

Chapter 1

Juárez, Mexico - 1995

Maria faced the warehouse, inhaling the last breath of fresh air she would enjoy until she trudged back out at dawn. Just looking at the poorly ventilated hotbox made her feel sluggish before setting foot inside. *Ándale, Maria. Be grateful. It's only for a few more months. I don't know where we'll be, but it won't be here. Anywhere but here.* The financial and political instability only deepened by the day giving Maria little confidence in what her future would be in Mexico with assassinations, currency devaluation, violent insurrections. She didn't recognize her home or what the world was calling the Peso Crisis.

The rusty front door let out an ear-piercing screech as she forced herself inside, the final rays of sunlight making her co-workers squint, each already at their sewing machines. "Hola, chicas," she shouted over the clip-clapping of the machines.

Big Boss was in his office watching some sports event on the crackling fuzzy TV. Pictures of naked women covered the walls, making Maria shudder. There he was, relishing his fistfuls of power while they all scrambled to make a living. "You're late," he barked, barely sparing her a glance. No cameras aimed their lenses at her, so she flipped the middle finger behind his back as she continued onto the middle of the factory floor. Maria never told her husband, Diego, that Big Boss still managed to sneak in his backside slaps or lecherous winks when he thought no one was looking. This seemed like a small price to pay for a job - a job that would get them to the States. These days, people lurked at every corner ready to suck her dry. If it wasn't Big Boss, it was the coyotes - and if it wasn't either of those, then there would be La Migra to deal with.

The Coyotes. Their prices were as high as their promises to get you into The States with no problems. She toyed with the idea of taking extra hours at the bakery with Mamá, but she was so tired and sick all the time. Once she reached twelve weeks, they would be across the border by any means necessary. No, she couldn't take the extra hours, as much as she wanted the money, because she would need every bit of strength for a journey that often ended in death.

It was the usual skeleton crew of five working that night. There were only five because the even Bigger Bosses didn't like to pay overtime, but their quota had to be met somehow. At night, temperatures dropped, and it was quiet enough to listen to Selena Quintanilla or Conversational English tapes while working. Tapping feet to "Como La Flor" or repeating English phrases under her breath made the monotonous work bearable. Today they were making cheap ugly red ties sold at a price they could only afford after a month's wages. Even though this was the easiest shift of the day there was nothing easy about maquiladora work.

What felt like hours passed. The muscles in her back and shoulders began to spasm and sweat gathered underneath her braided hair. She didn't want to lose momentum to stretch or scratch her head, fearing Boss's attention for not making her count. Selena began to sing "Bidi Bidi Bom Bom" when the screech of the heavy door broke the room's silent concentration. Maria turned to see Big Boss guiding three men inside, being careful to keep his distance as he did so. If Boss was afraid of these strangers, it couldn't be good. He pointed to the clock hanging on the wall and ran off. The revving of his car as he pulled away was distinct. There would be no one to help them now.

Two of the men were Mexican or South American; she could tell by their shiny silver-tipped animal skin boots, dark jeans and large hats. The third had to be white. From what Maria could see he was handsome with wavy light chestnut brown hair, soft blue eyes and a

perfect cupid's bow for lips. He dressed like an American soap or pop star in a silk shirt, matching jacket and stylish dress shoes. The gringo walked the factory floor looking at the faces of the five women and his surroundings in mild disgust while the other two chuckled amongst themselves. The girls were dumbstruck and fearful because Juárez and its body count was notorious for good reason.

"Mujeres," one of the laughing men shouted out. "Let's have some fun!"

The other rifled through a stack of cassettes before choosing one for the tape player located just outside the office. He pushed play and turned the volume up as loud as the crappy speakers would allow. "Devil Inside" by INXS started to play. "This one's for you, gringo!" he yelled.

The women were out of their seats and huddled together against the office's glass window. With a mother's instinct, Maria grabbed her belly. *No, no, no*, she thought. Not now, not before this little six-week-old life had a chance, her little mustard seed of faith in everything that was good in this miserable world.

Before she had a chance to join the group, one of the strangers hurled headfirst into the women. Blood and screams splattered everywhere. The nearly empty factory amplified the sounds of their terror. Maria's co-workers tried to run for the door, but the men blocked their way. One made silly faces like you would to a baby, toying with them while dancing to the music.

Backing towards the end of the factory floor she tried to make herself as small and unnoticed as possible. Her bladder cramped as fear seized every fibre of her being. If she recalled correctly, there was another door, a fire exit. As the two dark men tore into her co-workers again she white-knuckled one hand over her mouth and the other over her belly as if she could cast some protective spell over both. One for silence; one for safety. The gringo watched on, bored and impatient as he continually checked his watch before placing his hands back into his pockets.

