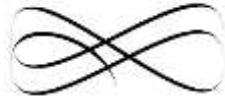


Kill for You: Excerpt

A Warrior for Her #2

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## Chapter One



### Faith

My life is a mess of ugly moments and painful realities, carved from adamantine and immortalized in stone. The things that shaped me usually hurt like hell when they happened. They burned, and gnashed, and clawed, ripping their way through me and stripping me down to the bone. What they left behind isn't whole, and it isn't particularly pretty either.

That's been my life for as long as I can remember.

So it shouldn't come as any surprise to me when, halfway through my mandatory double shift, a hail of gunfire rips through the seedy bar where I work...but the loud crack of sound and shattering glass surprises me anyway.

I stand frozen for a full ten count as some of the most dangerous cartel-affiliated gang members in Los Angeles dive for cover all around me, screaming and yelling. Not even the gunfire or their screams drown out the sound of Pitbull and Ke\$ha blasting through the building at ear-bleeding decibels.

Old wooden tables and rickety barstools crash to the floor alongside shot glasses and beer bottles. People dive for cover, some not nearly quickly enough to avoid the barrage of bullets ripping through the building from the broken front windows. The chaotic scene doesn't make sense to me. *Los Zetas* owns this part of the city, and no one ever comes after them in their own territory. I should know; my stepfather was an important man to the cartel before he cheated them five years ago and then ran off with my mother, effectively trapping me in this neighborhood.

Reality sinks in just about the time Adrian and Tito, two of the Zetas, fall to the ground, blood spreading rapidly around their bodies. Two others drop a few seconds later, shot to death where they stood. My gaze bounces to the now broken windows to see a group of men right outside, assault rifles and handguns aimed at the building. I blink rapidly, trying to wrap my mind around the fact that there are only five of them. They had to know coming here with so few was a suicide mission. The last I looked, at least a dozen Zetas were partying it up at three tables set up near the front of the bar.

"Faith, get down!" Tiny, my hulking boss, yells from the opposite end of the bar.

Bottles of liquor explode beside my head, lending a certain urgency to his order.

I drop to my hands and knees, hissing when my palms meet the sharp edges of a broken bottle. I scurry forward anyway, using the heavy oak counter as a shield from the war currently ripping apart my only safe haven in this city.

Tiny's bar is nothing special. It's old and decrepit, with years of grime ground into the cement floors and just about as much smeared across the walls. The building is falling apart at the seams, but my job here is the only thing I have that I can call my own.

Everything else—from the bed I sleep in to the roof over my head—belongs to Oscar Fuentes and the Zetas. They claimed it right after my mother and Enrique Salvador, her oh-so loving husband, took off with over three hundred thousand dollars in drug money, never to be seen again.

I've been collateral ever since, unable to leave the invisible lines that mark the boundaries of the Zetas' territory. Why they think my mother and Salvador might come back for me, I don't know. My mother hated the mere sight of me. As she loved to scream while pummeling on me, I was an accident, the product of too much tequila and a broken condom.

As soon as she gave birth to me, she dumped me in my dad's lap and left me there until he died six years later. She always resented him for saddling her with me...like it was his fault he had a brain aneurysm. She never let me forget that she didn't want me. And Enrique Salvador didn't much like me when he married her when I was fourteen. I doubt he'd like me any better now.

Telling the Zetas that hasn't done me any good. I've been saying it for five years, but I'm still their prisoner here. I don't think they plan to ever let me go. Part of me—the part that burns with hatred for the men who make my life a living hell—hopes the Zetas in the building all die. The other part doesn't want to be here to witness it.

"Stay down," Tiny orders, hooking his prison-tattooed arms around my waist and pushing me as deeply into the corner as he can get me. He then hunkers down in front of me on his hands and knees, protecting me with his big body.

He smells of liquor and stale cigarette smoke, but the rare display of kindness and concern from a man who's shown me very little of either has tears springing to my eyes. I squeeze them closed, trying like hell not to soften toward the hulking giant or think about the pain searing through my bleeding palms or the screams echoing off the walls all

around me. I'm pretty sure there's glass embedded in a few of the lacerations, but I don't exactly have time to confirm that suspicion right now.

A loud pop sounds to my right, directly on the other side of the chest-high bar. The jukebox makes a strange whirring-click sound and then dies while Ke\$ha is mid-chorus. The sudden absence of music serves only to intensify the other sounds ripping through the building—the screams of the panicked, the moans and whimpers of the injured and dying, and the loud report of gunfire still echoing off the rafters.

*Pow. Pow. Pow. Pow.*

"Get those motherfuckers!" someone yells between one crack of sound and the next.

