves on.

“Lay back, please,” I asked.

“She’s not the club doctor. She’s not even initiated,” he replied with a sneer.

“You can bleed out for all I care,” I offered, letting him lose a little blood as a lesson in courtesy. It was a lie; I’d tie him down if necessary, but I knew how to play tough, too.

“I’ll take anyone who can make my boo-boo better, initiated or not,” the one to his side cried.

“Prez is going to have words with you,” Veneno spat at the one they called ‘Mor.

“She’s the doc,” Calaveras said, not leaving room for argument.

I shook my head at the argument, turning away from Veneno. “Grab the scissors for me,” I asked instead of engaging in this nonsense.

Calaveras brought over a metal tray with everything they had, and I gritted my teeth not to swear. It wasn’t good enough if they planned to be shot every other day.

I cut through Mor’s shirt so I could have a better look at what I was doing. When the blade came close to his wound, he twisted uncomfortably.

“I’ll be quick,” I told him with a leveled tone.

“It doesn’t even hurt, doc.” He gave me a lopsided smile. “You have gentle hands.”

“Jesus Christ. Talk more about her hands, and Prez will kill you,” the third man chimed in.

It was barely a graze. I bit back a laugh at the amount of drama he’d caused over a scrape and poured some disinfectant onto it before giving him a plaster.

He really was faking it.

“You’ll survive to see another day,” I joked.

“Is it the luck of the Irish?” He smiled again with a flirtatious personality he couldn’t hold back. If it wasn’t for his tattooed arms, motorcycle club cut, and a bullet wound I was sure he didn’t get from anything legal, I would almost think he was adorable.

In a stray puppy following you around kind of way.

“I’ll let Prez kill you.” Calaveras hit his side, earning a pained yelp.

“I bet he makes it slow,” the third man interjected right before he let out another howl.

I brought my eyes over to him, seeing that his shoulder was also going to need some attention.

“What’s your name?” I asked when I came close, changing my gloves as I walked.

“Cruz,” he rasped out.

I nodded and took a proper look at his wound. “The bullet went through clean. It’s your lucky day,” I told him.

“Yeah, it was lucky we saw their guns and bailed before they could aim at our heads.” He laughed, and I raised my eyebrow in question.

“Who?” I asked, and it was ‘Mor who spoke.

“Whoever had planned that car acc—” With one stern look from Calaveras, ‘Mor quickly shut up.

“Did César send you out to investigate the car accident?” I asked, trying to hide the shaky quality in my voice.

If César sent his men to investigate the crash, and they found out who was after me, there was a good chance my nights of safety were over. If anyone knew Emory O’Connor was a ticking time bomb waiting to explode...

Then all of this would be for nothing.

“Where did this happen?” I prodded again while cleaning Cruz’ shoulder.

“Club business is for club members, Doc. Watch it,” Veneno chimed in.

I whirled his way, catching him messing with some gauze. “Fixing wounds is for doctors. Put that down!” I barked, rolling my eyes.

“You tell him, Doc.” ‘Mor nodded. “Who doesn’t love a woman who takes initiative?”

“Can you stuff some of that in his mouth?” Cruz asked me.

“Flirting relaxes me.” ‘Mor frowned. “I’m terribly injured here.”

“I’ll prescribe you a chill pill.” I chuckled and went back to work.

While they bickered, I cleaned up Cruz, only breathing again once I had his shoulder dressed properly. “You’ll survive.”

I turned to Veneno, arching my eyebrow. “Will you let me see it now, or in a week when it’s infected?”

“Let her see it,” a voice from the door growled.

I didn’t bother to look his way; my husband’s authoritative tone was one I’d recognize even six feet under. He marched to us, and my spine went stiff until I felt the heat of his body behind mine.

“Out of your cage, I see,” he said in my ear, a cold gaze drifting toward Calaveras, as if to say he’d be putting the blame on his enforcer.

“Turns out you can’t lock me away for long,” I mocked him.

He hummed over my shoulder. “We can try handcuffs next time.”

Veneno chuckled, making me arch an eyebrow toward his sorry ass. “We’re gonna risk the infection, then?”

César huffed. “Patch him up, blanca. I need all my men one hundred percent.”

His warm hand rested on the small of my back for just a second before I moved to help Veneno. I ignored the flush in

my cheeks and the way my hands trembled as I listened to the president of the Los Diablos Locos talk.

I wasn't easily disarmed, but around him, it was hard to keep my walls up so high.

I wanted to stab him in the throat most of the time, but sometimes, just the timber of his voice made my knees go weak. I'd grown comfortable saying no to everything he asked; it felt dishonest being on the same side for once.

He let me work in peace, talking with them in code, never really giving enough information to let me know anything, aside from the clear fact that enemies existed and bullets flew. They spoke like it was all in a day's work, getting shot doing club business. If I learned anything, it was that the less you knew, the longer you survived.

And I was hoping to play the long game here.

"Veneno, can you hack the traffic cameras in the surrounding intersections? I want to know which direction they came from." He gave his injured man his next task, before I had even finished plugging up all the necessary bleeding holes.

"I think you should sleep here so I can keep an eye on you," I told Veneno. "Both of you, actually," I added to Cruz.

"Do I get to be part of the sleepover?" 'Mor asked.

"He's fine." Calaveras shook his head, and before anyone had a chance to reply, he flung Mor's arm over his shoulder and towed him out.

Ignoring Mor's request I said, "These two both have been shot, you have no saline bags, and they've lost blood. Not to mention Veneno is at risk for an embolism. They need to be monitored." I laced my voice with an authoritative tone I'd grown into from being surrounded by male doctors who thought they knew better.

When I looked up, César was still there, watching me with his arms crossed over his chest.

"Fine, then," he said, pointing to the open cell.

"You're putting me back in the cage again?" I couldn't believe it.

"Yes." There was not an inch of uncertainty in his tone, but I didn't let that scare me. If I flinched every time César barked at me, I'd never have a voice.

"You need to let me do my job," I told him.

"I just did."

Growing bolder, I stepped closer, craning my neck to face him. "I can't do it from that cell."

"I let you out to play today." He shrugged like he didn't see a problem with keeping me captive.

How was I supposed to monitor Veneno and Cruz from a prison cell? I swallowed, trying to keep things civil. "I thought I was the club doctor. You're sending them mixed signals by keeping me away from patients."

He snorted amusedly, not bothering to reply. Nodding to the cell, he kept his hands to himself, and that pissed me off even more.

How dare he think I'd just walk peacefully to the cage he kept me in? I glanced at the cell and back at him, a dare written all over my face. "You're insane," I scoffed.

He didn't waste time stepping in front of me and gripping my neck, our faces so close, I could see the speckles in his dark, obsidian eyes.

"I think you like me crazy."

I gulped as his grip grew tighter. "I don't like you any way."

"Get back in your cage, Emory. Are you that desperate for my touch that you'll take whatever I give you?"

My eyes never wavered, even when I felt my knees weaken under me. I hated the effect he had on me. I'd promised to never bow to someone, but what was I supposed to do with the heat growing between my legs every time this goddamned biker ordered me around?

If he was that good with just fingers...

No.

He was a bad man, and I'd had enough of villains. I was worthy of a happy ending with a good man. I didn't know what one looked like, but I was allowed to dream.

Ready to be tossed over his shoulder again, I was caught off guard when his hand left my throat and his hands gripped

under my ass. My legs parted on instinct, wrapping around his waist when he lifted me up, and I yelped, placing my hands on his shoulders.

“César...”

He walked us to the cell, my mouth so dry, I couldn't say a word. Instead of dropping me inside the cell, he pressed my back to the bars. Neither of us said a word.

I was breathless by the intimacy of it all, the feeling of his legs between mine, his hardening cock pressed against me. César traced my features with his eyes, and I stayed paralyzed. His mouth dropped close to mine, and I gripped his t-shirt, knowing damn well I shouldn't let him kiss me.

My lips parted, and he took my bottom one between his, dragging his teeth over it. As quickly as it happened, he spun around and threw me inside the cell. Before I could say a word, I was locked in once again.

“Thanks,” he said simply as he walked away. A scream was lodged in my throat; I wanted to roar at him, to ignore the way my cheeks warmed and my heart hammered inside my chest, but I had a feeling that would somehow just make it better for him.

I avoided the heated stares of his brothers down here, watching me, and my face flushed at the realization they had witnessed the whole thing.



“What’s the initiation?”

Two days had passed since the shooting. Calaveras came down both days to allow me to check on the men and change their bandages. He was silent and stoic as ever, simply glancing at the cell when it was time for me to go in again. I mostly ignored his grumpy disposition and asked whatever questions I wanted.

“Every member is initiated,” Veneno, of all people, answered my question.

Calaveras didn’t react, not even looking at me while he slammed the door shut.

“Things here are too much,” I continued, my eyes on Calaveras. “That one wouldn’t let me patch his leg. Some lady came down here and basically told me I was shit.”

“I’d bet anything that was Lupe,” Cruz interrupted. “Hey, Doc, if you learn only one person’s name around here, it better be Lupe’s. She’s protective of her family.”

You could say that again. I sighed, watching while Calaveras looked around for something, opening drawers.

“What are you doing?” I said, distracted by him moving around.

“Looking for something.”

Clearly. “What are you looking for?”

He gave up on his search and eyed me up and down, walking back toward me. “Club members need to be initiated,” he repeated Veneno’s words.

“I’m not a member. I’m the doctor.” I frowned.

Calaveras shrugged.

“It doesn’t matter,” Veneno said as he sighed, like my presence annoyed him. “The doctor is a member’s title. It’s trust and loyalty; have you heard of it?”

My nose flared from the insinuation I didn’t know what loyalty was. He didn’t know me. None of them did.

“Will being initiated get me out of this cage?” I raised my eyebrows.

“Clever, Doc,” Cruz replied with a chuckle.

“How do I get initiated?” I wrapped my hands around the bars, giving up on Calaveras and concentrating on Cruz.

Cruz opened his mouth, but Veneno was quicker. “Do you *want* to be the club doc?”

I made a face, rolling my eyes. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

I was sure he was ready to say something rude, but Calaveras interrupted, surprising us all when he cared to speak a full sentence. “They won’t trust you until you prove yourself.”

“I’m getting tired of having to prove myself,” I replied, rattling the bars of the cell.

“Accept your place, or don’t.” Veneno wasn’t holding back now. “He’ll just get another doctor. Then, you’ll just be a wife.” There it was again, the insinuation that wives didn’t mean quite that much to them.

“I’m accepting my place,” I argued. “You aren’t accepting me.” I scratched my head, feeling the conversation wasn’t going anywhere.

“You look at us like we’re beneath you.” Calaveras shrugged.

“No, I don’t,” I insisted.

“You do.” He turned to face me again.

I wasn’t above anybody—I truly believe that—but being around criminals was triggering.

“That’s not what that is,” I responded in a small voice.

“Good guys, bad guys.” Cruz chuckled. “That’s not how the world works.”

I gulped, feeling red overtake my cheeks. I wasn’t a little girl anymore—I knew how the world worked. When I said I deserved a good man, I wasn’t thinking about prince

charming. It was laughable. I wasn't a prize by any means; I was nothing but damaged goods. Sure, the outside was shiny and painted brand new, but if you picked at the seams, you'd see that it was rotten underneath.

“People have their reasons for doing what they do. We can judge for ourselves and decide what passes the bar for morality, but *your* judgment doesn't mean a thing,” Calaveras said, probably the most I'd ever heard him speak.

I lowered my head, banging on the bars again in frustration. When César first locked me down here, everything seemed black and white. We had a deal: marriage in exchange for being the club doc. Nothing was clear anymore, and the only color I could make out was gray.

I was ready to be their doctor, but was I ready to become a member? You couldn't have one without the other, but I hadn't stopped to think about that. I wanted to come in, patch people up, and go to sleep, but this wasn't an E.R. To be here, I needed to be *really* here. Maybe César had a point.

I palmed the cold bar, holding me in place. I thought about the genuine excitement on every club member's face when César introduced me as his wife. For someone who was so desperate for family, I sure was quick to push everyone away the first chance I got.

“What do I need to do?” I asked with a heavy exhale.

Calaveras opened a cabinet, finding a bottle of pills and closing his palm around it before showing me the prescription.

“Will this help with pain?”

“What kind of pain?”

“Mor’s been a pain in everyone’s ass,” he huffed out.

I nodded, fighting off a smile as he pocketed the bottle.

“Commit a crime, get a tattoo, and drink someone under the table,” he said next.

I didn’t need to ask to know it wasn’t the dahlia tattoo I’d wanted when I turned eighteen. I had been obsessed with the idea of what they symbolized back then: devotion, love, beauty—all the things I’d never have. Who wouldn’t want that memorialized on their skin forever?

“Any specific order to that?” I asked, but he was already leaving. “Hey, any order, or should I just—” I sighed when he never turned around. “Start my crime spree from my prison cell?” I murmured to myself.

Veneno chuckled, happy about my misery.



“I thought about it.”

It had been a week since I was brought to this cell. Most days, I tried to keep quiet, because Veneno was still around, and he took every opportunity to antagonize me. When Calaveras came around, though? I jumped out of the bed quickly, never too shy to bother him.

“About the initiation?” I resumed, like we’d just picked up from our last talk.

He made a noise from his throat, his way of saying he was listening.

I stood, approaching the bars. “You said I need to commit a crime, right?” He gave me a small nod. “I’m ready.”

It was obvious they wanted to hold something over every member's head, keep them indebted to the club, whether by loyalty or need. You couldn't betray someone who could end your future. The problem was, their future was this club, while I had everything to lose: my license, my credibility, my anonymity. Though I wanted to pretend I was above all of it, I wasn't.

Maybe they were right; maybe things weren't so black and white.

Maybe good people were forced to do bad things sometimes, too.

I shook the thought away. It would benefit the club. Anyone who got hurt was in danger of dying once brought back here. They needed a doctor.

"You want in?" Doubt was clear in his words.

I twisted my lips before answering. Sure, a part of me only wanted to prove to all of them that I was a capable doctor, but this ran deeper than my ego. They needed me. The dummies were going to start dropping like flies without a real doctor around. César thought he could get another one, but how many people were ready to throw their medical degrees down the toilet over a few felonies?

He was my husband now. Even if it was all fake, we were entangled. I was the wife of a criminal, and I was necessary here.

This was a permanent decision. So, even if I was sure I wanted to be their doc, I wasn't sure I was ready to say the words. No one walked away from this life, and by saying yes, I was signing my name in blood on the dotted line.

It went further than just a marriage certificate.

It was more than pretending this was just about some green card.

It was about something I didn't know how to give.

They'd talked of loyalty. I understood it much more than they gave me credit for. By saying yes, I was marking my body with a tattoo and giving my life to these men.

"I want in," I finally said for the first time out loud.

Calaveras nodded. "Tell Prez."

I groaned. "Come on, you know how he is."

He crossed his arms in front of his chest. "And how is he?"

"He likes to boss me around."

"And you don't like to be bossed." He gave me a slight smirk, like he was starting to understand me.

"I have an idea, and I don't want César's input. This is about the club, right? It's about proving my loyalty to the people I'm going to treat."

"Nothing happens without his approval." Calaveras arched an eyebrow.

"Come on, Calaveras. She wants in," Cruz chuckled.

I cracked a hopeful smile. “I just need someone to drive me.”

He looked unsure, studying me up and down, trying to read the intention behind the request. I pushed him further. “This is what everyone wants, right? A commitment from me?”

“You got somethin’ in mind?” Veneno asked, showing interest for the first time.

“I’ve been plotting instead of sleeping. I’m a criminal mastermind now,” I joked.

“You ready to do all of it?” Calaveras wanted to know.

I shrugged. “I can live with a tattoo. Is the tattoo artist good?” I shook my head. “Actually, don’t tell me. If he’s shit, I don’t want to know.”

Calaveras stood there like a statue.

“Yes, maybe I’m a little stir crazy, but I can’t possibly commit crimes from this cell. Plus, César gets on my nerves, and the probability of this whole thing failing will increase if he’s involved.”

These walls were doing things to my mind. Time to think was never good for someone haunted by memories carved deep into their being like me. Burying my nose in work until I was so exhausted I couldn’t think straight was my chosen type of therapy. Unhealthy, but effective.

Now, I was sitting here, contemplating that maybe César had a reason to be so angry when I rejected his claim.

I still wasn't his ol' lady, but I was starting to feel remorse for telling him no in front of everyone. Calaveras was right: I was in or I was out. I couldn't stay on the fence for a minute longer, or I'd lose the trust of the very men I was hoping would accept me. I tied my future to this club when I married their president. I could whisper to myself a million times that our marriage wasn't real, but in the end, it didn't matter.

I had made a choice when I asked César Villalobos for help, and it was time to accept it fully.

Just when I thought Calaveras was done talking to me, he nodded. "I'll drive. I'm bringing brothers." I held my breath until he said, "Not the Prez."

The weight on my shoulders dissolved, and I let out a slow exhale. Thinking I was going to commit a crime was enough to make me nervous. I didn't need to add César to the mix.

Calaveras took the key from his pocket and swung the gate open.

"Now?" I asked, but I jumped to the other side before he changed his mind.

"Now." He nodded.

"I need a shower." I looked down at my clothes, promising to throw them in a fire once I was finally free.

He grunted like he wasn't pleased and turned, assuming I was following him. I'd never walked so fast in my life.

I came here kicking and screaming, but now, I tipped my nose up and walked away with the little dignity I had left. We

didn't stop to talk to anyone, and César was thankfully nowhere in sight. I was dying to know if Calaveras was even allowed to take me on a field trip, but I wasn't dumb enough to ask.

We stopped in front of a door, and Calaveras nodded for me to go in.

“Thirty minutes.”

I swung the door open, and the smile slid off my face.

My suitcase was waiting, but this was clearly César's room.

Besides the unmade bed and a couple of t-shirts tossed to the side, the room felt like him, smelled like him. It was leather, cigarettes, and something rough. There was not one thing personal to confirm it was truly his bedroom, but I knew it in my bones. The asshole put my suitcase here, thinking I'd give up and come cuddle against him.

Even though I snorted a laugh at his audacity, I couldn't deny his bed looked inviting after a week sleeping in that horrible cot.

I groaned and went straight to the bathroom, lifting my shirt over my head and pulling my skirt down my legs. When the hot spray hit my skin, I closed my eyes to bask in the momentary peace.

Everything was catered to a man in this bathroom. I wasn't sure what I had been expecting, but it still took me aback when all I'd found were wood-scented toiletries. I scrubbed days of dirt and grime off my body, remembering it wasn't so long ago

that I'd been kept in a much filthier state. I shampooed at least three times before the water finally ran clear.

In the fog of the steam trapped in the bathroom, I could almost hear my captors taunting me, but it wasn't their voices I heard snapping me back to the present.

"I see you're making yourself at home. Glad you've got some sense after all." César stood in the doorway of the bathroom just as I stepped out of his shower.

The Emory I once was would have rushed to grab a towel to cover myself before I'd let him see an inch of me. The Emory I was now didn't give a fuck. Let him stare. Just because you put a collar on a dog didn't make it yours.

His eyes narrowed, like his thoughts were tracking mine. He ran his tongue over that damn diamond on his canine, and for some reason, the only thing I could think of was his tongue running over me.

"The only sense I have is to stay away from you."

If I couldn't completely hate him, then I'd have to at least feign the illusion of it. I had a feeling a man like César couldn't be toppled once proven right.

He closed in on me, backing me into the tile wall until the leather of his vest pressed against my bare chest. It heaved from my quick breathing, my heart almost giving me away with how loud it thumped against its cage. He leaned in close, too close, and just when I thought his lips would make contact

with my skin, he reached over to the side, grabbing a towel off the rack and wrapping it around me.

“Keep lying to yourself, blanca. You’re gonna be begging for my cock soon.” He pulled a cigarette from his pocket and stuffed it between his lips. “Good luck,” he said before shutting the door behind him.

Good luck?

Somehow, he already knew about the initiation, and he wasn’t stopping me.

I didn’t know what any of that meant for us.

Us?

I dressed myself in a pair of scrubs, and just as I got my sneakers on, someone knocked. I quickly tied my hair up and dumped out the duffle bag with my personal items over César’s bed before bringing it with me.

“Ready?” Calaveras asked as he stood outside.

I nodded and followed him down the hall.

“Do I want to know?” He looked me up and down, referring to my medical scrubs.

“Not unless you’re ready to be an accessory.”

He mumbled something under his breath, but I didn’t care enough to ask. The important thing was that he agreed, and we were leaving the compound without a trace of César anywhere.

Big guy was doing me a huge favor, and I wasn't going to ruin it by asking if he was happy about it. I slid into the backseat of a black SUV before he could even open his mouth.

"Hey, Doc, ready for our day out?" Waiting inside was 'Mor, that lopsided smile of his too cheerful to do anything but beg for one to be returned.

Calaveras took the passenger seat. "This is André." He nodded to the driver.

"So, we have a full entourage?" I asked, eyeing them.

Calaveras grunted but didn't reply. Before I asked, André started the car. "Where to?"

"St. Murphy's Hospital."

"Are we going to play doctor?" 'Mor asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

André and I laughed, but Calaveras groaned at 'Mor's antics. He was cute, and the flirting was innocent. After a week without a shower and being stuck in a cell, it was nice to get a compliment or two. Knowing it would probably piss off César? That was just a bonus.

They talked on our drive, and I laughed once or twice when 'Mor said something funny, but mostly, I watched the streets, my heart hammering out of my chest. When we arrived at the parking lot I knew so well, André's eyes met mine in the rear-view mirror. "We'll circle back for you," he said.

"Give me thirty."

“Are you going to turn off all the machines and kill a bunch of people?” ‘Mor asked, lowering his voice so Calaveras and André couldn’t hear.

“Fuck no, that’s horrible.”

He nodded and looked at the front. “See, she’s going to be fine. No one’s even going to die.”

“The bar is really low,” I deadpanned, leaving the car with a bag over my shoulder.

I’d seen enough in life to know what I was doing wasn’t a big deal, not in the grand scheme of things. Still, my heart thundered in my chest as I made my way through the doors, the brightness of the fluorescent lights a startling difference from having been in that poorly lit basement for so long.

My hands were already sweating, and I clenched the straps of the empty duffle bag tighter, walking through the sterile corridor. Only a few weeks ago, I was working here. The pastel blue wallpaper that was supposed to be soothing just made me angry now. How many people had my boss turned away, or sent home before they had recovered, because their insurance had run out?

I hadn’t become a doctor to decide who lived and died based on whether they could afford it. This could be payback for all those patients. The real crime was charging for saving lives.

When Calaveras told me I’d have to commit a felony to be considered their club doctor, I was ready to pack up and leave.

I promised myself I was better than this.

Maybe the cell walls had mocked me enough in my loneliness. Maybe he'd broken me and I'd grown tired of fighting, but there was a part of me that also knew it felt good to belong somewhere. Things could only get better if I allowed them to.

Alas, that required *allowing them to*.

It was pure chaos inside. The lobby was full of patients with hardly any room to stand. St. Murphy's was so busy, I had no problem weaving my way through the masses and sliding into the supply closet completely unnoticed.

I hurried, first checking if it was empty, and only letting out a breath when I closed the door. With the duffle in my shaky hands, I started to stuff everything I needed to make the Diablos' hospital something I could work with.

Rolled bandages, gauze, swabs, transparent film dressings, and so much more went into the bag. God knew I needed a lot with those bikers around. At first, I went only for the scalpels, but then I decided to just grab the whole set of instruments. Medical gloves were, of course, a necessity, plus a stethoscope.

Anything in my reach, I put in the bag. Next, I went for antibiotics. My heart was practically in my throat, and I was trembling with nerves. Stealing wasn't exactly easy, but stuffing controlled narcotics in a duffle bag sealed the deal.

I was really doing this.

I was at the hospital where I used to work, committing theft for a motorcycle club. This was it. This was me selling my soul to the Diablos. I made my way out of the supply closet once the bag was full. It was heavy on my shoulder, but I pressed on, certain I needed to leave before someone heard the rattle of the pills.

“Emory.”

My eyes squeezed shut, my heart stopped beating, and I turned around slowly with a stupid fake smile on my lips.

“Lolita, how are you?” I greeted my old colleague, wondering if the madness out there had anything to do with why an obstetrician would be working the ER.

“It’s good to see you; it’s been too long. Do you have a minute?”

The no was right in my mouth, waiting to come out. I had a bag full of stolen medical supplies, and if she saw it, I wouldn’t be getting out of that mess. I was moments away from a long prison sentence and never practicing medicine again.

“Yes, of course,” I replied instead, transforming this day into a suicide mission.

I followed her to an adjacent room, taking measured steps so as not to rattle the pills I was smuggling.

“Your name is on her chart for the last few times she has been seen.”

She turned on the light for the view box so I could check the x-ray. I glanced at the chart, trying to remember the patient, and I forgot for a moment that I was in the middle of a felony.

I signed that chart three months ago. A woman came in with a broken arm. I didn't think much about it, but she was back again with another broken arm, and that almost always meant domestic violence. She wanted to know if I noticed anything suspicious, but it was always pretty hard to get these patients to open up and talk.

"I don't remember anything specific. Besides, that looks like—" She nodded and sighed. I felt bad. "I'm sorry I can't be of more help."

"That's fine. I just thought I'd ask since I had you here."

"It was good seeing you." I nodded, and her eyes shifted down to the bag, a single eyebrow raising before her chin lifted and her gaze moved back up.

"Take care out there Dr. O'Connor," she said with an eerie finality, extending her hand to me.

"You as well, Dr. Escura." I shook her hand.

I moved to the door, leaving her with the x-ray, and for a second, I felt sad, like this was a goodbye of sorts to the hospital I'd once called home.

I left the building, not caring to look back one last time. The three Diablos were waiting beside the car; André was smoking a cigarette, Calaveras was being fearsomely gigantic, and 'Mor was, of course, talking.

They stopped to look at me, Calaveras' eyebrows raised to his hairline when he saw the bag. "You stole."

"Shh!" I passed him the duffle. "Stop talking about the crime while we're still doing it."

He even curved his mouth a little. André chuckled, flipping the cigarette butt on the pavement. "Let's go."

"High five, Doc!" 'Mor brought his palm high, and I couldn't say no.

I fucking smiled after feeling like my food was coming back up from my stomach. They chuckled with me, Calaveras threw the duffle on the trunk, and I got in the car.

I guess I was one of them now.



I stood there in front of that hospital, watching her celebrate in the car with my men. They high-fived and congratulated her like they were already longtime friends before driving out of the parking lot, back to Grimm's Reach. I swung my leg over my bike and took off behind them, taking note of the parade of emergency vehicles heading out from the hospital towards the city.

Despite her judgment and feelings towards those who toed the line of morality, she'd just become one of them herself. She was no better than me, and for some reason, that gave me far more satisfaction than I could have imagined it would.

Maybe she'd finally stop looking down on me from that turned-up nose.

Her willingness to abandon her morals for a roof over her head—which she didn't need— and a husband—who she didn't like—spoke volumes. It meant there was more to her than she was letting on. My Irish snake was afraid of something out there; that was the only reason she was allowing us to rub this stain into her.

The fact that she was holding back, keeping her truth from me, was enough to make me concerned for my club's safety. I'd gone too far, and after treating my men, she'd earned the respect of the majority of the club. They wanted this for her. No, I couldn't go back on my word now, despite the possible danger her secrets posed. I'd keep my word. I'd be damned if I disappointed a woman as beautiful as Emory O'Connor.

That would be a crime.

I was too in my head the entire ride, trapped in a prison of my thoughts while I ruminated over the fact that I had no idea who my new wife was. I ended up falling behind, unsure how fast they'd even arrived at the compound by the time I'd gotten there myself.

She was already behind the bar, taking a victory shot with Calaveras, who held her fist up in the air for her, as if he were announcing the winner of a boxing match. Every member was going wild about it, and even Chiqui clapped, screaming for joy at the doc's win today.

She was too pure for this world. Even if I'd broken her heart, she wouldn't hold it against Emory.

“Don’t celebrate too quickly. You’re not done, Dr. O’Connor,” I reminded her, raising my eyebrows.

“I won’t get a tattoo unless it’s clean,” she warned.

“Now, I take offense to that,” André said. “Everything I do is clean, Doc. Clean lines, clean workspace, but my work is sick as hell.” He grinned.

“You’re the artist?” She lifted an eyebrow at him like she was surprised.

He smirked, tilting his chin towards the back hallway. “Follow me.”

Only she and I took the invitation, making our way through the main level of the clubhouse towards André’s tattoo shop. He was our personal club artist, and we kept him plenty busy, so it wasn’t often he opened his books up to the outside world.

It didn’t take him long to get ready for her, prepping his space, protecting it with a clear wrap. One by one, he set up little tiny cups of ink atop globs of Vaseline to secure them on his tray. She stood frozen at the door until he finally nodded her way. She slowly prowled forward, examining his setup, and she ran her fingers against the plastic-wrapped chair before turning to me.

“Do I at least get a choice on placement?” she asked, and I scoffed.

“No. On your back, like the rest of us,” I told her.

It wasn’t true. The perritas got a small version on their wrists or their necks.

She wasn't a perrita.

I wanted it as big as her back would allow. I wanted everyone to know without a doubt who she belonged to. I wanted her marked, branded in my club's imagery.

Los Diablos Locos.

Me.

Her jaw ticked.

Without any notice, she pulled her shirt up over her head. André immediately turned his head to look away, averting his eyes as much as physically possible. She smirked, clearly deriving pleasure from provoking me. Those perfect tits taunted me, begging to be squeezed. Then, she sat down on the chair, chest pressed to the leather, her back exposed.

He laid the stencil over her back, the skull centered with the scythes touching her shoulder blades. On the first try, he got the placement perfect, and, with a slight nod from her, he began to work silently.

Pulling up a metal chair, I opened it up, flipping it backwards before sitting down. The minutes turned into hours, and never once did she complain or voice any discomfort.

She also didn't speak to me.

"I need a break. We're almost done," André said around the five-hour mark, peeling his gloves off and sparking up a cigarette just as she made her way to the bathroom.

“Better step outside with that, brother. The good doctor will have your head if she smells smoke indoors.” I chuckled, knowing damn well I was craving one myself, but it was her presence I craved more.

“Do you need to stop?” I asked her once she came back from her bathroom break, her shirt bundled up over her chest for modesty.

“No, let’s get this over with.” She climbed back onto the chair.

“Hurrying it won’t mean it didn’t happen,” I taunted her, hoping to force the line between her eyebrows to crease again.

Something about it just made her look more... human, more approachable.

She flared her nostrils, refusing to answer and repositioning herself as André returned. He washed his hands before slipping on a new pair of gloves and sitting down to finish.

“It’s just the line work, but it’ll do for now, right, Prez?” André looked over at me, proud as hell of his art, and I nodded my appreciation. “Come back in a couple weeks when it heals, and we can color it in. You’ll need someone to help you put balm on to keep it from dryin’ out.”

She nodded, just a fraction of a movement. He began to wrap her up in plastic, giving her instructions on how to care for it. She didn’t have any other tattoos, not that I could see, at least. Now, she had my club on her skin, and something about

that drove me fucking wild. I wanted to peel that plastic off her and stare at it all night long.

She would never let that happen.

Her teeth chattered, her adrenaline starting to crash from a tattoo most large men would have tapped out halfway on. She sat through it, the whole damn thing. She tried to hide it, feigning cold as she slipped on her shirt, and we walked through the hall and back into the bar area, where members had likely been drinking for the majority of the day.

It was well into the night now, and the end of her initiation was expected.

“Are you ready for the last part?” I asked her.

“A drinking contest?” She let me know she’d been well informed of the rules. “Who’s my challenger?”

“I am,” I decided.

“Sorry, Prez, not allowed,” Coyote chimed in, looking like he was about to pull up the file with all the club rules outlined. “Conflict of interest. Any other takers?”

I huffed in annoyance and crossed my arms over my chest, narrowing my gaze at the room to see which one of these fuckers would challenge Emory to a drinking contest. No one spoke up. Not a dead pendejo in sight.

They knew it was a war with no winner. If they bested her, Emory would be ridiculed and I would beat them bloody for it. If she beat them, though unlikely by her size, it was their ego on the line.

“Prospect,” I barked out, and he was in front of me within three seconds. “Can you beat my wife in a drinking contest?” I tilted my head at him curiously.

He was a good kid, gringo as hell, and yet he somehow fit right in with the mixture of Latin American criminals in this compound.

“Uhh...” He scratched his head. “I don’t know about this, Prez.”

“Challenge her, and I’ll move you from the spare house into the clubhouse.”

There was no sweeter deal. The clubhouse was where most all the officers were housed. There were one or two spare bedrooms, but they were mostly left for emergency situations. Unmarried members, prospects, perritas, and those who just needed a safe space to land for a bit stayed in the spare house behind the farmhouse.

“Shit, I’ll challenge her then.” That came from ‘Mor, who’d been sharing a room with the prospect for the last year in the spare house.

I growled at him, knowing damn well his six foot, two hundred pound frame would put the doctor into an alcohol-induced coma by the end of the night. At least the prospect was a little string bean of a thing and would give her the chance she’d need to drink him under.

“You’re on painkillers,” she said, annoyed at his carelessness.

“It’s just one night.” He shrugged. “And it’s for a good cause.”

“Keep flirting with her, and this will be your *last* night,” I warned him, standing behind Emory as she took her seat at the bar.

“Drink of choice?” Chiqui asked from the other side of the bar.

“Jameson,” she answered.

Chiqui didn’t need to ask; she knew ‘Mor’s drink, and she dropped the cachaça in front of him, the shot spilling a bit over the top of the glass. She stepped back and turned the music up before letting out a celebratory ‘woop!’.

The attention was still on them, but it helped to diffuse some of the energy in the room. Some members moved towards the pool tables, and some shifted their focus to getting drinks for themselves.

Emory had already drunk her shot, and I hadn’t noticed. ‘Mor turned his over next, letting a slight shudder ripple through his body.

Chiqui poured them again.

She drank it down, not even a grimace or a wince gracing her face.

Redheaded temptress.

“Pelirroja” I whispered.

I gave her space, sitting down on one of the couches with my arms extended over the back, watching them from a distance.

They emptied shot after shot, both laughing like idiots at something only they seemed to comprehend. The rest of the club had long forgotten the challenge, and Emory had been declared a member of Los Diablos Locos. Eventually, ‘Mor tapped out, though I hadn’t quite figured out if it was from being shitcanned or if he was gracing her with the win she deserved.

She’d gotten through the day like the bad bitch I always knew she was, worthy of being called the MC queen. Not that I’d let her know that yet. She was still far from my good graces after shitting all over my every attempt to win her over, to provide her with a sense of home.

Maybe locking her in my basement wasn’t the best way to go about it, but goddamn it, if she wasn’t good at freeing the worst in me every time she denied what was so obvious.

It wasn’t that no one had told me no before.

It was that I’d been hearing it my whole damn life.

No, César, you don’t get parents.

You don’t get a normal life, basic education, security.

You get bloody fingernails. You get to shoot to kill before you turn ten. You get a vast emptiness inside that can’t be satiated by anyone or anything.

You get to be a machine for all the bad things in the world.

You get to hurt.

I was done with *no*. We weren't innocent here in Grimm's Reach, but I knew every wrong, every sin was in the name of family, in the name of keeping this village that we'd created for ourselves afloat. Most of the men here had a rap sheet longer than my tía's full name; they had nothing outside of the club.

We took what we needed, and we weren't ashamed of it.

Maybe someday, Emory would understand that not all things were exactly as they seemed.

Calaveras nudged me, noticing I'd been lost in thought, staring at what was now a vacant space in the room. Emory was missing from her place at the bar. My heart jumped, the thought passing quickly through my mind that she'd left before I realized that would have practically been impossible.

Someone as rational as her certainly wouldn't drink and drive.

No, it took just a few seconds to find my wife in the middle of the dance floor, three perritas grinding on her, all four having the time of their lives, pouring drinks down each other's throats.

I stood, grabbing a bottle of Añejo off the bar and using my teeth to pull the cork out before spitting it down onto the ground. Tipping it over, I swallowed down the burn of the tequila, hoping it would help me conjure up the courage to talk to her.

I stepped through the perritas, and they parted like the sea, opening a path to Emory.

“Still standing, then?” I joked.

“Did you forget I’m Irish?” she practically yelled over the music.

“I try not to make stereotypical assumptions I wouldn’t want made about me.”

“Oh yeah? Like what? That all bikers are misogynistic, murdering man-whores?” she said too loudly. “Or is that just you?” She frowned as I grabbed her by the arm and pulled her in to me, her chest slamming against mine, reminding me just how much self-control it took this morning to not run my hands all over her naked body.

The way her tits looked pressed against my leather.

The image of her wearing nothing but my cut flashed through my head, and I knew if I could have one wish in this fucking life, it would be for that fantasy to come true. My cock seemed to remember as well.

Men like me never got our wishes granted, though.

“Did I ever give you the impression I would be unfaithful? Cuz that’s a mighty accusation, *wife*,” I spat at her, but Emory just looked up at me through lush, glimmery eyes.

She was drunk.

“Wouldn’t matter either way. It’s not me you’ll be sleeping with,” she reminded me again.

I clenched my teeth together, pulling Chiqui by the hand abruptly.

“Fine then. If that’s how you want to play this,” I told her, dragging the heartbroken perrita who deserved better than this up the stairs.

She didn’t protest, but once we got to the top, she looked at me with wandering eyes.

“What are you doing, Lobo?”

“Get in,” I said, unlocking my bedroom door and shoving her inside.

She stumbled, landing on the edge of the bed uncomfortably and avoiding my eyes. I crossed the room, sighing heavily before I dropped to a nearby chair and crossed an ankle over my knee.

“I don’t sleep with married men,” she squeaked out, still not looking at me.

“Shut up, Chiqui. I’m not fucking you,” I told her without looking her way.

Her discomfort eased, but her annoyance grew. We didn’t speak to one another. She didn’t even pull her phone out to scroll aimlessly and kill time once she realized why she’d been brought up here. She just sat on the bed, staring at her nails awkwardly.

Thirty or so minutes had passed before she stood up.

“Sit your ass down.”

“I’m sorry, Prez, but I can’t stay here. I know what you’re doing. The doc doesn’t deserve that.” She stood, running quickly to the door before I’d had a chance to respond.

Frustrated, partially humiliated, and angry, I decided to call the only person who truly understood why I was the way I was.

It rang twice.

“Que quieres?” my sister asked on the other line.

She was a whole country away, and yet somehow, a phone call could make all of that seem meaningless.

