

GRINGA

In the Clutches of a Ruthless Drug Lord

A Mexican drug lord picks on the wrong girl. Sparks fly. Fists too.

A contemporary romance and romantic crime thriller.

A free book.

Book 1

By

Eve Rabi

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Smashwords Edition

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## CHAPTER ONE

If I knew an asshole was going to murder me that warm, summer's day in Mexico, I'd have done things differently that morning. I would have had pizza for breakfast, skipped the sun screen and written my family a farewell letter.

The letter would be poignant and heartrending. I would have thanked them for the precious memories, told them how much I loved them, wished them ... wait! Would I have done that? Nah. I would have told them to go fuck themselves!

Yep, my letter would read something like this:

*Dad or Father – Never had the guts to tell you this, but I always craved your love. Growing up, I felt unwanted, alone, fatherless. Because of you, I'm screwed up. I date older men, borderline fucking pedophiles, because I'm constantly searching for a father figure.*

*Elaine, you came into my life and said, "Call me Mommy". You should have added "Dearest". You eroded every bit of self-confidence I had with your constant belittling. You called me fat, unattractive, slow, and I am what I am today because of you – angry, aggressive, defensive.*

*You really are a Wicked Stepmother. In fact, you make Cinderella's stepmother look like the Tooth Fairy on fucking weed. I think God has issues with me. She must have, if she took away my wonderful mother when I was just six and sent me you.*

*Paris, my stepsister, or Miss Los Angeles Diva 1999, as you like to be called. So beautiful, so striking, so nasty. Meaner than a Nevada rattlesnake, meaner than a scorpion and meaner than, well, a mean girl in high school. Spent my childhood living in your shadow. You took everything – my Barbies, my books, my best friends, 'cause you could. Then we grew up and you took my boyfriend. You stole Austin and married him. Quickly. Then you had his baby. Very quickly.*

*You had so many fans, but you had to have him, because I had him. I told you I was cool with the two of you hooking up – I lied. I told you I was happy for you both – I was faking it. I hurt like hell. I still do.*

*So, Adiós family. Now, go fuck yourselves!*

## CHAPTER TWO

I stare into the murderous, bloodshot eyes of a monster and I shake with fear. He's huge, dark and hairy. With a snarl, he whips out a gun and points it at me.

'I gon kill you,' he growls. What do you know – evil keeps its word. Without the slightest hesitation, he raises his 9mm and fires into my chest.

I'm lucky though, I don't feel much. Hitting the pavement hurts more than the bullet.

Amazingly, I'm still aware of my surroundings. I hear distant voices, whimpering, a child crying, heavy, deliberate footsteps approaching. Someone roughly picks up my limp body and walks with it. Then I'm free-falling.

Suddenly, I'm wet and cold and it's dark.

'Mommy,' I call, 'my bathwater's cold again. It's too dark, mom. Turn on the light.'

'It's okay, Payton,' my mom soothes. 'Don't fight it. Just come with me, baby girl. It's gonna be okay, I promise.'

'Mom, why didn't you take me to this *better* place everyone says you've gone to? Why did you leave me behind?'

I get no answer, just a melancholy smile from my mom.

### CHAPTER THREE

I wake up in a dimly-lit room. The putrid stench of decaying flesh assaults my senses. I look down at my body – it's heavily bandaged and I'm lying on some sort of narrow stretcher.

My eyes scan the room. It resembles a large tepee – smoky, warm and crowded with all sorts of weird things – small dead animals in jars, bottled herbs, large leaves piled one on top of the other and various bizarre concoctions. Freaky, like I'm in a witchdoctor's room. I need to get the hell out of here. I try to move, but the pain in my chest is so intense, I stop. Where the fuck am I? How come I'm hurting so much?

Over the next couple of minutes, the fog in my brain clears and I start to remember. Payton Wagner – that's my name. Twenty-one – University of Los Angeles, on holiday in Mexico with my deadbeat father and bitch of a stepmother. I remember us leaving our five-star holiday resort and visiting my stepsister Paris and her husband Austin in Siempre, a village in remote and mountainous Mexico.

Austin's an engineer with a year-long contract with the Mexican government – something to do with building bridges in isolated areas of Mexico. At first, I had declined Paris's invitation to join her, but she badgered us with messages, complaining that she desperately needed company. Since I secretly wanted to see Austin, I went along and a psycho tried to murder me.

The psycho! My breathing is suddenly erratic, there's roaring in my ears and my mouth gets dry. Am I still in his clutches? Is he here? Why the hell did he shoot me?

I rack my brain. I did nothing wrong – I was just taking holiday photos when I heard a bloodcurdling scream. This swarthy, hairy, giant of a nut job on a black horse, screamed and thundered towards me, his dreadlocks flying all over his angry mug.