As if in slow motion, one of the now-bloodied strangers pointed straight at Maria. His wide smile was smeared with blood and white points protruded where normal teeth should have been. Maria ran towards the fire door, but a thick chain snaked around the handle, a large bolt latched on the front like an evil present wrapped with a metal bow. Prayers flooded past her lips as she pulled on the unrelenting chains.

"Your turn, amigo," someone called to the gringo. "We break bread tonight. Show us you're serious about our deal!"

As they continued picking through the nearly lifeless bodies, the blue-eyed devil with an angel's mouth looked at Maria with eyes that looked like they hadn't slept in years. She hoped whatever he had in mind would be quick. He didn't seem to have the same wild appetite as the others.

He grabbed a red silk tie from one of the boxes as he approached her. The others continued to feed and terrorise, but still managed to shout encouragements. "You tying her up? Kinky! It's always the quiet types!"

Those blue eyes narrowed at this comment, suddenly coming alive, his anger obvious. Maria couldn't understand -- if he disliked this pointless slaughter, then why was he allowing it? Desperate to survive, she searched for whatever she could find lying nearby as a weapon. All she found was a pitiful metal stool. The man walked towards her in a slow, calm manner, as if he was approaching a tamed rabid dog just waiting to strike.

"Please don't fight me. You will only make things worse. We don't want them to become involved."

Somehow, she believed him. His voice proved he was not local or American. He had an accent you would hear in historic films set in a country far away. English. He opened pale pink lips to reveal two small points stabbing downwards. A gasp fled her throat as she

dropped the useless stool and reached for the turquoise cross around her neck. These men, these *things* were not men looking for sex, they were out for blood.

He rolled his eyes, pushing the cross back to her chest. Her hands and arms went limp under his cold vice like grasp. But she wouldn't be taken that easy. Not like this, not here. If her life meant anything in this world she would walk out of here alive. Unable to move, she resorted to biting his hand while stomping on his gleaming shoes as hard as her foot would allow. *Maybe* by the sacred heart of Jesus she could just make it past the others and out the door. Not a drop of blood from his skin or welp of pain from his mouth. The stranger's eyes and voice trembled, "*Please*, I beg you. Don't do this. I will drain you and it will be over."

"Hurry, lover boy, we don't have all night," his companions joked.

He pulled his bitten hand away to wipe away her saliva and proceeded to pull her from the door with the other. Crouching on the floor, she did her best to resist being pulled towards the hungry demons nearby. She wouldn't go without trying to fight back for her baby. The creature lifted her as if she weighed no more than a small child. More music played loudly, and she heard the clink of shot bottles. The others must have found Boss's stash of tequila. Still bound and trying to wiggle away, the man lowered her onto the sewing table. He looked over his shoulder, then to Maria completely cool and calm. From the weight of his arms she knew the fight was over. There was no way out. How arrogant she was to think she mattered at all. The stupidity in her big plan to shake off this town and her unremarkable existence. Her mother was right all along.

"Como te llamas?" the stranger whispered as he caressed her cheek like a lover. His eyes darted across her face as though reading a poem about heartbreak. Maria's voice cracked, but she managed to whisper, "Maria."

He glanced back at his companions again. "Do you want to live in death? I've never saved anyone in my life and I'm not about to start now. I only give you a gift. Do you want my gift?" "Sí," she answered with hope as small as the child inside of her. Maybe the Sacred Heart still burned. Her tears drenched the stranger's fingers. Maria's fear throbbed and writhed inside as she wondered what would happen next. The stranger reached for a pair of scissors lying on the table. With a swift motion, he sliced open his wrist. Before she could react, his body was leaning over her and two long needles for teeth punctured her neck. A roar of laughter and howling filled her ears as the warmth drained from her skin. Pinpricks of pain dotted her body.

This was the end. The end of Diego, their baby, The States, night school, a good job. This was the death of the only dream she had ever dared to dream. Maria could feel her eyes become heavy while a small tide of blood moved down her throat, nearly choking her.

The gringo placed his hand over her lips. "Don't move until we leave. Your boss will be back soon, so I hope you enjoy your vengeance, Maria." A wicked smile, and then he closed her eyes. She kept them shut.

"We didn't think you had it in you!" The other two were still revelling in their killing spree. "You old vamps are all the same. You forget how to party!"