“Did you ever forgive me?” I asked, realizing I’d never taken the time to find out.

“For abandoning me?” she asked.

“For changing you. For hurting you. For being your father’s right hand when I should have been protecting you instead.” I blurted out all the shame I’d been living with for decades.

She laughed on the other end, a sound I hadn’t quite been prepared to hear from Celia Flores, the queen of the Mexican *Cártel*.

“You give yourself too much credit César. Sure, you were holding the weapons, but we both know the blame lies with a dead man.”

“Maybe I enjoyed it,” I suggested.

She stayed silent for a beat. “That’s not you. What’s got you all out of sorts?” she asked, but I wasn’t ready to answer.

“Let’s go back to the first question. Did you ever forgive me?” I asked again.

“For abandoning me?” she doubled down, letting me know where the root of the hurt existed.

“Did you?”

“No.”

Before I could think of a response, she was speaking again. “Should you be looking for forgiveness? That’s a dangerous road, usually one only traversed by men seeking penance, the ones who know the day of their death,” she cautioned.

“The doctor came to me for help,” I told her.

“Ah, so that’s what this is all about. César Villalobos is feeling something beyond himself, and the weight of his sins can’t allow him to just feel it. Is that what it is?” My sister laughed.

“She can’t stand me.”

“She’s a reasonable woman,” she countered.

“She doesn’t fit in here.”

“But she hasn’t left?” She had a point.

“I don’t deserve her.” The words rasped out like they were fighting my throat.

“Now you’re getting somewhere,” Celia chuckled.

“How can I deserve her?” I asked.

“You try your best every single day to be what she needs,” she said, like it was the easiest answer in the world. “Probably easier when there’s more men to share the workload.” She laughed before hanging up.

Talking to her was always like that: no straightforward answers, no digging too much into the past and picking at the scabs of our trauma. Yet somehow, it left me feeling better, hopeful.

I decided to end my pity party and make my way back downstairs. The party was dying, mostly perritas dancing and a few brothers playing pool. Aside from that, everyone seemed to have found their way back to where they belonged.

Emory was sitting at the bar by herself, back to the world, as if she didn’t care about any of us here. This wouldn’t work until she learned what family could mean, but she’d need to learn it for herself. I knew that because I had to learn the same lesson.

I’d already been jaded by my upbringing in the *cártel* when I showed up at the Diablos’ door. I was looking for shelter, but they gave me so much more.

Now, I’d do the same for her, even if she didn’t think she wanted it.

She needed it.

I could see that same ache, that same yearn for family that was in me, in her own eyes.

“Let’s go to bed, blanca,” I spoke in her ear, not so loud that anyone too interested would hear.

She hiccupped. “Now you control my bedtime too?”

“No, but my guys with bullet holes down in the basement need a rested and sober doctor to watch over them tomorrow. You’re officially on the clock,” I informed her.

“They’ll be fine,” she said, unbothered as she picked up a shot of whiskey and downed it. “I’m celebrating my new life, *Prez.*” She was drunk, and no longer in an adorable way.

Was she grieving her decision? The idea cut down on my nerves.

“Bed, blanca,” I said again. “Or I’m carrying you myself. It’s not Lupe’s job to clean your puke off the bar.” I pulled her stool back, nearly making her fall.

“I don’t need you to do anything for me, César,” she said, holding in another hiccup I knew she couldn’t hide.

I gestured dramatically with a wave of my arm for her to proceed if she didn’t need me. She stumbled with her first step, and I didn’t bother to wait for the rest. I picked her up and tossed her over my shoulder, a slew of insults flying out of her mouth at rapid speed, like this position made them rise to the surface instinctively.

I ignored the pain in my ribs, the soreness from the accident that still lingered in my body as she pounded against my back with every step up the stairs.

She didn’t stop until we’d gotten to my bedroom.

“Oh, not the basement anymore? I’ve been upgraded to a biker bitch now?” She scoffed.

She said biker bitch like it would have offended me, but at this point, we both knew this was our game. She was just trying to get a rise out of me, see how far she could push me.

Maybe the better response was to remain unbothered by her attempts to push me away.

That’s really what it was. I knew it and she knew it, but she would never admit it.

It was a test to see if I’d stick around.

I dropped her onto my bed, most of the fight already gone from the alcohol coursing through her system. She looked up at me through hooded eyes, another insult begging to fly out from her parted lips.

She sat at the edge, and I knelt on the ground in front of her. She eyed me curiously before leaning back on her elbows and raising her leg in the air. Ever so softly, she placed her high-heeled shoe on my shoulder. I turned my head to look at it, fighting a satisfied smirk at how tame the alcohol made her.

That wasn’t my girl.

Boring.

I wrapped my hands around her foot, my right hand fumbling with the strap on her shiny red shoe before lifting it slightly off my shoulder to remove it. It was softer than I expected. Women with painful looking shoes always had painful looking feet.

Not her, though. Every inch was soft skin, and she shuddered at the light touch of my fingers trailing over her flesh. She dropped the foot down to the ground and placed the other heel on my opposite shoulder. I repeated the action, this time running my hand up her calf, feeling the strong muscle of her leg and loving the way my brown skin looked against her ivory.

We were opposites in every way, yet doomed to be driven together by the powers that be.

An Irish woman and a Mexican man.

An ex-cártel soldier and a doctor.

A healer and a criminal.

It was like a bad indie-folk song that didn't rhyme but somehow still held a memorable tune.

No words had been spoken yet, like a temporary spell that had us playing far too nice for far too long. I wasn't going to be the one to break it. She lifted her hips as I undid the zipper on her pants and lowered them down to her shins, pulling each leg out one at a time.

Our eyes met, and the intensity of her stare bore through me like the pointed end of a rusty dart.

With her heel once more firmly hooked over my shoulder she pulled me in, down towards the bed. My hands fell to her thighs for support as I hovered over her, her pale skin flushed and red from the heat of the liquor.

I could smell it on her breath, heady and dangerous, lowering every one of her walls except the one I needed down the most. The one where she told me what hid behind her lies.

She parted her thighs beneath me, a sultry look painted on her face as she waited for me to make the next move. My fingers gripped tightly into her smooth skin, her features softening before she reached for the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head.

Fuck. She was tequila, dripping all over livewire, ready to spark and burn. The way her nipples hardened under the fabric of her shirt. The way every inch of her body, soft and delicate, begged to be touched and marked. I looked down to where my hands gripped, lifting them to see the red marks I knew I'd find.

I slid my hand up her thigh, and she gasped, dropping her head back with a quiet moan.

Too easy.

Her hands found me, running over the ridges of my muscles frantically, not exploring slowly like I'd imagined she would the first time she reached for me.

"Kiss me," she whispered, and I pulled back.

That glazed look in her eyes, how pliable the whiskey made her...I preferred an Emory who fought me every inch of the way. It may have been a farce, it may have been a cover she created to not let me in on how she really felt, but it was how she wanted me to perceive her.

Was she like this?

I didn't need her tamed. I didn't want her bending to my whim because of any reason other than the sheer desire to worship my cock.

This wasn't her.

This was whiskey.

Whiskey was mellow, smooth, and calm.

I needed the fire, the burn of her rejection when she pretended she couldn't see me the way I saw her.

"I like you better when you're in control of that twisted head of yours," I whispered in her ear.

"I'm giving you what you want," she said, the frustration clear in her voice as she tried pulling me down further.

"Then you don't know what I want, Emory."

I stood, walking to the bathroom, filling up a glass with water, and handing it to her.

She took it, the hard line between her eyebrows never softening as she silently drank her fill. I looked in the mirror, the version of me I hated best staring back at me in contempt.

A man like me could only ruin a woman like her.

She was right when she said I was a bad man. A good man would have faked along with the marriage without trapping her in a life of crime, without forcing her hand. A good man would have bought her a nice little house, given her the

documents she needed, and let her go on with the rest of her future secured.

Bad man or not, I was still certain I was worthy of something worthwhile.

Even if it was only one thing, maybe that thing could be Emory O'Connor.

I brushed my teeth and washed my face. Just as I stepped out of the bathroom, I heard a soft snore as she laid on her chest in the center of my bed. Chiqui had unwrapped her tattoo earlier at the party and already spread ointment over it, robbing me of my one excuse to touch her without further intention.

I pulled the blanket up to her shoulders and grabbed an extra pillow and comforter from my closet, setting it up on the floor at the end of my bed.

I was too fucking old to be sleeping on the ground, that was for fucking sure.



“Stop! Please!” Those words violently pulled me from my dream.

You lose the ability to sleep soundly once you’ve gone through too many tragedies in the middle of the night.

“No, don’t!” her voice called out, laced with fear and pleading for help.

I sat up, the ache in my bones from laying on the floor already settling. My phone said it was ten past three, far too late for trouble and still too early for anything decent to happen.

Her head shook from side to side, but her arms stayed pinned down, like she was reliving something in her dream.

“Please! Please stop!” she cried desperately.

A nightmare.

I made my way to her side, shaking her shoulder with a bit too much force, hoping it would wake her from her demons.

Nothing.

The despair in her tone was too much to bear. Wherever she was, she was stuck there, so I crawled into the bed, curling myself around her. She was whimpering, trembling, covered in sweat. I pulled her into me and held her tight.

“You’re okay. You’re not there. You’re here with me,” I hushed into her ears.

“No!” she cried again.

“I got you, blanca.”

She stilled, going soft in my hold and mumbling something incoherent.

“Mmm,” she moaned, shifting herself into the perfect little spoon and cocooning herself within my protection.

She smelled the same way the air did when you climbed to the peak of a mountain. Fresh, crisp, almost cold. I pulled back once her words from earlier hit my mind again.

The only sense I have is to stay away from you.

I peeled my arm away, letting her go in hopes that I could inch my way out of her hold before she woke.

“No!” she cried in her sleep again, shaking from side to side.

I exhaled heavily.

“Damnit, Emory, you don’t even fucking want this...” I complained as I wrapped myself around her once more and settled in for the night.



A Jameson hangover was a three-headed beast. I opened my eyes to a white ceiling, nothing like the one I was used to staring at inside that cell.

I breathed out through my dry mouth and turned my whole body to check where I was. Pain pierced my skull, and I had to tumble back to the bed with a hand covering my eyes. Saliva pooled in my mouth, and I quietly wished for death.

Careful this time, I managed to sit up, taking a look around just to groan when I realized I was in César Villalobos' room.

Like a boomerang, I was brought back to him.

My memories were a jumbled mess. I remembered dancing, laughing, but I remembered Jameson the most. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been this drunk.

I rubbed my whole face and brushed back the snarled mess of my hair. As I moved, the tattoo that now took up my entire back pulled and stung as it stretched across my dry skin.

I let out a sarcastic laugh.

Branded by a motorcycle club, robbed a hospital, and yet, I felt so free last night. I danced and laughed and got blackout drunk with people who weren't judging me for any of it. In fact, they were celebrating it.

Celebrating *me*.

I'd never been celebrated before.

I let myself be free around them. I somehow knew if I was among them, I was safe enough to let my guard down.

What a fucking nightmarish turn of events. Trust was a tricky thing, and it didn't happen suddenly. It was slow and almost imperceptible. I stopped trusting so long ago, I didn't even realize it was happening.

If I was here in César's bed, then I had to wonder where he slept the previous night. I looked back to the pillow, betting he decided to cozy up by my side. I didn't peg César as the type to put me in his bed and go sleep on the couch. I shook my head, and my eyes caught the bedside table with a full glass of water and painkillers waiting for me.

How thoughtful.

Fuck that man. Honestly, fuck that man.

He had a *diamond* in his tooth. He had tattoos on his face, for crying out loud. How dare he try to be anything other than what he presented himself to be? He wasn't supposed to be anything but what I decided he was. I just wanted to box him into a stereotype and go on with my life. Unsure if I hated him or myself, I took the aspirin and gulped the water down, already feeling a hundred times better.

When I was able to drag my feet to the bathroom, I did my best to ignore the reflection in the mirror. I cursed when I removed my shirt, thankful that Chiqui had done me the favor of removing the wrap but wincing at the fabric stuck to the fresh wound. Once I undressed, I turned my back to the mirror, looking over my shoulders.

There it was: a skull with devilish horns sticking out from its forehead, a split tongue, and two scythes poking out from behind the skull. They mimicked handlebars, bony hands wrapped around the blades. It'd be funny if it wasn't tragic. It'd be tragic if I at least regretted it. It would be worse if it wasn't fucking beautiful.

André was a goddamn artist.

I was a Diablo now.

It didn't feel like I thought it would. Not dirty, not trapped. No, I felt like me; hungover, sure, but I wasn't making plans to flee.

I turned the water on, facing the spray and letting the warmth of the water relax me.

The ease in my shoulders was new. It's not that I trusted the Diablos—I wasn't even certain that was something I was capable of—but I didn't expect them to kill me for money. The bar was set low, and it said a lot.

I made my way through the main building once I was out of the shower, using the walls for support and wishing for sunglasses to shield my eyes from the bright lights. Someone called my name, and I mouthed a weak hello, unable to muster the strength to look up to see who it was.

It was going to be a while until I could navigate this place without feeling overwhelmed and lost, but I kept going, hoping Lupe was there somewhere, with a greasy breakfast waiting. I turned left to the kitchen, a groan escaping me when I found it deserted.

Then, I read the clock: it was nearly noon.

No wonder there was no breakfast anymore. I'd missed it.

Why did he not wake me up?

I had another glass of water, breathing slowly when a flash from last night shot through my head. It was so fast, I placed the glass back over the table and watched as the images unfolded. The drinking contest with 'Mor. Dancing with the perritas.

César dragging Chiqui to his bedroom.

Had he fucked her in the same bed I'd slept in?

“Emory? Hungry?”

I blinked twice when Lupe arrived in the kitchen with a couple of grocery bags. Five seconds ago, food was all that I wanted, but that flash of a memory was enough to end my appetite. Did I care? I promised him he'd never touch me.

I couldn't think about food anymore.

No, once the fractured memories of César and Chiqui pieced together in my mind, it was all I could see.

His fingers gripped her waist, those large hands I remembered so well by the way they wrapped around my throat in that chapel as we said our vows. Even as he dragged her up those stairs, his eyes stayed on me. I feigned disinterest, telling myself it didn't matter. My gaze danced over to the stairs every five minutes until I decided I was done and in a need of a drink.

"I can bring him back if you want." Calaveras joined me at the bar.

I smiled as I shook my head. "You're big and bad, aren't you, Calaveras? How the hell are you my only friend?"

He didn't mind being called bad, brushing it off. "It's just Chiqui."

I scrunched my face. "Now, that's a wee disrespectful. Girl did nothing wrong, did she?" I laughed. "It's been years since I said 'wee'. I used to say it for everything."

"Drink some water, Doc."

"I'm fine," I huffed, knowing damn well any person with a dick in this clubhouse had drunk just as much as I had.

“I’m not getting shit from Prez if you get sick,” he warned, getting up from the bar.

I chuckled as my only friend left. If it wasn’t Calaveras, I had only one real friend, and she just so happened to be the sister of the man I married. She joked that drinking brought out the best in me. I thought it made me too susceptible to letting my walls down, to trusting and feeling things I definitely didn’t want to feel, thinking things I certainly didn’t want to think.

Like César and Chiqui.

So, I took more shots. I laughed louder, but even with my best intentions, I watched that door like a hawk until Chiqui eventually came back, her head tucked down, avoiding everyone’s eyes, especially mine.

Rage hit me like a brick wall. I could feel it rising to the surface again just as I shook away the drunken memory. “I have to go.”

I didn’t wait to see what Lupe was going to say next. I marched out of the kitchen, feet on fire as I stomped through the clubhouse.

How dare he.

He had the audacity to say—no, demand—that I sleep in the same bed as him when he brought someone else into it?

With no brothers anywhere in sight, I marched straight through to the room they held church in, knowing he was

likely there doing club business. My headache was better, and it was probably due to anger rather than the pills.

I crossed the room to swing the door open, ready to spit a million poisonous words at his face, but I stopped in my tracks when I found him sitting at a table with suited men across from him. His expression was masked carefully, giving nothing away. My stare burned into him as I mentally readied myself to sharpen my scalpel so I could remove his dick and sew it to his face.

He opened his mouth to speak, but before any words came out, the man across from him spoke instead.

“I know you.”

Time stopped, my stomach churned, and my hands trembled. I would recognize that voice anywhere, even in my worst nightmares, and my body was having a visceral reaction to it. I took my eyes off César, shifting my gaze to the man opposite him.

“Unlikely,” César chuckled.

“I don’t lose things very often. This one’s mine, I’m sure of it.”

His accent didn’t make me think about home, but rather that special place in hell waiting for him. He looked almost the same: short hair, but grayer than before, dressed in a dark suit, his bright green eyes cold.

Something shattered inside me, the air inside my lungs freezing solid. Afraid my trembling hands would give me

away, I balled them into a fist and begged my mind to let something come out of my stupid lips, something clever that would take him off my scent, but my body refused to cooperate. My legs wouldn't work to help me leave, but neither did my mouth. I was stuck there, letting him watch me like he had done so many times before.

“Not possible, ese. Doc here's been with the club for years now,” César interrupted, and my eyes went back to him. “She's a Diablo through and through.”

“I never forget a redhead,” his tongue grazed his canine making me gag.

César growled. “She's Diablos' property. I won't ask you to keep your eyes off my wife again.”

César's voice somehow freed me from paralysis, and I was finally able to step back, to take a bigger look at the situation.

Another chuckle came from the gray-haired Irishman. I couldn't make myself bring his name out of the darkness of my memories, to open that wound.

Finally, César looked my way, his eyes dark and full of warning. There were a thousand questions buried beneath that gaze, and I wasn't sure if I'd be able to answer any of them. My chest split in two, and my vision began to blacken around the edges. I shifted my focus to César, who mouthed only one word to me.

“Go.”

I stepped back calmly, shutting the door behind me.

Then, I ran.

I ran across the clubhouse, barely looking where I was going, only stopping with a hand over the wall to help my body stay upright.

“You alright, Doc?”

I nodded without raising my head, listening to the steps of whoever had just stumbled into me in that state.

Nothing had changed. I was still here. I was Emory O’Connor.

I was alive. I was free. I was my own. I said those words under my breath until my body moved without pain, until my hands stopped trying to carve into the wall.

I ran until I couldn’t go any further, out the door until I was breathless and surrounded by nothing but lush greenery and trees.

I never forget a redhead.

His voice rang in my head, the memory of his eyes scanning over my body, tainting my skin with his lecherous gaze.

A long time ago, I had to promise myself I wouldn’t die in a cage.

I didn’t care if my death came swiftly after, but dying outside those bars meant everything to me. After enough time passed, you gave into the depression, the all-encompassing knowledge that this was how it would end. I never meant to survive. I just refused to die by someone else’s hand. I refused

to die as someone's property. Every day, I fought to take the breaths that would keep me alive long enough to maybe see a day of freedom. I kept myself going out of spite, one day after the other. I celebrated every lungful.

The Black Crow Brotherhood saved me from that cage. They were a powerful crime organization that ran Cove City for nearly a decade, unsurpassed by other mafias. Their go-to activity? Stealing trafficked victims from their enemies and using them to bring down the operations. They found me, freed me, and financed my way through medical school. I treated their brothers as a way to repay the debt I owed them.

I worked *for* them, but I wasn't *one of them*.

I was free, independent, untethered to anything.

It gave me the chance to work at St. Murphy's.

Now, I was back in that god forsaken cage, even if just in my mind.

I found myself in the kitchen once again, my echoing steps announced my approach. Lupe raised her head from the dough she was kneading. "¿Que fue?"

I stood at the door, licked my lips when the words didn't come out right away.

"Ven, have a glass of water."

Lupe held an authoritative tone. Dealing with bikers on a daily basis, she had a way of making people do what they were told. I moved at her command, happy to do anything that wasn't drowning in my own sorrows.

She handed me a glass of water and watched until I was finished. “Talk.”

Again with that tone that almost uncurled my tongue. Thankfully, I knew better than to say anything. Even if I had words in me, I’d never put her in harm’s way.

“I need help,” I said instead.

“Oh yeah?” She reeled back with a raised eyebrow.

“I need to color my hair.” I pulled at the strands. “Can you help me?”

She looked like she could smell the secrets I was withholding, as if somewhere underneath that apron, she was equipped with generations of bullshit detection. The look she gave me was one that probably would have broken the strongest man.

I was already broken.

Releasing a breath, she turned her gaze back to the dough she was working. “You have to talk to Chiqui. She can help.”

“It doesn’t need to look pretty,” I begged.

“Chiqui. She’ll get it done.” She waved her flour covered fingers at me.

I rubbed my forehead and accepted it. “Do you know where she is?”

“She works at a salon in the city.”

I dragged my feet until I found the prospect, asking him to drive me to Cove City. He looked like he wanted to argue, but

I agreed to let him stay and wait out front. He took the car— not a surprise. I was a member, but it didn't seem like anyone wanted me on their bikes.

Unsure why the thought bothered me, I waived it off, focusing on the burning need to get away from this compound.

To get away from that monster whose very presence felt violating.



Once we hit the dirt road, my eyes were glued to the mirror, and I stared at the shrinking clubhouse in the distance. I thought I would feel better if I put some distance between us, but all it left was a fluttering fear in my heart. I was tired and raw from running from the same monsters since childhood.

“That’s Chiqui’s place.” He pointed to a gray brick building with a sign that read ‘Sheer Perfection’.

We parked curbside in front of the door, and I peeked nervously through the tinted window of the salon. I waved the prospect off, letting him know he was free to do as he wished, but he cleared his throat for my attention before I made my way inside.

“You’re not going to kill Chiqui, right?”

“What?” I snorted, turning to look at him.

He rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably. “I just—I don’t think Prez would be happy if I brought you to kill her.”

I laughed. “Tell your Prez she’ll survive.”

“He’s not worried about *her*.”

When I swung the door open, the smell of hairspray and bleach slapped me straight in the face. The place wasn’t busy like I expected it to be. There was one client in a chair, a chatty stylist combing through her locks, but aside from that, the place was empty.

When I reached the girl at the reception desk, so did Chiqui, placing a hand over the girl’s arm. “It’s okay, Mel, I can take it from here.”

Mel didn’t seem bothered and left us alone. Seeing Chiqui around the club was normal, but she looked like a different person here. Older, even.

“Chiqui—”

“They call me Alma here,” she interrupted, looking from one side to the other, checking if someone had overheard us. “I keep the club and the salon separate.”

Fair enough. Mixing anything with the club was probably a bad idea. Again, I tried to talk, but she was faster.

“I’m sorry—”

“Can you help me with my hair?”

I knew what she was about to tell me, and I wasn't interested. Whatever happened in that bedroom between her and César was the last thing I wanted to be worrying about. I had real problems. *Again.*

“Your hair?”

“I want to dye my hair,” I forced out. “Are you free?”

She looked at me for a second too long before lowering her eyes to the computer at the front desk. “I'd say no, but it's pretty clear my twelve o' clock canceled. Come on.”

I nodded, realizing the place was maybe a little too vacant.

“Is it usually this empty?” I asked.

“A few people called in sick. I think something's goin' around.” She shrugged.

I followed her to a chair tucked into the far corner of the room. She covered me with a black wrap to protect my clothes and turned her attention to my hair.

“It's natural?”

I nodded.

“What are you thinking?” She combed it through, checking my ends with care.

The truth was... I didn't want to think. His comment ran through my mind, and like everything else, he poisoned that, too. I wanted it gone. The red, my hair, and with that, my past.

I wanted it all gone.

My lips parted, but not a word came out. Chiqui looked at me through the mirror, a crease between her eyebrows. Maybe she'd been among criminals for so long, she knew when someone was hiding something, because in the next moment, she nodded, making her own mind.

“I think a chocolate brown would look great on you. Your skin tone, the light freckles...” She nodded. “I can see it.”

“It'll look natural?”

It wasn't a vain question; I just didn't want to look like I was hiding. I was possibly overthinking the whole thing, but the fear was eating me alive.

“Yeah.” Chiqui nodded.

“Go ahead.”

I kept my head down while she prepared the dye, strumming my fingers over my lap. I only looked up when Chiqui parted my hair and started to apply the color. I watched the brown cover the red, resentment washing through me at the need to camouflage a piece of myself I'd always loved.

“Nothing happened.”

“Mmm?” I glanced back at her, but she was focused on the brush in her hand, avoiding my eyes.

“Between Lobo and me. I wouldn't do that.” She'd used César's road name, throwing me off. I'd grown so used to them calling him Prez that I'd forgotten he even had one of those.

“It’s fine,” I replied quickly, trying to hide my discomfort.

What was I supposed to say? That I was livid César had brought her to his room, even though I’d denied him time and time again, assured him I’d never truly be his? That despite all that, I somehow still felt angry that he’d fuck her in the same bed he expected me to sleep in?

Things were too complicated between us. We were standing worlds apart with millions of languages dividing us.

“He wouldn’t do that either,” she added.

I shook my head. “He would.”

He did.

Didn’t he?

“He wouldn’t,” Chiqui insisted, pulling on my hair to make her point.

I groaned, bringing my hand to cover my eyes. Did I care? I wasn’t sure. Yeah, I did, a little. Between waking up in his bed, his deal with Chiqui last night, and the prospect promising César would kill for me?

It was all a little overwhelming.

The worst part, though, the thing that pissed me off more than anything, was his reaction in that meeting. He’d covered for me without missing a beat. That lie came out too easily from his mouth—smooth, dangerous, laced with a threat, just like him. He didn’t hesitate; he’d jumped in and saved my ass when it counted the most. He’d claimed me in front of them,

and the thing I hated with every fiber of my being was the very thing bringing me peace.

I belonged to the Diablos Locos.

I belonged to him.

It was that right there that kept me moving, kept me going. It was his eyes on me when he closed that door asking me to go, but it wasn't angry, or judgmental. I felt like he had my back.

No one took care of me. No one had ever attempted to, and I liked it that way. My mom had left us when I was barely sentient, and with the disaster for a dad I had? I practically raised myself.

Once Chiqui applied the color, she turned the dial on the timer, and the ticking began to fill the air as the needle spun the seconds away.

“Comfortable?” she asked.

I nodded. With a small smile, Chiqui cleaned up her station and threw the gloves away. Then, she gathered her long brown hair in a ponytail, asking me if I wasn't too hot under the black wrap. I shook my head, but I was too distracted by the small Diablos tattoo she had on her neck.

“How does a girl like you end up in a motorcycle club?” I decided to be bold enough to ask.

“I didn't end up there. I was born there, born to it,” she said, slouching down on the chair next to mine, swiveling side to side.

It made perfect sense, looking at her black leather boots and the pleated black skirt with fishnet stockings underneath.

“My dad was the old Prez,” she explained.

“So, you’re biker royalty?” I asked in an amused tone.

“Something like that.” She shrugged. “It doesn’t mean anything now that he’s dead, though.”

“Shit, I’m sorry.”

She faked an expression like it didn’t bother her, but I could tell it did. I couldn’t relate; I’d never had a good dad to miss.

Twenty minutes later, Chiqui took me to rinse the dye off with warm water before lathering my hair in a rich, floral-scented shampoo, massaging it into my scalp. I fought back a moan at the sensation. I wasn’t the touchy-feely type; in fact, I preferred if people kept a distance. Especially since the tattoo; that thing stung like a fucker. For some reason, though, at that very moment, the human contact felt good.

Necessary.

She rinsed and conditioned before wrapping my hair up into a towel and walking me back to the chair.

“Hey, turn that up,” the only other client in the salon asked, pointing at the television playing the news.

Chiqui grabbed the remote and increased the volume.

The news anchor was announcing a statewide curfew; hospitals were at capacity, and they were asking sick people to stay home. My mind raced with the possibilities. What could

be so devastating that people needed a curfew? I needed to reach out to someone at St. Murphy's and find out what was going on from the mouths of the doctors.

"I need a phone, Chiqui," I told her, remembering that mine had been snatched along with the rest of my belongings and I'd never gotten it back.

"I—I can't. Please don't ask me, Doc. Lobo gave strict orders." She looked down.

I wasn't going to make things bad for her just because I was miserable.

Was I miserable? I'd certainly been through worse.

"Has this been happening while I've been locked down in that basement? I need to know," I demanded from Chiqui, unable to mask the rage boiling at the surface.

"No." She shook her head, her eyes wide at the TV, telling me she was being honest. "This is new."

"Why a curfew?" I wondered out loud.

"Because when things get out of hand, the government gets scared they won't be able to control the people, too," Chiqui said, sounding far wiser than I would have expected.

Every time she opened her mouth, she surprised me more and more. In the last three hours, I'd somehow found that Chiqui was a kind person in a world ready to exterminate her type.

She was a good reminder to remain soft in a hard world.



The minute she walked out of the church room, the meeting soured. We were brokering a deal, the hopeful start of an alliance with The Sidhe—the Irish Mob—when she burst in there, looking hungover as shit.

Paul Kelly was a mean old bastard, and the moment he locked his eyes on Emory, I knew it wasn't going to pan out the way I'd planned. We were giving them a damn good deal on guns, cheaper than anyone could get around these parts, but he was looking at me like he didn't trust me.

I wasn't sure if the man was becoming delusional in his old age, or if I'd heard him right when he insinuated Emory belonged to him. Maybe he was ready to pass the torch to his son.

I turned my gaze over to the kid sitting next to the head of the Irish Mob. Padraic Kelly. He looked like he was barely eighteen, and yet he already had almost as many tattoos on his body as I did. Blond hair and green eyes stared vacantly around the room—he was apathetic to this life.

He had the right idea. That was the best way to not get swallowed up by it.

The old man's jaw ticked as he continued to watch the door.

This was going to be an issue.

“Did you say a thirty percent discount?” Padraic finally spoke, his monotone voice bringing conversation back to the subject at hand, as if to snap his father out of his trance.

“Nice try, kid. Fifteen,” I said, watching the older Kelly's disinterest in the weapons trade grow by the second.

He pulled his phone out and scrolled through it. The fucking nerve. He was gonna leave his barely pubescent kid son to broker this deal.

“Twenty,” he tried again.

“Keep pushing, and there will be no discount.” I hardened my gaze, showing him we weren't comfortable enough with each other to be playing this game.

“Padraic,” Paul growled under his breath, letting me know they needed these guns badly, and he was treading the line of losing it all together.

“Why does The Sidhe need so many guns, Kelly?” I asked with a smirk.

“Not your business,” he hissed.

“Then not my guns.” I crossed my arms over my chest.

Buyers weren't hard to come across. Everyone wanted weapons, and *cártel* guns were primo shit. The serial numbers weren't filed off—they never existed to begin with. The queen of the Flores *Cártel* had big players on her side, and she'd ended up owning multiple weaponries all over the place, spread around the globe. She controlled who got the guns, and she made sure they were untraceable. So, if she didn't like you, you didn't get guns.

This left all the pissy little mobsters with bunched up panties coming straight to my doorstep for a workaround. I promised them a 'discount', but in the end, I ended up making twice as much.

“Look, all I know is what my people tell me across the pond. I'm just making sure I survive whatever clusterfuck gets thrown my way,” he gritted out.

“Why not just go home?” I watched the way his jaw ticked at the question.

“They've closed the gates. No travel between the countries,” he clarified.

“The U.S has no beef with Ireland,” I said, confused about why travel between two countries with no diplomatic issues would be banned.

“No, boyo. All the countries. No one leaves The United States.”

“What the fuck is going on?” I pushed my chair back, the screech of the legs against the hardwood startling the men as I stood.

Calaveras pulled his weapon out, and Paul Kelly placing his hands flatly on the table out of reflex while his son raised his gun into the air. The suited men surrounding them stood, pulling guns out and aiming them at my men.

“Down,” was the only thing the older Kelly said, waving his hand to his men before looking back at me. “You know as much as I do now, Villalobos. Get me my guns. Whatever the fuck is happening, we’ll all find out soon enough.”

He bared his teeth, slapping his hand down onto the table before standing himself.

“If you’re keeping something from me, Kelly...” I didn’t finish my threat. I didn’t need to.

“I’ve told you all I know. Regardless, you’re too remote to be concerned. The Diablos are isolated out here in Grimm Middle of Fucking Nowhere.”

He wasn’t wrong. We’d chosen this very land because it was outside of the jurisdiction of all the surrounding cities. No one could touch us out here. We were essentially governing ourselves.

We were the only law.

“Padraic will be handling any future negotiations and deals between Los Diablos and The Sidhe,” he said, fixing the lapels of his suit and confirming my suspicions.

There was something bigger happening, to the point where Daddy Kelly was absolving responsibilities. Was that out of fear, or necessity? Either way, I wasn't happy about working with the runt, but maybe that was for the better.

The way Emory's entire composure changed at the sight of him.

The way she knew him.

He *knew* her.

How does the head of The Sidhe end up with their hands on a nobody doctor?

Ladrón showed them out while I stayed, sitting, ruminating over what had just gone down. There was a redhead I needed to question.

I marched out of church, my heavy boots stomping through the clubhouse as I looked for her. She wasn't in the bedroom, but it was well past noon now. I didn't expect to find her there, despite how drunk she'd been the night before.

Down the stairs, through the pool room, and into the kitchen, but she wasn't there either.

¿Que chingados?

“Lupe!” I called out.

She shouted Spanish obscenities at me like the mother I never asked for. “What have I told you about yelling for me like I’m some club whore que vive para servirte?” She crowed a few more colorful insults my way as she emerged from the pantry.

I raised my hand up in defense to let her know there was no harm done.

Lupe was a goddamn saint. After the old Prez died, she had no reason to stick around. She was too ornery and twice as stubborn as her ol’ man, and the chances of her kneeling for another biker was little to none.

Where do you go when you’re a dethroned biker queen widow?

You don’t; there’s no world out there for them.

We were the only family she knew. So, she and Chiqui stayed, because family here was something much thicker than the blood we shared; it was about the blood we spilled, too.

So, little by little, she softened after his death, from screaming her head off at us every time our boots scuffed up her floors to tying that apron around her waist and making sure every man and perrita was fed in this compound.

“¿Qué quieres, Lobo?” Some would have seen it as a form of disrespect that the widow of the former president didn’t give me the honor of the title, but the truth was, I understood.

She married the President, and while she respected my word and my rules, she wasn’t married to me. She still wore her cut,

the one that said *Property of the President*. She pushed Chiqui onto me every chance she got, hoping to bridge the gap Caipira left in his sudden absence.

She wasn't happy about Emory, I knew, but was she going to say it?

"My wife. Where is she?"

"Your wife," she mocked with a laugh. "She went into town to see Chiqui. Took the prospect." She threw a towel over her shoulder and walked away.

She went to see Chiqui...

Fuck.

Cold sweat dripped down my back at the thought of what might happen if Emory confronted Chiqui. Chiqui was sweet, downright overly cheery and forgiving, but she was born and bred in this life. She threw heavier fists than most of the men in this compound.

If Emory went to start some shit...well, I wasn't sure what kind of hoity-toity background my feisty wife came from, but I wasn't sure she could defend a punch.

The prospect was dead meat.

I picked up my phone and hit the call button next to his name.

"Hey, Prez," he said, far too calm and collected for someone operating under no command.

“Who the fuck said you could take my wife out of the compound?”

“Shit.” The panic in his voice was evident. “She made it seem like it was fine. I swear, Prez, I was kind of afraid to tell her no.”

I practically snorted. “You were *afraid* of her? Are we talking about the same person? How are you supposed to earn your patch if you’re afraid of a five-foot tall Irishwoman?” I paced nervously around the clubhouse until I found myself sitting at the bar. “Never mind. Where is she? What’s happening?”

“She’s coloring her hair.”

“Say that again?” I said in a sharp tone, waiting for his explanation.

“She’s in the salon, changing her hair,” the prospect said with a nervous voice.

“Get her home soon. If anything happens to her, it’s your skin on the line,” I warned, hanging up the phone.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Ladrón asked as he sat next to me.

“Have you met either of them?” I said, exasperated.

“Then we make it the prospect’s problem,” my brother said, raising a shot and pushing one my way.

I smirked, lifting my shot in the air and toasting his proposition.

There was nothing I could do for now, except sit and wait.



Blow-drying always took far too long. The only other client had long finished, the other hairstylist having left as well, leaving just the two of us with an anxious prospect out front.

I wasn't sure if he was nervous because it was taking so long, or because César hadn't called yet, which probably meant he was going to face some consequences. Honestly, it had definitely a bad judgment call on his part to let me boss him around.

He could use the lesson.

The sun was setting, and the news station was playing an annoying braying sound, accompanied by a colorful banner that warned of the upcoming curfew. Two cop cars pulled up across the street from the salon, no sign of life coming from

behind the tinted windows. They were sitting there, waiting, but for what?

Then, I saw them.

The masses of people storming the streets, throwing bricks, rocks, and makeshift Molotov cocktails wherever they could. Retail store windows were shattering left and right, and with every opportunity, the crowd would break off to make their way inside the stores, taking whatever could fit into their bags and arms.

“Let’s go. Now!” the prospect shouted just as Chiqui grabbed the brush to style my hair.

“What’s happening out there?” she said, voice trembling with fear as she stared out the windows, practically paralyzed.

“I don’t fucking know, but we gotta get back to the compound. *Let’s go.*” His voice took on a deeper tone than I thought possible for such a scrawny kid. He grabbed me by the arm, pulling me out of the chair so fast, I barely had time to undo the clasp on the smock as he dragged me out of the building.

“What about Chiqui?” I asked, the cop cars blaring their lights and sounding their sirens violently while they used megaphones to urge everyone to go home or face aggressive force. There weren’t enough of them, though; there were far too many people on the streets.

The citizens held the power here.

For now.

He gestured behind us, where I could see Chiqui slipping on her helmet. She threw her leg over a motorcycle and followed behind us as we drove away.

Two cops were shooting their tasers into the backs of unsuspecting looters, while another freely emptied the barrel of his gun at anyone close enough to target. Thankfully, they didn't follow us as we distanced ourselves from the craziness. My heart beat ferociously in my chest at the scene we'd escaped.

That was insanity on an entirely new level.

"He's gonna kill me. Holy shit, he's gonna fucking kill me!" the prospect kept chanting.

"Yeah, most likely." I gave him a soft smile before thumbing through the music on the radio. There was nothing; only the piercing alarm of something bad to come, playing on every station.

It was dark by the time we pulled into the compound, and my hair had dried on its own. I'd never seen the place so empty, so quiet.

"Prospect!" I heard César boom from inside his office.

"Oh fuck, shit, fuckballs," the kid whined.