I didn't know what he was saying but it sounded like he was calling me a spy. Like most tourists, my Spanish is limited to vacation words from a traveler's guide. There were many people around - why me? Fuck, I was scared. Especially when some people around me cowered and whispered, '*Santa María, ¡es Diablo! ¡Es Diablo!*' while others fell over each other, trying to leg it out of there.

Diablo, as they called him, jumped off his horse, stormed up to me, snatched the camera out of my shaking hands and smashed it to the ground. Then, he grabbed me by the scruff of my shirt, lifted me off my trembling feet and slammed me against a wall. I lay dazed while he ranted in Spanish. Suddenly, he grabbed me by the throat and started to strangle me.

I fought back, like I always do when I'm attacked - dug my nails into his calloused hands. That made him angrier - he shoved me away, pointed his gun at me and fired.

But I'm alive. I survived my own murder. Wow!

My recollection is interrupted by the sound of footsteps. I tense up, expecting the hairy sicko. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

To my surprise, it's an old woman.

I exhale. No need to panic just yet.

The woman's eyes are wide with surprise. She claps her hands. 'You're awake,' she says in English, then yells over her shoulder in Spanish.

Who's she calling - the crazy dude who tried to kill me? Oh Jesus!

She peers at me. '*Hola!*' Her smile is friendly and reaches her eyes.

'*H ... hola!*' I reply, my eyes scanning the tent for a back door, window – anything.

'W...who are ...?'

'Call me Enfermera,' she says. 'Everybody does.'

She speaks English. Considering the way she looks – zombie like, bent and bony, large, bulging, jaundiced eyes, greenish-brown teeth, hair sticking up in all directions like misplaced antennae, I'm

surprised. Her clothing is tattered and torn and she reminds me of a zombie from Michael Jackson's Thriller video.

But when she speaks, her weird looks recede and all you hear is a beautiful, melodious voice. Amazing – as if someone else is speaking inside her. Have I died and gone to hell?

An old Mexican man shuffles into the room, looks at me and frowns. He's short, wrinkled and bald and gives me a look that tells me I'm intruding. Still, at least it's him, not the whack job who tried to kill me.

'Where am I?' I ask in a timid voice. 'Who are you guys?' I'm already tired from the little interaction I'm having with them.

'Later,' Enfermera says, placing a cool, bony hand on my forehead. 'Rest now. When you wake up, we will talk.'

'No,' I protest. 'I wanna ... know ... where I ...' I drift into back into unconsciousness.

When I wake up, she force-feeds me gruel. It's revolting - smells like boiled, unseasoned chicken, but I'm not even sure it is as good as that. I gag but she just shoves it down my throat. 'You're going to need your strength,' she says in a singsong voice.

\* \* \*

A fortnight has passed, I'm propped up on my stretcher and we're finally having that talk.

'Enfermera means *nurse* in Spanish,' she explains as she puffs on a cigarette she rolled herself. 'My real name is Gaudelepe. Juan doesn't speak English, so I'll be your translator.'

At the mention of his name, Juan spits a disgusting glob of snuff or something like that on the ground.

Not the most sociable fucker, but hey, I'm cool with it considering he's sharing his gruel and vile smelling potions with me.

'My name is Payton,' I say. 'I'm an American ...'

'Yes, we know,' Enfermera says, reaching behind herself and removing a bag.

'My backpack,' I cry and snatch it from her.

'It was still on your back when we found you.'

'Awesome!' In the bag I find my purse, my student identification card, a picture of my secret crush, Austin, my cherry lip balm, a few dollars. Just what I need - something to connect me with my other life.

'What are you studying?' Enfermera asks, squinting at my student card.

Enfermera's English is amazing and I'm intrigued. I make a mental note to question her about it.

'Eh, Bachelor of Behavioural Science. Criminology, Psychology majors.' Wonder if she knows what's it all about?

'Aaah. Clever *and* tough?'

'Yep. Gonna head New York's FBI office one day. Gonna kick ass.'

She smiles. 'I believe you,' she says. 'You're obviously a survivor.'

Juan walks up to me and stabs my shoulder a couple of times with gnarled fingers. '*Milagro.*'

What the fuck did I do to piss him off now?

'That's *miracle* in Spanish,' Enfermera says quickly. 'Because you were shot and obviously thrown off the cliff into the sea and yet, you're still here. *Milagro.*'

I nod slowly. 'Wow. That's what happened? That dude *really* wanted me dead, huh? It's like overkill.'

She frowns. 'Do you know why? I mean, what exactly did you do to him?'

'Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I was just taking photos. Holiday shots of views ... nothing out of the ordinary. Don't know why he was so mad at *me*. I mean, *everyone* was taking photos, so why was he after me?' I exhale loudly. 'God, I wish I knew.'