Others repeat the same sentence, shouting it like a rallying cry, and then gunfire explodes from inside the building as well as from the men outside. I curl up in a little ball and rock back and forth, trying to shut it all out. It's too loud, too much. Watching people die, even those I hate, isn't something I've ever wanted to do.

What feels like hours later, but is actually closer to a few minutes, the gunfire ceases as suddenly as it erupted.

"Stay out of *el Demonio* territory and out of our warehouses!" someone shouts from outside in Spanish and then in English.

A second later, car doors slam closed and then an engine roars and tires squeal.

The chaos left in the wake of the departing vehicle is almost worse than the chaos that preceded it. Whimpers, cries, and curses echo throughout the building as everyone inside shouts to one another, checking to see who is hurt and who isn't. Someone flings the door open and runs outside. Another couple shots sound before someone else yells for whoever is shooting to knock it the fuck off.

All over the bar, patrons scream and cry, begging for help. It's so loud. Anxiety churns through me, kicking my heartrate up until my pulse races, sending fear skittering through my veins. Life in gang territory is hard. I've lived and breathed that reality most of my life. But this is an entirely new level of fucked-up...something infinitely worse than just another drive-by. This is my safe space, the one place I'm allowed to go where *Los Zetas* doesn't control every move I make. And now it's blood-soaked and destroyed too.

The bar smokes in places where bullets ripped through the heavy wood, charring it. My blood drips from my hands onto my apron and the floor beneath me. Shattered glass and pools of alcohol are everywhere, the stench mingling with the heavy metallic scent of blood until I feel like I'm going to pass out from the cloying mixture.

I slam my eyes closed, fighting the wave of nausea climbing up my throat.

"Those motherfuckers came for us in our own territory," Iván Santino—one of the most violent members of the Zetas—swears, his disbelieving voice climbing in volume as his friends continue to cry out from all around the bar. "They came for *Los Zetas*!"

I'm not sure what he expected. Over the last few months, *el Demonio* has targeted every cartel-affiliated gang in Los Angeles, dragging the city to the verge of war. It was only a matter of time until they came for the Zetas...though from the way it sounded of it, the Zetas went after them first. Or after their warehouses, anyway.

"Are you okay, girl?" Tiny rasps, shaking my shoulders.

I snap my eyes open to meet his brown eyes. He looks genuinely worried about me. The sight sends a little tremor quaking through me because it's been a long damn time since anyone has worried about me. Tiny doesn't like me much. He's gruff and rude and calls me *girl* instead of my name more often than not. Then again, Tiny doesn't like anyone. He's an ex-con with no time for bullshit and no concept of compassion or empathy. But as sad as it is to say, he's the closest thing to a friend I've got, even if he is almost triple my age.

"Faith, answer me." He shakes me so hard it feels like my brain rattles around inside my skull. "Snap out of it, girl. We ain't got time for you to panic right now."

"Fine," I gasp, releasing the breath I didn't realize I was holding. "I'm fine."

"You sure?"

"Yes," I say and then nod to punctuate my statement. "Yes, I'm fine."

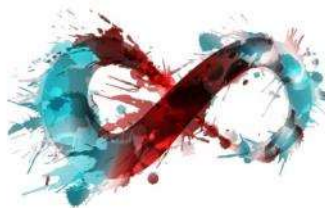
"Help me!" a girl cries, stumbling into view. Her makeup is smeared, mascara making tracks down her cheeks. Her hazel eyes are wide and terrified. She has her hands pressed to her side, trying to staunch the flow of blood spilling over to soak her skintight leopard print top.

Tiny releases me, lumbering to his feet with a curse when he sees her. "Help her," he orders me, fishing in his apron for his phone while he scans the building with his eyes narrowed. "I'll call for help."

I hop up a second behind him and grab the closest thing I can find—a bar rag partially soaked in alcohol—and hurry toward the girl on trembling legs. She collapses to her knees at the edge of the bar, shaking and crying. She's losing a lot of blood...too much.

Rage shoots through me at the realization that she's probably not going to survive. I've never seen her around here before, and now she's going to die. All because she walked into the middle of a gang war she knew nothing about.

I drop to my knees beside her, doing what I can to help save her life even though I know my attempts will be futile.



Eventually, police officers and first responders arrive in a roar of lights and sirens. People pour out the doors of the bar, and then a new set rush inside. An officer spots me with the girl in my arms and hurries over to us. He takes the dying girl from me, asking questions in rapid succession. I'm numb, words refusing to form in my mind, let alone on my lips. The cop doesn't wait around for answers anyway. He lifts her into his arms and runs outside with her, calling for a paramedic.