I'd tell César it was my idea, but in the end, I wasn't sure it would matter. It was less about me and more about orders, and I understood there was a hierarchy to the way things worked here.

I could respect that.

I wished him luck and found my way to the room my feet just kept bringing me back to. My bags with my belongings were gone, but it took one look at the open closet door to see that my clothes were hanging in his closet, my shoes placed on a shelf next to his.

My phone was still nowhere in sight.

I stepped back until the back of my legs hit the edge of the bed, prompting me to sit down. I took a few deep breaths, nervous to even materialize the thoughts running through my head.

Whatever he'd said to the prospect didn't take too long. A few moments later, he joined me, closing the door behind him. He tilted his head, his eyes hooded as he stared at me with what looked like appreciation before closing the distance between us.

He didn't seem surprised by my hair, but he hummed when he got closer, his eyes leaving mine to look at a strand he looped around his finger.

I let him touch it, my shoulders back. I held my breath as he played with my hair, his knuckles grazing my neck, forcing my skin to pebble with goosebumps.

“Now tell me, blanca,” he rasped. “How do you know The Sidhe?”

Like Pavlov's dog, the word incited immediate fear that The Sidhe themselves beat into me. I always felt in control until my memory brought them back to me, until the name whistled

in my head like a sharp knife to the temple, until my knees weakened and my hands shook.

“Do you want to sit?” I asked, brushing my hair back and looking away, trying to avoid his pinned gaze.

César didn't reply, and for a second, I thought he'd insist on looming over me, trying to decipher my secrets by intimidation like he usually did. To my surprise, he stepped back and took a seat on a chair in front of me, his legs apart and arms crossed over the chest.

“I know of them,” I offered.

Again with the silence. His eyebrow arched as he waited, making me squirm on my seat.

“I know them,” I said, trying to decide how much of the truth I was willing to give away.

I wasn't going to crack open and tell him my story. I couldn't even see it as my story. It was a cautionary tale, one that didn't feel like me. I'd created someone else to deal with the aftermath: Emory O'Connor.

My open wounds weren't here to be exposed, and I wasn't ready to share them. Logically, I wasn't even sure César could do anything with the information. As much as we butted heads, even I had to admit that César Villalobos wasn't the kind to make rash decisions.

He sighed and placed his elbows on his knees. “Tell me if we're enemies of The Sidhe, blanca. Tell me who I'm fighting.”

My mouth dried up, and Emer Fitzroy spoke instead.
“You’re not.”

“Try again.”

He was being more patient than I expected him to be, sitting there, waiting for me to spill something I should’ve told him before he signed the papers promising to be with me in sickness and in health. What I had over my head was bigger than anything he could’ve imagined. César had a club to think about; I knew that when I came to him for help, and still, I was selfish. Those were the words I couldn’t get out of my mouth.

I came to him ignoring what he represented and those who depended on him. I roped him into something without giving the full extent of what it meant to be married to me. Now, even as my past waltzed in and slapped me in the face, I still couldn’t say it.

“I’m sorry,” I said instead. “I didn’t want to bring a war to your doorstep.”

He frowned, staring blankly into my eyes, making me uncomfortable. We stayed unmoving while I thought of all the explanations I needed to give but couldn’t.

“Is The Sidhe after you?” He broke the silence. “Is that why you needed me?”

I took too long to answer, but he never once seemed angry or annoyed. “I’ve been thinking maybe that SUV was for me.” When his face didn’t show recognition, I added. “On our wedding?”

He nodded. “You think The Sidhe sent that message?”

I puffed air and scooched over on the bed. I winced once my back hit the wall at the other side, and I brought my legs up, hugging my knees. “I don’t know.”

César nodded, resting his back on the chair before he tried again. “Is The Sidhe after you?”

I said nothing.

“It’s a simple yes or no question.”

I sighed and nodded.

“You met Paul Kelly before.”

I flinched, and César’s hand balled in a fist, his jaw ticking.

“It’s a fucking mess,” I confessed.

He nodded slowly and rubbed his hand over his face, looking as tired as I felt. I hated this conversation and how it made me feel. I thought I was better than this. This feeling of insecurity didn’t belong to me anymore.

And yet, here I was. A different name, different country, different hair color. I was who Paul Kelly shaped me to be, and it didn’t matter how much I gritted my teeth and stomped my feet. I was always dragged back to his cage in my mind.

César stood up to his full height, grabbing my arm and hauling me to my knees on the bed in front of him. “I like it better when you’re cursing me, blanca.”

“Is that your kink, Villalobos?” I stared up at him, his fingers still gripping me tight.

César smiled, a genuine smile, and I hated him for it. His eyes wrinkled at the sides, and his teeth were white. He looked so handsome, and I couldn't help hating him. It was gross how vulnerable I felt. It was like something had cracked me open, all my parts exposed to the world.

On top of everything, I couldn't handle how that smile made me feel.

I diverted my gaze, looking anywhere that wasn't him, but he took it as an opportunity to move my chin with his fingers, like I was a doll he could manipulate.

"There was no problem with your visa," he said. It wasn't a question; he wasn't even waiting for me to confirm it.

I did anyway. The intensity of his stare was like a spell that forced the truth from me. "No, there wasn't," I admitted.

"You know this life?" he asked with narrowed eyes.

I let out a heavy exhale. "I know this life." The crushing weight of my secrets let up just a bit with my confession, and I'd almost forgotten who it was I was baring my soul to.

Removing the distance between us, he nodded, like I'd given him enough without giving away anything at all. He nipped on my earlobe, a shockwave running down my spine as I attempted not to tremble under his touch.

His deep voice rasped again, "I asked if we're at war with The Sidhe."

I turned and looked at him, my brows furrowed. His dark eyes had that murderous quality, burning to carry the world

back to hell with him. It didn't matter how many times I looked; I never found lies in César's eyes. He wasn't a man who said what he didn't mean, and I was starting to realize that.

He was a brute, a criminal, and everything else I had called him once or twice before, but he wasn't a liar.

I gripped his shoulder, the leather of his cut between my fingers meaning more than I could explain in that moment.

"I can't be the cause of a war," I whispered.

"Name them," he asked between my parted lips.

The silence was long as it was loud. He didn't repeat himself, but after a few minutes, I realized he was going to wait as long as he needed.

"Mike Fitzroy, Eion Doherty, and Paul Kelly." The names fought their way out of me, like I'd been waiting a lifetime to say them.

He hummed, satisfied, letting me know those men were dead before their names had even left my tongue. I made a vow to forget most of the things that had happened to me while I was with The Sidhe, but their names were engraved in my memory.

No matter how much therapy I attended, or how hard I tried, I couldn't make myself forget, and I couldn't go on and kill them. When I spoke their names, I reopened a wound I thought I'd sewn shut, but there it was, bleeding just the same as before.

Somehow, voicing it to César gave me a little more hope.

The burden I carried on my shoulders wasn't lifted, but it didn't feel like such a heavy load anymore. César's eyes burned for revenge, and for the first time in my life, I believed someone might just fight for me.

He didn't ask for more; not how I knew their full names, or why exactly they were after me. César seemed simply content in knowing who he was killing next, like a rabid dog I kept on a leash, and I could only wonder how much damage he could wreak.

There was power in being the one who held that leash.

I felt it here and now.

He closed the little distance between us, our lips not even an inch apart. I could almost taste him on my tongue. César's eyes were on me, not giving anything in his head away. *Fuck it.* I leaned in, my lips pressing against his, my breath shaky from anticipation as he let me explore. I took his bottom lip between my teeth, and right when I thought I had control, he grabbed my waist, lifting me up from the bed.

Being loved by César Villalobos was the most dangerous thing I'd ever done, and yet, it had never been my choice.

Love was a lot like that, wasn't it?

It didn't ask if we were ready, or if the person was the one we wanted. Hell, fate didn't even bother to ask if I'd *liked* the bastard.

Yet here he was, having proved himself ten times over. No matter what, he had my back.

He had my fucking back.

That was more than I'd ever been given.

César growled, forcing his tongue into my mouth and changing everything about the kiss. My legs closed around his waist, his hand keeping me in place so he could grind his cock against me. In a blink, my back hit the bed, and César had climbed on top of me.

I hissed without meaning to, my back stinging from the friction of the sheets. His eyes narrowed in thought, but before I could shake my head and give a weak excuse, he turned us around and positioned me on his lap. His cut flew off, along with the black t-shirt underneath, revealing the scar on his chest from his *cártel* days.

He had my shirt over my head in an impatience that matched mine. His mouth closed around my nipple, and I cried out, my hips moving in search of him. The need was building and growing inside of me, blinding me so that all I could feel was the *ache* for his touch. He gripped my hair, forcing my head to the side before he licked my neck, making me call out his name before I could stop myself.

He pulled back, staring at me with a knowing smirk.

César did what he wanted with me, shoving his hand in my pants and rolling his fingers through my arousal.

“Goddamn. You’re drenched, blanca.” He chuckled in satisfaction.

I whimpered at his touch, unraveling when he smirked. It was like a personal victory every time he caught me. He played with me, driving me wild every time his fingers slowly circled my clit.

“César...” I gritted, attempting to take more with every move I made against his fingers.

“Hold still,” he ordered, not waiting to see if I would obey. He’d already placed one hand over my hips, trying to control my movements.

I gasped for air, his kiss more powerful than passionate—desperate, needy, hoping to absorb anything I could give him.

When he removed his hands from my jeans, I grunted with frustration. He undressed me in an instant, stripping away everything but my underwear, until finally, he spread my knees apart over him.

Growling under his breath, he palmed my ass with one hand as he dragged his thumb along my drenched thong with the other.

“Shit,” I swore, looking up and away from him.

“Let’s see if you understand how this is going to work,” he said calmly, even when he brought his body closer to mine, his breath hitting the sensitive skin of my neck.

I whimpered and looked down, biting my bottom lip at the image of him under me, those dark eyes ready to end me. He

hooked his finger around the lace, dragging my underwear to the side, and that little contact broke my resolve. “Please...”

“Tell me you understand, and I’ll give it to you,” he said, showing more restraint than I thought was possible.

“Understand what?”

“That I’d kill for you. That you’re mine.”

I laughed, shaking my head. He wanted to buy me in blood. Romantic, yet twisted.

“You’re playing with fire, blanca,” he warned, sliding his fingers through the mess of my arousal again.

“I belong to no one, Lobo,” I taunted, meaning every word.

“I’ll keep you alive. I’ll gladly soak my hands in blood for you, but you will stop pretending you don’t feel this between us.” When I didn’t respond, he continued. “You want to know why I brought you here? Why I agreed to marry you?”

I shook my head.

He told me anyway. “I brought you here to kneel. To fill your mouth with my cock. To fuck you until your throat is hoarse from calling my name. To brand you as mine and no one else’s. The first time I saw you, I knew you were mine. You were *made for me*.”

His eyes were hard and filled with something I couldn’t put words to yet, a look I didn’t recognize.

“When he said you were his... I wanted to rip his throat out and feed it to the pigs,” he gritted out.

I lifted an eyebrow in shock. I didn't even know they *had* pigs. He held me still, not allowing me to grind over him in search of friction and relief.

“What do you want from me?” I breathed out needily.

“Say the words.” He arched his eyebrows, taunting me now, teasing.

I shook my head. “I can't. I'm no one's property.”

Without warning, he plunged two fingers inside me, my back arching in response. Gripping his shoulders with my nails, I cried out for him as he worked me with skillful fingers, rubbing that sensitive spot inside me that had me shaking. I blinked at the image of his tattooed arms between my legs, his attention all on me.

The pressure built, my core tightening, and just when I thought I would explode, right when I couldn't think straight, he pulled back, making me curse. My eyes refocused on him as he took off his belt, and I came up on my elbows.

“Say it,” he said without blinking.

“Do you want the words, or do you want the truth?” I asked, tilting my head to the side as I waited for a response.

His nostrils flared like he was considering it as he unzipped his pants.

“Do you have a condom?” I asked quickly, hoping he was done torturing me.

He said nothing; he just took himself out. My mouth parted on instinct when he stroked lazily at the veiny, throbbing length in his fist, the tip grazing over my pussy.

“Tell me you have condoms here somewhere...” I shook my head, my eyes never wavering.

He didn't move, his eyes tracing my body from top to bottom as urgency gripped me. I tried to move to reach his bedside table when his hand grabbed my leg and pulled me back.

In one quick move, he ripped my underwear clean from my body, and I gasped while he remained expressionless.

“No, blanca,” he said, so low that I almost didn't catch it.

“No condoms?”

“I have them, but not for you.”

He pumped his fist up and down, his eyes narrowed at me. “When you take my cock, you'll take it raw. I want nothing between us.”

“I'm a *doctor*. You must be delusional to think I'm gonna fuck you without a condom,” I spat at him.

He simply shook his head. “I'm not saying it again.”



“I’m clean,” I assured her, knowing damn well it had been months since I’d slept with anyone, and I’d been tested plenty since.

I’d never fucked anyone else without wrapping it up before, but with her...With her nothing made sense, and I needed to be as close to her as possible.

“I’m not even on birth control,” she scoffed.

“Emory, I’m the last man who will ever be between your legs again.”

Her eyes widened, and I grabbed the back of her neck, bringing her down so I could wrap my lips around hers.

I’d been dreaming of this kiss for months. Every time I closed my eyes, every time I was alone with my thoughts,

Emory-fucking-O'Connor was there, like the sun to my system, drawing me to the scorching heat that was her radiance.

She'd told me nothing, given me little to no information or hints about her past, and yet she'd told me everything I needed to know. She'd been marked, tainted, marred by the greed of men who thought the world was theirs for the taking.

She didn't have to tell me everything for me to know they'd taken from her too.

Every hateful word, every distrusting thing she'd ever said, became a clear show of the only way she knew how to defend herself, to keep herself safe from what she'd already been through.

I wanted her to be mine, but she refused to belong to anyone.

What she failed to realize was that it wasn't about owning her. I wanted to be hers too.

She parted her lips, opening up for me so my tongue could slide its way in. She tasted like summer, like sunshine and happiness and all the things I knew I'd find in her. I closed my eyes tightly, surrendering to the kiss and praying to La Flaquita that this woman wouldn't snap back to sanity and push me off.

I ran my hand up her side, feeling the soft skin under my palm as she shuddered against my touch, goosebumps pebbling on her flesh. She moaned into my mouth, her hands

gripping my bicep as her tongue fought mine for dominance. Her hand moved down, trailing along my stomach before her hand found its way around my cock.

“I knew you’d come around.” I pulled back from our kiss, chuckling in a low tone.

She scowled, like I’d ruined the magic by reminding her she’d broken a promise to herself.

It didn’t matter if she said she didn’t fuck criminals. She was one of us now.

I lifted her off me, flipping her over in one, swift move, gazing at the Diablos Locos outline etched on her back, not quite scabbing yet.

“I could fucking look at this thing all day long, blanca.”

She turned her head to the side, keeping one cheek on the mattress as those cold, distant eyes found me. She smirked, and I prepared myself for the worst. It was the kind of look that told me she was conjuring up something wicked.

“It doesn’t mean what you think it means,” she said.

I slid my hand back down between her legs, rolling her clit between my fingers and forcing a cry from her mouth.

I laughed. “Does it bother you more that I have you in the palm of my hand, or that you’re comfortable there?”

She didn’t answer.

I placed the tip of my cock at her entrance, the head beading with precum at just the thought of filling her up. She writhed

her hips, anxiously waiting for me to give her what she refused to ask for.

“I need you to tell me what you want, blanca.” I chuckled with satisfaction.

“You want it too, so be a good boy and don’t spoil the moment before I come to my senses.”

There it was.

With one stroke of my hips, I filled her completely, nearly blowing my load from the sheer sensation of her walls stretching tightly around the width of my cock. She bit back a guttural sound.

“I knew you’d feel this good around my cock,” I breathed out, a drop of sweat forming at my temple as I used every ounce of restraint to keep myself from coming.

Just the thought of watching my cum leak out of her brought a tingle to my balls that I couldn’t fight back. Her hands fisted the sheets beneath her, breathing heavily in anticipation as she waited for me to give her what she wouldn’t ask for.

I barely moved, pulling back just an inch before sinking deeper inside of her. She wrapped her lips over her teeth, biting them to keep her sounds of pleasure locked down. I fisted a handful of her hair, lifting her head up off the mattress a few inches.

“Don’t hold back. I want to hear you fall apart for me.” With my other hand at her hip, I moved back and forth, slowly,

just enough to hit that spot that had her curling her toes and sobbing for me.

“César,” she gasped just as I brought my hand down to her clit.

“This is nothing. Someday, I’m gonna have you all stretched out over my cock, a plug in that pretty ass, and you mewling like a desperate kitten for me.”

She cried as she spasmed, pulsing around my cock, sending me over the edge so unexpectedly, I barely had time to pull out of her, turning her over and coating her chest with my cum. Her pupils were blown wide, her face flushed with heat from her climax, a lusty fog draped over her features.

“Don’t think too hard about it. You and I have been a long time comin’, blanca.”

That scowl was starting to grow on me.

“What happens next?” she asked, the apprehension still on the tip of her tongue.

“Now, I’m gonna take care of it,” I answered, pulling back and climbing off her.

In the bathroom, I grabbed a washcloth and ran it under warm water before coming back to the bed to clean my cum off her chest. She was still eyeing me with a look that said she wasn’t sure.

No, it was a look that said she was still afraid to trust me. Now I knew she didn’t have a choice.

I decided not to push our boundaries, handing over the washcloth so she could clean herself off. She stayed quiet, not sparing a glance at me as she wiped herself with it.

“On your stomach,” I told her, getting the balm from my drawer and opening the can. “For once, let’s just pretend like it’s okay for you to need someone to help you.”

Her eyebrows furrowed, but she sighed heavily, turning over onto her chest again and exposing the tattoo. I hovered over her, knees on the bed around her hips before applying the sticky salve onto her healing tattoo. With light pressure, I rubbed it into her skin, a low hum escaping her every time my fingers made contact. This was somehow more intimate than what we’d just done.

I savored the moment, going as slow as possible over every inch of the art on her skin. She could hold her shields up, spill whatever lies she needed to convince herself that this was something else.

This meant everything.

I lingered, frozen over her once I’d finished, not ready to break whatever peace had settled between us. I cleared my throat at the awkward silence and lifted off her. For once, she seemed disarmed, not prepared with some snarky line or snippy banter. She tucked her hair behind her ear before sauntering her naked ass over to my closet, where her clothes were now put away.

She surprised me, grabbing one of my own t-shirts and slipping it over her head before walking back to the bed. I

grabbed my pillow and blanket folded on the chair and mentally prepared myself for another night on the floor.

It was better than being in another room.

She sighed heavily. “Come to bed, César.”

I raised an eyebrow up.

“It’s *your* bed,” she clarified like I’d forgotten. “It doesn’t feel right to kick you out of it.”

“Don’t get soft on me just because I got you off, blanca. I like it better when you put me in my place,” I chuckled, wondering if all that attitude came from years of pent-up sexual repression.

“I didn’t say come spoon me. I just said you should get to sleep in your own bed.” Her voice was laced with that coldness I’d come to realize was a protective barrier she wrapped herself with.

I scoffed, walking towards the bed as she moved from the center to the side I’d always slept in.

She could have it.

For now.

Tomorrow, I would worry about blowing up the entire Sidhe and all the miserable fucks who thought that being a man was about taking the freedom of those who couldn’t fight back.

She turned to her side, facing the wall with her back to me. I didn’t have to be a mind reader to realize she’d regretted

letting me in, that she was wishing she hadn't told me her secrets or let me between her thighs.

Every time I took one step closer to Emory O'Connor, she took four steps back, putting even more distance between us.

And every time, it seemed to sting a bit more.



I woke from the buzzing of my phone rattling against the wooden bedside table. I looked over to see Emory dead asleep, mouth open, facing me. I grabbed my phone, the latest call from Lupe the tenth missed one in the last fifteen minutes.

Pulling my pants up to my waist, I thumbed through my phone to figure out who to call back. I needed to piece together what the fuck was going on, and calling the right person would be the most efficient way about it. Dialing Lupe was a surefire way to waste a lot of time and end up with an earful of insults.

Then, the knock on the door came.

“Prez.”

“This better be fucking important, prospect,” I warned before opening the door.

“It’s Sanguinero. He’s sick or something.”

“Take him to the hospital then. Club doctor is for shit we don’t want the cops sniffin’ around for, not a fucking cold.” I pulled the door open, crossing my arms over my chest, unhappy that I had to micromanage a fucking cold.

“They tried. The hospitals are turning people away.” The kid looked scared, eyes wide and looking a bit paler than usual, even for a gringo.

“What’s wrong with him?” Emory’s voice came from behind me, scratchy and still laced with sleep.

I filled the gap of the open door with my body, keeping her from view.

“We’re not sure. He’s kind of delirious, keeps shaking a bunch.” The prospect shook his head.

She rubbed her eyes, reaching for my sweatpants at the end of the bed. Putting them on, she pulled at the strings to tighten them around her waist, and though they were far too big on her, goddamn if it didn’t make me want to undress her all over again.

“How long has he been like this?” she asked, piling her hair on top of her head as she opened the door completely and left me and the prospect behind.

“A few hours, but it’s getting worse.” I didn’t like the way he said that, and if I was judging by the way Emory curled her

lip, she wasn't happy about that either.

We made our way to the spare house, where my road captain had been bunking for the last few weeks. We followed behind her, the prospect breathing easier when he realized she was coming to help.

Sanguinero looked like shit. He was dripping in sweat, and though the man was as brown as I was, he had an almost pinkish hue to his skin. His teeth clanked together loudly from chattering, and just as she pressed her stethoscope to his chest, he began to seize, his eyes rolling to the back of his head.

"Shit. Help me get him on his side." Emory's voice was stern, laced with a confidence I only ever saw come out when she was doing what she did best.

"Hey big guy, can you hear me?" she asked, but he was still convulsing violently.

"What's happening, Emory?" My road captain was a tank, nearly as big as Calaveras, and to see a man twice my size so vulnerable, so helpless...

It felt wrong.

"He's burning up. His fever is so high, it's causing a seizure," she said, the concern in her voice apparent.

"He's been doing this for the last hour," the prospect said.

"And you just now thought to wake me up?" She raised her voice like she couldn't believe the negligence.

"How can I help?" I asked her.

“He’s reading 107. His fever is way too high, César.” She shook her head, and just as she spoke the words, his mouth opened and foamy, yellow bile poured out.

“Tell me what to do, blanca.”



Nothing.

It soon became obvious we could do nothing to stop the fever. No cold baths or anything I could think of worked. I had the bare essentials when it came to medicine, but basic antipyretics weren't going to do much for a fever this high. If the hospital was turning patients away, we were on our own.

The reality of the situation dawned on me as the night progressed. Nothing was breaking the fever, and Sanguinero showed no signs of recovery. I held him to the side while he had yet another seizure, while César stared at me from the other side of the bed. My stomach churned sickly at the realization that there was nothing I could do but let his brother die.

He saw it; he knew it too. His face hardened once our eyes met. Cursing under his breath, he came to me, hands gripping my shoulders tightly. “I’ll see what I can find out.”

I nodded, my lips quivering as he pressed a soft kiss against my temple. His heavy boots stomped noisily against the floors, announcing his departure from the spare house. I had never felt so useless than I did in that moment, tending to a patient without any means to help him.

While I wallowed in self-pity, Chiqui rushed into the bunkroom with a perrita draped around her shoulders. “Doc...”

“Here, bring her over.” I left Sanguinero’s side to get the bed next to him ready for the new girl.

“She’s burning up,” Chiqui said, her voice meek.

The girl was weak, lips chapped, and she closed her eyes the second her head hit the pillow. I rushed to grab Chiqui a mask to fix over her face. With gloved hands, I took the thermometer, aiming at her forehead until it beeped 106.

“Do they have the same thing?” she asked, her eyebrows scrunched up in the middle.

I didn’t know enough, so I said nothing.

“She’s my roommate...” she explained anxiously.

She was probably wondering if she was going to be the next one to get sick, and I had no comforting words to give her. I knew nothing, and I was doing my best not to spiral from the sheer lack of understanding.

“You all sleep in this house?” I asked, and she confirmed with a nod.

The spare house reminded me of college dormitories—just a few small rooms with their own bathrooms. From what I could see, there was no kitchen in sight. It made sense, because regardless of whether they lived in the clubhouse or the spare house, everyone seemed to end up in Lupe’s kitchen for meals.

It was after four in the morning when they brought in the third sick person, another perrita. I remembered dancing with her the other night, but I didn’t even know her name. Chiqui stayed and acted as my nurse, putting a towel over the girl’s temple, waiting for instructions. She was taking an unnecessary risk by staying, but part of me also knew that sending her away would be putting others at risk.

She had already been exposed by sharing a room with her, and whatever was going around was spreading fast.

We asked the prospect to bring any relevant medical supplies in the basement to the spare house, since it had unintentionally become a quarantine zone. So far, every person who had gotten sick had been bunking here anyway; they’d just been moved into a cramped little room together.

Whether we were here or in the basement of the clubhouse, it didn’t matter. We were going to have to ride this out and hope everyone made it through.

Sanguinero was seizing non-stop and nowhere near lucid. My confidence that he was going to survive this was so low, I didn’t have the courage to vocalize it. It had been hours since

César had left, and I couldn't stop wondering if he'd gotten any new or valuable information.

Anything at all would be better than this. We were completely in the dark.

I checked for signs of infection, tried all methods to break the fever, but as the morning rolled around, I had to accept they were waiting for the inevitable.

“Layla and Mara are inseparable.” Chiqui came closer to me, away from the patients. “And Mara and Sanguinero, are... you know.”

“So it's spreading fast.” I nodded.

“Then I should be sick too, right?”

I turned to her, but her gaze was glued on her friends, her anxiety so visible, I could practically read her mind.

“I—” I couldn't say again that I didn't know.

“The girls both dance at the Palace—it's a strip club in Cove City,” she added, letting me know exactly how this might have started.

I narrowed my eyes and nodded to a chair on the other side of the room. “Come here.”

Chiqui followed me, and I put gloves on before touching her neck, trying to find any inflammation anywhere. When I couldn't, I grabbed the thermometer and put it against her temple until it beeped at 97.

“Do you think I'll get sick too?”

“How do you feel?” I wasn’t even sure if I was going to avoid it myself.

She shrugged. “I feel normal.”

I was sure someone was briefing doctors at St. Murphy’s, but if they’d closed their doors to the general population, it wasn’t like I could waltz in and ask for help. Although, the fear of letting everyone down was bigger than any consequences of returning to the hospital.

Here, I was just making them comfortable, Sanguinero, Mara, and Layla. I wasn’t helping them. I was letting them go with no dignity, and it was the worst thing I had ever endured.

Chiqui took her phone from her pocket, found a video, and showed it to me. The hospitals were full, the sick piled on the streets while some jumped over them to loot. “They aren’t giving us much of what is happening and why.”

I looked over our three patients. “I think you should go.”

“Why?” She pocketed her phone.

“It’s dangerous, and we know nothing about it.”

“I was exposed to Mara and Layla.” She shrugged.

“Chiqui...” I shook my head, looking at her square in the eyes as I repeated, “It’s too risky.”

“You’re here,” she contested.

“It’s my job.”

Chiqui nodded. “They’re my family, and you need me. You can’t handle everything on our own.”

Like he was summoned by my determination alone, César slammed the door open, scanning the room until he found me.

“I’m going to check on Sanguinero,” Chiqui whispered.

“Traitor,” I whispered under my breath.

César marched towards me, and I forced myself not to run to check on Sanguinero too.

“Let’s go.”

I brushed the hair out of my face. “What?”

He was burning with rage, one of César’s moods I’d become familiar with.

“You need a mask if you’re coming in,” I warned him.

Not only for what he could get, but the people here were too fragile to risk anything else. I gestured to the box of masks to the side, but instead of reaching for them, he gripped my upper arm and dragged me out of the hospital. I couldn’t yell, afraid to wake up the people who were already suffering enough. When the door closed behind us, I shook him off.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, pissed.

“I don’t want you here anymore.”

“I’m doing what you asked me to do.” I frowned, confused.

César’s jaw ticked. “I’ve been making some calls about this. I contacted my sister in Mexico.”

“What did she say?”

“There’s nothing happening across the border yet,” he whispered. “But she has eyes everywhere.”

“What does that mean?” I held on to the hope of contacting someone with a magical solution to all of this. “I can’t figure out what’s—”

“No one knows, blanca. It’s everywhere in the country. People get sick, burn up, and—”

I shook my head. “There has to be a solution. They can’t just let people die!”

“Not everyone.” He nodded. His voice was somber, and I completed the thought he was unwilling to say. Not everyone died, but most of them.

“We need to contact a hospital,” I said as I began to pace. “They’re being briefed, I know they are. Maybe if I went to St. Murphy’s...”

“You’re not hearing me, Emory. The doctors have gone home. Everyone is afraid to get sick. The hospitals are closed.”

“No, that can’t—”

He didn’t let me finish the sentence as I was once again thrown over his shoulders. “César, put me down! This isn’t how you settle an argument!”

“It is.” His voice was dark. “You don’t fucking listen.”

I pounded my fists against his back until he finally dropped me to the ground when we reached his room. His arms crossed over his chest as he looked down at me with flared nostrils.

I snorted. “Are you going to lock me up again?”

“I’m trying to keep you safe!” He moved to grip my shoulders tightly.

“Your family is dying!” I beat the back of my fists against his chest.

“Don’t you think I fucking know that?” he growled.

There we were again, opposites in a battle. It didn’t matter what happened between us—we always found ourselves at arms against each other.

“I know I can’t go to St. Murphy’s.” He scoffed, and I narrowed my eyes—it was hard to be the bigger person like this. “But you need to understand how serious this is.”

“I know it’s serious,” he retorted.

“César, think about this. It’s not just those three. We don’t know how many people are sick. Right now, nothing is helping them. Right now, we are losing all three of them, and I’m being honest with you. You know what I am doing downstairs? I’m making them comfortable.” He winced, and I kept going. “We need information, and we need supplies.”

He sighed. “There’s no point relying on government information. I called up a few people, and they all reported the same thing. It happens fast, and whoever has it, burns from the inside out.”

I hated the whimsical quality of that report. Burning from the inside out, like it was straight from a fantasy book rather

something I wasn't equipped to fight. "There must be a way —"

"I don't want you in the spare house. Anyone else gets sick, we'll move them there." He was sealing all their fates, making the hard decision no one else wanted to. I blinked up to him. "You said it yourself: you can't do anything."

Whoever César contacted had told him a very grim version of events. It was written all over his face. To him, they were already dead.

"César..." I said desperately, walking up to him.

His eyes hardened, and he looked anywhere but at me. "You're putting yourself at risk."

"I'm a doctor. That's my job."

"Emory, for once, just do what I fucking tell you!" His voice cracked, and he stepped back.

He ran his hand against the short, buzzed hair over his head, his frustration painful to see. I stood there and watched him, his breathing fast, his chest moving harshly.

Everyone knew César was born to serve the cártel. He'd been through things I couldn't begin to understand, and now, after everything, he carried the Diablos Locos on his shoulders. I never thought I'd relate to him of all people, but I got it. He was a man who made the difficult calls so no one else had to.

Still, he was asking me to sit out of a war when I was the only soldier on the battlefield. It didn't matter if the other

army had guns and all I had was a slingshot. I was trained to fight, and even if my best wasn't good enough, it was all we had.

“Don't ask me not to be there for them. You branded me with this club's image, so let me fight for them, even if there's not much that I can do.”

“If you get sick?” He turned to me, a challenge in his eyes.

I shook my head. “I can't hide here. You should know this.”

He came closer, lowering his head until our noses brushed. “What I know is that we have a mystery virus, and you want to be right in the eye of the hurricane.”

“My life isn't worth more than theirs.”

His Adam's apple bobbed, and he turned the other way, hiding his eyes from me. “And if I said it was?”

The silence was overwhelming. It was the longest we'd gone without arguing.

I licked my lips before breaking it. “Chiqui... she should be sick too.”

He looked at me again. “But she isn't?”

I shook my head.

He frowned. “Everyone keeps saying the fever comes fast and doesn't go away.”

“She was with the rest of them, and she's not sick. Why?” I wondered.

César shrugged. “Maybe she wasn’t in close contact? I don’t know. Why does this even matter?”

“I’m not sure, but it makes me hopeful that some people won’t get sick at all.” I stood from the bed, and he raised a single eyebrow at me. “I’m going back César.” He sighed heavily, finally accepting defeat.

I let the corner of my lip turn up; not even he believed I was going to be kept away while sick people needed me. I opened my mouth to tell him just that when the prospect came rushing out of the clubhouse.

“It’s Lupe.” He swallowed. “She’s sick.”

I didn’t wait for a reaction. I shouldered him to the side and marched towards the spare house to prepare. I ignored the steps coming after me, knowing it was both of them bringing her behind me.

“Stay out here,” I said firmly, forcing both men to take a step back as Chiqui and I took Lupe into our arms. “It’s not worth the risk, not until we know more.” I reached out, my hand covering his as he took a frustrated breath.

He nodded.

Staying behind, he didn’t follow me inside. I took the door to the second bedroom, where the first three were staying. My eyes locked on Chiqui, her worried expression directed at her mother as she helped her into a chair.

“How many people stay in this house?” I asked her.

“There’s the prospect and André, but he usually ends up sleeping in his studio because he doesn’t want to miss an opportunity to create something if he wakes up inspired.” She shrugged. “Silvia bunks across the hall when she doesn’t stay in the city. Most of the older or married members live in the city, outside the compound.”

“Are they here now?”

She nodded.

“Call her, text her, whatever you have to do. Tell her to stay in her room. Don’t open the door.”

Chiqui pulled her phone out, calling instead of texting and just as quickly filling me in on the situation.

“There’s a brother in her room with her.” She bit her lower lip anxiously.

“Then tell them both to stay there. They’ll have to wait it out until it’s safe,” I told her, though somewhere inside, I knew it was probably too late for them.

She typed away at her phone before pocketing it and looking back at me for further instructions.

“Okay, help me move one of the beds in here for your mom.” We walked across the hall into the empty room, each of us grabbing opposite ends of the bed and walking it to the room with the others.

Lupe looked significantly better than they did.

“How long have you been feeling sick?” I asked as we helped get her into the bed.

“It started before bed. I felt hot, pero I just thought it was, you know.” She raised her eyebrows suggestively.

She was joking, which told me she was definitely better off than the others. I ran the thermometer across her forehead, the beeper going off once it hit 103. She’d already taken the maximum amount of Tylenol she could have for the day, and that had been the only reason she even reached out for help at all.

“Let’s keep you hydrated.” I twisted the cap off a water bottle before handing it to her.

She gave me a soft smile, nodding as she reached for it.

Her hands trembled from the weight of the bottle, and once she was done, she tipped her head back and closed her eyes.

Rest was the only thing we could do.



I glanced at the big clock on the wall every ten minutes, wondering when the next person would be brought in.

It had been a full day of this insanity. The sickness was relentless, Chiqui and I working non-stop against an unbeatable threat. The prospect was the only one passing by to leave us water and food every few hours, but for the most part, we were alone. César was hard to keep away, but in the end, even he knew it wasn't worth the risk.

Lupe was sleeping now. We were monitoring her temperature, applying a wet cloth on her temple and down her arms every twenty minutes. We did the same for the other three, but for them, it almost made no difference.

Mara had been sleeping for a long time, quiet, burning, and listless. Sanguinero tossed a couple of times, which gave me

hope. Layla had woken up twice.

I kept my eyes on Sanguinero as I dripped water over his dry lips.

I had no more answers than I did when he first got sick. Chiqui and I gave up watching the news; there was nothing to report that hadn't already been done. There was no explanation for anything, but every channel echoed the others.

Martial law was officially in effect.

Every citizen was to stay inside.

To make matters worse, the hospitals were closing. Doctors were giving up, going home to be with their loved ones for fear they were going to be next.

It was a repulsive thought, that any of my colleagues would prioritize themselves over their oaths. They were the haughty ones, the ones only doing it for the money, not because they cared about people.

Chiqui was tending to her mother, whispering something in Spanish in her ear while she tried to keep her comfortable. Lupe was the heart of this club; I didn't know much, but I knew losing her was unacceptable. She cared for every man and woman under this roof as if they were her own flesh and blood, and while that was something I didn't understand, I could still appreciate it.

Determination roared inside me at the thought, and I marched to the door, my head fitting through a gap to talk to the prospect, who lingered outside if we needed something.

“How much ice do we have?”

As if the suddenness of my question made him dizzy, he shook his head, but quickly recovered. “I can get whatever we have in the bar.”

“And rubbing alcohol, too,” I added. “Everything we have.”

“Doc!” Chiqui screamed.

Without saying another word to the prospect, I slammed the door shut and ran to her. She was holding Sanguinero on his side while he seized. Touching his skin was like touching a hot plate, but he needed both of us to hold him down while he convulsed in our hands. He was too big, and even in his pain, he was stronger than us. I looked at Chiqui, her eyes full of tears.

Bile foamed on the side of his mouth, and I waited until he was done, feeling helpless. I lost sense of time, but eventually, the seizure stopped, and he laid still. Chiqui hiccupped, her hand covering her mouth as I checked his pulse.

Dead.

I shook my head, pushing him on his back again before I started administering CPR. My ears rang above Chiqui’s sobs, but I couldn’t give up. He couldn’t go yet.

Not like this.

Something took over me, and I couldn’t stop, I couldn’t give up. I could hear Chiqui calling my name, but I ignored her. My arms trembled from exhaustion, but for the first time since they brought Sanguinero to me, I was doing something.

Arms circled my body, and suddenly, I was pressed back to a hard chest. I heard someone screaming in the midst of it all before I realized it was me. I kicked, trying to break free, but I was dragged away.

“Emory, stop,” said a voice in my ear. I shook my head and tried to get free. “Blanca, stop now.”

The stupid nickname broke me out of it, and I stopped, turning in César’s arms to face him. We stared at each other, the room almost silent except for Chiqui’s quiet cries.

“Are you okay?” he finally asked.

It was his friend, his brother, who had died, but here he was, comforting me.

“I’m a doctor.” I said it to him, but I meant it more for myself, like I needed the reminder to keep myself from falling apart any further. I was a doctor. I dealt with death. I lost patients every day in that emergency room, and while it hurt, I never lost anyone in a way that made me feel so out of control. I rubbed a sore spot in my chest, unable to explain myself.

Mara’s whimpering shattered the unbearable silence in the room.