She shakes her Don King-styled head. ‘Mmm ... doesn’t make sense.’

She’s right, it doesn’t make sense. The motherfucker failed his mission though, because in spite of the overkill, I’m alive and being christened by witchdoctors. Knowing someone wanted me dead so badly is a humbling experience though.

‘What?’

I slowly lift my head to look at Enfermera. ‘Shot, thrown off a cliff, almost drowned – that’s three lives down, Enfermera. I gotta take it real easy with my other six.’ My voice is grim even though I’m trying to make light of my murder.

She bursts out laughing. ‘You’re funny. You should write a book about your brush with death when you go back to LA. Maybe it’ll turn into a movie.’

‘If I get back to America. It will have to be an action movie, though.’

‘I know who’ll play you – that actress from *Friends*. What’s her name ...?’

‘*Friends*? The TV ...?’

‘The blonde ... ditsy ...’

‘Aniston?’

‘No, the one that married Troy. Rachel ...?’

‘Jennifer Aniston - she plays Rachel.’

She shrugs. ‘But younger ...’

‘Really? Wow! Thanks, I guess. She’s a babe, so I think you’re just being nice. Anyway, how the hell do you know about *Friends*? And how come your English is good, huh?’

‘Used to live in Kansas City many years ago. Taught Spanish to a bunch of racists kids – trailer trash. Then taught English to some immigrants. Had a nervous breakdown and landed in a mental institution. Locked up ...’

‘Wow.’ That explains the hair.

‘I got better, but they just wouldn’t let me out, so I attacked a nurse with a pen and escaped. Found my way to Mexico and roamed the mountains. Until I found Juan. Well, *he* found *me* and we retreated into a stress-free, solitary life. Now we heal. Lucky for you, eh?’

I look at the small, dead animals in jars. ‘Yep. Sure am lucky to be rescued by two psychos.’

‘Psychos?’ She throws her head back and guffaws.

She’s still nuts, but she’s warm and caring and she makes me think of my mom.

My mom was a gregarious person. Great sense of humour and pretty, so pretty. Everyone who knew her loved her. I still remember her smile, her tinkling laugh, her gentle voice.

‘Now what?’

I shake my head slowly, my eyes filling with tears. ‘My mom ... she spoke to me ... when I was like, in the water, drowning. She said ... she ... she asked me to ...’ I swallow hard, ‘go with her and I’m wondering ... is she my guardian angel now? I mean, she said everything was gonna be okay and it is. Like, I’m alive. Still. So I’m wondering ...?’

‘My dear, you must have a *team* of guardian angels if you can survive what *you* survived.’

‘Yeah?’

‘But yes, I think your mother *is* watching over you. Maybe she sent you my way.’

‘Yeah, maybe. But right now ... I really could do with my mom. Wish she hadn’t died. It’s just like, forced me to grow up. I don’t ... I wish ...’ I draw the tattered sheet over my head and weep, something I seldom do.

Enfermera takes my hand in hers and sings a Mexican lullaby, which makes me cry harder.

Juan spits on the floor and shuffles off, muttering under his breath.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The pain keeps me awake at night so they give me opium. Beautiful, wonderful, magnificent opium. I love it. I adore it, I worship it. I want to have it all the time. I want to live with my carers for the rest of my life just to be close to my beloved opium. I count the hours till my next fix.

My nurses are sharper than I think, and when they realize that I sometimes fake my pain to get opium, things change.

‘I want my opium!’ I cry.

‘No more opium,’ Enfermera says in a firm voice. ‘We have to wean u off it.’

“Wean””? What the hell does that mean? Give me my motherfucking opium! Hey! Hey, don’t ignore me. I want my opium!’

She turns and walks away.

‘Come back! One day ...one day I’ll grow my own. A whole fucking plantation. You hear me? Just wait and see!’

I share the tent with Juan and Enfermera so I keep waking them with my nightmares of Diablo. He’s strangling me with one of his dreadlocks, he’s watching me sleep, an axe in his hand, he’s shooting me, he’s holding my head under water. Each time my screams catch in my throat, but each time, I live. I always wake up shaking with terror. He isn’t a nightmare, he’s real and the villagers are right to fear him.

Enfermera slips stuff under my pillow. ‘Sage,’ she says. ‘Wards off evil spirits, bad dreams.’

But it doesn’t help - I have the dark rings around my eyes to prove it.

‘Diablo is evil,’ Enfermera says in a quivering voice. ‘Him, his family – they’re a bunch of cold-blooded killers. Cannibals, I hear.’

‘Cannibals?’

She nods slowly, her eyes wide. ‘Never met them but ... don’t want to mess with him, Milagro.