Maria lay on the sewing table, trying to still her quivering body and laboured breath. Twenty minutes passed before the pain began. Deep cramps radiated from her lower belly to her back, like tiny fists armed with knives trying to punch through her guts. Waves upon waves of torment pulled at her body like a lethal undertow, then stopped just as suddenly as they had started. A pool of warmth settled between her legs. Her jeans were wet, and the truth suddenly hit her like a punch to the face. Her mustard seed – her spark of life – was gone.

Maria placed her hand over her mouth, sealing in guttural sobs of loss and grief. She didn't know what to do besides lodging her fist between her lips to contain any sound. The heartache so deep, teeth broke the skin over her knuckles leaving little spots of blood. She hadn't realized saving her own life meant ending another. Those pinche good-for-nothing

English tapes. No longer able to contain the despair, she let out a soul-rending cry until the cords of her neck felt like they were about to snap. She didn't care if the monsters saw or heard her, but she doubted anyone remained with her in that metal tomb any longer. Maria grabbed her abuelita's turquoise cross and kissed it. Now she wanted to die. She wanted to fly away like a cicada leaving its shell clinging onto a branch.

It was then some other terror started to emerge with a fever. Beads of sweat formed at the small of her back and the top of her lip. Sweat continued to pour from her pores. Her gums ached, and she tasted blood on her tongue. Maria wondered if a slow death was the gift the gringo spoke of.

"Please, please take this pain, take me home. I *can't* do this, Lord. Why are you doing this?! What have I done? Hear me, dammit!" Nada. Not a sound. She responded to the silence by kicking the sewing machine from the table.

The front door creaked open. "¡Aye! Dios Mio!" a husky voice cried out. Maria knew that voice anywhere. Big Boss. That dirty, pig-faced traitor probably sold them for gambling money and a six-pack of beer. The sound of his voice caused Maria's vengeance to bubble and boil, coagulating into something hateful. Time to get up. She wiped away her wet mascara and eyeliner with the red silk tie still binding her wrists, then ripped it away like it was tissue paper. He would pay for this. Someone always pays.

Big Boss's gaze landed on Maria. His expression was that of a man who had seen the devil or a ghost or a woman scorned. Her red and black eyes flared as the small veins in her eyes grew. With unnatural speed, she ran to him and sank her newly sprouted fangs into his neck. Maria drank with vicious despair, digging her fangs deeper as she thought of how Diego held her after lovemaking, how they'd never hear that first little kitten's meow of a cry from their child. She ripped off a chunk of his flesh and spat it out before throwing his body down like a devoured tamale husk licked clean.

Until that moment, Maria hadn't noticed the gruesome crime scene. Blood and flesh speckled the sowing tables. The women's eyes were still wide open, their bodies the colour of sun baked dirt. This scene of injustice brought tears to Maria staining her red eyes with black all over again. Blood tears felt like hot candlewax sliding down her face that threatened to singe anything they touched. This place was now unholy. She would cleanse it with fire, but not before the families of those that gave their lives to this thankless work had some sort of real compensation.

Maria snatched the keys from the chain attached to Boss's wallet and headed into his dingy office. Immediately, the full nudes sparked her rage again. She ripped the images down one by one, remembering each time the man had inappropriately pawed at one of her co-workers. He deserved what he got.

The safe sat under his desk, she was sure of it, as she often caught sight of his half-exposed backside shimmying out from under. The old safe was helpless against her newly acquired strength. Inside sat piles of cash, real and fake passports, odd pieces of jewellery and watches. A glint of metal caught her eyes, and she found another set of keys to his brand new navy blue Camaro. Rifling drawers, she found his preferred method of punishment; brass knuckles. Many times she had seen the bruises and cuts on men and women alike. It seemed ironic they were engraved with crosses, the name JESUS splayed across the knuckles. She highly doubted that the prince of peace, the purveyor of "turn the other cheek," would approve. Nevertheless, she slipped them on her fingers. They were much too big. She would have to grip them tighter.

Nothing of value remained except the souls of her fallen co-workers. She kneeled beside them and said a prayer, crossing herself and asking God for mercy for their souls, forgiveness for the journey she would have to take and the strength to hear his voice when she needed it the most. Maria knew this was the end of whatever life she lived before.

Whatever she was becoming, it was a one-way ticket. Diego wouldn't want her like this. He deserved better. She took off her thin gold wedding band and tossed it in the pile of bodies.

Maria stuffed one of the unfinished ties into a half-empty tequila bottle and lit it with big boss's lighter. Before lobbing the firebomb into the office, she let out one scream, one name with every ounce of grief she had inside of her. "Gabriela!" The name of her unborn if she carried a little girl. This dream was as black as the smoke rise from the inferno she started. Maria drove away as the factory exploded.