“Prospect said you asked for ice?” César grabbed the heavy bag on the ground.

I nodded, hating myself just a little more. “It’s worth a try. We have nothing else.”

He nodded, taking a step back from me now that I wasn’t kicking and screaming. I looked back to the beds—Chiqui was

with her mother, thankfully no longer crying.

“You should go,” I reminded him.

I found César’s presence had a way of grounding me, and regardless of how frustrating that was, I knew I’d be worse off if he ended up the next person in one of these beds.

“You need to go to sleep, Emory.”

I rubbed my eyes and shook my head. “I’m going to try the ice.”

“You can’t help them like this.”

I sighed. He was right—I wasn’t going to be helping anyone if I was sleep deprived. “After this. Go. Now. Please, César.” I softened my voice, unable to hide just how vulnerable I felt in this moment.

He tucked my hair behind my ear, his index finger trailing down my skin until it found its way under my chin. The silence was heavy and said too much, feelings I wasn’t quite ready to admit. He placed a soft kiss on my forehead, my knees going shaky from the intimacy of it all.

He was making it too easy to count on him.

He didn’t know I had a habit of self-destructing every good thing that had ever come my way. My tongue wet my bottom lip just as he let go, turning away and walking out of the spare house without another word.

“Let’s start with your mother while her fever is still manageable,” I told Chiqui as I wet a blanket and laid it out on

the floor.

“You don’t want to start with the worst?”

I shook my head in shame. “I don’t want to waste what small resources we have.”

Between us, we shouldered Lupe to the damp fabric. She was conscious, but her fever was running pretty high, and she hissed from the shock of the ice on her scalding hot skin. Chiqui fussed over her, wiping her brows gently and whispering hushed things in Spanish.

When the prospect came back with a gallon of rubbing alcohol, I barely opened the door to take it from him before kicking him back out again.

“Just on her extremities.” I showed Chiqui on Mara. “Don’t use it too much.”

She nodded and went to work on Layla while I tended to Mara. I squeezed my eyes shut, hating this plan by the minute. This was the worst excuse for medical care I’d ever provided in my life. Everything I wouldn’t ever have done before as a doctor, I was doing today.

“Emory!” Chiqui called out to me anxiously.

“What’s wrong?”

Instead of replying, she held out the thermometer. My unfocused eyes took a minute to see, but finally, I let a relieved breath out.

Within fifteen minutes, Lupe was complaining about the cold. The sounds of our laughter bounced from wall to wall as Chiqui and I celebrated the small win, making Lupe curse both of us. Still grinning, Chiqui helped her mother out of the wet clothes.

Our victory was short lived, though, as we lost Mara half an hour later. I held her like I held Sanguinero, feeling helpless just like before. Once she stopped convulsing and I couldn't feel her pulse, Chiqui helped me take her away.

“Here.” She handed me her phone once we'd removed our gloves. “Lobo called about a million times.”

“Lupe is going to be ok?” he asked the second I called him back.

“Yes,” I breathed out.

“Blanca,” he whispered.

I cleared my throat. “The skeptic in me wants to say she has something different from the rest of them, but if not, I want to keep her here longer, in case she's still contagious.” I swallowed. “She's doing much better, though. The fever is going down, and she's talking.”

“Complaining?” I could almost hear the smile in his voice.

“Yeah. She is.”

“You did good, Doc.” Goosebumps prickled at my flesh from the praise.

“Now what?” I asked, wondering how the club would deal with all this tragedy.

“No one else is sick. Everyone knows not to leave the compound, but we’re going to need a sound plan.”

I couldn’t even start to think about what this meant for the Diablos. I couldn’t wrap my head around what it meant for the country. Things were about to change, and it wasn’t for the better.

“Go to sleep, Emory,” he said again before disconnecting, this time with a bit less authority in his voice and a bit more tenderness.

Maybe I could rest my eyes for a little. Lupe was doing better, and Layla was sleeping heavily. I curled myself up into a ball in the corner, pulling a blanket over me and resting my head against the cold wall.

Just for a moment.



“Shit!”

I sat upright with the curse, eyes still glued together from sleep as I ran to the bed where Chiqui held Layla in the same way we'd done for Sanguinero and Mara before they passed. It was fast, and just the same as it happened to them, it did for her, too.

Chiqui's expression was grim and cold, all the youth I'd seen in her before now stripped from her features. Death did that to a person. First, it tore you apart and ripped you up at your core, but like a strong whiskey, after enough of it, you'd become numb.

"I think you should go," I told her, a part of me still worried that the next to leave us would be her mother.

"You don't think we are done losing people," she said with a flat voice.

"We need to be ready for anything. You've done everything you can for me right now, but you shouldn't keep exposing yourself."

"I told you: I'm not leaving you. Emory, this is my family." Her hands found mine and she laced our fingers together.

I squeezed tightly, hoping to siphon any of the strength still surging through her, finding more comfort than I had expected to in such a menial gesture.

Whatever you wanted to call them, they probably were. The Diablos never hid their true selves, but one thing was for certain: the Diablos knew what family meant.

Something I was just starting to learn for myself.



It was practically dawn when I finished digging the newest graves. Coyote insisted one hole was enough for all the dead, but it felt wrong. After Sanguinero and the first two perritas died, the rest of those shacking up in the spare house were next to go. We'd given the first three their own places in the ground, and not giving the others the same courtesy was just a sure-fire way to piss off La Flaquita. The prospect helped for a few hours until the rain started, and we were ankle deep in muddy grave water.

This thing fucked us with no warning.

We had no way of knowing if anyone else was going to get sick, or how long we'd have once we got it. I hadn't seen Emory for almost three days, not since Sanguinero died. They locked themselves inside with the infected until the very end.

Lupe was still sick, but her fever was so low that at this point, Emory was only keeping her in the spare house out of fear of it spreading.

We were all afraid.

It was everywhere, all over the country—no rhyme, no reason, just madness. We'd lost five of ours in a matter of days, but, according to the math, we should have been counting ourselves lucky. People were dropping left and right.

Which meant The Sidhe were itching for their guns, nervous as hell about what was going to come from the chaos sure to follow. I wanted to shove the barrel of my gun inside Paul Kelly's mouth and jam it so far down his throat that when I pulled the trigger, the bullet would exit straight out his asshole.

They were going to get a lot more than what they bargained from me.

I felt her presence looming over me as she stood at the top of the empty grave, and I quickly climbed back up. Cautiously, Emory stepped back, raising her hands up to warn me off, a surgical mask still over her face.

“You expect me to stay away when I haven't seen you in days?”

She furrowed her eyes. “I can't be sure you won't get sick.”

“That's a risk I'm willing to take,” I growled out.

“It's not a risk *I'll* take. You didn't have to watch them all die.” Tears welled in her eyes, but they never fully formed or fell.

“It’s my choice, my decision, blanca.”

“César, you don’t even have a VP right now. What would happen if the next grave was yours?” The serious tone she took sobered me up.

There was no snark; it wasn’t a button she was trying to push. Emory was being so damn logical, and I hated it. She was right. I couldn’t take that chance. Los Diablos Locos deserved better.

I wanted to think we had finally bridged the space between us, that we had gotten to a point where the world would finally let us be, but Fate had its own plans, and the sadistic bitch had decided we were due for a bit more misery.

“This was easier when you didn’t give a fuck about me or my club.” She was fully drenched from the rain, the mask reducing itself to translucent wet paper over her face.

She stepped back to put more distance between us. “Who says I do?” She tilted her head like she was daring me to call her out.

“You don’t lie as good as you used to.” I smirked, a foolproof way to get the tension in her shoulders to soften a bit.

“Were you going to tell me about the run you’re planning?” she asked.

“No. That’s club b—”

“Club business. I know,” she cut me off. “And I’m a member.” She pointed to her back. “Or did you already

forget?”

Fuck.

Emory would never be a regular ol’ lady, the kind who wasn’t privy to the ins and outs of the club, because club business was strictly for patched-in members. Emory would always be more than them, more burdened with my decisions, forced to shoulder the brunt of the bad along with me.

I should have felt lucky in that realization.

I’d have a partner who I could lead this club with and not have to lie to. She’d know everything, whether it was good or bad, and her voice would matter here. In the same thought, though, I knew she’d also never have the blissfully unaware life of an ol’ lady, one where she could just enjoy the money, the family, and the good, old fashioned fuckery of everyday life in a compound.

She’d know it all.

“The Sidhe is getting anxious. If we delay the exchange much longer, they’ll think something is wrong,” I told her.

“Something *is* wrong...” She shook her head, a V carved deeply between her eyes.

“The virus, the disorder, the chaos. It just ups the need, Emory. If we don’t deliver, it’ll be a problem. It’s better if we handle it before they go to someone else for these guns. Catch my drift?”

I didn’t want to tell her my plan, that I was afraid if we didn’t make good on our deal with the Irish, they’d find guns

elsewhere, and I'd miss my chance for the retribution she deserved.

I knew that, regardless of her cold exterior, she wouldn't be okay with any of us risking any inch of our skin over her. She was the self-sacrificing type, the kind who thought her existence was just a bargaining chip, that she wasn't deserving of a hero to save her.

I wasn't a hero, and I wasn't saving her, but I'd cut the throats of all the men who'd wronged her.

That was a promise.

“What if something happens?” She shook her head.

I dropped the shovel next to me and stepped toward her again, still keeping some space between us. I reached for her but dropped my arm as soon as my hand touched her cheek.

“Don't start worrying about me now, little viper. I'll assume you're starting to like me.”

“Shoot for the stars, Villalobos,” she said with a soft smile tugging at one side of her lip.

“It's a three-hour drive from here to the drop off location. We won't be back until tomorrow,” I warned her. “Mor, Veneno, and a few others will stay back if you need anything.”

She nodded quietly. I knew she was dying to show me her fangs, spit some of that venom onto me again in the way only she knew how, but she was conflicted, worn down from the heaviness of the last few days.

She didn't realize it, because she'd spent the entire time thinking she wasn't doing much by being in there with the sick, but just her presence was enough to give the club hope. Even if they all knew there wasn't a cure, there wasn't an answer, there wasn't even a fucking name for it yet, they knew she was here, doing her best, trying for them.

That's more than what most people could offer the Devil.

"If you need anything..." I started, unsure of how to even finish the thought.

What kind of promises were you supposed to make to a woman you'd vowed to spend your life with, when she never really wanted you? What was the right thing to say to the person you tortured yourself over, every waking moment of the day?

"I won't. Be safe, okay?" Her eyes narrowed before she turned on her heels, wet as hell from the rain as she ran back into the spare house.

I exhaled loudly, looking over the empty graves and the corpses that waited to be thrown into them. The wind whipped against my face, and the rain beat down hard on the leather of my cut. I rolled my dead brother into the hole, and then did the same for the perrita whose name I couldn't even remember.

I wanted to say she deserved better, that we all did, but the reality was much more difficult to swallow. Maybe we were just bad people who deserved everything coming to us. Maybe Emory was the only innocent one here.

The dirt had turned to mud, and I did my best to cover their bodies, but it had been a half-fucked job from the start. The rain was letting up, and I looked up at the sky, the dark clouds still swirling above, like the Earth herself knew a cleansing was needed.

This shit felt biblical, but God had long died for me.

I could still remember the exact day it happened. It was the day my adoptive father scarred my chest with the symbol of his *cártel*. The only lesson I learned that day was that family meant pain.

So, I made my own.

That family included her now. She may have lied—hell, she was probably still keeping things from me—but she was letting me raise my battle flags for her, and she'd soon see how hard I could fight for what's mine.

I shook the excess water off just as I stepped onto the porch of the farmhouse. Inside, the guys were preparing for the run, everyone's expression serious and grim. You could almost feel the surge of adrenaline pumping through the room.

No one batted an eye when I said Emory's safety was in jeopardy, that The Sidhe were shady fucks up to no good, that Paul Kelly had looked at my wife for far longer than I would allow.

The body shop in the compound was filled with crates of *cártel* weapons waiting for distribution. We wouldn't be loading any of those into the vans.

A shower would have been great. I was frozen down to my bones, but there was only one thing I could focus on for the last three days, the only thing keeping my mind off the family I'd just buried.

Slitting Paul Kelly's throat.

So instead, I dried off and changed my clothes, stomping back down the stairs at rapid speed to find the van being loaded up with empty crates to thwart off suspicion.

I got in the passenger seat as Ladrón took the wheel. Calaveras crammed in the middle while Coyote and Hálcon stuffed themselves into the back of the van. We should have brought more men, but we couldn't leave the compound unprotected, and now we had to minimize the risk of bringing something back after dealing with all this death.

We hadn't even had a proper fucking funeral yet.

I shut the door behind me, buckling my seatbelt and checking my phone to make sure there were no messages missed from Paul. I had a feeling I'd only be dealing with his son tonight. It didn't matter. In fact, I was almost banking on it.

It would be easier that way.

I was seasoned in this life, and he was just a little pup.

I turned up the volume just as Ladrón thumbed through his phone and switched the song to "Down with the Sickness" by *Disturbed*.

I rolled my eyes at him.

“What? It’s fitting.”

The prospect rolled the gate shut and locked it behind him before jumping into the back of the van.

“Who the fuck said he could come?” I asked.

Ladrón shrugged. “Give the kid a chance, Prez. He can’t earn his patch if you don’t let him out of the compound.”

“I’m trying to keep him alive,” I gritted out.

“Well, not much point in that anymore, is there? Might as well just let him *live*,” he said without taking his eyes off the road.

“Too fucking late anyway.” I crossed my arms over my chest, and my treasurer chuckled.

He was doing more than just money work these days. None of us had said it, but with Maluco missing, there was a massive hole left in the dynamic of our club. Without being asked, Ladrón had picked up the slack when it came to handling club business, and for that, I was grateful.

We were gonna need to talk about it sooner or later. With this virus, who even knew if Maluco was out there anymore?

We all woke up one day to him gone; no note, no explanation, all his things still in his room. My Vice President had a lot of issues, none of which were his fault, and I felt for every shit hand the guy kept being dealt throughout his life. This wasn’t the first time he disappeared, but I certainly hadn’t expected it would be the last.

It was a grim thought, to wonder if he was just lying somewhere, dead under a bridge after an episode. Thankfully, fate would force us to focus our energy and emotions on what was right here, in front of us, and we kept being handed pile after pile of misfortune.

So now, I was taking back control.



“**Y**ou sure this is the spot?” Ladrón whispered.

“Yeah, it’s the spot. I’ll bet you anything The Sidhe heir is scared,” I mused from the passenger seat.

We were at a Sidhe-owned dock, parked between two shipping containers, waiting for some sign of them. It walked, talked, and smelled like a setup from every angle, but I had too much confidence in Kelly unloading this on his offspring.

That, and the Diablos hiding in the back ready to take heads off.

“Shouldn’t he be?” He raised an eyebrow, and I smirked.

“He’s too fucking green. I almost feel bad.” I flicked the ash off my cigarette through the crack in the window.

“When’d you grow a conscience?” he snorted.

“It’s a product of getting old.”

“Forty ain’t old,” he said, like he was offended when the fucker was barely thirty himself.

“Forty is dyin’ age in the cártel.” I took another drag, the crackle of the cherry sizzling the only other sound in the pitch-black night.

A light flickered twice in the distance, and less than fifteen seconds later it happened again, then once more.

“Is that supposed to be some sort of fuckin’ signal?” Ladrón laughed, unable to stop himself from criticizing anyone else’s method of doing things.

“Pull up,” I told him, hitting the partition so the guys in the back knew to get ready.

A white van nearly identical to ours came into view as we got closer to the flashing light. The blacked-out windows made it hard to see inside, but from what I could tell, there were no other cars in the vicinity. We parked directly across from them, the front of our vehicles almost touching.

I leapt out the passenger seat, and just as my feet came into contact with the ground, I heard Ladrón’s door slam shut. Then, the Sidhe heir was out of the van, suit all dapper and shit. The thought of his entire ensemble costing more than my wedding pissed me off.

I wore suits just like that once, a lifetime ago.

I was the right hand of the devil.

None of that mattered anymore.

He was dead, and I was el Diablo himself now.

“Took you long enough,” I said, jaw clenched tight as two of his men exited the van.

“They’ve set up roadblocks all throughout the city to keep people indoors. Wasn’t easy to get out here.” He fixed his tie and flipped his palm up, like he was waiting on *me*.

“Money first. What are you, new here?” Ladrón choked out a laugh, and the suited lackeys bit back an amused smile.

Kelly sending his inexperienced son either meant he didn’t respect me, which pissed me the fuck off, or he was hoping someone else would deal with his son to keep the blood off his own hands. These mafia types were obsessed with the idea of an heir—that is, until they got old enough to realize that said heir would soon become a livelihood risk for them.

Nobody in that life passed the torch down amicably.

Crowns were taken with blood.

Maybe Paul Kelly already had some bitch lined up with a swollen belly to guarantee him the heir he’d need while keeping himself in power for at least another two decades. That was the thing about power: once you got a taste of it, you’d do whatever you could to make it last longer.

The kid frowned, turning on his heels and walking towards the back of his van. I gave Ladrón a look that said ‘be ready for anything’ as we approached it. I expected the same trap

we'd laid out for them: instead of money, I'd find four to six men with weapons pointed at my face.

I was a seasoned man, jaded and bitter from what time had done to me, so when he opened the doors of the van and there was nothing but duffle bags of cash, a twinge of guilt returned for what I had planned for him.

"Good. Bring it over," I ordered, walking back to our van as his lackeys picked up a duffle in each hand.

It happened so fast, I almost didn't have time to keep the kid from getting a bullet to the head himself. Ladrón opened the doors, and within seconds, shots blasted from inside, the suited lackeys dropping to the ground, dead. With my Glock pressed to his jugular, I pulled Padraic Kelly into the back of the van.

Hálcon slapped the metal partition and yelled for Calaveras to pull out. The van moved fast, barely giving Ladrón time to close the doors to keep us from falling out as he took a narrow curve out of the shipping dock.

"You did good, Prospect." I nodded at the kid we'd brought into our pack.

He was still standing there, pale-faced with shaky hands around his gun, reminding me he'd just taken his first life. Ladrón clapped his back and pulled the pistol from his grip as he sat the kid down onto one of the wooden crates.

"Respira," he coached him.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Padraic Kelly finally spoke.

“Why did Daddy send you out for business so ill prepared, *eh?*” I asked through clenched teeth, pressing the gun harder against his neck.

“We’re supposed to be allies, Villalobos,” he said with little inflection.

“Yeah? We’ll see about that, *boyo.*” The rest of my men laughed with me.

“You’re making a huge mistake,” the kid growled out.

Ladrón cuffed his wrists behind his back, and I released him, reaching into his suit jacket to find his handgun. Then, my phone rang—Calaveras in the front.

“We have a tail, and it doesn’t look like cops.” He hung up, essentially telling me to deal with it because he was too busy driving.

“Keep an eye on him,” I instructed Ladrón.

The prospect still looked shaken up.

“I need you to get your shit together. Can you do that for me, kid?” I put my hand on his shoulder, and he filled his chest with air, looking up at me before nodding his head. “Good. Get ready to open the door and get the fuck out of the way, okay?”

He moved into position.

“On three, be ready to shoot,” I said to Coyote and Hálcon as we pulled our guns out, one in each hand while we waited for the door to open.

The black town car was right on our ass, close enough that if Calaveras hit the breaks, one of us could jump onto the hood.

I grinned. Maybe if I was twenty years younger.

The bullets flew from my guns, shattering their windshield. Another suit stuck his body out of the passenger side with his gun pointed at me, but before he could hit his target, Hálcon's bullet took him out. A foot kicked through the windshield, knocking it out of the way so the driver could see. A third lackey moved from the backseat, shooting in my direction. My focus was on the driver, and I plugged one right between his eyes, my gun recoiling as their car spun out of control before it hit the highway divider.

The prospect shut the door, and I slapped the metal partition, calling Calaveras again.

"Find somewhere to pull off for the night, somewhere in the middle of nowhere, preferably." I ended the call.

"He's gonna kill all of you," the son of my newest enemy declared.

"He can try, but not before I kill him." I walked up to him, bashing the end of my gun into the side of his head, knocking him out as Hálcon laughed.

"What was that for?" Coyote asked.

"I'm not spending the night listening to this fucking kid. Throw him in the crate," I told them, pulling the lid off.

Hálcon grabbed him beneath the arms and the prospect held his legs as they stuffed the Irish mobster into the crate with the packing peanuts. Within a few minutes, I could feel rumbling beneath the tires of the van, telling us Calaveras had pulled off-road now.

Another few bumpy miles in, and the prospect was still blank-faced and quiet.

“Take this time to decide if this is the life you want, prospect. I’ll back up whatever choice you make.” I placed my hand on his shoulder, and he looked up at me again.

He was just a kid when I found him dumpster diving and sticking up gas stations for petty cash and junk food. No family, no money, nothing but the clothes on his back and a grateful attitude towards whatever we gave him.

He followed me unquestioningly.

He was a Diablo through and through, and if it was the path he wanted, we’d take him with open arms, but it was a decision he’d have to make for himself.

This was a pivotal moment, because if he was in, if he wore that mark on his back, I couldn’t promise him he’d never take another life again.

Occupational hazard and all.

We popped open the other crates, pulling out pillows and blankets to get comfortable for the night inside the cramped van. Calaveras would take the first watch as planned, then Hálcon, followed by Coyote. Ladrón and I would take the final

watch, and the prospect could have a full night's rest. He earned it. There were enough of us that the hour and a half blocks of vigilance gave everyone plenty of time to get some sleep.

The Irish prince woke up earlier than planned, so when it was my turn to take guard, he was already bitchin' and moanin' about needing to take a piss.

"You've got two options, Kelly," I warned him. "You can piss your pants, or you can hold it."

"Let me the fuck out of here Villalobos," he growled.

"Or you'll tell your daddy? I need a better threat, friend," I laughed.

"Yo, shut the fuck up." Coyote sleepily kicked the crate from the corner of the van.

"What do you want with me?" Padraic asked quietly.

"Now you're asking the right questions." I jumped out of the van, dialing for him and wondering if he'd yet been informed by his own men.

"Have you heard yet? I have your son."

Silence.

"I said—"

"Here's what's gonna happen, Villalobos. You're gonna give me Padraic, and then you're gonna bring me that pretty redhead back. I want her wrapped up nice and shiny, with a bow and everything. After that, you'll get on your knees and

beg me for my forgiveness, beg me to not come after you and yours. You have an hour.”

I laughed louder than I intended to. “You don’t get it, do you, Kelly? You have nothing. This virus works to my benefit. I don’t need reinforcements. You, however, are about to end up very alone out here, cabrón. La Pelirroja es mia.”

“You better be prepared. I’m fucking co—” I hung the phone up.

It would be a couple hours until we were back in Grimm’s Reach. I didn’t think that Kelly would risk something as brash as ramming down my fence the same day I stole his son. No, he’d take the time to calculate this.

Good.

He had no idea what was coming for him.



While staring at the empty corridor, I chewed on my bottom lip. I knew it was time to go back to the clubhouse. Against all odds, I had contained this shit. I had held myself in place, breathing through my mask as I calculated all the risks.

Before this, I always had others to rely on, an attending who knew better than me, someone who'd worked in the hospital for longer. There was always someone looking over my shoulder. I always wished to have the final say. Now, my wish came true, and I hated every second.

The corridor was empty. I blocked the voices coming from the room we'd quarantined, trying my best to think rationally. It would be on me if I made the wrong call. I carried that responsibility on my shoulders. My chest felt tight, and I

squeezed my eyes shut when the door behind me opened with a creak.

“What’s going on, doc?” I turned to find Chiqui watching me with narrowed eyes, her head poking out of the room.

I cleaned my throat. “It’s safe for us to move from the spare house.”

Chiqui opened the door completely, tilting her head. “That’s great news.”

I nodded.

She scoffed. “Tell it to your face.”

Before I could quickly correct my expression, she’d announced to the room at large that we were all free to go and mingle with everyone else.

They wanted out, pretty much since we’d broken the fever. The ones who were too sick were now gone, and the ones who’d survived were eager to resume their lives.

Maybe I’d be celebrating with the rest of them if I wasn’t responsible for their well-being. Outside the compound, the world was still on fire. People were dying, and there was no sign of an end. Like hell itself, all over the country, people were burning alive, chaos left in its wake. We were lucky to be so perfectly isolated out here, in the middle of Grimm-fuck-nowhere.

“Thank you, doc.” Cruz patted me on the back on his way out, and I offered a feeble smile.

They dispersed to their own rooms, or back to the clubhouse, murmuring their thankful goodbyes. I stood by the door until Lupe left, Chiqui on her heels.

This was a huge step for us. For a second there, I'd lost all hope of ever controlling this. I thought this was how we were going down, one member at a time, watching them burn up and foam from their mouths in endless seizures.

I had gotten used to preparing for the worst. My hands trembled at my overworked imagination; the idea of holding Chiqui's body while she convulsed had become my newest nightmare. Every day, I would watch the door, waiting for César to arrive so sick, I'd even wish for death to take him out of his misery.

Yet, here we were. *Contained.*

I marched to the clubhouse, feeling odd to be back after so long. I avoided everyone on my way in and went straight to César's bedroom, finding it empty.

It looked exactly like it had when I'd left. Untouched. Unslept. Everyone in the compound, sick or healthy, was battling against the clock. We were all exhausted, holding ourselves together by sheer stubbornness.

I went to the shower for the first time in days, cursing under my breath when the warm spray hit my skin. I washed my hair, closed my eyes, and breathed deeply. I could keep doing this. I could be the one standing between the club and this virus.

Even if we had another wave, I knew what to do now. I saw the virus up close, and we were reluctantly acquainted with one another. I knew this fever was a bitch, but I was a bigger one.

After my shower, I stole César's clothes, just gray sweatpants and a t-shirt. I couldn't imagine putting on anything too tight, and I refused to stay a second longer in scrubs. He was still on his 'run'—whatever that meant—so I assumed whatever was his was mine now too.

Just as I left the bedroom, my stomach growled, letting me know I should head to the kitchen first. I needed a long, uninterrupted sleep, but I couldn't relax before I had a proper meal.

The plan was a ham sandwich and then straight to bed, but when I got there, I knew it wasn't going to be possible.

“What's going on?”

The long table was covered with vegetables. ‘Mor, André, and Chiqui were on prep work while Lupe and two old timers were managing the stove.

“Prez is on his way back. It's Asado Sunday,” Chiqui replied, chopping the onions with impressive speed, no tears to be found.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“We eat as a family on Sundays. It was my dad's thing.” She shrugged, and I remembered César demanding my presence at the last one before the virus hit. It felt like a lifetime ago.

I nodded and moved to the fridge before another brother cut in front of me, a bucket filled with corn in his arms. I halted to a stop, trying to circle around, but before I could, one of the old timers requested something in Spanish, and Chiqui moved quickly to get the request fulfilled.

It was obvious I couldn't squeeze into a spot to make a sandwich. Everywhere I turned, more people were moving, bringing vegetables or finding somewhere on the table to work.

With a resigned sigh, I moved to the table, sitting across from 'Mor as I asked, "What can I do to help?"

"How are you with a vegetable peeler, Doc?" he asked, wagging the thing at me.

"Not as good as I am with a scalpel." I smiled.

That seemed to be enough for him. He nodded and passed me the peeler, along with a big plastic bowl filled with a strange, brown, misshapen carrot.

I took it in my hands and turned around. It felt rough to the touch, making me doubt my peeling capacities by the minute.

"That's mandioca," 'Mor said.

"Yuca," Chiqui corrected.

'Mor pulled out a butternut squash and a sharp knife before saying, "Mandioca."

"Since we're making Sancocho, it's called yuca."

I tried the peeler as they continued to argue, but it didn't even scratch the thick peel. "Whatever it is, this won't work with a peeler."

Chiqui made a face, took the vegetable from me, and placed it on the table before using the peeler beside her with no problem.

"Ugh," I complained, but I took it from her and started again. "Tell me, how important is this two-named vegetable for the San—"

"Sancocho." Unfortunately, that came from Lupe, eyeing me over the stove.

"Sancocho," I replied with the world's worst accent before murmuring, "I should learn Spanish."

"It wouldn't help," Chiqui quipped while cutting her share of vegetables. "The brothers are from all over Latin America. People here speak a mixture of everything; Spanish, Portuguese and French. What ends up coming out isn't even a real language anymore. 'Mor is Brazilian; that's why he's calling it by the wrong name.'" "Mandioca!" 'Mor yelled again as he elbowed André beside him. "Tell her."

"I'm not invested in this root vegetable war, man." André shook his head.

"André is Brazilian too," Chiqui added.

"You'd think being compadres would mean he was supposed to be with me on this," 'Mor argued, but André shrugged, clearly not bothered.

“Actually, we have quite a few Brazilians here,” she laughed.

“And you?” I asked Chiqui.

“A little of a lot.” She looked at me from across the table and then over to her mother. “Mami’s Dominicana. Her Sancocho is legendary.”

Like it was being summoned, my stomach growled. I tried hiding it by forcefully peeling the yuca, but Lupe ordered something else in Spanish. I knew it wasn’t for me, so I kept my head down and kept peeling until Lupe herself slid a plate with a sandwich in front of me.

“Thank you,” I said before she turned around. “This is way nicer than what I would have made.”

Lupe nodded. “The Sancocho will take a while, and you look like you’re about to faint.”

“It’s just the color of my skin,” I said, drawing an honest laugh from the woman who seemed so intimidating the first day I got here.

I could have argued about the fainting part, but instead, I sunk my teeth into the bread and moaned another thank you between mouthfuls.

“Do you tend to have these big meals often?” I asked curiously.

“Every Sunday, or if the occasion calls,” Mor answered.

“And the occasion almost always tends to call,” Chiqui joked.

I wiped the corner of my mouth, waiting for the real explanation, and it came from Chiqui again. “Today, we’re celebrating our dead. Everything happened so quickly, we didn’t have time for any of it.”

“We’re going to get shit-canned in honor of our mortos,” ‘Mor added.

I ate another bite, nodding. “Last time I saw my cousins, it was at my grandad’s funeral. I wasn’t even eighteen, and we all drank for three days.”

That particular slice of my life slipped through my mouth before I could hold it in. I never talked about my life before arriving here, and I never even thought about my family.

My father had seven siblings, so while I had plenty of cousins, I wasn’t exactly close to anyone. We always kept everyone at arms length and by the time I found out why, it was too late. My mother was smart to leave us while she was young, I was only bitter she didn’t take me too.

The men in the family weren’t known for being affectionate, but we all met when someone got married or died. We’d drink and be merry and talk for hours. Maybe that’s why it hurt—I couldn’t think about them without thinking how hurtful it was to have such a big family and end up completely alone.

“So, you know,” Chiqui replied.

I nodded. “Yeah, I get it.”

My eyes were cast down as I peeled, but I still felt my ears heat every time Chiqui sent uncomfortable looks my way. “What?” I tossed the peeler to the side.

“Nothing.” She shook her head.

“Tell me.”

“This is a big thing.” She finally gave in. “For everyone.”

“Yes, Chiqui. I was there when people died.”

“It’s more than that,” Lupe spoke above the chatter. “We lost brothers. We lost part of our family.”

I nodded. They thought that I couldn’t grasp the immensity of it all. Wasn’t I the one who treated them until they died? Who stayed locked in that spare house, trying to think of ways to magically heal everyone?

I breathed in and put my armor down for a second. When was the last time I actually lost someone I loved?

I couldn’t remember.

“The president carries the club on his shoulders, gringa.”

“Mami...” Chiqui warned, but her mother didn’t spare her a look.

“You’re the president’s wife.” She spat the word wife, making me flinch. It was the exact way she had when I was stuck in that cell. “It’s your responsibility to stand behind your president, to be there for this club. To care for everyone,” she continued.

The kitchen fell into silence, peelers and knives stopping all together.

I faced Lupe, my ears warm and hands shaky, but spoke anyway, “I care about this club.”

She arched an eyebrow and stirred her pot. “You’re a great doctor, Emory. You’ve proven that.”

At least she used my name that time. I shook my head. “I know I am, but I wasn’t just doing my job out there. It was more than that.”

Lupe stopped stirring and narrowed her eyes at me. “It has to be. You carry this club’s name on your skin now. You married into this. It’ll take more than peeling a few yucas the wrong way.”

If she had said these same words to me when I first walked through those club doors, I would have thought she was a bitter woman, unnecessarily mean and out to get me for not worshipping at her precious president’s feet.

Not anymore.

I saw her icy exterior for what it truly was. Behind the mask of a woman with a permanent scowl was the soul of this entire club, the woman who carried every burden, every hope, and every moment of joy on her back.

“Is there a wrong way to peel something if it ends up peeled in the end? Maybe I’m just doing things a little different from you.”

She snorted, making it clear she agreed, so I pressed on. “This club is your family, your home. I’m not here to get in your way, and I’m certainly not here to try to take any of it from you.” I said, looking around the room. “From any of you. César and I... we are what we are, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want the best for the people under this roof. If you want me to be anything to this club, you’ll have to let me do it my way.”

“And what’s your way?” she challenged.

I shrugged, going back to my stupidly impossible yuca. “The gringa way, apparently.”

The tension broke as all around me, people chuckled. I held my own smile back, but my shoulders relaxed. I wasn’t the same woman who arrived here with César’s grip around her arm, who’d been tossed inside that cell in his basement.

I thought Diablos Locos was a business, like the Black Crow Brotherhood had been. Easily broken, a bunch of criminals who lived outside the law and promised to share the profits. Of course, I knew nothing about loyalty, as no one had ever cared to show me. To me, the world was a cruel place, where every person was only looking out for themselves, looking for any reason to screw the other over to get ahead.

While I wasn’t ready to believe in humanity, I saw the way these people cared for each other. The last time I stood in front of the whole club, I shoved César to the side and told them all I wasn’t his ol’ lady.

I got why Lupe wasn't sure of me. She might have trusted me as a doctor, but she knew better than to trust me as a sister.

Fair enough. I had time to prove myself.

A shot glass slid toward me, pulling me out of my thoughts as 'Mor raised an eyebrow. "All hail the new queen."

I chuckled and shook my head, looking down as I took the shot between my fingers, the smell of tequila hitting me straight away. I looked at 'Mor and the others over the rim, and my lips curved.

"I know only one word in Irish," I told them. "Sláinte." I drained the glass.

"Sláinte!" they cheered.

In the end, peeling vegetables could be fun if people were drinking and laughing around you. The brothers who remained in the compound didn't stick around, already busy with club shit, but they all had at least thirty minutes to spare helping Lupe. She didn't have to ask; they just came around and started peeling, cutting, and boiling in rounds.

"Let's take a break and get a drink," Chiqui proposed after a couple of hours.

I nodded, wiping my hands on my clothes before sneaking over to the bar.

"Jameson?" she asked, reaching up to grab the bottle from the shelf.

I got two tumblers and set them on the counter, waiting for her to pour. Without a word, she moved right after pouring, and I followed her through the church and then César's office, which we found unlocked for the first time. She handed me the shot and pointed to a framed photograph above the president's chair.

"Is that your dad?" It was a needless question. The man was a giant, taking up most of the space in the photo, and despite there being dozens of other brothers around him, I could see the features she'd taken from him etched into his face.

She nodded, handing me the glass. "That was the summer César prospected."

I focused on the image, and sure enough, there he was. Seeing him like that brought a smile to my face. He was a young thing, still tall but not yet filled out into the body of the man he was today. He was overcast by his own shadows. It was hard to explain, but it was almost as if his time in this club had lightened the load for him, washed him of all the sins that weighed him down from his time as the devil's right hand in the *cártel*. I could still see them haunting him in the photo.

"Who's that?" I gestured my glass towards the man next to her father, his face blacked out with a permanent marker.

"That was Corvo." She shook her head, shifting her gaze downward. "We don't talk about him anymore."

"Oh?" I raised an eyebrow up. "Well, now you *have* to tell me."

She exhaled dramatically, clinking her glass with mine before downing it. I followed, swallowing down the smooth burn of the whiskey.

“He was my dad’s Sergeant, and when he died, Corvo disappeared. It left a lot of us heartbroken, especially Mami. The three of them, they were a *thing*... you know?” She lifted both eyebrows up, insinuating the old bird had lost more than just one piece of her heart to this club. “But I guess he couldn’t handle doing it without my dad and decided it was time to go. He even voted Lobo in as president. The next day, he was gone.”

“He was like a dad to you?” I asked.

She frowned. “He *was* a dad to me.”

I nodded, understanding that I couldn’t expect to know what family looked like when I’d never had it for myself.

“We take care of our people, Emory. ‘Pride and blood’,” she reminded me.

“Pride and blood.” I raised my empty glass.

“Another?” She smirked, and I followed her back out to the bar.

We were clinking our glasses together just as the front door slammed open. I placed it down when Ladrón and Calaveras came through the opening, dragging a suited man with a burlap sack over his head down to the basement. Halcón and Coyote came in next, leaving the door open for César.

My eyes locked onto him the second he arrived. He sucked all the energy out of the room, his aura vibrating darkness, rooting me to the spot.

He found me there, my fingers closed around a whiskey tumbler, but no words left his lips. He just watched me. I couldn't take my eyes off him even if I wanted to, his face murderous, steam practically rolling out of his ears.

I opened my mouth to tell him the obvious news—that we were out of the spare house—but before I could, he moved his eyes from me and told the room at large, “Church.”

I tightened my hold on the glass as he crossed the room, and before I could understand what was going on, he went inside, and with him went every brother. I stood there, watching them go in, the laughter from the kitchen completely gone now.

Calaveras and Ladrón returned, joining their brothers in the room, giving me an expression that almost read something like an apology before he closed it in my face.

Gripping the glass even harder, I knocked back the whiskey without a flinch.

What could have happened if they needed a meeting straight away? Who the hell was in the basement?

My skin prickled, and I was moving before I could stop myself. I circled around the bar, stepping close to the doors. Right when my hand found the knob, *she* stopped me.

Chiqui gripped my arm and pulled me away from the door. “Church is for members only.”

“I’m a member,” I argued.

A crease formed between her brows, and I tried to shake her off. “I have this huge tattoo on my back for what? Didn’t I do everything I had to do to become a member? I’m not here to sit on anyone’s lap, Chiqui.”

She rolled her eyes and squeezed my arm, making a mark. “It doesn’t matter what you think. There are rules for how we do shit. Fuck, Emory, just...” She shook her head. “Wait a fucking second, okay?”

I stepped back in a show of good faith, even when all I wanted was to storm into that meeting. I saw César’s face. I knew him enough to understand shit was going down, and I had a visceral need to know what.