He’s the Bastard of Mexico. Diablo - means devil, in Spanish. People don’t see much of him, but some say he’s half-man half-beast. And strong, very strong.’

‘Yeah, he’s strong alright,’ I say, my lips curling with disgust. ‘Tried to strangle me with *one* hand. Don’t know ’bout the half-man-half-beast thing, though. He looked pretty normal to me. Hairy, fugly, but normal. Like a gigantic coconut with a fucked up wig.’

‘A coconut ...’

‘A big one. Jeez, he’s one ugly motherfucker, Enfermera. When I first heard about him, I just thought, well, Bermuda Triangle, Loch Ness Monster, Elvis is alive – you know ...until I came face-to-face with him. He’s real alright. Got scars in my chest and an opium habit to prove it.’

‘Juan says they live in caves round here. In the mountains.’

‘Round *here*?’ I get sudden shivers and my eyes dart around. ‘Maybe we should go inside, then?’ As if that flimsy tent is going to protect us from that Diablo.

She waves her hand, dismissing my suggestions. ‘Well, at least you got a good look at him.’

‘Oh yeah. I guess if someone tries to strangle you – you *will* remember his face. He was like, huge. King Kong huge. He didn’t need a weapon – he was a fucking weapon himself. Tattoos all over his slimy arms and neck. Blue, red, right down to his fingertips. Yuck! And dreadlocks – long, wild. Christ! I’ll never forget how he looked as he and his horse flew towards me. Like a lion. Yeah, he looked like a dark, angry lion on crack.’

We both laugh.

‘Three green lines ...like, tattoos lines ... across the forehead. And eyebrow rings - I’ve seen eyebrow rings before, but he had about *ten*.’

‘Ten?’



I hold out both my hands, fingers splayed. 'Per evil, bloodshot eye.'

Enfermera smiles.

'Yeah, really – the motherfucker's masochistic *and* sadistic.'

'I believe you, I believe you.'

'You should, I wasn't on opium then, so it's all real.'

She nods.

'Not that I'm on opium *now*.'

Silence.

'Cause you ... you took it away.' My voice is accusing, bitter.

Silence.

'Even though *some people* think you're being cruel and you should let me have some for at least another ...'

'We should be getting back,' she says and stands up. 'Enough exercise for you today.'

'Mfff.' Good move Witchdoctress. Change the subject and that'll shut me up, eh? Well, I'll sulk until you give me my goddamn opium.

'Siempre is beautiful,' she says as we walk back. 'Friendly bunch. I've been there.'

'Yeah,' I say. 'I love the villagers. They make great Tequila and whisky. And they share it with foreigners too, so that makes them really, really hospitable to me.'

She smiles.

'Even though the village lacked the five-star amenities we were used to – the resort, I mean - we didn't wanna leave. We wanted to stay and just enjoy the place, the unspoilt beauty.'

'Mm ...'

'Yeah. Except Elaine - she desperately wanted to get back. Said something about running out of wax strips. Needed to wax her upper lip. Among other places. Other *private* places.'

Enfermera bursts out laughing and slaps me on the shoulder. 'Payton you crack me up! You find funny in the most serious of things. Just don't know when to be serious and when to be flippant. I suppose you drove Elaine crazy when you were growing up.' For an old lady, she sure has a girlish laugh.

'You betcha. I lived to irritate the bitch. She frowned so much, she constantly needed Botox.'

'Love talking to you,' she says, wiping the corners of her eyes. 'Guaranteed a laugh when I do.'

Then her smile disappears. 'Your family ... do you think he may have ki ...'

'Don't say it!' I say holding up my hand. I shake my head and take several deep breaths. 'My dad ... he's alive. I know it. When he sees me, he's ... he's probably going to hold me and cry with relief, disbelief. He's gonna regret that he never gave me the attention I deserved as a child.'

'You think so?' Enfermera asks, a frown on her forehead.

'Sure. As for Austin ...' I place my hand on my heart when I remember him. 'They're all alive.'

'What if you're wro ...?'

'Don't!' I snap and storm off.

\* \* \*

Three months. Three months since my rebirth, since the asswipe tried to kill me. But now, I'm ready to go home, back to America.

Enfermera and I are crying. I wipe away her tears and hug her. She doesn't say much but I know she'll be lonely without me.

Juan is throwing impatient looks our way. He glares at us, frowns and then puffs vigorously on his pipe. Clearly he's irritated at our display of emotions.

But we don't care – we're both struggling with goodbye. I'm the only connection to a world she once lived in, and she's the closest to a mother figure I've had since my mom passed.

‘Remember, keep practising your Spanish,’ she whispers. ‘If you don’t, you’ll lose all that you’ve learnt. It’ll come in handy one day.’

