

Chapter VIII

Felicia

When I was young, we buried my *abuela*. After the funeral, we returned to her small house for the funeral party. Growing up, my cousins, brothers, and I had spent many fun times at her house, playing games, making tamales, and just celebrating family. I think we held the funeral party there to hang on to her spirit. We wanted to hang on to that feeling of family she created. The love of our matriarch kept the family all together, made us whole and important and cherished. No one was willing to give that up too soon.

Her funeral was my first funeral. I didn't know what to expect. Didn't really know how to act, so I watched and copied my aunts, uncles, and older cousins.

I kept my face firm. I talked in a quiet voice. And I wouldn't cry. Even when I saw my beloved *abuelita* in her casket at the church, I wouldn't dare cry.

But what I remember most about that day is the smell of her house. It was typically filled with such wonderful smells, like carnitas and fresh handmade tortillas. I carry many good memories of growing up with those smells. But that day, my mom and aunts cooked at their homes and brought the food to her little casa in Commerce City.

No, the smells weren't food; they were something else. *Muerta y mierda*.

The smells in Commerce City were typically bad, but I don't know if an evil wind ran that day, because all I can remember is it smelled like shit. It smelled like burnt shit. I was young and stupid at the time, and I kept wondering if that was the smell of death, if the terrible smell of my dead *abuela* haunted the house even though we had already lowered her casket into the ground hours before. I didn't know it was just the smells being kicked up into my *abuela*'s poor

neighborhood from the nearby sewer plant and oil refinery. At the time, I thought the death smell could haunt your house like a ghost even if the body was in the ground.

Now at my latest funeral, we bury Hector in the garden near our barracks. And I am haunted by the death smell. Kevin had us round up all the dead soldiers. We piled them in front of the flag where they whipped Michael. He said we didn't have time to dig graves, so we made a funeral pyre, poured gas on top of them, and lit it up. It smells like burnt shit. It smells like death.

I couldn't move the dead. I couldn't help make the pyre. A bullet hit my arm when Hector made his stand. A soldier surprised us in the halls of the base, and Hector charged him, unarmed. He took two bullets in the gut but still disarmed the *pendejo*.

Saved us. My Hector, the hero. Not like those soldiers who killed the other soldiers in their sleep with exhaust. We fought them like men. But now we bury Hector while they burn.

With my hidden wound, I couldn't help pile the dead. But I lit the pyre. I put the lighter to the gas-soaked flesh. Then I stood back and watched as the killer of Hector burned. Watched as the fire quickly spread to his fellow traitors. Watched as they all turned into a blackened heap of burnt shit. *Muerta y mierda*.

Cisco leads us in prayer, but the smoke from the base still fills the air. The evil wind is changing and blowing the smoke our way. God, the smell is awful.

Cisco coughs and then continues, "Hector, you were the strongest among us. The most loyal. Our rock. You showed loyalty and strength in your life and in your death. The only gift we can take from this tragedy is an example of how to live our lives, how to protect our loved ones, our tribe."

"Amen," everyone says.

Everyone is gathered around. Kevin, the girls who didn't fight, and even Charlotte, the one who dressed up slutty and slit that guy's throat all cold blooded, is here. Jaden too, patched up and done with his crying.

The only one off to the side is Michael, the big black man they whipped under the flag. He is standing on one of the trucks, watching us and watching the other barracks. He has a big machine gun pointed at their buildings. His face is angry and unforgiving. I understand that look. Sacrifice isn't the only gift Hector left us.

The boys start to throw shovels of dirt on Hector's body with ease. The dirt makes a sad drumming sound as it lands. The sound is constant and building like war drums. It's appalling how skilled we've become at burying bodies.

I try to be strong against the sickening sound of dirt drums and the smell of scorched death. I need to be strong like Hector. I take a step forward, and with my good arm out, I bend down and grab a handful of dirt. I kneel and throw it on my Hector. Then I fucking lose it. I can't stop crying. I am grown-ass woman now, not a small child, but I can't help it. This isn't like losing an old abuela. I just lost my love.

My girls put their arms around me, crying too, holding me close, hurting my arm, but I take the pain. I need the pain. I chew on it to mash away the crying and weakness. The pain makes me stronger.