“Here.” Chiqui handed me a glass.

I looked at it with obvious confusion, but she just sat on the ground, the glass to her ear and against the door to listen like a child.

“Sit down,” she whispered. When I didn’t do it straight away, she sighed. “They’ll never talk openly with you in the room. Regardless of what *you* think your position is here, there are decades of misogynistic tradition, not to mention Latino machismo as the cherry on top. This is the best way. Trust me, okay?”

She was right. I reluctantly sat on my knees and placed the glass between my ear and the door.

“How many times have you done this?” I asked, turning my face toward hers while we both listened.

She smirked. “Since I saw someone doing this on TV, before I could even understand what they were talking about.”

I grinned back at her and closed my eyes, trying to concentrate on what they were saying behind that door.

At first, I heard mostly mumbling. When I was almost certain this whole thing wouldn’t work, Ladrón raised his voice, making it much easier to understand.

“We have the kid downstairs. It’s already in motion.”

A few members talked at the same time, but César spoke over them.

“We’re at war with The Sidhe. We have the Irish prince.”

My insides tangled into a knot, and I blinked my eyes open, meeting Chiqui’s stare. It was too overwhelming, so I closed my lids once again, trying to make out the words on the other side of the door.

“They can’t have what’s mine. That’s what they want,” César said.

The Sidhe wanted something that belonged to César, and since he wasn’t very much into sharing his toys, he decided to take Padraic as payment? That was a bad idea. That was a shitty idea, and more than ever, I wanted to storm in and let César know the best thing for everyone was giving Padraic back and not pissing off the Irish.

I lost track of what they were saying, the words losing meaning when all I could hear were chunks of the conversation, until Halcón cleared his throat.

“Can we talk about the elephant in the room? Getting into a war is madness. They want the girl? Give the girl back.”

Voices were raised, but there were too many for me to make any sense. I heard César’s cursing, but I couldn’t understand exactly what was going on. A heavy feeling of dread spilled over me, and I felt a single drop of sweat make its way down my spine.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

“Doc is family,” Calaveras said.

“And we protect our own, Halcón, in case you forgot.” That came from ‘Mor.

My eyes blinked open to find Chiqui still staring straight at me. I jumped up, turning from her, leaving the glass behind. Chiqui was quickly on my heels, careful enough to take both glasses and place them back in the bar.

“Doc...”

I brushed my hair back and shook my head, and she sighed. “If they have someone downstairs, they’ll get Mami to feed him. I can check—”

“Don’t.” I cut her fast. The idea of Chiqui getting wrapped up with The Sidhe made all the hairs in my body stand up.

“You look like you’re ready to do something stupid.”

“I never do anything stupid.”

Besides ever thinking I'd be free of them. Or marrying into a motorcycle club thinking it was enough to keep me safe. Or committing a crime and pledging my life to said motorcycle club.

Or letting the president fuck me.

Worse yet, letting him love me.



I'd learned to pretend to be somebody else a long time ago, so this wasn't a big deal. I put a cropped tee over my head and squeezed on my tight jeans. It was nothing—biker chick clothes— but it was also my way of fitting in, or at least showing them I wanted to.

Being César's wife had turned into so many things I couldn't predict. I thought I could lie to him, ask for help with my fake immigration problems while I stayed under his protection. From the second César collected me from my apartment, I felt better.

Safer.

The truth was that I'd been working a late shift at St. Murphy's when I saw a member of The Sidhe come in. It was unsettling enough to share space with them, regardless of

whether they were having a routine check-up or even a fatal wound as I often hoped. Instead, he was leaving the hospital director's office, and I couldn't shake my worries away.

I went home that night to my small apartment away from everything, knowing I had to leave it. I couldn't sleep for weeks. I'd woken up a million times during the night to double check that my door was still locked, even though I knew damn well it wouldn't keep The Sidhe away.

I was paranoid, but I knew it was for a good reason. I couldn't dismiss that feeling stuck in my chest telling me to *run*. Then, fate kept tossing me back in César's path.

I could have gone back to Ireland. I could have gotten a third, completely different name and maybe gone to Dublin, hoping it was big enough to get lost within. But that meant losing everything I'd worked for here, everything Emory O'Connor had accomplished.

Ireland wasn't my home anymore, and while I was scared to stay, the idea of going back was scarier. Just like the snakes, I'd been cast out from my home, and I wasn't sure I was meant to ever go back. What would I even go back to?

So, I went to the scariest man I knew, hoping he could send my demons away.

He married me without asking any questions. He put his brothers' lives in my hands repeatedly. He trusted me completely, and I had yet to really allow him a place in my life.

I didn't like the idea. I actually felt itchy, tight in my own skin, thinking about letting César Villalobos in. Maybe it was the clothes, but I was pretty sure it was just the thought of having to lower my guard down.

I struggled to be vulnerable. It wasn't something I knew how to be, or even understood what it truly meant. Sure, it could be considered a weakness, but most of all, being vulnerable made me to put my trust in someone other than myself.

That... I wasn't sure I could fully do.

But I could try.

The bonfire was ready when I stepped outside, most of the club standing in small groups, steaming bowls in their hands. My eyes locked onto the big table full of food pushed to the side, and I piled my food into a bowl of my own before anyone could stop me.

“Doc! Over here.”

I turned with a smile when I heard her voice; honestly, I barely function without Chiqui these days. The girl was pure goodness, I knew that, but she was around five perritas, and I wasn't exactly a likable character.

I told myself I was going to try, so I nodded and headed their way. “Beer?” one of the girls asked the second I sat down.

“Yeah, that would be great.”

She reached beside her chair, inside a cooler, and passed me a beer before doing the same for the other girls. One of them rested her back on the chair and tilted her head up in acknowledgement. I smiled awkwardly, taking a huge swig of my beer, knowing full well I needed something stronger than this.

“I see you dressed up, Doc,” she laughed.

I snorted. “You think?”

“You don’t look so out of place now.” Another perrita watched me with narrowed eyes, not giving away anything.

I lifted my shoulder. “It’s a day for celebration, isn’t it?”

Chiqui nodded. “Mara was Naya’s sister.” She gestured over to the girl across from me with narrowed eyes.

I could feel all the blood draining from my body as Naya stared me down, like she dared me to feel pity. I shook my head. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

It took an uncomfortable moment, but eventually, she nodded, taking a sip from the beer and letting her elbows fall over her knees. “She was my baby sister.”

Another perrita stood behind her, rubbing her shoulders. “It’s fucked up out there. I lost my daddy.” I looked alarmed, but she shook her head. “He was out there.” She pointed beyond the gates. “Wouldn’t talk to me since he found out I was involved with the Diablos. He was still my daddy, though.”

My throat swelled up, and I had to put my bowl away, unable to keep eating. Everything was so fucked up. I looked at the gates, knowing they weren't enough to keep the fever from us.

"We're protected," Naya said. "We lost too many, but not everyone."

"God!" Chiqui groaned and stood up, grabbing a bottle and shot glasses from the table beside us. "Come on, we said it was a fucking celebration."

Without another word, we all drank down a shot, so she poured another. When the second round was finished, I nodded to the bottle again. "We drink until no one feels a thing."

Chiqui giggled. "I like the science of that."

"It's not science. I'm Irish."

They laughed, and Chiqui poured another round, chasing it with the rest of my beer. A weight lifted from my shoulders, the need to apologize for not saving Mara getting a little smaller. Suddenly, my skin prickled from the weight of being watched. That's when I looked across the fire to find *his* stare glued to me, hotter than the flames themselves and so impossibly dangerous.

"Chiqui, Lupe wants you in the kitchen. Something about feeding a guest?" I overheard the prospect.

The girls were still talking, but with my focus shifted to the criminal whose gaze was fixed on me, all the sound felt muted.

Someone commented on my natural red hair being gone, but all I could focus on was him.

César was sitting on top of a picnic table, legs spread apart on the bench beneath it, away from everyone. He nodded when someone called for him, accepted a drink when it was offered, but mostly, he stood there, distant from them, overlooking everyone.

Watching me.

His mouth twitched just as I felt one of the girls do something weird with my hair. She played with the strands as she spoke above my head to some other perrita, but I wasn't paying attention.

My cheeks warmed as he moved. I could have told myself it was the whiskey, but I knew better, and while my tongue was sharp enough to lie to anyone else, I knew I couldn't lie to myself anymore. Not when it came to him.

Never averting his gaze, I burned with the feeling of his eyes on me. One step after the other, he moved slowly towards me, ignoring everyone else, like we were the only ones out here. When he found his place directly in front of my chair, his legs parted, his expression a complete mystery to everyone else.

Not me. I could see through it now.

If César decided you were worth caring about, he made sure you knew it.

I'd been throwing his affection away, stubborn, relentlessly intent on proving I didn't need anyone's help, even though I knew I wouldn't have survived a minute without him.

The perritas cleared away, and I craned my neck up to keep eye contact with my husband. He rubbed his mouth, watching me as I slowly stood, even when I wanted to curve and block the sliver of skin peeking out at top of my jeans from his gaze.

Like he was ready to torture me, his eyes fell right there, and he took his sweet time looking back at my face.

“All hail the queen,” he said with a smirk.

I snorted a laugh, and he curled his lips. “Your brothers gossip more than the perritas.”

He hummed in agreement as I moved toward him, a magnet pulling me to his arms, our chests brushing. César tilted his head down so our mouths almost touched.

“You look good, blanca.” His voice was low, and he was so close, I felt the vibration of his voice on my skin.

“Yeah?” I poked.

He moved to my ear, biting at the lobe. “I'm ready to drag you to our room.”

I slapped his chest away. “Who said I'd go willingly?”

He grunted, his eyebrows dipped, like he wasn't sure if I was teasing or if this was the standard for us. He grabbed a chair to the side, the girls already long gone, reading the situation well enough to know when their presence wasn't

needed. I barely knew how to behave around them all. To top it off, I was confused.

César was confusing.

I wasn't sure what we were to each other anymore, and I couldn't handle anyone watching too closely. It felt too fragile, too new.

He dropped onto the chair and pulled me to his lap. I gasped in surprise when he brought me even closer, my back pressed to his chest as I felt his cock harden beneath me.

“So, stay here until you want to go.”

I felt the pressure of his arm around me, holding me too close, afraid I was going to walk away. I breathed out and relaxed into his chest.

“You're too docile,” he complained.

I chuckled. “Do you have a thing for being put down?”

He bit my shoulder. “I know the snake I caged.”

I nodded and turned my head to his. “I don't want to fight anymore, not when we lost so many people.”

He tensed around me. “It's contained now.”

I hummed noncommittally. Today wasn't the day to fill his head with my fears. The music was loud, the food was delicious, drinks were flowing, and the Diablos were honoring their fallen the best way they knew how. There was plenty of time in life to be scared.

Even if I pushed the feeling away, though, he could feel it in me. “We know what’s out there now. You just have to trust me.”

I nodded, watching as the fire grew. “I do.”

With one hand gripping my arm tightly, he spun me around on his lap, my side to his chest while he held on to my legs with one palm and brought my chin up with the other.

“What?” I tried to wiggle my way away from him.

“You said you trusted me.”

I slapped the hand on my chin away, rolling my eyes. “I don’t always like you, but I trust you.”

“You like me sometimes?” He just had to ask, his tone softer than before.

“*That’s* your takeaway from this?” I arched an eyebrow.

“No, but I want to know everything.”

“There’s nothing to know.” I tried to move from his lap again, but he was too fast and kept me in place.

“Emory...”

“I’m not stupid, César,” I sighed, lowering my voice so only he could hear me. “I see what you do for them. You’re probably the most loyal asshole I’ve ever met.” Before it could go straight to his head, I added. “I don’t like you very much, though.”

My attempt was so pathetic, he laughed, the diamond stud on his canine glinting in the light of the fire. I groaned, but he

held me closer, always too afraid of letting me go.

“I’m glad you finally see it, blanca. You took your time.” I tried to elbow him, but he wouldn’t let me move. “Prove you trust me.”

“Like marrying you? Trusting you with my life?” I tilted my head to the side.

“Tell me about your past.”

My mouth went dry, and I stopped moving. He was being serious, a crease growing between his brows while his hands held me in place. I swallowed the lump in my throat, thinking a million reasons why no one should ever know about my past, especially him.

And yet, I whispered only for him to hear, “Do you want to know my real name?” Not a second later, Calaveras, Ladrón, and Veneno zoomed over to interrupt.

“They need you, Prez.”

César’s eyes took a while to leave mine. When the shock of my question wore off, he finally looked up at Calaveras looming over us, his expression like thunder.

“Do they need you downstairs?” I asked, arching an eyebrow.

He groaned under his breath, and I smiled. Calaveras didn’t move, making me think whatever was happening was urgent. César must have noticed the same energy from his quiet enforcer because he nodded stiffly, sending him away.

“Wait in my office,” he ordered, taking a chain from around his neck and placing it around mine.

I looked down and saw a key nestled between my breasts. “Blanca,” he rasped, tilting my head up. “Go.”

He lifted me off of his lap and followed Calaveras, leaving the bonfire behind. I wrapped my arms over my stomach, finding more members were missing as well.

Heading for the kitchen first, I expected to find both Lupe and Chiqui, but neither were there. I couldn’t wait for César at his office like the good girl he wanted me to be. My feet were already in motion, and I tried not to look guilty when I crossed the courtyard and snuck inside, finding my way to the stairs.

With most people outside, the clubhouse was empty. I ran through the rooms, not finding anyone in my way until I arrived at the door at the top of the stairs, the prospect stationed right in front.

He chuckled when I groaned. “Prez said to stay here and wait for you.”

“Let me in.” I had to try.

“Sorry, Doc. He asked you to wait in his office.”

“I hate him,” I said in a huff, turning my back and heading to the stupid office.

“He knows you too well,” the prospect laughed.

Well, I hated that too.

Dragging my feet to his office, I unlocked the door, letting myself in. It looked and smelled like him, much more personal than his room, he probably spent more time here. I tried opening every drawer, but they were all locked. I tried pulling books from shelves, hoping it might reveal a secret passage, but when everything failed, I sat on top of his desk, a bored expression fixed on my face.

Ten minutes later, he arrived, knuckles bloody, wiping them on a handkerchief.

“Classy,” I said pointedly, looking at the blood. “I can clean that properly for you.”

Closing the door behind him, he shook his head. “It’s nothing.”

“Looks gross.” I arched an eyebrow.

Not bothered by my comment, he moved over to where I was sitting. Placing his hands on my thighs, he slowly slid them up, his eyes tracking the movement.

“Tell me your real name.” His voice was a whisper, almost like a plea.

“Tell me whose blood this is,” I whispered.

“Mine.” He looked up, running his tongue over that damn diamond again. “Probably.”

“I heard you declared war with The Sidhe, César,” I pushed further.

“Did you now?” His hands slid even higher, undoing the button of my jeans and sliding down the zipper.

I sighed at his non-answers, trying my best to ignore the way his touch made me feel.

“I want to know what’s happening,” I tried again, lifting my hips while he pulled my jeans down my legs.

“Tell me your real name,” he asked again as he parted my knees, palms reaching between my legs.

“What if I give you that, and you give me something in return?” His fingers found my drenched underwear, my legs falling open almost on instinct.

His eyes met mine. “You first.” He helped me out of my underwear, tossing my boots and jeans to the side.

“This feels unfair...” I trailed off when he gripped the front of my t-shirt and lowered me to the desk, wincing at the discomfort against the healing ink decorating my skin.

“All you need to know is that I’m taking care of things.”

There was something so impossibly hot about his words, as if he somehow knew that never in my life had someone ever offered to take care of anything for me. It was enough to make the rush of liquid heat flood between my legs just as I felt his fingers slowly circle my clit.

“Open up for me, amor.”

My body responded to him fast, my knees falling apart at his command. He dragged his fingers through my slit,

collecting my arousal with a pleased hum before he slipped a finger inside.

I moaned, and he added the second.

“Your name, blanca.”

Looking at him, I tried to trap a whimper by biting down my bottom lip. He worked methodically slow, driving me crazy with need every time he thrusted in and out. His thumb brushed over my clit so casually, like he had all the time in the world. My toes curled, and I cursed his name.

“It’s not my name anymore. You can’t call me it,” I said.

He increased the pace. “Why not?”

“I’m not that girl.” The words stumbling out of me. “She’s dead.”

“I wanna know every single person you’ve ever been,” he insisted.

I wasn’t used to telling the truth, so it felt like a lie coming from my lips. “Emer Fitzroy.”

César lowered himself, kissing me wildly as a reward. His thumb worked my clit faster, and this time, I couldn’t hold back a moan, my head lazily dropping back.

“I love that you named yourself. Every single man here left their past behind to become someone else,” he murmured in my ears. “You are no different.”

My orgasm threatened to peak, tears sliding from the corners of my eyes. I wasn’t someone who cried—not that I

was too tough for it, but because at some point, in that cage, I'd cried all the tears I thought I had inside me. But of course, César Villalobos was dead set on always proving me wrong, so I cried for him. Right as I was about to dive off the edge into oblivion, he removed his fingers, and I whimpered in protest.

He forced me to sit up, my body wound and desperate for release. He pulled his cock out and curled his arms around my back to bring me forward. I looked down, watching him stroke the thick, veiny length in his hand.

“Tell me what you like, blanca, and I'll spend the rest of our lives doing it.”

I brought my hands to his cheeks, watching his wild eyes. “No one's ever asked me what I liked.”

His Adam's apple bobbed, and he rested his forehead on mine. “You've never been with someone who wanted to please you?”

I couldn't even say it; I just shook my head. Before I even finished the move, he was kissing me slowly, bringing me even closer as the kiss turned needy. I helped him out of his cut and then his t-shirt, desperate to feel his warm skin against mine. I reached between us, fingers circling his cock as I gave it a tight squeeze. He hissed between my lips.

“I want to bring you to bed,” he confessed. “Spend the whole night figuring out what makes you come undone.”

“I don't want to wait. Start here,” I demanded, trying to get him inside me as quickly as possible.

He resisted, he needed more from me still.

“We’re messy, César.” I stared into his eyes. “But I happen to like messes. Don’t make me regret letting you in,” I begged, realizing that never had I been as needy as I was to feel him between my thighs. His lips curled, still refusing to take me. I sighed. “You want to know about my life?” He kept quiet, and I took a breath. “My father sold me to The Sidhe to cover the money he stole from them. I was kept as Paul Kelly’s pet for a year.”

“The kid downstairs, Kelly’s son,” he growled through gritted teeth, like he was ready to charge back down there and bloody up the prince some more on my behalf.

“I don’t know him. It was a long time ago. He would have been a child back then,” I said, pressing my hands into his chest.

“The names you gave me?” he asked.

“Mike Fitzroy. That’s my dad. He sold me, Kelly purchased me, and Doherty kept me afraid and in line. He did the dirty work so that Kelly would be able to use me whenever he saw fit. He broke me for him.”

His grip on my thighs tightened, a bruising pressure from his fingers as his rage became visible and tangible, his jaw ticking when I traced it with my finger. “I don’t know what I like or who I am because I only know what I’m not. I’m not theirs.”

I wasn't ashamed of the silent tears I shed in front of him. I had never been so raw in front of someone, so close to anyone in my life. He knew my name, my past, my story. He knew everything I wanted to forget, the monsters who kept me awake at night. The most terrifying part of it all was that I wasn't even afraid of telling him.

There was a fire in my heart telling me César Villalobos would never betray me, and it burned hotter as he brought me closer, my legs hooking around his waist as he pushed in all at once.

"You're mine, blanca," he finally said. "I protect what's mine."

I laced my arms around his neck, and he thrust to the hilt, filling me with promises.

Time.

All those years, all I wanted was time. Time way from The Sidhe, to become someone else. A doctor. A full person who wasn't only the result of someone else's sins. Now, he was asking me for time, too. To let him fix things, to take care of me, to learn what I liked.

He moved in and out, pushing at a slow but steady pace, his eyes wild and full of intention every time his hips met mine. I carved my hands around his shoulders, letting his name fall from my lips.

What I liked was this, us, the mess, the ridiculous arguments. I liked how I could feel his loyalty in my bones,

how he was the only one who ever tried to win me over. Regardless of what a raging bitch I couldn't keep myself from being, he never stopped trying.

It didn't matter to him.

No one had ever fought so hard for me, for my secrets, for my love. Never in my life had anyone wanted to know me like he did. César was famished, wanting to eat away at everything that threatened to ruin me so he could put me back together.

He was greedy and he wanted all of me, not just who I was pretending to be in this moment.

He hissed in my ear, his neck straining, a vein throbbing as I bit his shoulder.

“César,” I moaned, feeling closer to oblivion with each thrust, gasping as they got harder, quicker.

He held my back and angled our bodies, positioning himself even deeper inside me, hitting that magic spot that forced my ankles to press into his back, pulling him toward me.

“Blanca,” he pleaded, the raw quality of his voice sending me over the edge.

I came with a cry, and he smirked, like he'd won a prize. I expected him to hammer into me, equally desperate for his release, but instead, he pulled away, leaving me empty as my arousal dripped out of me.

“I want to savor this,” he said, using his fingers to push my wetness back inside of me with his fingers, taking the opportunity to rake along my g-spot.

I gripped his bicep with a squeeze, eyes rolling back for just a moment before I found his magnetizing brown eyes swallowing me whole.

They were so beautiful. The way the skin wrinkled slightly around the corners told me far too much about the lives he'd lived before me. How was this the first time I had noticed? César was a man who had seen too much, and the same hands that killed with intention were now lighting a wildfire inside of me.

And I couldn't seem to care.



It took everything in me not to paw at her perfect skin like some sort of rabid animal. Our hands explored each other's bodies frantically, like it was the first time we'd gotten a chance to really appreciate the other's touch. Her fingers traced the muscles of my abdomen, and her wet cunt pressed onto me as I carried her up the stairs through the empty clubhouse.

Well, aside from the Sidhe prince in the basement, but that was officially a problem for tomorrow.

I'd tear down the Irish mob before they had a chance to spread their wings and grow over Cove City.

My mouth never left hers, consuming her like I had every intention of pulling her soul out and swallowing it down

myself. Emory was water turned to wine, and she kissed like a sinner desperate for a miracle.

I wanted—no, I needed to savor every second of this.

I ached to carve a place in my memories where I'd always remember how she smelled tonight: sweet like honey, laced in whiskey and bonfire smoke. Where I'd never forget how her skin felt under my coarse fingers, soft, and responsive to my every touch.

My left hand skated up her ribs, softly grazing past the hardened bud of her nipple, and a whimper traveled from her chest, straight down my throat. Our tongues clashed, a warm, velvety dance where for once, fighting her didn't feel so bad.

I cut the corner as we reached the top of the stairs, pushing her against the wall, teasing her as I ground the hardest erection I'd ever had in my life against her center. She moaned, reaching down to thread her fingers around my waist band.

The softest touch was all it took. My hand slapped the door behind her, the latch giving in and pushing open from the force. It wasn't my room; a brother was plowing into a perrita with little regard to our intrusion.

Emory let out a quiet laugh, and I pulled the knob, shutting the door and walking further down the hallway to my own bedroom, still holding her by the ass with her ankles locked together behind my back.

I pushed the door open, her hands fully wrapped around my neck as she locked her lips on mine again. The taste of the Jameson on her tongue still lingered, bringing a warmth to my mouth that traveled down my throat and surged down to my cock.

“I’m gonna fuck you the way I should have done on our wedding night,” I rumbled into her ear, dropping her onto the bed with a light bounce.

She bit her bottom lip, nodding up at me through hooded eyes.

“You don’t get it, blanca. I’m gonna spend all night between your legs, so that anytime you think about that soreness in your cunt, you’ll be drenching your panties with the memory of me filling you up.”

“Shit,” she exhaled, pulling me down to the bed.

“You get it yet?” I chuckled.

“I know that you’ve never made a promise you haven’t kept.” She pulled my cock from my pants, hungry and determined to have me.

This woman had all of me. She didn’t realize it, spent so long denying it, but I think she was finally seeing it for the first time.

I was hers.

Utterly and completely.

I pulled her shirt over her head, exposing her breasts fighting against the fabric of the bra that held them back. She reached back with one hand, undoing the clasp and freeing them.

She'd barely rolled straps off her arms, and I was taking a nipple into my mouth, grazing my teeth along the hardened bud and sucking wildly. She moaned, grasping at the sheets below her and bucking her hips upward needily.

She was so fucking responsive, as if she'd been so wound up and never allowed to fall off the edge.

There'd never been a man who had made her come before me. That was a dangerous place to be, from where I stood. It meant I had a power over her, power to give her exactly what she needed, and she knew it.

I had no intention of abusing it. I'd lower myself to my knees every day in reverence for my queen. I'd worship at her altar, offering nothing but my soul in exchange for a piece of her pleasure, if only she'd allow me to grant it to her.

I slowly trailed a path of kisses down her stomach, watching the way her eyes sparkled with lust as I breathed over her cunt, drenched with arousal and her previous orgasm.

She shuddered at the feel of my hot breath against her most sensitive parts, and just as I lowered my face, my tongue lapping a long, flat line up her center, her back arched up.

"I'm too sensitive!" she protested, pushing her hands against my face.

I chuckled a dark sound. “That means it’ll be even easier to get you to come undone for me again,” I said, running my tongue over the diamond on my canine.

“Again?” she asked, her eyes widening like she didn’t know it was possible.

That was a goddamn fucking crime.

A woman like Emory deserved to lose her voice from screaming with pleasure, and I was dead set on finding out what that sounded like. I moved up to kiss her, undulating my hips, grinding against her again, her desperate gasp filling the room.

“César,” she begged.

I laughed, forcing a line to appear between her eyebrows. “Do you remember, blanca? What I told you the first time we met? What I reminded you on our wedding night?”

She pursed her lips, narrowing her eyes as her hands traveled down my stomach. She shook her head.

“Say it,” I forced out through clenched teeth.

“Please,” she breathed out. “Papi.” The minute she uttered the words, her cheeks turned a bright red color, her hands covering her face in embarrassment.

Correction—*now* my dick had never been harder.

“You’ll be the death of me,” I groaned.

It took everything in me not to blow my load inside of her downstairs—the way her pussy clenched around my cock with

her climax nearly had me losing all grip on reality, but I was intent on making this last for her. Making her realize that my bed and my life was exactly where she needed to be.

Where I needed her to be.

She tasted so sweet as I moved back between her thighs, so warm as she melted to my touch, relaxing her body and arching her back even further. I rolled her clit in my mouth, sucking with sloppy noises, her attempt at silencing her cries failing as the room echoed with the sounds of her pleasure exploding.

I didn't bother wiping my lips, rising back up as I pushed my pants down my hips. I leaned over her, finding that glazed look taking over her eyes as she flicked her tongue over her bottom lip at the sight of my cock. Lowering down, I pressed my mouth to hers, forcing my tongue through her lips and letting her taste herself on me.

She moaned, her hands traveling over every inch of my body, looking for something to hang on to, until her hand curled around the base of my cock.

She squeezed.

“*Fuck,*” I gasped, unable to hold back any longer as I aligned the tip of my cock to her entrance. “Do you feel how wet you are for me, Emory?”

She blinked slowly, looking up through her eyelashes.

“Tell me you need this as badly as I do, blanca.”

She broke out of the lust-filled fog, hardening her stare and burrowing straight into my soul with it. She took a moment, breathing so deeply, her chest rose high before coming down.

“I do,” she said in a husky voice. “I need you.”

It was a bigger admission than I cared to acknowledge at this moment.

I pushed into her, slower than I’d ever done before in my life, and where I found the restraint to do so, I couldn’t say. She let out a cry tortured with pleasure, ringing out until I’d buried myself to the hilt inside of her.

“Oh fuck,” she breathed out, looking down where both our bodies met.

I brought one hand behind her neck, lifting her up just slightly off the bed once I remembered her healing tattoo.

“Is this okay?” I asked, and she nodded her head, licking her lips once more.

I pulled out an inch or so before pushing even deeper inside her.

“God, yes,” she cried, not seeming to understand that I was asking about her back.

She wound her arms around my neck, locking her wrists together as we moved in sync, a choreography of pleasure and intimacy as we learned and memorized every part of each other’s bodies.

In and out, every thrust, her heels dug further into my back, and her screams became louder until she clenched around me, her walls pulling me in as her orgasm broke through and left her limp in my hold. I dropped any reservations and chased my release, the aftershocks of her undoing triggering my own.

“This pussy is mine. You hear me, Doc?” I growled as my cock pumped her full of my cum, and her eyes stared back at me with wide bewilderment.

She nodded silently, her mouth gaped open just slightly, a sheen of sweat glistening over both our bodies. We remained bound together, her legs still wrapped around my waist, even as I felt my cum starting to drip down to my balls.

I lifted her off the bed, a squeal slipping from her lips as I moved us to the bathroom and kicked on the shower. I kissed her again, this time slowly, less needy, more of an ache to tear open my chest and show her how I really felt inside.

Life made me hard. I didn't know the words anymore, the words I could use to describe what she did to me, how she made me feel, how she made me want to be a better man.

For her, I would.

I told her she was mine. I told her I owned her.

What I had meant from day one was that she owned me, that I was hers to love or to ruin, to have or to discard. I swallowed another quiet moan from her lips, my cock barely getting a chance to go soft inside her, the taste of her sparking it alive again as I grew fully hard once more.

Steam filled the room, and I walked us inside the shower, turning the spray into a gentle mist that filled the space with warmth. I blocked the spray with my back, and she sighed, melting into my hold even more.

I lifted her hips up, pulling out halfway before thrusting her down onto my cock again.

Her hands squeezed my shoulders, her nails digging into my skin with a painful pressure as she ground her hips against me. She wanted more friction; I could help with that.

I smirked.

“You’ve wanted my cock all along.” I reached down, pinching her sensitive, swollen rosebud between my fingers and eliciting another gasp from her. “Say it.”

“What would be the fun in admitting that?” She raised one eyebrow, letting me know I hadn’t fucked her stupid yet.

It was a shame.

“You’re a fucking brat, you know that?” I growled into her ear, pulling out of her and flipping her around.

She whined at the loss, but gasped once I filled her from behind, my hand on her shoulder, bending her forward while her hands braced on the tile wall. One hand gripping her hip tightly, and I pulled back once again and slowly moved inside her.

Her moan was guttural, feral almost, pure animal instinct as her brain ignored everything around her that didn’t bring her pleasure. I pulled all the way out, thrusting two fingers inside

of her and coating them in her arousal before I stretched her back open with my cock.

Those same fingers found their way to her ass, teasing at the entrance of the tight barrier playfully. She turned her head back to look at me, the look in her face unsure, and her body tensed.

“Do you trust me, blanca?”

With a stuttered exhale, she nodded again. “Yes.”

One finger went in with ease, and she bit her lip, moaning at the feel of being stretched everywhere, my cock in her cunt, my finger in her ass. The second finger struggled at the barrier, so I settled for the one, moving in and out of her in a slow rhythm as her body went slack from the pleasure.

I moved my free hand below her, wrapping my arm under her chest and holding her up as I thrust into her, the final orgasm crashing like a riptide that threatened to swallow us both. My vision went white, dots of colors dancing over my eyes as I emptied inside of her again, one final time.

We stayed this way for a few more moments before I pulled out, holding her up as I cleaned every inch of her body, taking care to make sure her tattoo was in good shape before getting out. I dried her with the towel first before letting her go, and she swayed and stumbled.

“I can’t feel my legs,” she laughed.

I lifted her over my shoulder, forcing another squeal from her lips as I brought her to the bed, dropping her onto her

stomach.

She turned her cheek to the mattress, watching me as I reached into my drawer to pull the salve out and rub it over my fingers. She closed her eyes, a relaxed expression on her face as I rubbed the balm on her tattoo.

She sighed, no tension left in her muscles, and by the time I'd finished, I could hear the soft snores coming from her lips. I turned the lights off before curling in beside her. For the first time in my life, I went to sleep a happy man.



I traced his jaw with a trembling finger, the warmth of his chest on mine making my eyes droop, but every time I tried going back to sleep, my heart bled and woke me up all over again.

He had Padraic downstairs, risking a war with The Sidhe. All I've ever wanted was Paul Kelly's head, and now that César offered it on a platter, I realized I couldn't accept it.

Not from him.

Life wasn't fair, was it? I never had anything to love, and while I swore this was how I liked it, I carried around this giant hole in the middle of my chest, a vacuum that yearned to love and to be loved. I was still that stupid little girl who lost her mother, who couldn't trust her own father who lost her innocence to monsters.

All I wanted was to find peace, and peace found me in his arms.

César squeezed me to his chest, a satisfied sigh escaping his lips, and I cried like I promised I never would. They were selfish tears from the girl inside me, who only ever wanted to be loved, and had to learn that love meant nothing without sacrifice.

I'd died a thousand times before. At least, a part of me did. When I was sold, when I was kept. Fear tasted different when you'd gone through the worst. It tugged at the heart in unexpected ways, and it yanked on mine while César slept.

It was really a stupid thing.

I lied through my teeth to get his protection. When I came up with the visa issue, I knew I was spinning a sticky web that would likely ensnare me. I was relentless in my pursuit to keep myself alive.

That had always been the goal, but now... My legs were tangled with his, his heart beating in my ear, my hand feeling the warmth on his skin.

I knew exactly when the lies started, but I had no idea when they stopped. How many times had I told him I would never want him? Now, I wasn't sure if I wanted anything else *but* him. He slept peacefully while my mind ran a mile a minute, until I finally couldn't stay still any longer.

With his t-shirt over my head, my toes reached the cold floor. I put on jeans and a pair of shoes before I looked back at

him, cursing his name three times.

For being the one who saved me.

For being the one I had to save.

For sleeping too deeply and not stopping me.

I carefully closed the bedroom door and threaded through the dark corridors. I could hear music coming from downstairs, the faint echoes of the party dying out, reminding me that I was doing this for them.

For all of them.

Even when I knocked at *his* door, I repeated under my breath that this was the only right way to do things.

Halcón opened it with a scowl on his face, and it got worse when his sleep-ridden eyes found me standing there. Before that permanent foul attitude of his made me regret my choices, I raised my hand, stopping whatever venom he was ready to spill. “I heard you want to get rid of me.”

He raised an eyebrow.

That got the door completely open, but he still wasn't talking, so I pressed on. “Then we need to go now.”

Halcón crossed his arms over his chest but didn't move. I sighed, not bothering to hide my desperate need to rush. “Just drive me somewhere, and there won't be a war. Let's go. We don't have time.”

With all the confidence I had left, I turned on my heels and left him to follow. I prayed he would, refusing to look back

until I heard the door click as he stomped behind me. The smile curving my lips was small, but this was a big victory.

I'd counted on Halcón wanting to get rid of me for this to work. He was the only one who spoke the truth during that church meeting.

He was right: get rid of me, get rid of the war.

We moved to the garage in silence, most of those who had been partying passed out around the clubhouse. I already knew what car they used when they couldn't ride, so I found the key resting on the right front wheel and tossed it at him, who caught it mid-air.

"You didn't pack."

It wasn't so much a question as it was a statement. I didn't have an answer, or anything to add to it. I looked at the window and away from him, my heart shattering into a million pieces as he drove us away from the compound.

I didn't need anything on me. Not my clothes, nothing that could alarm Cesar once he was awake. I needed to be as far as I could from this place, I needed to grow the fuck up and stop dumping my problems at any willing person's gates.

"Where are we going?" Halcón asked when we were far enough from the compound.

I couldn't remember the address, but I still remembered every turn we needed to take.

The car ride was filled with silence and nearly tangible dread.

I was doing the right thing.

Life gave no guarantees, but the second César told me I was his, I knew what I had to do. I had to fight my own battles.

This was the war, the one I'd been waging since I'd been a young girl. The Sidhe was the big bad wolf waiting for me at every corner, and I'd dragged the Diablos unknowingly to my battlefield. Now was the time for me to grow up and leave them out of it.

I was almost seventeen years old when I found the door to my father's study unlocked. I was a good kid, with my head stuck in whatever book I could find, and because of that, there had not been a need for many rules in his house.

Except one.

Do not enter the study.

But I had always been too curious, and in my never-ending boredom and quest for knowledge, I broke in one day while he'd been away for a work trip. I'd been expecting a Narnia of sorts, something forbidden with an element of mysticism or magic that should have been the reason to keep me away.

Instead, I was greeted by a boring office with shelves upon shelves of dusty old ledgers and files. So, I did what any normal teenager with a knack for disobedience and an insatiable boredom would do. I read everything. It didn't take long to get to the good stuff, to figure out why it was all off-limits and why my father had been so wary of keeping it from my eyes.

Hour after hour, stopping only to eat and pee, I flipped through countless ledgers, familiarizing myself with all The Sidhe's crimes and my father's transgressions.

To simplify it, he was in charge of managing the finances of Ireland's number one criminal organization.

To amplify it, he was robbing them blind.

Time escaped me, and it wasn't my father who caught me in the act, breaking his one rule and learning far too much for my own good. It was Paul Kelly himself, his goons holding a bloodied version of my father, his bruised-up face letting me know that it had taken Paul just as little time to figure out the truth as me.

"What'd'ya find there, Emer?" I could still hear his voice in my head now. I was just a girl, young and unhardened by life.

Paul Kelly was large and frightening then—not in the sense of his body, but the grandiosity of who he was. I had been present many times when he visited us for business, or requested my father over for meetings and parties, forcing him to drag me along.

Life wasn't easy for a widowed man with a young daughter.

Even before I knew Paul Kelly was the face of The Sidhe, I understood that he held power. In that moment, as I stood in my father's study, a seventeen-year-old girl holding the physical proof of decades worth of crimes and thefts, I

understood that I was unequivocally, undeniably, and unquestionably...

Fucked.

“Just some papers...” I’d whispered.

He chuckled, and with a wave of his hand, his goons had a gun to my father’s head.

“Dad!”

“Now Emer, your pa’s told me all about your grades. You’re quite a smart girl, aren’t you? You’ll have the pick of universities.” His hand found the back of my neck and he squeezed firmly. “Too smart, maybe.” His voice twisted into a sinister sound as he gripped the hair at the base of my head tightly, using his hold to force me to my knees.

I yelled from the pain, and then once more from my father’s angry protests being silenced by heavy fists into his face.

“What’s he taken from me, Emer? What’s your father owe me?” He leaned down to my level, yanking my head back and forth, as if it would get me to spit the answers he wanted out.

He was my father.

He was all I had.

Everything he’d taken from The Sidhe, I still remembered to this day.

I could have told them.