I stumble to my feet and follow in his wake, trying desperately not to see the destruction all around me. It's hard to miss it though. Especially with four bodies lying motionless in the grime. Tito Alameda and Adrian Jiménez are dead. So are Hugo Ruiz and Thiago Urias. Tomorrow was Thiago's twenty-second birthday.

Several other people, most of them not involved with the Zetas, are critically injured. Blood and alcohol pool in the floor around them. Tables are smashed and windows shattered.

A chill works its way through me, freezing me from the inside out as I walk on wooden legs outside into the late August air. I stumble aimlessly around, trying to avoid the chaos.

"Hey!" A cop latches onto my arm, stopping me in my tracks. He lifts my hand up to examine it and then swears loudly. Before I can even process what's happening, he drags me toward an ambulance and shoves me into the hands of a paramedic.

The paramedic takes one look at my palms and forces me to sit down. I'm too tired to argue with him, so I do as I'm instructed. He goes to work on my hands, talking to me the entire time, but I don't hear a word he's saying.

My eyes dart all around as I try to process the scene unfolding up and down the block. Cop cars and ambulances are parked all over the place. There are two dead boys in the middle of the street—two of the shooters, judging by the guns still lying beside their bodies. They're my age, maybe a little younger. A dark liquid pools around their bodies on the cracked blacktop—blood, I guess. A cop hovering over them checks for pulses and then shakes his head and takes a step away, placing his feet carefully as if to avoid stepping on the bullet casings littering the ground.

Crime scene tape stretches from Tiny's bar to the dry cleaners next door, and then across the street to the little Mexican restaurant that's been there for longer than I've been alive. The tape continues on past that building, but I lose sight of it when a cop steps up in front of me, blocking my view.

At least I think he's a cop.

Unlike most of the others, he's not dressed in a uniform. I've been surrounded by men most of my life, but aside from Tiny, he's one of the biggest I've ever seen. His booted feet are planted on the ground, shoulder-width apart. His jeans aren't tight, but they do nothing to hide his thick calves and powerful thighs. His dark blue LAPD t-shirt stretches across his hard stomach and broad chest, hugging his muscular frame in ways that has heat sparking low in my belly. With his arms crossed, he looks as immovable as a mountain.

He clears his throat and I jerk my gaze upward...over the badge hanging from a chain around his neck and up to a chiseled jaw and full lips. His skin is caramel, the hint of a five o'clock shadow on his cheeks and jaw. The higher my gaze drifts, the hotter he is. His face is all sharp angles and planes. His eyes are so dark brown they're almost black. Intelligence blazes in them...and something else too. Something I'm not even sure I know how to define. It's some mix of confidence and uncompromising authority that screams cop.

Jesus, he's hot.

He's maybe thirty-five. He's got a beanie pulled low over his forehead, but it does nothing to hide the way his dark brows climb upward as he looks me over. His hard expression softens incrementally, and I realize he's speaking to me and I haven't heard a word.

"I'm sorry," I mumble, shaking my head as if that's going to clear it of the screams and gunfire still echoing in the recesses of my mind. "Can you repeat that?"

He eyes me for a moment. I'm not sure what he sees on my face, but his expression softens even more. "I'm Octavio Hernandez. I'm a homicide detective for the Los Angeles Police Department. What's your name, *pequeña*?" he asks. His voice is a deep rumble, like water rushing over rocks. It's...pleasant. It washes over me in comforting waves,

soothing away some of my raw nerves and anxiety. He crouches in front of me, forcing the paramedic to move over a little to give him room.

"F-faith. Faith Donovan."

"Faith," he repeats. I like the way he says it like he's savoring the taste of my name on those full lips. "Faith, did you have friends inside?"

"I..." I almost tell him that I don't have friends at all, but catch myself at the last moment and shake my head instead. "I'm a bartender. I was at work."

"Okay, that's good." He gives me an encouraging nod. "Can you tell me what happened?"

I glance over his shoulder at the two dead bodies in the street, and then over to the group of Zetas cloistered together on the far side of the crime scene. They're all blood-stained and tight-lipped, refusing to speak to the officers standing in front of them. Not that I thought they would or anything.

In this world, problems are handled in the streets, with knives and guns, not in a courtroom. The Zetas will hunt down whoever *el Demonio* sent and will kill them. That's how gang warfare works. It's a never-ending cycle of retribution, retaliation, and revenge that's only gotten worse the last few months. I'm guessing what happened here tonight is only going to fan the flames and send the city spiraling closer to all-out war.