‘Okay, I will.’

‘As for Austin – he’s made his choice a long time ago. Time for you to move on, let go.’

Fat chance of that. I’m never going to be able to let go of Austin. ‘Okay,’ I say and hug her again before I turn to hard-ass Juan, hoping he will accept my goodbye handshake.

I gingerly stick out my hand. Juan stares at my hand as if I am handing him a grenade without the pin. I’m just about to withdraw my hand when he bursts into tears and grabs me to him.

I’m speechless as he hangs onto me and sobs like a kid. Loud, noisy, wah! wah! sobs. I had no idea he was capable of crying. I had no idea he cared. I gape at Enfermera over his shoulder.

He’s shocked away her tears and she stares slack-jawed. Somehow I don’t think she expected this reaction from him, this display of emotion.

I mean, I really thought Juan found me loud, maybe a little exhausting, but he weeps so hard, I find myself comforting him. ‘I’ll come back one day to visit,’ I whisper in his ear and pat the hunch on his back.

‘B ...bring big b ... beer,’ he manages to say.

‘I promise I will.’

Christ! He better mean big *beer*, not big *bear*.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The only way back to America is through the village of Siempre. I hate the thought of treading there – Diablo shot me there, remember? I really want to avoid the bastard at all costs.

The only way to Siempre, is through the mountain, Juan points out.

I have to climb it. ‘No cable car, Juan? Fuck!’

‘Language!’ Enfermera chides.

The mountain’s daunting, eerie and I’m scared. I’ve never climbed one before, so I guess I’ll have to learn as I go. But I don’t mind too much because ... I *can’t* mind. Hell, I’d move it if it meant getting out this place and back to clean drinking water, coffee, shampoo, my iPod, the internet and other such *essentials*.

Armed with just a map I sketched myself and two bottles of murky water, I start to climb the ominous mountain. Barefoot. My shoes didn’t survive my murder.

Throughout my climb, I worry about plunging to my death. Since I’m desperate to get back to the US, I heed the words of Deepak Chopra, ‘If you really want it, nothing will stop you.’ (Or was it Beyonce? Amy Winehouse? Whoever the fuck said it.)

*Don’t look down. Don’t look behind.*

*Just one more step, Payton.*

*One more step. One more step. One ... more ...motherfucking step!*

At night, the temperature in the mountain plummets and I’m freezing my ass off. I wrap my arms tightly around my wiry body and curse myself for venturing into Mexico. Why didn’t I go somewhere safe for a holiday? Like Iraq. Why didn’t I just stay in the warm, comfortable tepee with Juan and Enfermera and their pickled animal parts? Why didn’t I just stay and become a witchdoctor myself? That way I’d be the one dispensing opium. The thought of that gives me a warm and fuzzy feeling.

So what if they had sex (at their age) while I slept a few feet away? Why the fuck didn’t I steal a stash of opium for the *trip*?

Well, in spite of the precarious climb, I’m still alive. Maybe, it’s because I’m young, strong, an athlete. I can outrun and outswim just about everybody I know and I have medals to prove it.

Did my father nurture those talents in me? Nope. He was too busy diapering and burping the former soap actress he married.

It’s light, so I resume climbing and after a couple hours I see the top of the mountain. Tears spring to my eyes. If only I had a flag.

Now, all I gotta make sure is that I don’t run into Diablo or his hombres. I hide in the bushes and peer across the fields. When I see no signs of them, I venture out.

I limp all the way to the village and finally, I arrive emotional and exhausted, but extremely happy.

At first, the village kids scream in terror at the sight of me and back away.

‘Jesus Christ!’ one of the older kids say as they back away.

‘No! No!’ I cry. Damn! I shouldn’t have worn this long white dress.

*“¡Es un fantasma!”*

‘No, I’m not a ghost. Please!’ I hadn’t anticipated this. Now I worry they will drive a stake or something through my heart. ‘It’s really me,’ I explain. ‘I didn’t die.’

A *ghost* that talks – that ought to reassure them.

‘Where’s Austin?’ I ask. They stare with eyes popping out of their skulls. ‘Austin, tall ... um ... henpecked ...?’

‘Payton?’ A familiar voice whispers my name.

I spin around and look into Austin's beautiful face. 'Austin! Ohmigod Austin!' He's alive. My love is alive and living here. I fling myself into his arms.

'Payton ... am I dreaming?' he whispers and hugs me.

'No,' I blubber, 'it's me Austin, I'm alive. I made it. I made it.'

'I can't believe it,' he chants softly as he squeezes me to him. His arms around me feel wonderful and familiar and I want to stay in them forever. He holds me

away to look at me, then hugs me, then holds me away and finally, he just holds me to him while the villagers clutch their children and stare.