“Fuck you!” I said instead, earning myself the burning sting that came from the back of Paul Kelly’s hand striking my

face.

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll kill him,” he promised me with a growl.

His words had been enough to stir my father back to coherence.

“Kelly, wait. No. I’ll pay you back. I’ll give you everything. Just give me time. You can have anything you want: the car, the house. Emer. You can have Emer!” My father blubbered out desperately, those four words bringing the world as I knew it down to nothing right in front of me.

I blinked up slowly. Everything had felt muted, maybe I wasn’t witnessing it in real time, just reliving an old memory as I often did when I wondered where it all went wrong.

“What?” I whispered.

“I know.” Paul Kelly’s cold laugh still echoed in my ear, but it was the sound of the gun that imprinted onto my memory deeper than anything else.

The warm splatter of my father’s blood against my skin from the bullet that split his brain, the way Kelly stepped over his dead body before gesturing for his men to bring me with them, marked forever into my conscience.

That was the last day I belonged to myself.

That was the last day my body belonged to me.

I shuddered at the memory, the way I’d been kept like an animal and used like a toy for a sick man’s enjoyment.

A cure for his boredom.

I looked over to see Halcón still focused on the road, not a bit bothered by the long stretch of silence I'd granted us while trapped in my own ruminations.

It was obvious I'd never get rid of Paul Kelly by running away, but for a long time, running away, no matter the cost, had been good enough.

Against all odds, I'd managed to survive thirty years when I was sure I wouldn't make it to twenty. I was a dead woman walking from the second he saw me as payment for my father's debt.

The warehouse's silhouette against the rising sun prickled my arms with goosebumps. I wasn't even sure if it was theirs anymore, a complete shot in the dark that I was desperately betting on.

I left this warehouse a broken girl, and now, I was willingly returning to it, not quite a healed woman, but one who understood her damage.

I owned it, too.

Halcón pushed forward against the unkept road, the car shaking from the loose gravel. I had trouble keeping my body still, the movement shoving me forward. He stopped so abruptly, I had to brace the dashboard so I wouldn't fly through the windshield.

The curse was on the tip of my tongue, but when I raised my eyes to the end of the road, I caught sight of heavily-armed

members of The Sidhe waiting for us.

“I guess this is the end of the line. I’m not dying for you, Doc.”

“You can’t ever tell him where you left me.”

“I know,” he spat, his jaw ticking.

“I’m serious. He can’t never know. He needs to think I —”

“Left him.”

It wasn’t my favorite part of the plan, but it could only work this way. César would tear the earth apart to get me back if he knew what I was doing.

I swung the door open, leaving Halcón behind.

The world was already ending; my time was done. I walked with assured steps, the two men waiting at the end of the road, their guns pointing at me. I closed my hands in a fist, tilted my chin up, and faced The Sidhe.

If this was the end, I was ready to make it mine. If he insisted on having me, he’d better make it a bloody one. I was done hiding, done with this torturous game.

One of the lackeys kept his eyes trained on me right along with his gun. Eyes never leaving me, he reached to a walkie-talkie at the front of his belt before saying the words that made my stomach twist: “The Fitzroy girl is here.”

I squeezed my eyes shut for only a second, breathed in, and when I opened them, I was Emer all over again.

The cold metal of the gun's muzzle bit the back of my neck when the lackey finally reached for me. There was something powerful about knowing your death could be minutes away.

His hand closed around my arm, and he tugged me toward the warehouse door. It looked exactly the way it had when I left. The dirt beneath my feet was once soaked in my own blood. I remember the way I had winced coming out of those doors for the first time in a year, the way the sun burned my eyes and kissed my skin.

Time rewound, and I was shoved back again, losing my footing and falling, catching myself with my hands on the rough gravel. While the gun wasn't directly on me, I could still feel I was its target. They kept repeating my old name to each other, like no time had passed, as if the life I'd had in the time between had truly made no difference.

It didn't take long.

Maybe he'd been waiting for me all this time.

Maybe he knew it was just a matter of time before I'd be back here again after seeing me at the compound.

The slow tapping of his steps echoed one by one as he approached me, and I stuck my chin up and faced Paul Kelly without any fear left in my bones. I was at peace with my choice, even if it would hurt to die in his hands after all these years. Even if it wouldn't be a death of my physical body.

It was my choice to die.

That was enough.

It had to be.

His Italian leather shoes stopped right in front of me, and he crouched until we were eye level. He still had the same horrible, piercing eyes, cold and calculating. They shone as he took me in, a smirk decorating his thin lips.

“The prodigal daughter always returns,” he chuckled, as if he’d been cleverly waiting to use that line. I spat on his shoes. “I’ll take great pleasure seeing the fight leave your eyes.”

I thought it was already gone, but I didn’t correct him. His goons reached for me again, one at each arm, raising me from the floor and dragging me away from Paul.

The warehouse was just like in my nightmares, long and ill lit. Infinite rows of tall shelves with undescriptive boxes lined each section, blocking the light coming through the windows at the top.

This place was a maze. It was designed to be only navigated by those who knew the way. I was never sure what they kept in the boxes, but something told me there was nothing good inside them.

They dragged me deeper into the building, and I saw again with my own eyes what product The Sidhe was most famous for circulating. Their biggest export. The very thing I stumbled upon in my father’s ledgers. What cost me my freedom.

In the heart of their well-designed maze, I saw the first cage. It was small, probably perfect for a dog. I would have been surprised if the girl inside was even eighteen. She looked

frightened, beat down and dirty, but she stayed silent as we passed in front of her.

The same happened again: another girl, another silence. Even when they were kept together, they never dared speak a word. I knew they wouldn't. I'd been there, too.

They hated when you talked, when you tried to communicate.

It was funny that The Sidhe still knew my old name, because I remembered well when they beat any individuality out of me. I was supposed to be no one. I was a thing that belonged to them, to Paul. I was nothing but my father's mistakes. I wasn't meant to have any ambitions or purpose. I was only meant to be possessed.

A thing to be commanded without personal thought or critical thinking.

But in the end, what they turned me into made it so much easier to stand as somebody else when I was finally given the chance.

When I was rescued.

When the Black Crow Brotherhood asked me my name, I didn't need to think twice. I wasn't Emer anymore, and I owed that to Paul Kelly.

"Hey!" a voice called out from the darkness.

The men holding me stopped in their tracks, and my stomach dropped when I saw him coming my way. Eion

Doherty's sleazy smile hadn't changed, even if the years had aged him terribly.

"I'll take her."

The men looked at each other over my head, but Eion didn't budge. He kept his smile in place, practically salivating as he waited for the opportunity to welcome me back himself.

The lump in my throat refused to go down, my legs almost giving in when I felt the grip on my arm loosen. Soon, I was being passed over to Eion, and I knew right there that this was the end.

Nothing changed much since the last time his hands had been on me, but now, his left hand only had three fingers. Eion was never allowed to touch me before; he wasn't that important, and the lack of fingers told me I could bet he wasn't right now.

If he grew too ambitious, Kelly would have killed him.

The missing phalanges only spoke of repeated failures and an inability to grow from them. Eion never had much freedom, and he was never allowed to enjoy anything that belonged to Kelly, me especially.

It didn't mean he didn't do his best to try to break me, piece by piece. Eion Doherty liked to play with his food, even when he wasn't allowed at the table.

His sweaty palms closed around my arm, his nauseating cologne the same as before, sharp and overpowering. Once the

other goons were out of view, he chuckled in my ear as he walked us further into the warehouse.

“I’ve missed you, little birdy,” he started. “I heard you came back, and I just had to see for myself. We had such good times before you left.”

The day I was rescued was the best moment of my life. Time moves slowly in a cage, and for an agonizingly long year, I had given up believing I had any future beyond that cage. Then, one day, it happened. The only thing I regretted was the fact that Eion was left breathing after The Black Crow Brotherhood saved me and the other girls.

“Who would willingly leave this five-star hotel?” I scoffed.

He laughed and kicked a cage as we passed by, making the girl inside whimper. “That’s why people can’t get enough of you. It’s that mouth.”

Bile rose in my throat as he tainted the very same words César had so often granted me.

I shook myself off, refusing to let Eion destroy the one thing I held dear. I thought I came here without hope, thinking if I let it go, it wouldn’t hurt that much. Surrendering to pain was always easier, but it wouldn’t be painless if everything reminded me of what I left behind.

We finally arrived at our destination: a small cage, waiting just for me in the maze of other cages.

I tried to resist, a scream breaking free from my throat as he stuffed me into the small space. I said it was my choice, that I

was ready to face whatever they had in store for me, as long as they left the Diablos alone, but now, right back where I was before, I couldn't stop the fear.

Eion laughed when he locked me up, shaking the cage with me inside to evoke more fear. I tried to keep myself in place, but the whole thing fell to the side. He rubbed his mouth, watching me as he crouched down.

“I bet we can sneak around. I won't be a good boy this time.”

I tried to scramble as far as I could from him, hitting the back of the cage, but it wasn't large enough to make any difference.

Eion took his gun, aiming it at my head. “Your hand.”

I didn't follow his command quickly enough. While I wasn't happy to see a gun pointed at my face, I doubted he was allowed to take my life before Kelly had a chance to play.

He chuckled and aimed the gun at my leg. “Last week, I took a girl's toes. She didn't need those.” He aimed next to my foot. “All you need is a cunt.”

I quickly pushed my hand between the bars, offering it to him, and he smiled, like he had just won the lottery. Without moving his gun, he lowered his mouth to my fingers, taking two in his mouth. I grimaced, but I didn't dare to move as he chuckled, savoring the moment.

I felt his tongue swirling around my fingers. I tried to fight the urge to puke, but once he used the same hand that held the

gun to coax his erection, I felt the bile making its way up my throat again

“Always so sweet. There’s something magical about a northern girl.”

I wasn’t sure where he was from; his accent, like mine, had softened over the years, but I heard enough Dublin in there to take a guess. Whatever dreams about northern girls he had, I dreaded being the one to fulfill them.

With a satisfied hum, he stood, tilting his head, happy to see me back where he liked me the most.

He turned the lights off and left.



At first, I woke up like any other morning: hungover, dehydrated, and looking over at the empty pillow next to me. Then, it dawned on me: it wasn't supposed to be empty.

My gut did a sick turn.

I rolled out of bed, slipping on a pair of sweats I'd found on the floor before sluggishly dragging myself to the bathroom for a piss. I had half-assedly expected to find her there, and when she wasn't, I started to question if she'd been there at all last night.

It had been far too good to have been true.

I thought Emory O'Connor was fun when she was riled up, but there was no comparison to what she was like when she was soft and willing, as if her entire existence had depended on being touched by my hands.

My dick hardened at the thought, and I swatted at it, heading out of my bedroom and taking a turn for the stairs down to the main area. It was still a wreck: beer cans and empty bottles of booze spread across the floor, perritas half-naked and asleep on top of the pool table.

‘Mor was passed out with his hand in his pants on the couch. I could hear Lupe in the kitchen, grumbling about the mess and bitching about how it was gonna be up to her to clean ‘now that everyone was fuckin’ dead.’

Her words.

I looked at the clock on the wall; it wasn’t even six in the morning yet.

Why the fuck was I awake?

I could have sworn it was nearly four when I brought Emory into bed with—

She *did* come to bed with me.

Chiqui slid through the basement door like she was trying to be covert about the fact that she had been down there again. I frowned.

“Don’t go down there alone, Alma,” I warned her.

“I don’t think he’s so bad. Plus, Mami said he needed breakfast.” She shrugged.

“Have you seen Emory?” I asked, cutting to the chase.

“No, not since last night.” She looked away, as if she didn’t want to mention that she’d seen us on our way to my room.

I walked through the kitchen doors to find Lupe already had the coffee brewing and a tray of roscas proofing under a towel.

“Has Emory been down here yet?” I asked.

“Why do you think I’m keeping track of where your woman goes, Lobito?” She stuck her hand on her hip and flashed me far too much attitude for six in the morning.

“It’s just a question, Guadalupe. Settle down.” I left her to her morning preparations as I walked through every inch of the clubhouse, looking for my wife.

Every open door held nothing but an empty room, or a pile of naked, hungover bikers and whatever girl they’d chosen to bury themselves inside of for the night. No Emory. For a moment, I wondered if she was crazy enough to be down in the basement, talking to the Irish prince, but if she thought he was blameless, why would she bother?

Chiqui would have told me if she was down there, wouldn’t she have?

The two had been getting close quickly, and I couldn’t quite figure out if it was going to be a good thing or a problem.

I took the stairs down three at a time, the darkness of the room engulfing my vision the minute my feet landed at the bottom. Padraic Kelly was sitting in the corner of the cell, the same one Emory occupied not too long ago.

His hair was a disheveled mess, his fancy shirt torn at the collar, and the rings beneath his eyes gave away just how little sleep he must have gotten down here. It wasn’t like it was

soundproof, and like I said, we partied *well* into the break of dawn.

His head tilted to the side, and he frowned at me, not speaking, just waiting to see if I was going to reveal my reason for coming down here.

I wasn't.

She wasn't down here, either.

I turned on my heels and ran back up the stairs, panic officially settling into my chest and crawling under my skin like an unwelcomed addiction

“Emory!” I shouted through the house, flying up the stairs and bellowing her name.

My brothers came out of their rooms at my voice, eyes glazed with sleep and confusion as I stormed through the clubhouse looking for my woman.

“She’s outside. She’s probably just taking a walk outside,” I told myself, my mind going to that awful place where all I could do is go over how every decision I’d made leading up to this had been a poor one.

I took her phone away, and I never gave it back. Why the fuck didn't I give it back?

I had no way to talk to her, no way to call to see if she'd walked too far into our property and gotten lost in the woods. What if she'd fallen in the river and the current swept her away?

Where the fuck was she?

“Emory!” I was outside now, standing over the grave of our fallen family, my hands cupping my mouth as I called out to her.

My heart was beating too fast. I couldn’t formulate the thoughts quickly enough in my mind. There was no part of my brain that could understand how this could happen. Where the fuck could she have gone?

We were in the middle of a plague, for fuck’s sake.

I stormed back into the clubhouse, this time shooting straight up for Veneno’s room. I knocked but didn’t bother waiting. He was awake from my previous outburst, but from the looks of it, he was annoyed that I wasn’t letting him return to sleep.

“I need you to check the surveillance,” I commanded.

Veneno was security. He handled all the surveillance, all the technical shit that none of us had the brains to deal with.

“What are you lookin’ for, Prez?”

“My—the Doc... I can’t find her,” I told him.

He rolled over to this bedside table, pulling a laptop from the drawer and quickly typing the password in. With a few clicks, a window appeared with six smaller sections, each highlighting a different portion of the clubhouse.

“Start around five this morning,” I said, remembering how long we’d spent tangled around each other last night.

Every movement, every touch, felt so genuine, so real, it was like, for the first time, she was letting me love her. *Loving Emory was like drinking the last sip of water on this Godforsaken Earth.* You did it anyways, even though you knew it would only leave you thirstier.

I recalled the way her lips felt against mine, soft but desperate for my own, the way her skin blushed a stronger shade of pink with each orgasm I drew from her body. I remembered the way my name sounded, a hushed prayer on her lips, a devout promise that she would finally be mine.

She hadn't said it, but I had felt it.

My knuckles went white, my fists tightening at the memory of the previous night.

I know I had felt it.

That's when I saw her.

"Stop," I paused as her figure appeared coming out of my door, holding nothing in her hands as she walked out of the camera's view.

She reappeared further down the monitor through another camera, her fingers rapping against a door that made me question how the fuck she even knew who it belonged to. Hálcon opened it, the sneer on his face never disappearing while he led my wife out of the clubhouse.

They got inside a car together, him in the driver's seat, and then they were gone. Eleven minutes past five. That was the time the clock read on the monitor.

It was now closer to seven.

I didn't wait for Veneno to close the laptop. I rushed out of his room, my blood boiling beneath my skin and pumping so hard, I could feel it swishing around in my ears. Veneno was close behind, like he could feel the weight of my rage, could smell the betrayal in the air.

I kicked down Hálcon's door.

There he was, sleeping like a fucking baby, as if he himself hadn't led my wife out of this compound by the fucking hand. I pulled his blanket off him in one, swift movement, and before he could react, I was throwing him off the bed and onto the floor.

It all happened silently. I gave him no time to question my actions, or to justify his own.

My boot went flying, slamming down against his chin before coming up under his ribs. Blood flew from his mouth on the second thrust of my foot, and it was Calaveras who pulled me back, the sound in the room finally rushing in all at once. Yelling, shouting, cursing, coming from my own mouth, as well as all of those around me. We weren't close to being alone.

"She's gone because of him!" I shouted.

"She was going to be the end of all of us! You would have gone to war for her!" He tried standing taller.

"Damn right I would have. I would have gone to war for any of you." My nostrils flared, my anger rose, and the room

went silent. “Would *you*?” I asked him.

“It was her decision,” he confessed.

“You’re lying. You said something to sway her.”

“She came to me! She asked me to take her away from here.” He slapped his chest angrily, like he wasn’t proud of his decision, but that he’d do it over and over again if given the chance.

“Where did you take her?” I asked, giving him the chance to atone.

“I promised her I wouldn’t tell.” His jaw clenched, and my fist flew out again, hitting below his chin and making him fly back with a few awkward steps.

“*Now* you’re loyal?” I seethed, pushing him back even further.

“Prez.” Calavera shook his head, grabbing me by the arm.

“What?” I spoke through clenched teeth.

“If it was her choice, there’s nothing we can do.” His eyes bore into mine, and I shook him off, ignoring every member who stood watching as I stomped down the stairs to let out my anger on someone who deserved it.

I knew what they were all thinking; they’d felt the resistance from her. There was no way for me to explain what we had grown into, because they hadn’t seen it. They had only witnessed her contempt, her disapproval, the line in the sand she had drawn between us.

I couldn't convince them we'd somehow crossed that threshold together, that the Emory who looked at me like that, who trusted her body and her soul to me, wouldn't have left.

Had it all been a lie?

"Sidhe Prince!" I barked out, stomping down the basement steps.

His head barely shifted to acknowledge my presence in the room. His hair was out of place, like he'd spent the entire night running his hands through it. His shoulders hunched over, and his elbows draped over his knees. If I could have guessed, he'd likely stayed seated in this position all night long, despite the uncomfortable cot in the cell. The bruising on his face was darkening, and his lip was split open from its previous encounter with my fist.

I ached to feel his bones under my knuckles again.

"Where can I find your father?" I asked, my foot kicking the steel bar of the cell and the noise ringing out through the basement walls.

He didn't flinch, but his head finally turned my way fully to acknowledge my presence.

"Now you want to talk?" he asked, a stony calmness to his voice.

"I was gonna give him a few days to die. Plans have changed. I need someone to take my anger out on, and it's either going to be you, or it's going to be the entire Sidhe operation. You can choose."

His head lifted completely, and his eyes hardened as his stare finally fixed in my direction.

Good.

“I’m not a rat.” He feigned disinterest, picking at his nails.

I fished the key out of my pocket and turned it in the lock, the alarmed look on his face breaking the mask he was trying hard to keep up. As I stepped into his cage, he scrambled to his feet, not letting me have a moment of towering over him.

“It’s you or your old man. Take your pick.” I rolled my sleeves up, closing the cage door around me.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I dialed the old crone. “Lupe? I need a favor.” She grunted on the other side, forcing a chuckle from me. “Yeah, you’re not going to like it.”

I pressed the speaker button, tossing my phone to the ground so my hands were free to dish out the violence I needed to feel, the only thing that would satiate the burning need to have her back in my arms.

I shouted over the sounds of my knuckles hitting bone, giving Lupe instructions, knowing damn well the price for her compliance would be high. Fist after fist, I slammed into the pretty face of the Irish mafia’s next boss, uncaring whether or not it would leave him permanently hideous.

I didn’t care if there would be a single one left to tell their story when I was done with them.



They must have left me in that cage the whole day. It felt like it, at least, the way my toes lost feeling, the numbness traveling up my legs to my thighs, forcing me to shift uncomfortably until the burn woke my muscles up just for a few moments, before the numbness came again.

It wasn't anything new. The first time around, I had been left covered in my own piss before I saw another human's face. It was less maddening this time, being wiser now.

Knowing more.

The Sidhe had their own special way of breaking one's spirit, and fortunately, it wasn't my first time.

The surprise was when Paul Kelly himself came to me again, instead of sending someone else. He knelt down in the

dark, turning a flashlight on my face, forcing me to shield my eyes from the brightness.

“Are we all cozy again?” he asked, thumb and forefinger stroking his chin, as if deep in thought. “I should be grateful for life’s second chances. Tell me, Emer, how did the little pet in my cage manage to become a successful doctor?” I kept my mouth shut, knowing Paul loved monologues. “I don’t like to lose. When we found out you were working at St. Murphy’s, I told the boys... Well, we need to get her back, don’t we? She belongs here. It was so lonely without you,” he chuckled.

The phone in his pocket rang, startling me. Paul looked at the screen before slipping it back into his pocket and pulling out a cigarette.

“About that man you married.” He placed it between his lips. “I know you’re a Fitzroy, but tying yourself to that dog is low, even for you.”

He struck the lighter, bringing the flame to the cigarette and taking a deep drag before speaking again. “I was saving you for Padraic.”

“He was a child. Do you always rape your son’s potential girlfriends?”

“Families share.” He smiled, and the phone rang again. “I was breaking you in for Padraic. I was going to take the shame your father left you with and turn you into a Kelly.”

“Why do you think I rushed to marry Villalobos?” I couldn’t stop myself from saying it with a smile on my face.

Paul tilted his head. “Clever, Fitzroy. It doesn’t matter anymore. You ruined yourself.”

“You ruined me long before César ever could.”

“He’s calling for you.”

I stared at the phone in his hand, the screen turned away from me so I couldn’t see the truth of who was calling. I almost wished he was right, that César was trying to get a hold of him, though at the same time, I wished it wasn’t. He was supposed to think I left him.

He wasn’t supposed to think for even a second that I was with The Sidhe. Halcón had only one job, and it hadn’t been even twenty-four hours after I left. Was my sacrifice for nothing? How was I supposed to stay strong knowing none of it would matter?

I moved my eyes from the phone. “You sent the car?”

“Car?” he asked, barely interested.

“The car crash?” I swallowed.

“Oh, yes. Well, I sent Doherty to keep an eye on you. I guess he wasn’t happy about seeing you getting hitched. My boys always had a soft spot for you.”

“Eion Doherty would fuck me under your nose if you looked away long enough. He’s probably raping all these girls,” I spat.

Paul smiled. I almost forgot how much he loved my reactions.

The phone stopped again, and I breathed slowly. He was messing with me. César wasn't calling. No one was coming, and that was fine.

It had to be fine.

“Emory O'Connor.” He chewed slowly on every syllable, as if savoring the name I had been reborn under. “Not even a proper Irish first name, Emer? You took assimilation too seriously.”

“I think I blend in just fine,” I scoffed.

“The first time, it was Joe who'd seen you at St. Murphy's. I thought I'd bring you home right then and there, but once he told me you were cozied up with the Black Crow Brotherhood, well, I thought, 'how interesting.'”

I snorted and turned my head, but Paul kept going. “How interesting that everywhere she goes, Emer Fitzroy seems to find herself in a position where she's privy to far too much information about dangerous men and their dangerous activities. I mean, we couldn't even turn our heads, and there you were, collecting more and more secrets.”

When I whipped back my head his way, he chuckled. “Emory O'Connor, doctor, involved with the Black Crow Brotherhood. Honestly, Emer, I bought you for the pound of meat to fuck, but you're a smart girl. You know that to stay alive, you need value. And you've made yourself so valuable, haven't you? I heard you even know the queen down south, don't you? And now... married to the Diablos Locos' president.”

A worrying crease formed between my eyebrows as he kept talking. “Joe died that day when he let you see him at St. Murphy’s. Useless.”

A chill traveled down my spine, my hands closing into a fist, trying to hide the trembling. I thought I was ahead of the game. I thought I’d spotted The Sidhe at St. Murphy’s and ran before they found me but... they never lost me.

I tilted my head up with force, banging in the cage. “What do you want from me?”

“It’s like raising children, don’t you think?” he asked. “One day, they are just a fuck toy. Next, they know information about three different criminal organizations.”

A Cheshire-like grin spread over his face, and I let out a cackle.

“I don’t know what makes you dumber: to think I know something, or that I’d tell you anything at all if I did. You said it yourself: these people are dangerous. Even if they let me in on their secrets, I’d be dead before I finished telling you the first word.”

“Are you sure?” He arched an eyebrow. “Because I think that biker loves you. I think these people care much more than we all think. So, I win either way, Emer.”

He folded his sleeves up, standing tall, looking down at the cage before turning. Couldn’t Kelly just kill me already? I’d escaped him. He could now show everyone that no one ever escapes him. The end.

Great lesson.

He whistled, and his goon stomped his way to my cage. The big guy stopped right in front of me, his arms crossed in front of his chest as he waited.

“Let’s play a little game,” he started. “I just want you to answer a few questions.”

“And if I don’t?”

He reached into the cage, brushing my hair off my face. “Why did you change your hair, Emer? I loved your beautiful hair. Red hair is so rare nowadays, even back home.”

“*If I don’t?*” I asked again between gritted teeth.

“I’ll let Doyle here play with you.”

My eyes went to the big guy, his face impassive. His size and quiet demeanor reminded me of Calaveras, and that guy could hurt a bitch. In this case, though, the bitch would be me, and playing with him was going to leave a mark, no doubt.

“Let’s start with Villalobos’ officers.”

“Fuck you,” I spat.

“Now,” he tsked, “I just want their names. Nothing else.”

“Tell your man to do his worst. I’m not telling you shit.”

Kelly sighed like I was just one big inconvenience. “Tell me about the Black Crow leader.”

Why did he care about the Crows? They were disbanded, broken from a war with the Bratvas. They were no one, not

even important. Was he prying me for information, or was he testing my loyalty?

“No.”

“They don’t even exist anymore, so why does it matter?” His eyes narrowed my way.

I threw my head back with a laugh. “I’m smarter than that, Kelly. If it wasn’t important, you wouldn’t be asking.” I beckoned over his henchman, licking my lips. “Come on, big guy, let’s play.”

He waited for Kelly’s signal, and with a nod of his boss’ head, moved from his spot, a knife in his hand and the key to the cage in the other. I eyed it, knowing it was the closest thing to salvation I had.

I gulped, watching the blade, my jaw set, telling myself lies that I wasn’t scared. I was scared shitless, but I wasn’t going to say a word.

Not against anyone.

I got myself into this position, and I would die before I somehow made it someone else’s problem.

Who would have thought that I’d learn loyalty from a motorcycle club? Kelly was a few years too late. The Emory I was now wouldn’t betray the Diablos like that. I would defend those lunatics with my blood, and by the way his brute was watching me, it was going to be a *lot* of blood.

He twisted the key into the hole, twisting it with a sharp flick of his wrist and jarring the gate open before pulling me

out by the front of my shirt. My knees dragged along the metal bars painfully, and I bit back a cry once he threw me to the ground, the shock of my muscles waking up forcing me to cry out in pain.

He loomed over me, tilting his head like he was deciding where to chop first. It was the sound of tires on gravel in the distance that ripped us out of our stare off. My head whipped to the tall windows, and Kelly cursed under his breath.

“Hide her,” he clucked out with annoyance.

I panicked, scratching at Doyle as the sound of bullets bombarded the warehouse. He didn’t budge, taking my abuse as he pulled his boss into his side and shielded him from any possible attack.

His men were moving fast, covering every inch of the warehouse and fighting off the intruders and their guns.

“You need to hide, boss.” Doyle didn’t think twice, maneuvering the three of us across the building until we’d made our way to Paul Kelly’s office.

Just as the big brute pushed us inside, Paul’s arm wrapped around my waist from behind, pulling my back into his chest. The blade he held against my throat was sharp, positioned just right so if I moved even an inch, I’d be gushing all over the floor.

“Are you scared of the Devil, Paul?” I laughed.

He growled angrily in my ear, unhappy to be emasculated during a life-or-death situation.

Without moving my head, I shifted my eyes down to this desk, attempting to look but failing to see anything as I went searching for something sharp. He had a knife, but I knew of easier ways to make a man bleed out.

My fingers slowly roamed around the surface of the desk while Doyle and Paul continued to shout back and forth. I felt the thin, cylindrical shape under my fingertips, and I squeezed my fingers in an attempt to gather it in my hand.

“Get out there!” he spat at Doyle, nodding his head towards the door.

His man left us, closing the door behind him as the sound of bullets quieted all around us.

Our breathing filled the space, silence reigning until a bullet suddenly cracked through the door, the unmistakable thud of a body hitting the ground just outside the office the clearest sound I’d heard all day.

The slow gait of heavy boots approached.

One. *Please don’t be César.*

In front. *Please don’t be César.*

Of the other. *Please don’t be César.*

I chanted it a million times, even when my heart begged to hear his voice. I came here to prevent a war, but now, I realized that I had started it. The last thing I had wanted was to drag the Diablos deeper into this. I wanted them out. I wanted them safe.

I wanted César safe.

The sound of metal clanging outside the door filled the air, the sound of his voice reaching me before the comfort of his touch could.

“I heard you have my wife.”



I could only see the blood.

I could only hear the bullets.

I could only feel the crunching of bones under my fists.

One after the other, my limbs flew on autopilot, searching for a Sidhe target to demolish. Determination hammered through my skull like a pounding ache. That was, until her voice broke through the fog of fury clawing up my throat. My scream ripped through my vocal cords as my men and I tore down the doors.

“Emory,” I roared, my fist immediately crashing into the face of the next fucker to greet me.

I wasn’t here under the pretense of a hero. I was here to unleash hell on the motherfuckers who thought they could take

the only thing I'd ever deserved.

It was barely a shout, a faint echo of a cry in the distance as my brothers and I rammed our way through the warehouse that the Sidhe had burrowed themselves in. I had no idea why someone of Paul Kelly's caliber would be holed up in a shithole like this, but I had a feeling it wasn't going to be good.

I knew what I needed to do, and it involved putting every asshole in this building six feet under.

It wasn't just her voice that broke me out of my bloodlust fueled rage, but the chorus of frantic women screaming deeper inside the giant building. With no hesitation whatsoever, I pulled my Glock out from my cut to shoot down whatever came my way. Flipping the safety off, I pulled the trigger, hitting a Sidhe lackey in the chest then once more in the head for good measure.

It was absolute chaos, bullets flying in every direction, the voices of women begging for our help in the distance. Madness echoed from every corner of this warehouse, the air powdery, like they'd been storing something else down here and the raining bullets had somehow released it into the environment.

"The fuck is this shit?" I heard Veneno complaining from behind.

"Cover your face. At best, it's drugs. At worst, it's poison." I pulled my bandana out of my pocket, tying it behind my head and leaving only my eyes exposed.

The metal clink of a bullet hitting a shelf just to my left pulled my attention back to the present, shifting my focus back to the only goal I had in mind.

The woman I not only wanted, but needed with every fiber of my being. The woman who made me want to be a better man than I ever had the desire to become.

There were so many of them, and though they weren't coming for us, they were well-armed and outmanned us in every way. Just holding their position was enough, and unless they ran out of bullets, we were fucked. There was no way to get further inside.

No way to get to my girl.

“What are we doing, Prez?” The prospect stepped to my side, more bravery in his eyes than I thought possible for the little shit.

“We're gonna kill these fucking scumbags,” I said without turning my head to look at him, pulling another pistol out of my cut.

I stepped out of the safety of the shelves hiding me and my men and walked straight into the line of fire.

There was no time to look and see who was following me, or if anyone was shot down by our enemies. I was alive, and I'd yet to feel the burning sting of a bullet piercing through me, so I pushed on relentlessly, finger on the trigger.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

One by one, they all fell to the ground, whether by my own hands or the guns of my brothers, until there were only a few left standing, guarding cages on the ground with half-naked women inside.

Every cage was filled. All but one.

Its door was open.

The women whimpered inside their cages as my men and I got closer, as if they weren't sure if we were salvation or something worse. Calaveras covered me from behind, shooting first, not bothering to pretend like we'd need to keep any of these low-level Sidhe scum around for extra intel.

I already had the most important one chained up in my basement right now.

I pocketed my guns again, throwing my full body into the next swing of my fist, nearly knocking my next victim unconscious.

“Wait!” the mustached man begged as I stood over him. “I can tell you where he is.”

“If he's in here, I'll find him,” I chuckled, letting him know just how useless he was to me before I sent the heel of my boot down on his ribs.

That was the thing about begging for your life: it had to actually matter for it to be worth something.

Calaveras casually handed me a lead pipe as he walked forward, examining the caged women. I lifted the pipe, cocking my arm back and preparing for the hit of my life.

“Swing, batter, batter!” ‘Mor sang out behind me, and with that final word, I brought the lead down on the man’s head.

Veneno called out from the front. “Down this hall, Prez. He’s gotta be here.”

“Kelly!” I called out as I made my way down the dark hall. “I heard you have my wife.”

The words made their way out of my mouth before I’d fully made it down the dark hallway. A man stood outside the door—it wasn’t Paul, but one I recognized from previous transactions with The Sidhe. The tell on his face was too clear, and he pulled the gun out of his pocket to shoot.

He was a shit shot, and my reflexes were better.

My steps turned into a sprint, and I lifted the lead pipe over my head once more. This time, I threw it with all the force I could muster, letting it fly directly into the man’s head.

The sound was almost musical. The hollow of the lead pipe echoed against his skull, the muted sound of his bones smashing under the weight of the metal.

It took him an extra second to recover, and that was all the time I needed to close the remaining distance and grab the pipe from the ground. He lifted the gun up, but again, I was quicker. I sent the pipe down once more, shattering his arm and forcing him to drop the gun.

That was when I finally pulled my Glock back out, placed it under his chin, and fired, the back of his head exploding over the door my woman was no doubt behind.

“If you come in, I’ll kill her Villalobos,” Kelly shouted from behind the door.

I sneered. “Coward! You’ll hide behind a woman? Show yourself!”

“Emer Fitzroy was mine long before you soiled her with—”

“Emory,” I shouted, interrupting whatever bullshit he thought would be an insult.

“César!” There was desperation in her voice, fear, but there was something else, something I couldn’t distinguish. “Go back, César.”

My stomach churned, rejection sinking its claws into my skin once again, the same rejection she was so good at dishing out. What I thought was our game. What I thought we’d conquered and moved past.

Yet here she was, in the throes of danger, the very thing she’d come to me seeking protection from, and yet, even now, even here, I wasn’t enough.

She would have rather died, she would rather have them take her, dehumanize her, shove her into one of those cages, than be my wife.

I clenched my teeth together.

Fine, then.

“You heard the girl. Go home, César,” Paul Kelly mocked from behind his door.

It was faint, but she let out a small, frightened whimper, just barely audible.

It was all I needed.

I kicked through the door, her eyes wide as hell but her brain working faster than mine ever could. Before I had the chance to point my gun at Paul Kelly, she’d already somehow managed to stab a pencil straight into his jugular.

She broke free of his hold once he brought his hands to his neck in panic, pulling the pencil out and sealing his own fate. The blood came out like a fountain as it poured from the spout she’d created in his throat.

Then, she was in my arms, crying and squeezing me harder than anyone had ever done.

“You came for me,” she mustered out between heavy sobs.

“Of course I came. You left,” I told her, unable to hide my bitterness.

“I didn’t want to endanger the club. Your family! I—I couldn’t be responsible for putting everyone’s lives at risk.” She shook her head, tears streaming down her face too fast to even try to wipe away.

“You’re my wife. You’re mine, Emory. Do you get it now? Do you get what I’d do for you? For us?” I was yelling, unable to contain my anger. It was the only feeling that could break through the icy wall of rejection she had left me with.

She looked past me, staring at the devastation I'd left behind on my way to her. "Why?" she asked softly, like she couldn't understand her own value.

I peeled my upper lip back, still too furious to say anything that mattered.

"What are we doing with the other women?" Ladrón's voice breaking through our fragile moment.

Fuck.

"How many are there?" I asked.

"Seven."

"Call for transport, bring them back to the compound, and we'll assess the situation there." I stared back down at her, furrowing my eyebrows as I attempted to read what might be going through her head.

"I can hang back with the doc while we wait," Ladrón suggested.

I looked back down at her, noticing how battered and beaten she looked just from one night in Paul Kelly's possession. I wasn't one hundred percent sure she could handle the ride back on two wheels.

My mouth made the decision ahead of my brain. "My wife rides with me."

I exhaled heavily, picking her up off the ground and walking towards my bike. She didn't protest, didn't punch my back or spit curses as we made our way out of the warehouse. I set her

on her feet, taking her hand and helping her straddle the bike before I placed the helmet over her head.

I sat behind her, pulling her close to me and feeling her chest stutter with a gasp once her back hit my chest.

“Hang on here.” I showed her where to grip the handlebars, and I wrapped my hands over hers.

The violent throttle of the engine startled her once I kicked it on, forcing her to lean back into me even closer. My cock didn’t care how angry I was or how fucked up any of this had been. It recognized her presence, and it begged for more of it.

“You ready?” I asked, knowing there was no way she could ignore the hard bulge of my erection pressed against her back.

She nodded, and I peeled out, heading back in the direction of Grimm’s Reach.

Home.



I remembered every ride.

Every time I got on my bike, it was a fresh experience.

That's what I loved about it most.

You would have thought having her here, between my legs, sharing this with me for the first time, it would have permeated into the core of who I was, but all I could focus on was my anger, my bitterness, my self-loathing.

My mind was running faster than the tires spun, and before I knew it, we were back at the compound, where there was nowhere to run, from myself or from the woman who deserved more than I'd ever be able to give her.

Lupe and a few others were waiting outside on the porch as we pulled up, and Chiqui ran to Emory as soon as I flipped the kickstand down.

"It's okay, I'm alright." Emory waved her off, her eyes darting up at me nervously.

"Get the Doc tended to, Alma," I barked before marching forward.

Storming through the compound two steps at a time, I charged my way up to the second level, and I swallowed a hard lump as I pushed the door open. Staring at the bed of flowers I'd arranged from Lupe's personal garden, Emory's voice rang in my head from behind that office door once more.

Go back, César.

Because I was no better than the enemy to her.

I let it all out, unable to contain everything that had burned through me for the last eight months since I'd first met her. Every drop of desire, every inch of need for her.

It was never reciprocated.

I shoved every item decorating the top of my dresser onto the floor before pushing the entire thing to the ground with a loud crash.

I was a fool. A fuck up. A nobody. An orphan with no real blood ties, who would never have a true family to call his own.