We stay there at the foot of his grave. I've stopped crying, but my girls still moan while the boys fully cover Hector and bury him deep in the ground. Finally, they lift me up. The pain shoots through me from their hands on my arm, on my bullet wound. We are walking as a mass back to the barracks when Yesenia pulls her hand away and looks at the fresh blood.

"Felicia, you're bleeding?" she asks.

I ignore her, but she stops me. She puts her hand on my wound, and I flinch away in pain. She pulls her hand back and looks at the new blood.

“We need to get you fixed, girl.”

But I don't want to get fixed. I don't want to be helped. I want to be strong like Hector. No one could fix him.

Lupina is called over. She didn't even try to fix Hector. Now that too-good half breed wants to help me. She starts cutting at my sleeve with a pair of big scissors.

“Were you shot?” she asks, surprised and too loud. Now everyone gathers around me instead of paying respect to Hector.

I don't say anything.

“If we don't take care of this, you will get infected, and then you'll lose your arm and probably your life. Very painfully.”

For a softy, she knows how to cut to the point. I let her take me into the office.

I am cleaned up and stitched and wearing a new sling like Annie. Lupina doused me with iodine and gave me a small bottle as well as some antibiotic pills.

“Luckily, the bullet didn't hit bone and went straight through, but if any infection breaks out, you could be in a world of trouble,” she says.

I'm about to thank her when Cisco knocks on the door and sticks his head in.

“Meeting time,” he says.

Kevin called a meeting. Everyone is in the barracks. Michael joined us too, but he parked the truck by the door and keeps staring out the window at the other barracks, ready to pounce in a heartbeat.

We walk by, and I say to him, “Light ’em up.”

He looks at me and then looks back at the other barracks without a smile or nod.

Yesenia punches me playfully in my good arm, but it still hurts all over.

“This shit is crazy,” she says with a shake of her head.

I look out the window, following Michael’s forever stare. A pool of blood has collected by the truck from where Annie dropped those two chickens sneaking up on our barracks. Way past the pools of blood sit the other barracks, quiet and cooped and under Michael’s angry watch.

“What? I think we should waste them all,” I say.

We join the rest of the group and turn to look to the chair where Michael preached from the other night.

“You ever see that movie?” Yesenia says. “The one with the white schoolboys that crash on the island. All the adults die, and then the kids go all tribal and start fighting each other. That’s what this feels like.”

I nod, but that know-it-all Eva butts in with her too-loud voice.

“You mean *Lord of the Flies*?”

“Yeah, that’s it, crazy fucking movie. I keep hoping them soldiers roll up and save us and take us back home.”

“You know, it was a book before it was a movie,” Eva says.

I give Eva a shut-the-fuck-up look. I read the book too, but no need to make Yesenia look stupid. Eva purses her mouth shut and goes back to minding her own business.

Kevin walks past us. He is getting ready to start the meeting, to go to the preaching chair, but he stops and turns to us.

“Yesenia, friend, those soldiers, they are coming,” he says.

He climbs up on the chair and looks at us all, a cold, hard look like the look a parent gives before breaking the bad news.

“They’re coming. That much I guarantee. They just aren’t coming to save us.”

Now everyone shuts the fuck up.

Kevin starts. He warms over the cold he just unleashed on the room.

“Our hearts are with Hector,” he says. “As Cisco said, we lost one of the strongest and bravest who died saving others. We all sacrificed a lot. Our innocence, our health, our Hector. Maybe even our safety. But we kept our freedom and our honor. We will continue to fight for that as long as we can. We will live the way Hector lived. With pride and honor. And here is what we are going to do.”

Kevin looked right at me when he mentioned Hector by name; now he returns to his gangster stare.

“Felicia, you and Spencer are going to make peace with the other barracks.”

“Peace!” I snap. “Hector is dead!”

“They didn’t kill him,” he dictates. “Eva, Michael, and I are going to leave soon for a day or two, and I want this peace to be quick and permanent. Or would you rather have the blood of hundreds of teenagers on your hands?”

He looks at Spencer and then looks back at me. We both nod.