An eye for an eye. It really does leave the whole world blind.

Iván Santino's dark gaze meets mine. He's one of three Zeta lieutenants in Los Angeles, second only to Oscar Fuentes. Iván is vicious and cruel, and has spent the last five years making my life as painful as possible. I think, if Oscar would let him, he would have dragged me kicking and screaming to his bed a long time ago, and then left my battered and broken body for someone else to dispose of. But Oscar thinks I'm still of some use to him, and no one crosses Oscar, not if they want to live, anyway.

The way Iván looks at me sends another wave of nausea crawling up my throat. He's running out of patience...which means I'm running out of time. If I don't find a way out of this city soon, he's going to come for me and not even the threat Oscar poses will be enough to stop him. What the Zetas have taken from me thus far won't even compare to what Iván will do to me when he finally gets his hands on me...I know that much down to my soul.

Even from across the road, I can read the warning in his eyes. I'm supposed to keep my mouth shut and give this cop the same runaround the Zetas are undoubtedly giving the rest of them. Normally, that's exactly what I'd do. My survival depends on me keeping my mouth shut and my head down. But I'm covered in the blood of a girl who probably didn't make it to the hospital alive. I've seen more dead bodies tonight than I ever wanted to see. And I'm done with this whole mess. If Oscar kills me for talking...well, whatever death he gives me will be a sight better than what Iván wants to do to me.

"Faith, look at me," Detective Hernandez says, reaching up and placing a hand on the side of my face. Sparks hum to life where his skin meets mine. His touch is gentle despite the roughness of his fingers. He moves my head gently until my gaze focuses on him again and then he releases me. Those dark eyes suck me in, compelling me to open my mouth and talk to him. "I know you're scared, but I will protect you. Just talk to me. What happened tonight?"

"I..." I don't even know where to start or how much I should say. "Some of the Zetas came in with their friends to celebrate Thiago's birthday. They were drinking and laughing. Someone started shooting. I looked outside, and there were five men with guns."

"Okay, good. That's real good. Did you recognize any of them?"

My gaze darts away from Detective Hernandez to the Zetas. Iván's glaring at me, hatred in his eyes. My heart pounds erratically, fear pumping through my veins. I break his gaze and glance back to Detective Hernandez to find him watching me intently. I lick my lips and then shake my head.

"I can protect you, Faith," Detective Hernandez says again, his voice soft.

I think he means that, but I don't think he can keep that promise. He doesn't know who I am or what my mother and stepfather did to the Zetas. He doesn't know I'm a prisoner here and have been since I was sixteen. He can't help me because no one can. He'll forget about me the second this case closes, if not before.

"She needs to go to the hospital," the paramedic announces after wrapping my hands in bandages. "There are a couple pieces of glass embedded pretty deeply into her left palm. She might need stitches."

"Fuck," Detective Hernandez swears. "Faith, talk to me and I swear to you that I'll find whoever did this to your friends."

"They aren't my friends," I mumble.

One dark brow climbs, letting me know I've said a little too much. I silently coach myself to get it together. I'm out of sorts and off my game. I can't let this man get to me. He'll be gone soon, and I'll be right back where I started.

He stays silent for a moment, just watching me. "Talk to me, Faith. Please."

I shouldn't, but the foreign tinge to his plea does me in. It's been so long since anyone has needed my help with anything, so long since anyone has said please to me...and I don't think this man is used to having to ask for anything, but he's asking me.

I want to help him, even though I shouldn't. I want to believe he can help me, even when I know he can't.

"One of the Zetas said they were *el Demonio*," I whisper, my mind made up. "I heard them... I heard them tell the Zetas to stay out of their territory and away from their warehouses." I blink my eyes rapidly, though I'm not sure if I'm trying to keep myself awake or keep myself from crying. It's been a long time since I let myself cry outside the confines of my own room, with my pillow over my face to mute the sound. But this man makes me feel like if I gave in to the tears, he wouldn't find me weak. He wouldn't laugh at me. I think he'd use his body as a shield and let me fall apart without prying eyes focused on me.

"Warehouses? Are you sure that's what you heard?" he asks.

"Positive," I whisper.

He eyes me for a minute like he's trying to gauge for himself if that's what I heard, and then he nods. "Do you know who the victims are inside the bar? The ones who didn't make it?"

I rattle off their names and he nods again. He doesn't write anything down, but I have a feeling he probably doesn't have to take notes. He's smart...really damn smart, I think. He could probably talk to everyone else who was inside the bar and still remember every word I said verbatim. I'm not sure why I'm so confident of that—perhaps it's the way intelligence shines in his eyes—but I *am* sure of it.