No matter how hard I tried to force it.

I'd conjured every lie about us in my own head, a fantasy of my own fabrication I'd been using as my personal torture device.

Throwing whatever I could reach off the shelves onto the ground, I ransacked the room, burning every ounce of rage I had inside of me until it was nothing but ash.

I had never been anything more than a means to an end for her, and she tried telling me herself.

Our vows had been a lie, I knew that, but I wanted more.

In the closet, I pulled her clothes off the rack and threw them onto the floor.

Stupid.

When had I ever been worthy of more?

I stood in front of the mirror, looking at the man I'd somehow missed the chance to witness growing up. I was tired of him, too. My knuckles flew into the mirror, shattering it, the shards spilling all over the floor.

I didn't notice the burning sting in my hand, but I noticed her presence.

"I'm sorry." It was quiet, like she was almost unsure if she should be witnessing this.

"And what do you have to be sorry for, Emer Fitzroy?" I turned just in time to see her wince at her old name.

"I told you... I'm not her anymore." She shook her head, looking down. "I'm sorry that I made a bad call. That I thought leaving would be best for everyone here."

"You think I'm mad you left?" A cynical laugh bubbled its way out of my throat.

"Isn't that what this is about?" She gestured at the wreckage I'd made of our room.

"No, Emory. I understand now that you'll never be mine. This, *this* is because I've finally come to terms with how I feel about myself," I said dryly, a forced smirk painting its way over my lips like armor.

"What do you mean?"

"Those cages. He kept you in one, didn't he?" I asked, clenching my molars together as I readied for an answer I already knew.

She nodded, her lips pressed into a flat line.

"It wasn't the first time either, was it?"

Again, silence, just a fraction of a movement from her head to confirm what I already feared.

“And just the same, I caged you too, didn’t I, blanca?” My jaw ticked as I looked out my window, refusing to meet her gaze,

“It wasn’t the same, César.” Her cold fingers wrapped around my forearm, but I pulled back.

She flinched.

The woman I’d known didn’t flinch, regardless of how she’d attempt to spin the story.

It came down to me; my inability to protect her, to do for her the one thing she came to me for.

“It wasn’t the same.” She whispered it this time, shaking her head, as if she finally understood the way my thoughts worked against me.

“I told a million lies to get to you, César,” her voice rang out with a newfound strength. “And I would have told a million more. You are not Paul Kelly. You are the man who brought him down. There was no one else strong enough to bear the burden of my past.” She sounded ashamed she’d orchestrated everything.

Almost everything.

She was clever, but my feelings were my own.

“You thought being married to me would somehow save you from becoming a gift to The Sidhe prince.” I waited for her to confirm it again, and it came in the form of a heavy exhale. “So why sacrifice yourself in the end?” I turned to

look at her, speckles of Paul Kelly's blood still splattered over her neck and chest.

"I couldn't let you all risk yourselves for me. I couldn't handle the weight of the guilt that would come from anyone else here dying, especially not for *me*." She clenched her fists at her side, her knuckles going white as her gaze shifted downward, like it wasn't a confession she had been fully prepared to make.

"What's the matter, Doc? You already tired of burying Diablos?" I chuckled as a single tear fell from her left eye, and with one finger, I lifted her chin up before catching it and wiping it away.

"They're your family." She stared at me without blinking.

She did it because they were her family too.

"Why did you tell me to go back?" I asked, unable to stop myself.

"Because I'm not worth all of this death—"

"Do I deserve you, Doc?" I interrupted, her mouth going slack as she took a second to steady herself from the whiplash of the question.

Her eyebrows softened, and she took a step closer to me. Her head tilted to the side, and she smiled. "This whole time, I've been hoping that by telling you that you weren't good enough for me, you wouldn't notice it was me who didn't deserve you, César. Your loyalty, your strength, your family, your *love*. It didn't take long for me to figure out there wasn't

a single Diablo who wouldn't lay their life down for me if you asked them to. I'm not worth—”

“Shut up, Emory. You *are* worth it. You're everything. When you close your eyes, the sun sets for me. When you close your mouth, I stop breathing. When you left, the fucking world ended. When you told me to go back, I—” I didn't get a chance to finish.

She threw herself into my arms, pulling me down to her level. Her lips pressed against mine, her tongue pushing through with a desperate force. Tears fell down her face, trickling against my own as we stayed locked in a kiss. I pulled back, staring into her eyes, looking for any trace of dishonesty. For once, I couldn't find it.

“They aren't just my family. They're your family, too.” I gestured out toward the door. “That's why you went. They'd give their lives for you, so you gave yours instead. You're a Diablo, blanca.” I said the words out loud, anxious for her response.

With a long inhale, she grew taller as the air filled her lungs before she answered.

“I'm a Diablo.” She nodded.

I reached up with hands covered in dried blood, holding her cheeks between my palms as I devoured her, body, mind, and soul, with a kiss that I wished to God somehow could be rewritten as our first. Her lips parted, her body melting into mine as she surrendered to my touch, a moan escaping her lips before her body tensed.

She pulled back, a crease forming between her eyebrows. “Let’s clean you up,” she breathed out. “It’s confusing to be this turned on by you covered in the blood of my enemies while also knowing the many diseases I could contract from ingesting any of it.”

I looked down, finally taking account of myself and realizing I was fully drenched in it, most of it dried, except for where my knuckles now freshly bled.

I barked out a laugh, following her to the bathroom as I ripped the shirt off my shoulders and kicked my boots off. She pulled my pants down, any fatigue from spending the night in that cage practically gone as she licked her lips at the sight of my dick springing free.

“Eyes on the prize,” I reminded her with a chuckle, moving into the warm spray of water.

When she granted me her compliance, it was a gift from God. Her eyes stayed glued to me, and in return, I offered the same back, not paying any mind to the stream of red water washing down my skin as it circled into the drain.

“Wash,” she breathed out from the other side of the shower door.

There was a hunger in her voice, one I hadn’t heard before from her.

I shook my head. “Wash me.”

Her eyes widened, and she made a small, stuttered movement towards me before she hesitated. She inhaled again,

her eyes running over every inch of my naked body, as if it was the first time she'd really took to appreciate it. Her fingers found the hem of her shirt, and she pulled it over her head. In another quick movement, she was fully undressed and crossing the threshold into the water with me.

Her mouth stayed parted, droplets of water collecting on her skin as she reached for the sponge and lathered it with soap. She started slowly, making small circles with the soapy loofa as it scrubbed away the evidence of the crimes I'd committed in her name.

She washed me with a careful precision, making sure to clean every inch of me as she worked her way down. She dropped to her knees, looking up at me through wet eyelashes before she covered my cock with soap. It twitched from the slightest touch, both of us pretending like it wasn't screaming for her attention, as if we weren't counting down the seconds for this shower to be over so I could be inside her tight little cunt.

I looked down to see her biting her lower lip, her gaze now locked onto my erection.

“Fuck, blanca. You keep looking at my cock like that, and I might have to make you choke on it.”

There was a glimmer of curiosity in her expression, nearly invisible to probably anyone else, but I'd been studying every movement her face could make since the moment I decided to make Emory O'Connor mine. In a motion almost too abrupt for how shaken she still was, I laced my arm behind her back

and scooped her up into my chest, turning us away from the water so I could examine her more clearly.

“Did they touch you?” I asked, worried that her answer would only accumulate my guilt.

I had already killed them, but I’d pray to Santa Muerte to ravage their souls on the way to hell if they’d put one finger on my girl.

My fucking wife.

“No,” she said, lifting her chin up. “Not this time.”

There was a strength in her voice that hadn’t been there before. This admission, that while they hadn’t taken from her this time, that they had once before, might have somehow been the first time she’d uttered the words.

“If I could kill them all over again, I would,” I rasped.

“Once was enough,” she assured me, placing her hands over mine where they still held her face.

I shook my head; she still didn’t get it.

“If the Devil came to me and said I’d finally get to have you, but only for an hour, and in exchange, my own personal hell is to wake up every day and kill the men who hurt you over and over for eternity? Little viper, there would be no question. I’d sell my soul in a heartbeat.” I pressed our foreheads together.

I kissed her hard this time, tasting the salty tears as they fell down her face. She trembled in my hold, fragile again, but this

time from my words. The kiss grew from something that felt like an ache into a burning need. The desire to replace the feeling of bones breaking under my fists with the feel of her soft skin in my hands. To swap the smell of blood with the sweet scent of warm vanilla I could still smell in her hair, the sound of desperate screams for help with the echoes of her pleasure.

“I need you,” she panted, breaking our kiss apart.

As I was about to grab her ass and bring her to my room, she surprised me, dropping to her knees right there in front of me. There that tongue went again, wetting that bottom lip while her eyes watched my cock with an insatiable hunger.

“Fuck, Emory.” It was the closest I’d come to begging, but the sight of her on her knees was doing something to me I couldn’t explain.



César melted with a moan over my head as I closed my lips around his cock, taking him deep. There was something about kneeling for him, the devil I wasn't supposed to trust, the king I promised to never obey, and yet, here, right now, nothing could feel better than finally giving in to him.

The Sidhe had broken me, but he didn't just save me. He let me save myself, and now, he was putting me back together. I looked up at him, and he stared back at me with far too much admiration.

Maybe I was putting him back together, too.

I held on to his hips, bobbing back and forth as he gripped the back of my head with his large hands. I'd never been afraid of César, regardless of what I dished out. I knew he not only could handle it, but he'd always come back to me for more.

It was just how we were.

But the way he looked at me in that warehouse, his hands bloody as he stood over Eion Doherty's dead body... I'd wondered if maybe everything had just gone too far, gotten too out of hand, past the point of no return.

My fears had been doubly confirmed when I watched him destroy his room with nothing but his bare hands, trying to redirect his rage at anything but the people he called family.

The very rage that was there because of me.

Tears welled and threatened to spill at the corner of my eyes, maybe from the whirlwind of chaotic thoughts crashing around in my head, or maybe from the size of César's cock ramming its way down my throat.

I was just a girl when I'd lost everything, and I never dared to want again after that. Being around César had been this confusing, frustrating, burning need that I couldn't describe, couldn't extinguish. All I knew was that I had to keep pushing it away.

But one by one, he pulled every brick down, until I found all my walls were gone. All that was left was faith.

Faith that no matter what, there would always be some crazy Devil who would have my back. I needed nothing more: only him, only this. My need for the president of the Diablos Locos motorcycle club came like an undeniable prayer.

Somehow, he had become my safe place.

His grip tightened around my hair, the water beating against my back like a steady metronome. He pulled me back, a string of spit still connecting us together, even as his cock separated from my mouth.

“When I come, I want it to be inside you,” he growled out, lifting me up as he pushed me against the tile wall.

I felt those words right to my core. Every part of me felt hot, but just as I prayed his fingers would find my clit, he turned the water off.

His stare was dangerous.

Menacing.

An unspoken threat.

If I was hungry, he was famished. I took a step back out of the shower, and he followed, his gaze locked onto me as he admired every inch of my naked body. Maybe I was prey, or maybe I was the predator, leading him into my trap.

One step after another, I walked until I found the back of my legs against his bed, the softness of a flower petal under my heel. I broke our stare, finally finding a moment to really take in the state of the room.

César noticed, awkwardly laughing, like he wasn't sure if he was too old to be embarrassed about any of it.

It wasn't the aftermath of his rampage that I was observing. It was what I had missed when I first came in.

Dozens upon dozens of dahlia flowers laid scattered on his bed, their petals draped over the pillows, even over the floor under the mess he'd made.

There was an entire garden of dahlias in his room.

For me.

I looked back at him, unable to disguise the confusion on my face.

“I thought you left...because of me.” He scratched the back of his head, looking down.

A man who filled his room with flowers just to get his wife back.

It was silly, this giant, six-foot-three, tattooed gangster who thought a grand romantic gesture would heal the rift between us. Yet here I was, ready to drop to my knees for him again over it.

Paul Kelly was gone. That chapter of my life had been sealed shut, and I could finally breathe. I could be anyone, I could do anything, go anywhere, get my apartment back, get another job in a hospital.

Yet, there was no part of me that actually wanted that.

The possibilities were endless. I'd fought and given everything to be in the position I was in right now, and yet, I wasn't running away from the compound. I was here, in his arms. Breathing him in. Feeling safe only because of him. The very man I'd been scared to let in, I now found I no longer wanted out.

“I know nothing about you,” I confessed, looking into his pitch-black eyes.

“We have the rest of our lives,” he said.

“I want to spend it together,” I told him, and he nodded slowly, licking his lips as he ran his hands up my body.

I dropped my head back, relishing the feeling of his coarse hands running over my skin, trailing up my ribcage as his thumbs rubbed soft circles over my nipples.

I tilted my head up and watched him for a second before looking around the room, overwhelmed once again by the gesture. I wouldn't be getting a new apartment or finding a new hospital to work for. Nothing mattered anymore outside the gates of this compound. These were my people. I was a Diablo, and more than anything else, I was César Villalobos' ol' lady

This life was about choice. No one who wore the tattoo on their flesh did it by force, and I was choosing my freedom.

He was my freedom.

On the tips of my toes, I kissed his jaw, my hands traveling up his strong shoulders and feeling the prickle of his short hair. César hummed under his breath, and I took his mouth, slowly taking my time savoring the taste of him against my tongue.

My history with this man laid in a perfect pattern in front of my eyes. He was the only one who never gave up on me, never let me go. He had always put me first, and he had never been scared to show his intentions.

Then there was me, who'd never met an honest man in my life. I'd kicked and screamed all the way to the altar, but it was César Villalobos who I ran to when I needed protection.

It was his club I called home.

It was his people who had been more family to me than my own flesh and blood.

The passion in our kiss grew deeper, our tongues tangling and our hands exploring each other's bodies, like teenagers finally giving into temptation for the first time. But there was nothing inexperienced about the way this man touched me, or the way one look from him could bring me to ruin.

That cocky mouth of his curved into a crooked grin, the diamond on his canine tooth mocking me, like it could read my thoughts, like he knew exactly what I was thinking.

I clenched my thighs together, hoping to relieve some of the heat building up inside of me. César's arms wrapped around my waist, and as he lowered us onto the bed, the cloud of dahlia petals surrounded us like a delicate blanket.

He loomed over me, like he was waiting for me to make the first move before he dared try. Apart from our breathing, there was only silence in the room, our chests moving in sync against each other with every inhale. We were moving slower now, that hunger still there, but we moved at our own pace, enjoying each other.

I traced my fingers over the array of tattoos on his chest, my hands stopping at the scarred flesh over his heart, the *cártel*

brand I knew well. I had seen it on his sister once, too.

Paul Kelly was right about one thing: I *did* know too much.

César didn't talk about his past. Nobody here did, but maybe that was the point. I wasn't Emer Fitzroy anymore, and he wasn't the Lieutenant in the Cártel.

He was the Diablos Locos President, and I was his.

"Get out of that head of yours for the night?" he challenged me.

I nodded, agreeing to give in and surrender to the moment. He took my nipple in his mouth then, grazing his teeth until sparks burst inside of me from pleasure.

"Tell me what you like, blanca." He reminded me of his promise.

His fingers found their way between my thighs, spreading me open as he pushed my legs apart with his knees.

"You're so fucking wet for me," he groaned as he speared his way inside me, each knuckle thicker than the last as he searched for that spot that would make me unravel.

"Say it," he gritted out.

"I'm so fucking wet for you," I breathed just as he curled his fingers, hitting my g-spot immediately and bringing stars to my vision. "Fuck, César!" I wrapped one hand around his forearm, squeezing tighter the more the feeling in my core grew.

“Come for me, Emory,” he commanded, and like my body was made to obey him, I gave in, riding the wave of pleasure as I shook in his hold.

He smirked, satisfied with himself before positioning the thick head of his cock against my entrance. My back arched, and his fingers carved against my skin.

There was a time I’d never thought this would be possible. Every good part of me had been stolen by other men. I could never trust someone this much to close my eyes and let myself be taken.

César won me over every step of the way. He lacked finesse and the words for romance, and yet, he fucked me on a bed of flowers he gathered for me, for an apology that was never needed.

Every inch felt deeper, and my mouth watered with every thrust. My toes curled when he rose to his knees, supporting my waist with his hands.

“Come on, blanca, give me one more,” he rasped, fucking me harder and deeper than before.

I held myself back, still not willing to give him the satisfaction, but César wasn’t a man to mess around. He placed his thumb over my clit, circling while he thrust, and my body convulsed under him as I whined out his name in a broken voice. “César... fuck.”

“Say my name again,” he ordered.

He was breaking me apart, the need to come barreling through me, making all my thoughts about him. “César...”

He gave me what I needed, kept the perfect rhythm until my orgasm thundered, coming out like torrential rain.

My bones were suddenly made of goo, and I was floating in perfection, desperate for nothing and everything. My climax was all he needed to encourage his own release, hot ropes of cum painting my insides as he groaned my name in pleasure.

He fell to my side, and we faced the ceiling, catching our breaths.

My eyes stung, and a tear fell from the corner of my eye. I wiped it away with an awkward laugh, and César raised an eyebrow in question, waiting for an explanation.

Fuck, I felt too safe.

After a lifetime of running, I met a man who would burn the whole world just to get me back. Someone to trust with my life and secrets.

“I think I love you.” The secret finally broke free from my lips.

“You think?” he asked, but I found laughter in his eyes.

I lifted a shoulder. “I keep running scenarios in my mind, reasons for how it happened. I never trusted anyone like I trust you, and I think it happened while I wasn’t watching.”

Before I could finish, he hooked his arm around my waist and brought me on top of him, my legs straddling his waist.

“Are you sure? Because I remember you being very difficult.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I tilted my chin up, and he laughed.

“So, you’re staying?” The smile fell from my lips, a crease forming between my brows when César tsked. “I’m not dumb, blanca. I just ended all your enemies. I gave you the freedom you never had.”

“We both know I wouldn’t last a second out there alone,” I teased.

He didn’t fall for it, gripping my waist hard. “Just tell me you want me. Tell me you’ll never leave.”

I lowered down and kissed the middle of his chest, slowly looking up to find his eyes on me. I licked his skin, taking my time tasting every inch of him until I lined my mouth up with his and whispered between his lips.

“I need you, César.”

He released a growl, taking my mouth with pure, unadulterated need. He moved under me until I was sitting on top of his cock, and I felt him harden under me.

“I know.” He smirked.

Something told me he wasn’t above keeping me in this room just to convince me, but after what happened in that warehouse, after the months we’d had together, after this bed full of dahlias, I knew in my heart there was no one for me but him.

Nowhere to belong but here.

The Diablos needed a doctor, but I needed them more.

He brought my hands behind my back and held them together with one of his. With the other, he lined us up, and with one, thick thrust, he was inside me again, taking what belonged to him.

César was big, but from this position, he was impossibly large. He pulled my hips down, fully sheathing himself inside me and urging a gasp from my lips at the fullness.

It was a confusing contrast of pain and pleasure, the feeling of my wrists stinging from his hold just as he lifted up and bit down on my nipple. Sparks shot out from my core, a gush of liquid heat flooding down my thighs. Everything he did made me feel like I was made for him, made to be his. He commanded my body, owned my decisions, took everything from me without scaring me. I was at peace when he had me, loving the parts of us that tangled together to make a whole.

“Tell me how much you like riding my cock, blanca,” he demanded, my cheeks heating from his words.

I bit down on my lip, my fingers gripping the ridges of his hands as I clenched around his thick length, relishing the power I felt from the groans of pleasure that made their way out of his throat.

“Tell me, and I’ll let you come again,” he promised.

“I love,” I gasped as he held my hips down, burying himself even deeper inside of me. “Riding you,” I managed to finish.

He released a knowing smirk, his thumb moving with ease between my legs as he gathered up the slickness there and used it to paint mind-bending circles on my clit.

“I’m gonna come.” I threw my head back, my mouth watering as I drowned in tantric waves of rapture. His hands found every sensitive spot on my body, every livewire nerve waiting to erupt.

“Give me your screams, blanca,” he demanded, scorching heat erupting from my core.

I let go, seizing around him as I came with a powerful shockwave of pleasure. He pulled me down to his chest, nothing but a limp bag of bones as he thrust until he followed with his own release.

I stayed there, laying over his chest with him still buried inside me, uncaring that his cum was dripping. I felt the rumble of his voice through his chest before I’d heard it with my ears.

“All hail the queen.” He buried his nose into my hair.

I relaxed into his hold, knowing that from here on out, there could only be good.

I was home.

Everything would be okay.



I slept better than I ever had. I was safe, sure of myself and every decision I had made up to this point.

Because I had her, wrapped in my arms, naked, legs tangled together.

This was love, a word I'd never dared to breathe out loud in my entire forty years of existence.

But like all good things, they didn't last.

It came too fast.

One minute, she was putty my arms, and the next, she was scalding hot against my bare chest while trembling, teeth chattering from the sweat that drenched her as her body attempted to cool her off. My heart wasn't beating. How could it, when I had ripped it from my very chest and given it to her?

Now that I finally had her, the universe meant to take her away from me with this fucked up sickness.

“You... need... to—” I placed my fingers over her lips before she could weakly mumble out any more protests.

“I’m not leaving you, blanca. Tell me what you did for Lupe. Tell me how to get you better,” I said, too much anger in my voice at the entire situation.

She shook her head. “It... wasn’t... me...I didn’t...do anything.” Her head dropped to the side, like holding it up to talk to me was more effort than she could already manage.

I rolled out of bed, pulling my phone from the bedside table and dialing Ladrón.

“Emory is sick,” I said.

There was nothing on the other line; he knew what this meant for me. He’d told me a million times I’d regret this, succumbing to the redhead who commanded me with a power much like gravity.

We would all pay for it.

The panic that wrapped around me threatened to boil into rage at the very idea that she might never leave this room—not alive, at least.

It was nothing short of poetic justice.

A man like me didn’t deserve something as good and beautiful as Emory, but even so, I’d tricked myself into believing that I was worthy, that I’d won her fair and square,

and that not even the forces of the universe could tear us away from each other.

How wrong I was, to not assume that fate always had a backup plan.

“Deal with the club. Bring me ice,” I said before hanging up.

Just as I turned to face her, she began shaking, a gurgling sound coming from her throat as she seized, her eyes rolling into the back of her head. I turned her onto her side, steadying her to keep her from hurting herself.

“Hold on for me, Emory.” I clenched my molars together, each second passing achingly slowly, tearing away a piece of the strength I had inside.

She was soaked in sweat, blistering hot, and for the first time in my life, I felt completely out of my depth. I couldn’t solve this, not with a bullet, a knife, or my fists. I laid back down, bringing her back to my chest as I held her through the seizure.

Even search engines couldn’t keep up with what was happening, either because of the standardized chaos, or by the government attempting to keep it all as quiet as possible. My *cártel* connections kept me informed that this wasn’t happening south of the U.S., at least not yet, which meant there was a good fucking chance it wasn’t happening anywhere else *at all*.

I wasn't a paranoid fucker by any means. I didn't listen to conspiracies, but I had enough tangles with the law and its men to know that some things *were far from accidents*. I stayed by her side, holding her, talking to her despite her being unable to muster much more than a mumble every now and then. I only left her side when the knock on the door came, waiting a bit to make sure I made no contact with whoever dropped it off.

I dumped bag after bag of ice into the tub, filling it up with cold water and hoping it would be enough to make a difference, to do something, anything.

I scooped her trembling body off the bed, knees bent over my arms while I carried her towards the tub. Her head dropped back, hanging heavily. Was I supposed to keep her clothes on? What was the right way to do this?

“Emory, what should I do?” I breathed into her ear, knowing there was no answer coming. Her eyes stayed shut, her body too weak to remain lucid. “Corazón, what do I do?” I whispered again, this time mostly to myself.

I pulled my shirt off her, leaving her naked, unsure if that was better than wet clothes clinging to her after being removed from a freezing ice bath.

Once her skin touched the water, a high-pitched noise left her throat, her eyes never opening as she shook viciously, hands gripping my bicep like a plea to not be fully submerged.

I couldn't listen. Not for her own good.

Even if it wasn't the right thing to do, it was all I had. I would die exhausting every possible option if it meant Emory O'Connor would survive this thing, even if it meant I would be the next one taken down by it.

She howled and screeched, like the shock of cold water was the only thing that could bring her mind back to the here and now. She wailed, her teeth clanking loudly, like the water was painful to endure.

Her skin was flushed from fever, a bright pink I'd personally never seen before, and once my fingers lifted from her, their imprint stained her flesh, white, marking her with my distress. Her eyes stayed closed, but she still clenched onto my clothes, as if the coldness of the water was too unbearable to tolerate on her own.

"You're doing so good, so good," I soothed her, running the side of my finger over her forehead and dragging it down the side of her face.

Her shaking stilled a bit, as if my voice was drawing her out of some darker place her mind had created for her.

"I'm right here, blanca. It's me and you."

A whimper escaped her throat, but she softened at the sound of my voice, her head resting against the wall. So, I kept talking her through it, walking her through the fevered darkness she wandered all alone. I wasn't sure it was doing anything, but at the chance that it helped, I kept going.

“Maybe, after this, we can have a real wedding. What do you think?”

Slow drips from the faucet fell into the tub.

“I don’t know about white on you, though. I think I like you better in leather,” I whispered in her ear, refusing to give into the voice in my head that told me I was lying to myself. I continued, making fake plans and promises to a woman I wasn’t sure could even hear me anymore.

I had to hope, hope that somewhere in there, she was fighting to come back to me.

More than thirty minutes had passed, the ice had melted into the water, and her lips had turned purple. Her grip on me softened as I heaved her into my arms and pulled her out of the tub. She felt cold enough to be confused with a corpse, but her skin was still flushed red from the fever.

I laid her down on the bed, not bothering to dress her, just drying her carefully before rolling her back to her side. She shivered loudly, those same pained moans leaving her lips again.

I undressed completely, knowing my skin had enough heat to bring her back to a comfortable temperature.

I hesitated, unsure if it was better that she felt the cold, or if her comfort mattered most.

“Fuck!” I yelled, grabbing a glass ashtray on my bedside table and throwing it at the mirror hanging across the room.

It was already cracked and splintered from my outburst the previous day, but it shattered, the rest of the pieces bursting before they fell onto the ground.

She was unphased, lost again in that scorching hot darkness. I curled in next to her, bringing her frozen body into mine. Her muscles were tight, tense and wound from the shock of the bath, but once my heat surrounded her, she began to soften and melt.

She moaned softly, and I came to understand it as a thank you of sorts.

It was such a contrast to see her like this, to see the raging, fierce woman who took none of my shit be so tiny and meek from something so small. I wanted her submission, her compliance.

I wanted to possess her, and here she was, unguarded, unprotected, fragile.

All of a sudden, I missed her sharp tongue, her insults, her hard demeanor. They at least gave me hope for another day with her. Right now, I was afraid to speak the words that were hammering through my mind like a bullet train.

She wouldn't make it through the night.

Not like this.

Just as her skin dried from the bath and her muscles softened from my presence, sweat beaded at her temple, and her temperature rose again. I rolled away, feeling like the physical contact was probably making her too hot.

I reached for my phone, texting the first number that popped up in my contacts and asking for more ice.

I'd do it for as long as it took.

For as long as her body would allow.



I'd fallen asleep, briefly, when the next set of knocks came at the door.

The clock read nine in the morning, and Emory was trembling quietly above the sheets. Her breathing was so shallow, the pained noises that came straight from her chest the only sign of life she showed.

I opened the door to find three industrial-size mixing bowls on the ground filled to the brim with ice.

Lupe.

They were the kind she used when making big batches of food for club events.

It meant there was no more bagged ice, bought from previous trips to the store in-town.

It meant she'd been making ice slowly, manually, with ice cube trays, emptying them as fast as she could make them to collect enough for another bath.

I dumped each bowl into the tub before filling it up with cold water again, the sound of it cascading down, borderline hypnotizing me into a delirious trance from my lack of sleep. Sleep was a collection of all my fears, vividly danced in front of my eyes like some sort of taunting promise of misery.

She wasn't getting better.

I'd fixated on this woman holding the key to my future, my happiness.

Maybe it was wrong to put so much burden onto a single person's shoulders. Maybe I shouldn't have hoped she'd bring me all those things. A laugh fought its way out of my chest, because not once did she give me permission to hold her in such high regard. Not once would she have accepted the responsibility of taking care of my heart.

Here I was, laying it all at her feet anyways.

It would be my own demise.

She was quieter this time as I lowered her into the water. Her eyes never opened, but her moans were low, barely audible, like all the fight was leaving her body.

"Blanca, I need you to stay strong for me," I hushed into her ear, my forehead pressed to the side of her face as I held her head in my hand.

Her breathing became rapid, and her grip on me loosened completely, her hands dropping to the icy water and her head leaning back onto the tub.

This was all wrong.

I kicked my pants off, pulling her forward and stepping into the tub behind her.

Put a madre!

It was the coldest water I'd ever felt in my life, and if it wasn't, I sure as shit couldn't remember a time.

I sank down, pulling her body into my lap and wrapping my arms around her.

"I'm here," I told her, my teeth clanking together noisily as I settled into the tub.

I felt her hand wrap around my wrist softly, no strength left to it, just a small amount of heat still radiating in her touch.

How long could her body endure this?



She faded faster in the middle of the day, losing consciousness completely and leaving me to wonder when I'd be praying for La Flaquita to take her as a mercy. Still, I continued, running ice baths one after another at the speed Lupe could make them.

It wasn't enough.

It had to be.

But it wasn't.



There was nothing left of me anymore. I was only a shell of a person waiting to be given the gift of death to end this inescapable misery. I finally saw it for what it was: a kindness. Every minute of fever was spent in agonizing pain, waiting for the moment I'd finally boil from the inside out.

My eyes were dried shut, my lips cracked open and bled, waiting for the cool dabs of wet cloth to feed me drops of water through parched lips.

I was empty. My mind was long gone, and my body had nothing to give.

All that was left was him.

In the blistering swell of the heat, I could hear his voice. In the fog of fever, his touch soothed.

César.

I couldn't feel him now, and part of me wondered if this was the subconscious processing death. This enveloping darkness was just the gateway to the other side, and, with no heat left in my body, I could only take it for what it was.

If César wasn't here, it was my time to go. I marveled in that feeling for a second too long. I had spent my entire life holding on, and there was a poetic peace in finally letting go. I accepted whatever my destiny was. I was ready for it, and right when I expected to be dragged out of this life, I heard a movement in the distance.

A heavy sigh.

I forced my eyes open, wincing at the unexpected light. I found him sitting across the room from me, his elbows on his knees, a haggard version of the biker king I knew. Dark circles marked his eyes in a way that almost seemed permanent, his skin clammy and sweaty.

Was he sick?

I opened my mouth to ask, to urge him to leave and stay away from me, when his eyes found mine, and he rushed to my side.

“Emory,” he called, brushing my hair out of my face.

My mouth opened and closed, trying to form words. He seemed to understand my struggle and was quick to bring water to my lips. I drank as much as I could before I looked straight into his eyes and croaked, “Get out.”

César's mouth curved. "Feeling better?"

I took a deep breath and rasped out, "You need to leave." He helped me take another sip before I managed a few extra words. "I'm sick."

"I noticed." He put the glass away and sat on the bed with me, checking my temperature.

I slapped his hand away. "Are you insane? This could kill you!"

He tsked but ignored me, that crooked smile of his mocking me, like this was all a big joke. I tried to sit up, falling back into the bed when my vision turned white.

"Calm down. Let me call for some food."

I nodded as my head hit the pillow and I breathed slowly through my nose. "How long I was out?"

César stood up and reached for his phone, glancing at me just once before texting. "Three days."

"That's..."

I gulped and ran out of words. I remembered feeling sick sometime in the night after we came back to the compound, but it felt like hours, not days. A chill ran down my spine at the thought of missing that big chunk of time.

"Anyone else sick?" I croaked next.

"No. I kept you here. No one has been sick."

"Kelly. His last attempt to murder me, I guess." I smiled weakly and tried to get up once again, just to fall and make

César rush to my side.

“Wait!” he barked.

“I hate being sick,” I murmured.

“You’re a terrible patient.”

I sliced him a look. “Just help me up?”

He was ready to say no, but he ended up coming closer and helping me to sit up, my back to the headboard.

“Update me.”

He scowled. “What?”

“What’s happening in the club?”

“It doesn’t matter, Emory. You’ve been out for days. That’s what matters.”

“How do you know if anyone else got sick? Are you monitoring your temperature? Do you—”

Rapid knocks on the door cut me off, and he went to answer. I tilted my head back, breathing in slowly, still barely able to open my eyes. My hand shook in my lap, and my attention turned to them while César got a tray from whoever left at our doorstep.

“Can you eat?” he asked, kicking the door shut.

“I thought I had no choice.”

He made a face. “I don’t want to make you sick.”

He sat on the bed, the food between us. I closed my shaking hands in a fist and looked at the broth waiting for me in a

small bowl with a side of plain, white bread. My stomach growled, like it could see for itself the nourishment it so badly needed.

It didn't look appetizing, but my mouth watered at the sight anyway. I wouldn't be able to stomach much more than this regardless.

"I can try," I whispered.

I knew better than anyone that it was a miracle to sit and talk after so many days catatonic. This fever was unforgivable. Even after treating so many, I couldn't pinpoint what I did right to help the survivors and why it didn't work with the rest of them. I couldn't understand why Lupe was alive, and now I couldn't understand how I was sitting here, sipping on broth.

César spoon fed me, keeping his intense eyes on me at all times. "I'm ok," I reassured him.

He shook his head and fed me another spoonful. I waited until most of the bowl was gone before I denied any more, unable to keep going. Out of breath from eating, I placed my hand over my head and squeezed my eyes shut.

"Tell me what hurts."

"You shouldn't be here," I reminded him.

I felt the bed shaking when he stood up in a rush. I opened my eyes and watched him stomp through the bedroom, tossing the tray on top of the dresser.

"I'm grateful for the help," I tried to say, "but this is dangerous."

“What was the alternative?” He turned to me, growling like an animal.

“I said I’m grateful. I—”

He stalked toward me, his eyes narrowed. “When my wife burned in my arms in the middle of the night, should I have left? When you were shaking from seizures and I almost thought I lost you... should I have asked someone else to hold you still?”

His eyes were shining, his words like barbed wire, digging deeper the more I tried to escape him. He wasn’t just tired—no, this had aged him. He stayed in this room, taking care of me for days, not sure if I was going to live to see the sun the next morning, and now that I was finally up, he seemed ready to fall apart.

I nodded, extending my hand to him, asking for him. It took him a second too long, watching my hand with suspicion, but eventually, his shoulders relaxed, and he came to me, taking me in his arms before I even got a chance to apologize.

“You almost died, blanca. Here. In this bed. I watched, and you almost died.” He paused for a minute. “All I could do was watch you die.”

I curled in his lap, my eyes damp as I relaxed against him. “What would I do if you got it too?”

He shook his head above mine. “I’ve been locked away with you since day one. I breathed the same air, slept right beside you. I should have this thing already.”

“That’s what I had thought too... before.” I reminded him that what I thought had been immunity was now just an obvious fluke.

Luck.

Without meaning to, I reached for his forehead, but he stopped my hand mid-air. His rough fingers caressed mine as we stared at one another in silence.

“It’s like every time we think something is fine, every time I feel safe—”

“You are safe,” he interrupted me, no doubt in his eyes. “I said I’d keep you safe from the second—”

It was my turn to cut through his words, bringing his hand to my lips with a chuckle. “What I was saying is that every time I needed you, you were there for me. You keep proving me wrong. It’s exhausting.”

He smirked, and I smiled, the tension rolling off my shoulders, making me feel hopeful that this would be it, that we would get to have more.



We spent the next three days in the room, locked in together. César's main goal was making sure I was eating and getting my strength back, and my goal was making sure we contained this virus and kept the rest of the club safe.

Despite our very reasonable excuses, we needed it, the time to get to know each other beyond a man with an obsession and a woman in need.

I slapped his hand when he tried to reach for the book in my hands.

“You need to eat.” He was quick this time, taking the book from me and jumping out of range of my foot kicking him.

“I'm done with broth.”

César couldn't help treating me like a fragile little doll, and I understood now that it came from a need to repent for all the irreparable hurt he caused in his past life.

He told me that his father used to make him torture his sister, in hopes that it would strengthen her into the future leader he needed her to be. When she grew older, he'd set them up against each other to see who'd come out the victor.

I guess daddy trauma wasn't very niche.

So, César fed me, bathed me, held me to sleep at night. Too gentle for a biker, but who was I to say I hated the care? Though I loved to pretend. I was learning all the different layers of his personality.

"Lupe left half a sandwich," he said, bringing in yet another tray left at our doorstep.

I eyed it with suspicion but ended up accepting the sandwich after making a face at the rest of the meal. I was done with soup.

"We missed Asado Sunday again." I deflated, realizing that since my arrival, I'd disrupted almost every single chance for the one meal that made them feel like a family every week.

"I'm not trying to keep you locked up," he said, sitting on a chair across the room, his elbows over his knees.

"I know." I nodded, polishing off the food.

"There will be more Sundays," he reassured me.

“I like to complain,” I confessed. His lips twitched, and I smiled. “I’m not so sure I should go outside just yet anyways,” I admitted, looking at the closed door. “The compound is safe, and I want to keep it that way.”

César nodded to himself, rubbing his finger over his mouth. “I’ve been thinking how to manage this whole thing from now on.”

“What do you mean?”

“We don’t know how long this is going to last. We need to be smart and prepare for the unpreparable, starting with a plan in place for outbreaks.”

Everyone was dying; no one was spared. When we turned on the TV, we were bombarded with the most horrifying details of this sickness. While the news anchors never agreed with a name, one thing they all agreed on was that the fever wasn’t going anywhere.

“Outbreaks only happen if you’re exposed,” I reminded him.

He nodded. “Yes, that’s exactly what I’ve been thinking about.”

“Well,” I sat up. “We have animals already, and Lupe keeps a vegetable garden. We just need to be sure it’s enough to feed everyone.”

“We can’t forget medical supplies,” he pointed out. “And everything else.”

“You need a scavenger team, too.” He nodded. “And an apocalypse captain.”

We both chuckled, but César ended his smile with an exhausted sigh.

“We can do this,” I reassured him. “This place is in the middle of nowhere. You have enough land and a crew who listens to you. We can live sustainably. Everything else... We’ll find a way.”

“More than ever, we need our connections.” He rested back on the chair. “The government is already crumbling.”

“Not that you ever gave them much attention.” I arched an eyebrow.