“Here are the terms. Our group, our tribe, will leave the base within three days. We will leave enough food and light weapons for the other barracks to defend themselves, but we will be carrying and driving out what we can.”

I want to yell out again, but at least I don’t have to. Everyone else is standing up and yelling at Kevin.

Kevin watches us patiently. He lets the yelling run its course. Then he raises his hand, and everyone goes quiet.

“This isn’t a negotiation. This isn’t up for vote.”

No matter. Lupina steps forward and speaks.

“Kevin, if we were just going to leave the base anyway, why did we have to kill all those soldiers? Why did Hector have to die?”

Lupina’s all right.

“We needed the weapons and the supplies. We needed to neutralize the corporal. And there are other reasons you will just have to trust me on. It’s not safe here. It’s not very safe outside the fence either, but with the weapons and each other, we should be able to survive.”

“Ha, should be able to survive?” I think. Not the best sales pitch.

“Where are we going?” Pax asks, but Lupina throws him a sad, weak look.

Damn, dude, you should stand up for your girl.

“We are heading to the mountains. To a region called Badakhshan. It’s fairly ungoverned and full of mountains and valleys where we can hide.”

I want to ask, “Hide from what?”

But Yesenia blurts out, “Badassastan? Well, that fucking fits.”

Everyone laughs at her comment—everyone but Kevin. He just looks to the floor and recites, “Let this grisly beginning be none other to you than is to wayfarers a rugged and steep mountain.”

With that, he steps down off the chair. He waves me and Spencer over. I am not sure why the white boy and me were chosen to make peace. I think to check each other, to make sure I don’t go too hard and Spencer doesn’t go too soft.

“Listen, Spencer, Felicia: part of the terms is they need to stay in their barracks until we leave; understood?”

We nod.

“OK. Good. You better get going then. I recommend carrying a white flag, but trust me; they’re more scared than you. Oh, and one more thing,” he says with a soft, quiet voice, pulling us closer. “You can let them know that unfortunately their girls who were staying with the soldiers were killed in the firefight.”

We take the long walk over to the other barracks. Spencer has a pillowcase taped to a broken mop handle. He waves it in the air, both defiant and friendly at the same time. It seems like a surrender, but it’s not. Still, I feel better knowing Michael is back up on the truck behind us with that big machine gun. You never know when a scared sucker is just going to pop off a few rounds, and he has the bigger gun if that happens.

We reach their door, and it opens. They were watching us the whole time. We enter. I am ready to do battle, ready to lay down the law, but when we enter, they just look like a bunch of scared kids. The barracks is packed full of kids, and I realize all three buildings are hiding in here. The body heat and fear hang in the air like a stifling blanket. Despite the scared kids, there are still a few off to the side with hard faces and machine guns.

“We’ve come to make peace,” Spencer says.

“Damn,” I think, “way to start all soft.” Maybe he fears the ones with guns.

“Peace?” an armed teenager snaps, taking advantage of the soft spot. “Brad and Tony are dead! And where are Becky, Lily, and Kelly?”

Spencer looks flustered, all red in the face. He starts to talk but doesn't know how to break the bad news.

"They're dead," I jump in. "And if you don't shut the fuck up and do what you're told, you all are going to be dead too." I wonder if this is too harsh, but they're not the only ones who lost people.

"Listen," Spencer says. "The terms aren't bad. We are leaving. We'll be out of your hair in three days. We'll leave enough food and some weapons for you to survive for a long time."

There is some grumbling and debating between their leaders when Spencer follows up. "This isn't a negotiation."

They stop and stare at him, surprised by his firmness. I'm surprised too. And then he takes it up a notch.

"You need to stay in your barracks for three days. You can't leave to use the latrines you watched us build. You can't leave to say the pledge of allegiance at the flag where you watched Michael get whipped. You can't leave, period. If you do leave, then Michael, the one you watched get whipped, the one who saved Fetien from being raped while you watched, is going to unload a fifty-caliber machine gun on all of you. Understood?"

We turn to leave. I stop at the door and turn around. They are looking at me like a bunch of beaten dogs. They look even more scared than when we entered.

"We'll fetch you some buckets of water," I say and turn to follow Spencer back to our tribe.