"What about the others? The ones who are injured?"

"It was chaotic inside. I don't remember who was hurt," I confess and then shift my gaze from Detective Hernandez to the ambulance directly across from mine where two paramedics are working on a girl with a gunshot wound to her shoulder and another to her leg. I know the girl inside. "That's Camila. I don't know her last name, but Thiago Urias is her cousin."

"If you saw them, could you identify them?" Hernandez asks.

I nod once.

He rises to his feet, recalling my attention. "I know you need medical treatment, but I need your help. Some of the injured can't speak for themselves. *Los Zetas* will tell us nothing, not even to save the lives of their friends. Will you help me help the victims?" He holds out his hand, but doesn't make a move, instead leaving the decision up to me.

I study his callused palm and long fingers for a beat and then reach out and place my bandaged hand into his. He helps me to my feet and then releases me again. He leads me from ambulance to ambulance, allowing me to peek inside. He doesn't touch me again, but he stays right beside me the entire time, hovering as if he's trying to offer me a little of the strength that practically radiates from him. I can feel the angry gazes of the Zetas on my back, but I don't look in their direction. If I do, what little nerve I have will vanish, and if I'm going to die for this...well, I'd at least like to finish the job first.

Tiny's standing right outside the doors to the bar with a cigarette hanging from his lips, ignoring the cop asking him questions. He takes one look at me and then shakes his head like he's disappointed in me. I guess he probably is. He doesn't like cops any more than the Zetas do.

By the time Detective Hernandez and I reach the last ambulance, most of the others have pulled away, carting the victims to the hospital for treatment. I identified those I could, and told the detective where to look for the names of those I don't know. The dying girl, the one I tried to help, is nowhere to be found. I ask about her, but Detective Hernandez tells me that she's already been transported.

"Is she going to survive?"

"Probably not," he says, his tone weary.

"Oh." I already knew that, but hearing him confirm that she's going to die bothers me. I don't even know her, but I feel badly for her. People in this neighborhood die all the time, usually by the hands of the Zetas. But this is different, though I can't put my finger on why. Maybe because public venues are supposed to be off-limits. They're supposed to be safe. I guess safety is only an illusion in places like this though. One I was naïve enough to believe existed behind the rickety doors to Tiny's bar.

"Was she a friend of yours?" Detective Hernandez asks me as he escorts me back to the ambulance waiting to take me to the hospital.

"No."

"*¡Maldita soplona!*" one of the Zetas, Miguel Serrano, snarls as we pass by him.

*Fucking snitch.*

I flinch away from the accusation, fear shooting through me.

"*¡Cállate, carajo!*" Officer Hernandez snaps at Miguel, pinning him with a hard glare. He positions himself a little closer to me, so close the heat of his big body sears into me. "Come on," he murmurs, ushering me toward the ambulance. "Let's get you out of here."

Once we're back where we started, I expect him to put me in the ambulance and send me on my way, but he doesn't. He glances at me, his lips turned down into a thoughtful frown. "They're going to make your life hell for helping me, aren't they?"

I don't plan to stick around long enough for them to make my life any worse than it already is. If the Zetas are going to kill me, they're going to have to find me first. As soon as I get to the hospital, I'm finding a car and getting as far as I can before Oscar and Iván realize I'm gone. Instead of telling Detective Hernandez that, I shrug. "When isn't life hell in *Los Zetas* territory?"

I realize that was the wrong thing to say the second his frown deepens, carving little lines around his eyes. Anger sizzles in those dark orbs, searing along my skin. I open my mouth to tell him I'll be fine, but before I can, he turns away from me and plants his hands on his hips.

"Anderson! Patel!" he yells.

Two cops glance our way and then jog toward us when he motions them over. He meets them halfway and converses with the two of them quietly. They both stand up straight and listen intently as he speaks. The smaller of the two is Indian. The other is really tall and lanky. They both sneak glances at me as he talks.

After a few moments, he leads them over to me. "Faith, this is Sergeant Rich Anderson and Officer Sai Patel," he says. "They'll be escorting you to the hospital."

"That's really not necessary," I mutter.

He cocks a brow at me, silently telling me this isn't up for discussion. He's made his decision and nothing I say is going to sway him. He's spoken and that's that.

"Fine. Whatever," I mutter and stomp toward the ambulance, hoping like hell he doesn't intend for Anderson and Patel to hang around once they get me there. I plan to be long gone before the Zetas even know what hospital I was taken to. There's no way in hell I'm going to sit around and wait for my tear-stained cage to become my funeral pyre.