I briefly tell him about how I survived my murder.

'My family ...?'

'They're here,' he says as if in a trance.

'Oh thank God!'

'Come, let me take you to them.'

I see my dad first. 'Payton?' My dad slowly removes his glasses. 'Can't be,' he mutters as he rubs his eyes.

'Dad ... Dad ... It's me Dad,' I whisper and throw my arms around him.

Elaine and Paris are tearing. So is Austin. My dad isn't crying and that bothers me. Maybe he's in shock. I am so happy to see them all. I laugh and cry all at once.

'God, you're stick-insect thin,' Paris says, her lips curling with an admixture of envy and admiration.

'Vegetable gruel for three months,' I say, clutching the front of my dress and shaking it. 'Try it. You'll puke, but you'll be stick-insect too. Hey, that reminds me – got any steak?'

Jack, Austin's good friend and business partner, a former native of Siempre, divides his time between Los Angeles and Mexico these days. He immediately arranges a steak the size of Siempre for me.

'Thanks,' I say. 'Do you have any butter? I really need grease now.'

The steak drenched with homemade butter is delicious but almost immediately, it makes me gag. Disappointing.

With an enigmatic smile, Paris walks over and takes my hand. 'Got something to show you,' she says, her eyes gleaming.

'What? My steak ...?'

She ignores my protests and leads me to what appears to be a gravesite.

'This is a cemetery Paris. What the fuck?'

'Look,' she says and points to a wooden cross.

I peer at the name on the cross and balk.

*Payton Wagner*

*1977 -1999*

*RIP*

'Omigod! That's ... that's *me!*'

She nods slowly, wriggling both eyebrows. 'It sure is.'

'Fuck Paris! You look so goddamn happy showing me this. And you call *me* psycho?'

'*Schizo*,' she corrects. 'But sometimes, *psycho* too.'

'Mmm.' Same ol' Paris. 'My birth date is incorrect, you know. I was born in 1978.'

Paris squints at the cross. 'Really? That's funny, cos your dad wrote it.'

'Did he?'

'Yep. What a loser. You'd think he will remember the birth date of their only child, huh?'

I stare at her as her words sink in. She's right. What can I say?

Time to change the subject. 'So Diablo, he's like, taken over the village then?'

'Yep. We expected him to kill us too, but he didn't. Says he'll kill us all if we ever harbour a spy again.'

'A *spy*? *Again*? He's still going on about that shit?'

'Yeah.'

'I wasn't a spy.'

'*He* thinks you were.'

I shake my head. 'Imagine, I was murdered because of a case of mistaken identity. Fuck!'

'We had the pleasure of meeting his family too. His psycho mother Christa and his slutty sister, Santana. Evil bitches from hell.'

## CHAPTER SIX

‘It’s too dangerous,’ my father says.

‘You’ll never make it,’ Austin says.

I purse my lips and continue packing my stuff that Paris inherited. ‘I’m determined to leave Mexico, Diablo or no Diablo. You guys can stay.’

‘Payton, it’s too dangerous,’ Austin says. ‘Maybe wait a while for ...’

I zip up a suitcase and pat it down.

‘Fine,’ Austin says in a resigned voice, ‘we’ll leave after midnight.’

To my disappointment, my father does not offer to go with me. But I understand - he’s old and scared I guess.

Austin appears thoughtful. ‘We’re gonna need the villagers help here. I’ll get Jack to organize that.’

I nod. ‘Thanks Austin.’

We’re all packed and ready and I can hardly wait for nightfall. I’m fighting to keep my eyes open, but I refuse to sleep. I’ll sleep when I get to America.

At 6 PM I step outside the house for some air and look straight into Diablo’s hideous face.

As in my nightmares my scream lodges in my throat and as in my nightmares he towers menacingly over me. Déjà vu all around.

He has a posse - about twenty hairy, tattooed men and two women, all on horseback all staring at me.

Diablo stares as if he’s seeing a ghost. ‘I thought I killed you,’ he says and grabs me by the neck.

Like someone lost in a trance, I can only gape at him. He jabs a gun under my chin and sticks his puce face in mine. Imagine, I cheated death only to be killed

again by the *same* monster. What are the odds of that? Could my life suck any more?

‘Listen fucker,’ I hear myself say, ‘you got the wrong chick. I’m no spy, okay?’

Okay, I’ve travelled for two days, I’m dehydrated, exhausted from the harsh mountain climb, my feet are shredded from the jagged rocks and I’ve probably got sunstroke – my mind is AWOL.

His grip on my neck tightens and his gun jabs harder into my neck.

‘You wanna kill me? Do it. Just make sure you do it right *this* time, huh?’

Okay, I having one of those out-of-body-experiences people talk about. This can’t be me asking this barbarian to kill me.