“Yeah, but it was there. This government, flawed as it is, was the pillar of this country. This virus shakes everything up. If everyone is right and we’re the only ones affected by this...?”

I bobbed my head. “A lot is about to change.”

César rose to his feet. “And we’re going to grow from it.”

A chill ran down my spine when he spoke. “What do you mean?”

“Cove City has no owner, the country is falling. It’s a good time to make big moves.”

He walked toward me, certainty in every step, his heavy boots scratching the floor, bringing goosebumps over my arms.

“I mean...” I lifted one shoulder.

César circled his arm around my waist and lifted me up to him. My legs went around him, our noses less than an inch apart. “Tell me I can’t,” he challenged.

I didn’t.

“They’re calling this a sinner’s sickness,” he said, grazing his teeth over the delicate skin of my neck. “If God’s left this country... all that’s left—”

“Are the devils.” I smiled.

“Was there ever a doubt you belonged here?” He eyed me hungrily.

I looked down, pushing him away as the need between my legs grew awake again. It was all I seemed to think about when César was in close proximity now.

“I need a shower,” I confessed, swatting him away.

“Sure.” Not waiting for another word, he took me in his arms and took me to the bathroom. I felt his muscles shaking under me, another sign of his own exhaustion.

“You need to eat too,” I said when he put me back on my two feet.

“I’ll eat after this,” he promised, pulling my shirt over my head.

“You need to take care of yourself.”

He chuckled and helped me out of my pants. “You can’t stop for a second?”

“Stop and let you take care of me?” I asked. He nodded and turned the shower on before removing his own clothes. “And leave my husband tired, hungry, and sleep deprived?” I arched an eyebrow.

He dropped his jeans, his cock hard already. “Say that again.”

“Sleep deprived?” I mocked.

César growled, circling my waist with his arm, bringing me under the spray. The warm water hit me at once, and I closed my eyes, letting my body melt, trusting him to keep me upright.

I brushed my wet hair out of my face, tilting my head up to look at him. “My husband.”

When he kissed me, it was gentle, slow, and delicate. I held onto his shoulders, and he took my mouth, seemingly too afraid to completely overwhelm me. He had said before that I was his, and I could feel it now, in the way his hands covered my body and the soft way his lips sought mine.

My muscles were sore, and he massaged them under the water. My body was still fragile, and he held me in his strong arms, keeping me steady.

“Hold here,” he whispered, taking my hand to rest on the tiles.

I followed his instructions and watched while he took the loofah and the soap before coming back to me and putting my hand on his shoulder.

He cleaned my shoulders first, down to my arms. I couldn't remember the last time someone thought I was worth caring for. My heart squeezed when he washed my breasts with selfless attention, making his way down my navel and my legs.

My hands shook, holding onto the tiles again as he knelt, his eyes serious while he bathed me in such an intimate way. The water ran down my shoulders, making a path over my nipples and finally dripping down as César finally looked up, an adoring expression taking over his beautiful face.

“I remember looking at you on our wedding day and thinking ‘who is this man I’m married to?’” I traced the word *Diablo* over his eyebrow.

“You thought you were too good for me,” he murmured as he stood.

I shook my head. “I don't think I'm better than anyone. I thought I knew the type of man who chose this kind of life. Until I met you...” I breathed, hugging him closer. “You made me weak, and I thought... so many men tried to break me, but you were the only one who truly could.”

César rested his forehead on mine, his lips brushed against mine as we stood there, frozen in time while the water washed our sins away.

“Thank you for being alive,” he whispered.

“Thank you for making sure I was.”

I could feel the pressure in the air shift, a simple look enough to tell me that the man who'd been my caretaker in sickness the last week was no longer present. In his place stood my husband again, admiring my naked body all to himself.

“So, you plan on being king of Cove City?” I asked as he dried me with a plush towel.

César hummed in approval, biting down on my lower lip. “It’s the work of immigrants to make the best in a shitty situation.”

I couldn’t hold back a loud laugh, and he growled and licked my neck, starving again. “You treat me like I’m fragile one second and want to fuck me like an animal the next.”

“You can take it.”

My knees nearly gave out at the low vibrato of his voice in my ear, but I told myself if I showed signs of weakness, he’d revert to treating me like a patient again.

He was right.

I could take him as many times as he needed me, in any position imaginable. I loved what our bodies did together, the feeling of his skin on mine, like I was born to be in his arms.

My body had been used again and again by greedy men, and with César, I wasn’t just willingly giving—he was drawing everything out of me. Pleasure, pain, sadness, fears.

I was relinquishing it all to him freely.

With nothing but time and each other and a heap of newfound trust, it was suddenly easy to open up, to tell him every single detail of what The Sidhe had put me through.

How, even in the face of death, I chose to protect my father, and when given the same option, he sold me. How Paul Kelly and his men defiled me, broke me, beat me, and caged me for a year of my life.

The only way to move past it was to kill the memory of the girl I was to become the woman I was now.

After days stuck in this bedroom, I thought I'd grow tired of him, but instead, I never felt so happy about our little bubble. Staying here gave me time to process all my new feelings for my husband. I wanted to be out there, to feel normal once again, but I secretly loved that he was taking his time taking care of me.

Without knowing it, he took the responsibility of containing the virus off my shoulders. There was a good chance I wasn't contagious anymore, but every time he force-fed me, checked my temperature, or made sure everything was okay, my shoulders relaxed and the anxiety left.

We needed to leave these four walls at some point. We had a life to go back to, and he had a club to manage. Still, strange as it seemed, this was the only honeymoon we ever had, locked away in this bedroom.

I let my guard down and allowed him to make decisions for me. To think, relinquishing power was my biggest fear, and now... I couldn't think of anything that felt this good.



“Are you sure?” I looked at the door like it was my enemy.

“It’s been a week since you burned up. No one else is sick. You’re good. Come on, blanca, it’s time.” I nodded but chewed on my lip as his shoulder bumped into mine. “I thought you wanted to go out.”

“I do. I do.” I nodded.

I couldn’t ignore the full anxiety attack that gripped me by the throat every time I had to make the decision to rejoin the group. Logically, I knew I was cured. This thing was out of my system, and I was stronger every day, but it was a lot of responsibility.

César waited for me, looking amused and not annoyed that I was taking so long to open a simple door. He let me overthink that moment, but eventually, my hand closed around the knob. I took a huge breath, and I stepped out of the room.

He followed me down the corridor, and I held my breath when Ladrón came to César without fear and patted his back.

“How you feelin’, Doc?” he asked with a smile. “It’s good to see you up and about.”

More than the shock I got when I realized I was in love with César Villalobos was realizing I loved his club, too. This group of criminals were my new family, the only family who ever gave a crap about me.

I carried so much fear at being responsible for their deaths, whether at the hands of The Sidhe or this virus. My overprotective ways could only mean one thing, really.

I loved the Diablos Locos like I loved their president.

A lot had changed since I’d walked through those doors. César’s hand closed on the back of my neck while he guided me down the stairs, making our way to the bar. As I suspected, everyone was around; some were having a beer, most of them just hanging out between club business.

Everyone looked at us, big smiles on most of their faces. It didn’t take long for the first glass to go up, and soon, the whole club was cheering for us.

Ladrón immediately pulled César off to the side, no doubt to catch him up on missed club business. I smiled and jumped to Chiqui’s side, who was talking to Lupe over a beer.

“So, you’re alive,” she said, passing me a drink.

I sighed and looked around me. The celebration, the old new faces... “Yeah, I’m alive.”

“Now Lupe can stop bitching about Asado Sundays. Ow!” ‘Mor barely had the chance to make the joke before she’d

smacked him with the back of a wooden spoon.

“You start fucking with traditions, you’ll see a whole mess of bad shit happen.” She pointed her superstitious finger knowingly.

“Yeah, yeah,” my husband said, draping an arm around me. “Asado Sundays can proceed as usual.”

“Come on, Doc, come take a shot!” Chiqui insisted.

“She just got better. Give the girl some time to turn water into blood again,” Lupe croaked.

“She’s not Jesus Christ, Mami,” Chiqui laughed, too infectious for me to ignore and not return.

César draped his arm around me protectively. “You got her shitfaced last time I left her at your bar.” He scowled at the club princess.

“The doc is a big girl, Lobo.” She waved his bullshit away, taking me by the hand.

“What do they say? Cú de bêbado,” Lupe huffed under her breath.

“Excuse me?” I laughed, hoping she’d repeat herself.

“Cú de bêbado não tem dono,” ‘Mor said, following us to the bar, his arm casually replacing where César’s had been. He was a hopeless flirt.

“It’s a Brazilian saying,” Chiqui explained. “It means—”

“A drunk’s asshole has no owner,” at least six voices chimed out simultaneously.

“You all rehearsed?” I said with amusement.

“No! My dad, Caipira, he used to say it all the time,” she said, just a trace of sadness in her eyes before she turned her shot over.

“To your father, then,” I said, lifting up a shot.

The rest followed, raising their own glasses in the air.

I was already on my second when I noticed César going down the basement steps, his officers at his side.



I hadn't slept in days. My entire body ached, and all I truly wanted was to be back upstairs, burying myself inside the Irish woman who now held my heart. Instead, Ladrón was sweating from unwillingly being bestowed far too much responsibility, and it was time for me to deal with the remnants of our old problems.

Kelly's kid was a loose end.

He stayed sitting on the ground, unbothered to acknowledge my presence. His head was dropped, chin down to his chest, one knee up, his elbow resting limply on it.

"Villalobos," he said without looking at me.

"You've made yourself at home, then," I noted.

"What do you want?"

“I haven’t decided yet. Have my men told you The Sidhe is gone?” I couldn’t help but curl my lip upwards into a smile.

His eyes narrowed, and his jaw set in a hard line.

“I guess not then.”

“The Sidhe will never be gone.” He finally turned his head toward me. “You kill the ones on Earth, and others come crawling from hell to take their place.”

“I guess we’ll just have to settle with ‘gone for now’.” I grasped one of the bars in my hand, wondering why he wasn’t giving me the reaction I expected.

“What do you want from me?” he asked again.

“I wanted to pummel you into the concrete with my fists,” I admitted. “Again. But my wife won’t let that happen. She said you aren’t to be blamed for your father’s sins.”

“Your wife seems to be the smartest woman in this operation.” He scoffed, his head turning in the opposite direction again.

“You aren’t wrong about that,” I smirked, walking around the cell and letting my fingers trail over each metal bar. “Convince me to let you live.”

He raised an eyebrow up. “I thought you said your wife wouldn’t let it happen?”

“Do you see her?” I gestured to the room, where only my enforcer and Ladrón stood

“Then kill me.”

“You one of those depressed ones?” I asked, snorting at the kid’s demeanor.

He turned his head to look at me once more. “Come back when you figure out what you want with me, Villalobos.”

There was a part of me that wanted to pull him out of the cell and knock some teeth out just for the audacity alone, but I’d made a promise to my wife, and it seemed like the kid was relatively innocent.

“Tell me what you knew about the warehouse.”

“That’s where he stored his merchandise,” he said, conveying the appearance he had no allegiance to his father left.

“You knew about the women?” I clenched my jaw shut, once again fighting the need to beat his face in. Emory said he was off limits, but she also didn’t know how much he knew.

“I never stepped foot inside that place.”

“Why don’t I believe you?” I scoffed.

“Believe what you want. Kill me, don’t kill me. Nothing will change either way, Diablo.”

Life had hardened me, and it was difficult to remember sometimes that the same situation that shaped you could ruin someone else.

The knife that sharpened steel, easily cut through flesh.

He was the son of the head of a major criminal organization, just like I had been. Lucky for me, the throne had never been

intended to be mine. That was the only thing that spared me.

Célia, my sister, wasn't so lucky.

"We'll see," I said just as my phone rang.

Speak of the Devil. In this case, she was a woman.

"Finish up here and have Emory come up to my room when she's done," I instructed my enforcer. I walked up the stairs, finding that most people had dispersed, and the festivities had already wended down.

"Habla," I answered, knowing I summoned her myself just by letting her invade my thoughts.

"I got your invite, but there wasn't anywhere to RSVP," Célia chuckled.

"The expectation is for you to show up."

"I'm not stepping an inch over the border until this shit is cleaned up. Estás loco?" She laughed.

"I can't believe you're going to miss your big brother's wedding," I teased.

"Hermanito, let me remind you that you skipped out on my wedding, too," She huffed with annoyance.

"You married three men. I didn't think you needed a fourth around."

"Funny," she said in a flat tone.

"I won't hold it against you, since these pendejos won't open the borders, but I know you have the means to cross over.

I have some plans I think we need to discuss soon. Face to face,” I told her.

She sighed. “You’re a stubborn hijo de puta, ‘mano. I just want to make sure whatever you’re planning isn’t going to cost you more than you can afford to lose. I hear bad things are happening on the other side of the border.”

“Were safe here. Grimm’s Reach is a stronghold,” I reassured her, my eyes traveling up to my wife, who was leaning against the open door with a lusty look on her face. “I gotta go.”

“I’ll see you soon, César. Give your wife my best.”

“Give them to her yourself.”

“Do not pass the phone to that evil redhead,” my sister pleaded on speaker. “I’m not in the mood for her lectures. I can’t afford to be on Emory’s bad side.” She laughed before hanging up.

“She’s been ghosting her therapist for weeks and thought I wouldn’t find out,” my wife explained, shaking her head.

“Célia is like that. She stops taking the medicine when she thinks she’s cured.”

“Don’t we all?”

“I don’t want to talk about my sister anymore.” I walked towards her, and she lifted an eyebrow.

Her hair was lighter now, not yet back to the beautiful red color I loved so much, but it was fading. Chiqui promised that

the color wouldn't last more than a couple of weeks. She would start to look more like herself soon.

“Let's go for a ride.”

I watched her through hooded eyes, rubbing the stubble on my chin with two fingers while I waited for an answer.

“Out there?” she asked, attempting to remind me that we'd just contained this thing again.

“No, within the gates. I want to show you your kingdom.” I grinned, rubbing the tip of my tongue over the diamond on my canine.

Her eyes went straight to it.

She bit her lip, nodding before she ran to the closet to put on the riding boots Chiqui handed down to her.

“That's a hell of an outfit, corazón.” I eyed her from head to toe.

She was wearing a flowery sundress I'd never seen before. It looked like her, but maybe a version of her I'd never gotten the chance to know. It felt right to see it, though, to get to experience these little pieces of her she was letting free again. She paired the dress with leather boots and a matching jacket. She looked hot as hell, sinful, yet like she didn't mind pretending she was sweet somewhere deep down.

The only thing sweet about Emory O'Connor was the way her pussy tasted. Perfect demeanor for her position as the first lady of our club, as tradition held.

I pressed her against the wall, sliding my knee between her legs. She parted her lips, and I dove right in, shoving my tongue inside her mouth as my hand found its way up her skirt. Her legs were soft, freshly shaved and begging to be touched.

I slipped my fingers between her thighs, and she parted willingly, letting her head drop back into the wall as I slid up and down, coating her most sensitive parts with her arousal.

“Fuck me,” she whimpered.

“Soon,” I chuckled, pulling my fingers back and slapping her swollen cunt.

“*What?*” she protested in shock.

“I told you, let’s go for a ride.” I tilted my head towards the door.



He stood at the doorway waiting for me to pass by, his palm smacking my ass cheek just as I crossed the threshold.

“Ah!” I yelped, a spark of heat finding its way between my legs.

He narrowed his eyes at me, eyebrows furrowed like he was deep in thought. He ran back inside the room and in just a few seconds, he was right back out into the hallway, closing the door behind us and shoving something into the pocket inside of his cut.

Probably a gun.

I rolled my eyes. What did he expect to find out here while showing me the property? Was he going to shoot down some rattlesnakes? Knife some unsuspecting racoons? I snorted

under my breath as we made our way down the clubhouse steps and out the door.

It was peaceful now, an air of calm throughout the compound. No one bickered or fought, like we were all just grateful to be alive and together. I'd even convinced César to drop his resentment for Hálcon. Sure, he wasn't my favorite biker, and I would probably never grow on him... but he'd done what he thought was best for the club, what I'd asked of him.

You couldn't punish loyalty.

Still, there was rift there, a divide between them that couldn't be ignored, and there was nothing that could be done but wait for the ground to crack under their feet and push them apart.

I placed the helmet over my head, but before I could sit at the front, he took the place instead, letting me know I'd be riding behind him. My heart was pounding in my throat; there was something about this that was almost too monumental to encapsulate into words.

He turned his chin to look at me, despite the helmet shield covering my eyes. It was as if he was staring straight into my soul, past all the lies I'd built to protect me. He knew me, he saw me, and I saw him.

I was his, and he was mine.

I wrapped my arms around his waist, clutching tight before he turned his head forward and started the bike. The throttle of

the engine was powerful beneath me, the rumbling vibrating deep between my legs. My hands instinctively lowered to the outline of his cock through his jeans. Unable to stop myself, I ran my fingers over it, giving a hard squeeze.

The bike swerved hard when he let go to move my hand back up to his stomach. He grabbed hold of the handlebar once more, steadying the bike as I buried my head into his back.

My face felt hot, and I was thankful the helmet could hide my expression.

César began his tour of the compound, lining the perimeter as we drove past the gates and the pigsty. There was a thicket of trees, and despite the loud hum of the bike and the noise of the tires against the dirt, you could hear the loud splashing of water.

A waterfall.

The trees opened up to a barren cliff with a singular tree near the edge. César came to a slow stop and lowered the kickstand down. A massive blue hole sat below the cliff's edge, nearly twenty feet below us.

He stepped off the bike, extending his hand to me to help me down.

I left the helmet on, and his eyebrows furrowed as he stared through the visor, trying to read my face for any tells. My breath hitched as he stepped forward, our chest pressing against each other with every inhale.

He was devastatingly beautiful. Annoyingly smart. Cunning as hell. He had complete control over how my body responded to his presence, and like a trained dog, my thighs squeezed together, already desperate for some form of release.

All I ever thought about now was him inside me, how delicious he felt stretching me open, the way he tasted on my tongue after burying himself inside me.

“I thought you were showing me the property,” I gulped, taking a few steps forward.

“I’ve shown you plenty. Turn around,” he commanded, no hesitation or self-doubt in his voice.

I didn’t hesitate or protest. He turned me around, the front of the bike’s tire now between my legs as he folded me over. I held onto the handlebars for support, his hands lifting up my skirt, a low growl coming from his throat at the sight of my exposed ass.

He knew who he was, and he knew who he reigned over.

I gasped at the feeling of his hot hand trailing up my thigh, helmet still on, and I turned my head back to look at him.

He was famished, and I would be his next meal.

I’d been wet since he cornered me in the bedroom, but now, I was uncomfortably soaked and needy for some sort of relief.

“Tell me who that pussy was made for,” he demanded, his knee finding its way beneath me, grazing against my clit and sending an electrifying surge of pleasure up my spine.

“You,” I moaned, dropping my head between the handlebars, my legs already shaking in anticipation for more of his touch.

I felt my panties tear as he ripped them at the sides, pulling them away before slipping his fingers once again between my folds.

“Fuck. Look at you, dripping all over my tires, blanca. There was never a doubt in my mind that it was always for me.”

I heard the zipper of his pants, and the familiar feel of his thick cock pressed against my entrance. I gripped the handles tighter as he snapped his hips forward, pushing back to meet the full length of his dick inside me.

“Oh God,” I moaned.

He pulled back an inch, reaching between my legs to stroke the bundle of nerves waiting for his touch. My legs jolted at the feeling, trembling from the pleasure such a small touch could provide. César knew my body now—he’d spent the last few days discovering everything that made me burn, and he would use that power however he damn well pleased.

I exhaled heavily at the feeling of him stretching me to the brim, the inside of the helmet fogging up. He continued, finding the right pace, where just a few intentional strokes were enough to make my head spin and make me beg for mercy.

“Fuck, please! César!” I wasn’t even sure if he could hear my words clearly, but he kept going, mercilessly thrusting inside of me until drool slid out between my lips.

“From the first time I saw you, I knew you’d be mine, Emory.” His hand gripped my hip tighter while the other coated itself in the slickness between us.

He continued to explore, his fingers competing for space with his cock as he attempted to push his fingers inside me.

“You were worth every headache, blanca,” he groaned, his fingers sliding their way up higher and pressing against the rim of my ass. “Every inch of you belongs to me.”

I nodded, barely finding the strength to muster out a response as every thrust of his hips was like lightning inside me. The need to explode, to let go of the pressure inside, was immense.

“Don’t come yet,” he insisted, his hand on my hip moving away.

I looked back to find him reaching into his cut. What I thought had been a gun was now blatantly just a bottle of lube. I choked out a laugh. He scowled, pulling my helmet off immediately and throwing it into the ground before he sank his teeth into the side of my neck.

“Ah!” I groaned at the feeling of sharp, burning pain just as he pulled my hips back, his cock somehow finding its way deeper inside me than ever before.

It was a back and forth of pain and pleasure. Every time he pulled out slightly, he loosened his bite. Once he sheathed his way in again, he bit down with more pressure. Hot magma built up in my core, threatening to unleash itself in a powerful wave.

“I need to come,” I gasped.

“Not yet,” he growled, his fingers leaving my clit.

I didn't have time to be disappointed or frustrated. His fingers found their way back to my asshole, now slick and coated in the lube.

“Breathe,” he reminded me before slipping both fingers through the tight barrier.

“Oh fuck!” I moaned, loving the way he filled me up.

Back and forth, he moved skillfully, pressing down against the thin barrier that separated his fingers from his cock.

“Come for me, corazón,” he pleaded in my ear.

The sensation was too much to ignore. I quaked in his hold, my hands still gripping the handlebars tightly, the rest of my body collapsing onto the bike, forcing him to hold me up as he fucked me senseless through my orgasm until he reached his own.

He held me up, the two of us breathing together as we slowly came back to Earth.

“I want to marry you again,” he said, still panting and buried deep inside of me.

“What?” I laughed.

“I want to marry you again, officially.”

“We got married in a church. We signed papers. It was as official as it gets,” I reminded him.

“Nah, the only kind of ‘official’ that counts around here is the kind the club can witness. Marry me in front of my family. Be my ol’ lady,” he clarified.

“With you deep enough inside of me to touch my guts, how can I deny it?” I smirked.

“You’re a doctor. You know damn well I’m about seven inches deep,” he growled in my ear.



The proof I was really a Diablo was that I didn’t even flinch when Chiqui pointed the gun directly at the glass window of the bridal shop. I just whooped when it shattered at our feet.

I still looked left to right while the other girls boldly entered the shop like this was something they did every other day.

“Relax,” Chiqui tapped me on the back. “They evacuated this little town months ago. Whoever was left...” She shrugged and trailed off.

Towns like this were all over the country now, small communities too far from the big cities to have access to proper medical care. They watched their families and neighbors die one by one, unable to do anything to help those who contracted the fever.

Most of these abandoned towns were rural with very little resources, but this one had a bridal shop.

“Ah, Chiqui, you burned a hole right through this one.” Naya complained, grabbing the dress at the front window, murdered by Chiqui’s gun.

“Doc’s not the princess gown type, right?” Chiqui checked over her shoulder.

I shrugged.

“I can try to fix it if you are,” Judith offered with a shaky voice.

Naya eyed her suspiciously. Judith was the only one from The Sidhe’s rescued girls who was able to talk and interact somewhat easily with us. Most of the girls left the compound quickly, preferring the unknown rather than the help of strangers. Who could blame them after what they had been through?

Judith, though, had remained.

Maybe the world was too screwed up for her to attempt to find normalcy once again. Maybe she knew she wouldn't be the same anymore.

I knew that feeling well.

Different from the other girls who'd been rescued, Judith was brash, cynical, and refused to talk about her time with The Sidhe. Since arriving, she'd made a point to dive into any activity that brought her further from her emotions. I understood her more than anyone I ever met.

“Okay, okay... What kind of dress are you looking for?” Chiqui asked, her hand softly sweeping through the line of lace hung at the right side of the store.

I lifted a shoulder. “Something simple.”

Judith took a puffy dress off the rail. “So nothing like this?”

I chuckled and shook my head.

In reality, I'd never thought about this moment, this milestone. I never had close friends who I'd bring wedding dress shopping with me. The first time we got married, I grabbed a white dress from the first shop I saw and called it a day. That first wedding now seemed a lifetime long ago.

I was a different person back then. I wouldn't say time with a motorcycle club softened me—I was going to steal my wedding dress after all—but I knew I wasn't alone in the world anymore. I wasn't afraid of getting close to people, to let them see the real me.

“You like lace?” Chiqui pressed.

“Maybe. Nothing that looks like my nan’s tablecloth, though.”

The girls chuckled as we started looking through the dresses. It was a small shop, and not all of them fit me perfectly, though Chiqui tried to assure me that Lupe could alter it for me.

Eventually, I found the one on my third try. No lace, off shoulder, form-fitting, and it wrapped around me like a glove. Simple, but it made me feel like a bride.

I packed it securely in a dress bag before we took off in the same way we arrived: fast, hard, and slightly unhinged. B&E and robbery aside, it was a successful girl’s trip.



I never considered myself a romantic, but here I was, getting ready for a second wedding to the same man. If that wasn’t a love story begging to be told, then what was? I pinned my hair back and gazed in the mirror, trying to find something out of place.

My fingers trembled as I put one earring on before the other, eyeing my exposed collar in the mirror. I looked serene, royal, peaceful. Inside, though, I tried to contain the butterflies swarming. I shouldn't be so nervous. It didn't matter how I looked, or how the party was going to be.

Today, I was marrying the man I fell in love with. No pretenses, no fear. It was only me and César, saying yes to each other in front of our family.

A knock took me out of my thoughts. I looked at the door just in time to see Lupe, a rare but gentle smile on her lips.

“I know you wanted to get ready by yourself...”

“Come in.” I nodded.

She scraped the floor by dragging the chair all the way to reach mine, and by the time she sat down, my eyes couldn't move from the leather she had folded between her hands.

“Now, it's tradition for you to get a new one, but we can't get anything new made right now,” she explained, waving to the outside world. “I can't let you get married without it.”

A crease formed between my brows for just a second, but when she unfolded what she brought, I smiled.

In her hands, she held a cut just like César's and the rest of the brothers, heavy leather and perfectly embroidered with the club's logo. On the back, it read “Property of the President.”

“This belonged to me for the last thirty years.”

“Lupe...” I sighed, shaking my head. This was too precious. I couldn’t take that big of a memory from her.

“Don’t be stupid, Emory,” she chastised in that very Lupe way. “This belongs to the President’s ol’ lady. That’s you.”

“Yes.” I smiled, my fingers over the thick stitches over the back. “That’s me.”

My entire life, this had been my biggest fear, to be labeled as someone property. I was so dumb, I didn’t understand that when you truly belonged to someone, they belonged to you right back.

“You’ll be okay walking down the aisle on your own? I can get Calaveras here,” Lupe asked, standing up.

“I’ve been on my own my entire life.” I nodded. “It’s fitting that I do it for the last time now.”

She dipped her chin and reached for the door. “Whenever you’re ready.”

I smiled and breathed in slowly when the door clicked closed.

With the remainder of Lupe’s dahlia-garden fashioned into a bouquet in my hands, I walked down the stairs alone, breathing slowly. Anyone would have given me away if I’d asked, but walking towards César felt like something I needed to do alone.

I’d done it so many times before. When I needed help, when I needed to be safe. When I said I didn’t want to do it, even

when I denied liking him. Through my worst times, I ran and ended up in his arms.

The courtyard was decorated with lights, a breath-taking scene right in the middle of the compound. As I turned right and reached the red carpet, they all stood, and the music started. ‘Mor strummed the guitar to some ancient *Death Cab for Cutie*, and I slowly stepped toward my husband.

The leather cut covering my delicate white dress felt heavier than ever as I approached him, smiling at every Diablo watching me. My hands strangled the dahlias, and when I looked up, my eyes found his eyes from afar. My mouth watered at the sight of him: black button up shirt, black pants, and those heavy boots, his cut sitting perfectly on his broad shoulders.

Ungodly to behold.

Lupe was officiating today, her expression letting me know that César had spoken the truth. Even if we *were* married legally before, it really did mean more this time around.

Once I reached them, ‘Mor’s guitar stopped, and the Diablos watching took their seats. César stepped closer, no secrets, just love trapped inside the dark of his eyes. I bit my lip, and nothing came out, afraid if I said one word, I would let the emotions win.

“Sit the fuck down,” Lupe said.

We chuckled at her tone, and while throughout the whole ceremony, she made the moment nothing but perfect, it was

my new husband I couldn't stop watching.

My ol' man.

His eyes, the way they watched me like I was in trouble. At some point, he came closer, his fingers trailing over the cut. He was still unable to see the back, but it was like he felt it. It was the opposite of who I thought I was, and yet... I'd never felt more like myself, finally free to be whatever I wanted to be.

I wanted to be his.

César took the rings from his pocket, offering me one when it was time. His coarse hand was warm as it wrapped over mine, and my shoulders relaxed at the contact.

He was my safe place.

I carefully slid the ring on, repeating the words instructed by Lupe. "I'll always be yours. Always be true. Always and forever."

He arched an eyebrow, a smirk covering his lips when I rolled my eyes. Then, he took my ring and slid it around my finger. "Blood of my heart, pride of my soul."

"Orgullo y sangre," Calaveras boomed from the side.

"Orgulho e sangue!" "Mor and a few others rivaled.

"Bród agus fuil!" I smirked in response.

César laughed loudly, his head thrown back. "Bringing a little culture, blanca?"

I shrugged, like I hadn't searched online for how to say that in Irish just the other day.

Lupe cleared her throat. "Now, for the last time, I declare you husband and wife. You may kiss the fuckin' bride."

Before I could even look around, César threw his arm around me, bringing me close and kissing me hard.

The people celebrated all around us. Speakers blasted music from afar, and I smiled between his kisses, his tongue tangled with mine. My whole body filled with heat, wanting more from him, and I wasn't sure I'd ever be satisfied.

When we came back up for air, everyone was moving the chairs and setting up space for the party. Our embrace turned into a dance, no one in the world but us.

"I finally got you," he whispered between my lips.

"You've had me for a long time now," I chuckled.

He twirled me, humming under his breath before his teeth closed on my earlobe. "I'm gonna fuck you so hard tonight, just this cut on and nothing else."

I nodded, eager, licking my lips at the thought.

THE END.



Epilogue

Two years later

Wearing my cut with my cock deep inside her ass was the way I liked her best. The virus had slowed down now, becoming more of a minor inconvenience than the wrecking ball it had once been in our lives.

Despite the rest of the world's best effort to keep this shitstorm contained in our hellmouth of a country, it eventually leaked out, the second year being nearly three times as worse as the first.

Mutations and all.

Nearly half the population was gone now, but Diablos remained, strong and united.

It was a bitter pill to swallow, profiting from what was bringing so much misery to so many, but as outcasts and immigrants, we knew we could use the opportunity to grow our wings.

We'd make the best of this.

Right now, though, all I wanted to do was make the redhead on top of me come her brains out. She ground against me, her pussy rubbing for friction over my stomach as she moved up and down on my cock.

"You need more?" I grinned, waiting for her to beg for it. She nodded. "Say it, blanca."

“Please, Papi. More.” I licked my bottom lip, her eyes following my tongue before she glanced over to the nightstand.

I reached into the drawer, pulling out the strap and her favorite appendage. She wet her lips hungrily, lifting up to allow me to get it situated over my hips.

“Look at you, dripping all over me. My filthy fucking doctor,” I growled, sitting up just to wrap my arms around her and devour her in a passionate kiss.

She mumbled incoherently with every stroke in and out of her ass, the vibrating dildo resting against her pussy, sliding back and forth over her clit. She wrapped her hands around my biceps, her sharp red nails digging into my skin just as I turned the vibration on, a scream ripping from her throat.

“Don’t you dare fucking come yet.” My hand found its way to her neck, where I gently pressed my thumb against the side of her throat.

Her eyes grew wide, and she lifted her hips off me. With my free hand, I guided the rubber dick into her cunt, so wet and waiting to be filled.

“God, yes,” she cried, throwing her head back as she settled fully over the vibrator, both holes filled to the brim.

“Fuck,” I exhaled, the buzzing strong enough to reach my cock and push me closer to my own climax. “You were made to take my cock, blanca.”

We moved together, frantically searching for release, eyes burning into each other as we surrendered to the overwhelming pleasure. I let go of her throat, a stuttered cry escaping her lips just as she came. Her ass squeezed my cock, and I pulled the strap out just in time for the gush of her release to cover my stomach.

“I’ll never get tired of watching you come.” I brought her down to me, still thrusting slowly as she continued to seize from the aftershocks.

My balls tightened, my core readied itself, and soon, I was there with her, pumping my cum inside of her with one final thrust.

The knock came far too well timed, too suspicious to think that they hadn’t been waiting for the opportune moment to disrupt.

I opened the door, still in my boxers, but my wife was already in jeans, buttoning up her top.

Fucking prospect.

“This better be fucking good,” I warned.

“There’s a problem.”

I threw my pants on as fast as possible, rushing downstairs to see Calaveras coming through the clubhouse doors with something in his arms.

No. *Someone*.

Emory gasped, pushing me aside, realizing before anyone else that something was far too wrong. The thing in his arms was shaking violently, that much was obvious. ‘Mor and André were right behind him, serious expressions on all three of their faces.

“Doc...” The deep rumble came from my enforcer’s mouth, and my wife rushed to his side.

He was so big, he needed to crouch so she could get a proper look, making it easier for all of us to see the woman in his arms.

Emory brushed her dark hair away, revealing an array of bruises, her face swollen from a merciless beating. She looked weak, her eyes fluttering closed, like someone who was giving up the fight.

“Hey, can you hear me? You’re okay now,” Emory said softly.

“What’s happening? Where did you find her?” I asked them.

André looked at ‘Mor, who didn’t have smile on his lips for the first time in a long while. He shook his head with a calm that chilled me to my bones. Everyone looked to Calaveras, waiting for an explanation, but his gaze was glued to the girl.

She moved in his arm, took a painful breath, and opened her eyes before she smiled serenely. “Finally.”



Coming soon: No Mercy for the Depraved

**“The Devil rules here now, and there will be no mercy
for the depraved.”**



If you enjoyed book 1 of Diablos Locos Motorcycle Club,
please consider leaving a **review**.

(It helps indie authors like us get our books into more
readers hands!)

LUPE'S SANCOCHO

INGREDIENTS

1lb beef flank - chuck, or round [0.45 kg] cut into small pieces

1lb goat meat [0.45 kg] cut into small pieces

1lb pork for stews - belly, or chump end [0.45 kg] cut into small pieces

Juice of 2 limes

1 tsp minced cilantro or parsley

$\frac{1}{2}$ tsp oregano (dry, ground) powdered

1 tsp garlic crushed

$\frac{1}{2}$ tsp salt

4 tbsp vegetable oil

1lb chicken [0.45 kg] cut into small pieces

1lb pork ribs [0.45 kg] cut into small pieces

1lb bones from a smoked ham [0.45 kg] cut into small pieces

1lb pork sausage longaniza [0.45 kg] cut into small pieces

2 corn cob cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch slices, optional

$\frac{1}{2}$ lb auyama (kabocha squash) (auyama) cut into 1-inch pieces [0.23 kg]

3 plantain (green, unripe) peeled, 2 cut into 1-inch pieces, one left whole

$\frac{1}{2}$ lb ñame (yam) cut into 1-inch pieces [0.23 kg]

$\frac{1}{2}$ lb yautia (malanga) cut into 1-inch pieces [0.23 kg]

$\frac{1}{2}$ lb yuca (cassava) cut into 1-inch pieces [0.23 kg]

DIRECTIONS:

1. PLACE THE FUCKING BEEF, PORK, AND GOAT MEAT IN A LARGE BOWL AND SEASON WITH LIME JUICE, CILANTRO (OR PARSLEY), OREGANO, GARLIC, AND A TSP OF SALT. SEASON IT GOOD, NONE OF THAT GRINGO SHIT. COAT MEAT WITH THE SEASONING AND LET IT MARINATE FOR AN HOUR, ANY LESS YOU MIGHT AS WELL THROW IT IN THE TRASH.
2. IN A BIG ASS POT HEAT THE OIL OVER HIGH HEAT, ADD THE SEASONED MEATS, AND STIR (THE OIL IS HOT IDIOT). COOK STIRRING UNTIL BROWNEED. ADD THE REMAINING MEATS (CHICKEN, PORK RIBS, HAM BONES, PORK SAUSAGE) AND CORN, AND COOK STIRRING FOR A COUPLE OF MINUTES.
3. LOWER HEAT TO MEDIUM AND POUR 1/2 GALLON [2.5 LT] OF WATER. SIMMER UNTIL IT BREAKS THE BOIL.
4. ONCE THE WATER BREAKS THE BOILS, ADD AUYAMA, CHOPPED PLANTAIN, AND ROOT VEGETABLES (ÑAME, YAUTÍA, YUCA). GRATE, OR SCRAPE WITH THE KNIFE THE REMAINING PLANTAIN TO MAKE IT INTO A PULP, AND ADD TO THE POT.
5. SIMMER COVERED OVER LOW HEAT UNTIL THE LAST INGREDIENTS YOU ADDED ARE COOKED THROUGH, IT SHOULD HAVE THICKENED A BIT TOO. IF IT DRIES TOO MUCH, ADD WATER AS NECESSARY, OR SIMMER UNCOVERED TO REDUCE IF IT IS NOT THICK ENOUGH FOR YOU.



About the authors

Santana Knox is the pen name of a Brazilian writer, neuro-divergent creative, follower of Santa Muerte and self acclaimed Witch who emerges from the foulest swamp bogs to bring you even filthier stories. Santana got tired of letting the voices in her head drive her crazy, and decided to write down the stories they were begging to tell instead. A lover of the unusual, and a hopeless romantic when it comes to toxic villains, Santana's books should always be taken with a grain of salt, specifically the kind that keeps demons away.

Join Santana's cult (Reading group) for bonus content, early looks, and sneak previews: Santana Knox's Heathens on facebook.

Instagram: @Santana.knox

Amy Oliveira loves writing about strong Latina leads and the quiet brooding men who can't help but fall for them. A hopeless romantic, Amy married the same man three times in three dresses and two different countries. If anything, that should be enough credentials to write romance. You can find her in the wild reading too many alien romance books, watching reality TV shows and ignoring small talk.

Instagram: @AmyOliveira.author

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Angie- Amiga, eu te amo. Nunca vou parar de agradecer a o universo para ter posto você no meu caminho.

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