There is a collective gasp around us as surprise registers in his bloodshot eyes. I doubt anyone has ever spoken to the miserable, cranky bastard like this before.

‘Why? Huh? Tell me why? Why the fuck are you so desperate to kill me, huh? What are you scared of?’ To my surprise, my voice is low, controlled, impatient,

but not at all scared. ‘You that afraid of a chick, you actually have to kill her? Huh, you fucking shithead?’

The place is so quiet, I can hear a clock ticking. Or is it my heartbeat? I can’t tell right now.

‘Apologize!’ My father shouts.

‘Fuck him!’ I say. ‘I’m not apologizing to this asshole!’

Diablo’s bushy eyebrows shoot up and a wry smile appears on his repugnant face. He cocks his gun. What’s worse than being shot in the chest by Diablo? His 9mm – cocked and cold under my chin.

‘You think I’m scared to die, you bastard? I’m not. But you shot me three times and I’m still here. Back from the dead. How many times do you need to *try* before you give up, eh? Seriously Kong, you’re a lousy hitman. I mean, look at me - I’m still fucking alive.’ Did I just say those things? I’m possessed for sure.

I feel his hold on my neck slacken and I'm surprised I still have my remaining four lives.

Then to my absolute horror, I slap him across the face. This is me going nuts. Having a breakdown, meltdown – whatever the fuck you call it. If I survive this, I'm probably going to be institutionalized in the same mental hospital Enfermera escaped from.

The ticking of the clock – now sounds like a church gong now and I feel a prayer coming on.

*As I walk to the ...how do you say it? As I walk into the ...As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death ...*

For seven long seconds nothing happens and I stare, mesmerized by his finger hovering over the trigger. One tap of his finger and I'm a *milagro* no more. Sobering thought - the kind that forces you to race to the nearest public restroom.

Then I hear the sound of guns being cocked behind him. I look past him at his men. They want to kill me themselves.

'You are going to get ripped to shreds, gringa,' one of his men says.

Oh, I believe him. I really do.

I look past Diablo and see my family's horrified faces. Elaine's hands are across her mouth, while my dad gapes with hands on top of his head. As for Austin - he looks the colour of fresh cement, while Paris chews furiously on her talons, her shoulders locked into a hunch.

From the corner of my eye I see Carvil, a village elder get on his knees and place his forehead to the ground, probably to pray for my soul that is heading for hell anytime now.

To my absolute astonishment, Diablo slowly lowers his gun, his eyes fixed on mine.

The older woman, Christa, who must be his mother, steps forward and shoves her gun in my cheek.

That hurts. Did she not see me slap him?

'I am going to turn you into a tea strainer,' she says, a sinister smile on her face.

They have tea strainers in Mexico?

Diablo snaps at her in Spanish. Reluctantly she lowers her gun, her eyes hard and blazing.

'Let me shoot her, Diablo,' she says. 'Please.'

'*Si*, shoot the gringa, Diablo,' the younger woman says. This must be the slutty sister, Santana. Slowly, she circles me and taps her riding crop on her palm. Her eyes are narrow, her nostrils flaring. 'She got no respect.'

Diablo shoves me away and steps back. A murmur ripples through the crowd. Diablo's behaviour seems to be confusing them. It confuses me more. He stares at me as if this is the first time he's seeing me.

Carvil is still on the floor, ear to the ground, probably waiting for the sound of gunshots. When nothing happens, he hops to his feet and looks questioningly at

Diablo, as if to say: 'What you waiting for?'

Don't really blame Carvil. Who wants a family of vengeful cannibals lurking around Siempre because of some insolent gringa?

To everyone's surprise, Diablo slowly backs away, his eyes still fixed on my face.

What does this mean? Am I out of danger? Does he plan to return with renewed vigor and rip me apart like his mother promised to?

Christa steps forward and smiles at me. A wave of relief washes over me. At least she's no longer mad at me. Maybe I'm out of danger after all.

Anyway, she looks far too young to be the Demon's mother. If I have to guess, I'd say she's 40ish, stylish, attractive. Her jet-black hair is slicked into a low chignon. Her skin is olive and smooth, her face caked with foundation. Her scarlet lips are full and pouting, her eyes, hard and black. Tight-fitting sweater with low-slung jeans tucked into brown, mid-calf boots. Large silver hoops dangle from her ears each time she moves.

Still smiling, she removes a large atomizer from her saddlebag and sprays me. Great – she’s sharing her favorite fragrance with me – maybe it’s her way of apologizing. I exhale and suddenly I’m feeling really hopeful.

She turns around and sprays everyone around her. The villagers smile and exchange see-we-were-worrying-for-nothing looks.

Laughing, Christa runs through the crowd and sprays everyone in sight. Really, she is so damn generous with her ... *Chanel No 5*? Well, it has to be something expensive. After all, she is a drug dealer - she must have dough.

I sniff the fragrance on my clothes and frown. Strange, it smells really familiar and not at all like *Chanel No 5* or any of the expensive perfumes I’ve stolen from Elaine from time-to-time.

To me, it smells more like ... gasoline. Holy cow, it *is* gasoline! What the hell ...?

Christa is talking to Diablo now. Her eyes are glistening and her face is flushed. She claps her hands to her chest as if she can barely contain her excitement.

Diablo’s hooded eyes shift around and settle on me again. His gaze is penetrating and I quickly avert my eyes. After a moment he nods at Christa and she lets out a whoop of delight. She spins around and points to one of her men carrying the strangest contraption I’ve ever seen. Some sort of mini gas pump. He steps forward and tips his cap at her.

Then I notice the cylinder strapped to his back – it’s a fucking flamethrower.

Christa closes her eyes, raises her hands to the skies and says, ‘Diablo has spoken, everyone.’

The villagers let out an anguished roar as the flamethrower takes three steps back.

Now, I have a fair understanding of Spanish, although I have trouble speaking it. But when people speak really fast, I tend to lose them. ‘What did she say?’ I ask to no one in particular.

All her men are moving backwards, except the flamethrower. He aims at the barn and fires. Flame shoots from his contraption and the barn ignites.

‘Ohmigod!’ I cry.

Some of the screaming villagers race to the barn and try to douse the flames but it’s no use - the barn is already an inferno.

‘Payton, what the fuck have you done?’ Paris shrieks.

Shocked, I stare at her and realise that with one slap, I sentenced the villagers to death. Fuck! What the hell was I thinking? How could I be so stupid, so dumb, so self-absorbed to do something like that?



## CHAPTER SEVEN

‘What the hell is wrong with you?’ I shout at Christa. ‘There are women and children ...’

I look around. ‘There are animals ...?’

Christa hangs her head for a moment, then looks up at me and says, ‘Burn them all.’

Stunned, I whirl around to look at my murderer. Even though I’m terrified of him, we enter into a staring contest.

I can’t back down now – the situation calls for drastic action. And besides my fear is slowly morphing into rage and I struggle to contain myself.

‘What do you want?’ I screech, my eyes flitting from Christa to Diablo. ‘Gold? Land? Tequila?’

His men scoff at my question, while Diablo just stares at me. One of his men places a lit cigarette between his fingers and he takes long drags on it. With all the gasoline around, this place could end up looking like a 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration in no time.

Carvil and another village elder push me aside and totter up to Diablo. They bow before him. ‘Please Diablo, please.’

He ignores them, his eyes fixed on me.

They get on their hands and knees. ‘Diablo, please! Diablo ...’

Diablo sidesteps them and walks away. They follow him. He stops, they stop. He walks, they walk. Suddenly he frowns and curses under his breath.

‘Take our gold, Diablo. You can have anything you want, Senor,’ Carvil says.

Diablo turns and levels his gun at them but they just close their eyes and remain standing in front of him.

Diablo inhales deeply and lowers his gun. He strokes his chin slowly. If I thought the retard had a brain, I’d accuse him of thinking.

After a few moments, he raises his hand. A man rushes up to him. They whisper for a moment. The man shouts out to the flamethrower. The flamethrower sulkily lowers his trigger.

Diablo’s man turns to the elders and talks to them. The elders listen, hop to their feet and nod vigorously, their eyes gleaming.

‘What? What’s he saying? What’s going on?’ Nobody answers me. Some of the villagers rush to douse the burning barn with buckets of water.

Carvil scrambles over to Jack and talks to him in Spanish. Jack’s eyes light up as he listens. He glances at me, then quickly looks away.

My family and I exchange confused glances.

We’re feeling a little hopeful now that the flamethrower has stopped firing and we have this *stay*. All eyes are glued to Jack.

Jack nods several times at Carvil then slowly advances towards me and I’m now convinced that Diablo has instructed the villagers to kill me. Maybe he was negotiating: ‘I’ll spare your village if you burn that foulmouth bitch on a stake for disrespecting me in front of my *hombres*.’

Jack stands in front of us and scratches the back of his neck. ‘Um ... eh ...’ He looks at his feet then shuffles them.

‘Oh, for Christ’s sakes!’ Elaine snaps. ‘What is it, Jack?’

‘He wants your daughter!’ Jack blurts. ‘Then he’ll spare the village.’

With a hanging jaw, Elaine turns to look at her only begotten, whose face is the colour of alabaster right now.

‘I’m not going!’ Paris cries, clutching her chest with both hands.

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