

# Into the Fire

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A Refuge prequel

Jeff Kerr

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# Contents

1. Into the Fire	1
2. Death Train	16
3. End of the Line	32
Thank you ...	49
About Jeff Kerr	50
Also by Jeff Kerr	51



# Chapter 1

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## Into the Fire

Miranda Flores pointed a finger at the empty chair across the table and said, “His is cheese. The scrambled is mine.”

The server, a stone-faced man with drooping eyelids, set the plates down with a grunt. “Enjoy.”

Miranda picked up her fork. Should she wait? These were the best pupusas in San Salvador. They should be eaten hot, with the masa cake still supple and the chicken filling moist when cut into. Then she remembered Berni’s sour look the last time she started eating while he was in the bathroom. She decided to wait. Her mouth watered as she watched tendrils of steam rise from her plate.

By the time Berni returned, the steam had disappeared. He plopped into his chair and grinned. “Sorry. That took longer than I expected.”

Miranda returned his smile. How could she be annoyed at such a handsome man? “No problem.”

They dug into their food. Only the soft hum of an overhead fan broke the quiet of the cozy café, deserted except for the two of them. Berni’s duties as an army lieutenant had kept him busy until mid-afternoon, well after the lunch rush ended.

“We arrested seven people this morning,” Berni said between bites.

Miranda stopped chewing. "What did they do?"

"The usual. Consorting with known traitors, that sort of thing."

She studied his eyes for any sign of emotion and saw none. "What will happen to them?"

"I don't know," he said, talking through a mouthful of food. "I never do. We just arrest them and turn them over to the captain."

"What do you think he does with them?"

"There's a camp out in the country. Maybe they get sent there."

Miranda winced at his casual attitude. Was he really that uncaring? "What do they do at the camp?"

Berni's face hardened. "Look, I told you I don't know, so stop asking. Besides, that's not what you should be worried about."

An alarm sounded in Miranda's head. "What do you mean?"

He cocked his head and stared at the ceiling. To Miranda, he looked like he was trying to decide how to deliver bad news. "I shouldn't be telling you this, but I saw your brother's name on a list at the station."

"What list?"

"It's probably nothing," he said with a dismissive wave. "It's a list of people we're supposed to keep an eye on. The captain put it up."

"Do they think Ramón did something wrong? Do they think he's a rebel?"

"No, nothing like that. It's probably just his age and the fact that he's not in the army. Anyway, I thought you should know." He glanced at his watch. "I have to go. See you tomorrow night?"

She gulped, wanting further explanation that she suspected would never come. "Yes, I'll be there at seven."

After he was gone, Miranda cast a rueful eye at her pupusas. She had taken only a couple of bites, but her appetite had deserted her. She dropped some money on the table and hurried out of the cafe. She had to see Ramón.

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She found him in the den playing a video game. A beer bottle protruded from between his legs. At his side lay a half-eaten bag of tortilla chips.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” she said, dropping into a chair.

“Sure.”

“Can you turn the game off?”

He muted the sound but kept playing.

“Come on, Ramón, this is important.”

“Fine,” he said, clicking off the TV. “What’s so important?”

She drew a deep breath. How would he take this? “Somebody told me they saw your name on a list at an army station.”

“Was it Berni?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Okay, so it was. What list is this?”

“A list of people the army is keeping an eye on.”

Ramón snorted. “So?”

“So, the army is watching you. It means they suspect you might be helping the rebels.”

“Let them watch. They’re morons.”

“Are you?”

“Am I what?”

“Are you helping the rebels?”

He swigged his beer and clicked the television on. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Miranda rose to block the TV. “If you are, you’re putting us all in danger.”

“Good thing I’m not, then.”

“Stop it, Ramón,” she said, her voice rising. “You must have done something. Whatever it is, don’t do it again.” When he rolled his eyes at her, she said, “I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“I can take care of myself. Now, will you please move?”

“Ramón! Stop blowing me off. This is serious. Whatever you’ve gotten mixed up in—”

He leapt from the couch, knocking his beer to the floor. Liquid guzzled from the bottle to soak into the faded carpet. “Goddamn it, Miranda!” He was shouting. “I’m a fucking adult. Shut the hell up and leave me alone.”

Miranda flinched at his outburst. What had gotten into her brother lately? Recovering, she pointed at the beer-stained carpet. “Mom is gonna kill you.” When he didn’t respond, she shook her head and stormed out of the room.

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Miranda tugged on the leash and said, “Come on, Fresca. You don’t have to smell every little thing.”

The dog, a small mixed breed with the coloring and bushy tail of a fox, gave a final sniff and trotted to catch up. Miranda’s friend Facundo patted the animal’s head. “That dirt smells pretty good, doesn’t it girl?”

They strolled along a gritty residential street of one- and two-story buildings. Miranda took such walks with her long-time friend at least once a week. They had known each other since her return to San Salvador after thirteen years in Albuquerque, New Mexico. There was no romance between them. She saw Facundo more as a brother.



She appreciated his quick wit and willingness to engage in probing conversation that most guys she knew ran from. Even Berni.

“There’s something I wanted to run past you,” Miranda said.

“What?”

“I just learned that Ramón is on a list of suspected rebel sympathizers at an army base.”

He raised an eyebrow. “And?”

“And I’m worried something could happen to him. Just last week one of our neighbors disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

“They came for him one night. Nobody’s heard from him since. His wife is worried sick.”

Facundo picked up his pace. Miranda could hear the gears churning inside his head. “He *is* a rebel sympathizer,” he said.

Miranda jerked to a stop as if she had walked into a wall. “How do you know that?”

“Because I’m a rebel sympathizer, too.” Noting her shocked expression, he added, “He hasn’t hurt anybody if that’s what you’re worried about. Mostly he runs messages or delivers packages.”

“Drugs?”

“No,” Facundo said with a laugh. “Food, medicine...maybe a gun or two.”

Miranda gaped at Facundo like she was seeing him for the first time. “How long have you known? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to put you in danger.”

She said nothing. What was there to say? Ramón a rebel, sure. He was a hothead. Always one to jump into a situation first and worry about the consequences later. But Facundo? Calm, patient, rational Facundo? He was someone she could rely on for thoughtful advice.

Someone she could trust. Or at least that's what she had thought until now.

Facundo said, "Aren't you going to say something?"

"Yes." She spun on her heels and strode away. "Fuck you both."

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Miranda awoke the next morning with a vague sense of dread twisting her insides. What was it? Oh, right. Facundo. And Ramón. Rebels. Fighting against a government armed with tanks and planes. Did such rebellions ever prevail? Maybe. But at what cost?

A series of clicks on the hard tile floor shoved those morose thoughts aside. Fresca! The dog charged into the room and leapt onto the bed. She shoved her wet nose against Miranda's cheek, wriggling and licking with her sandpaper tongue. Miranda kissed the top of her head and said, "Let's go get some breakfast."

She pulled on a robe and followed Fresca into the kitchen. Her father Josúe and her mother Valentina sat at the table, untouched plates of scrambled eggs before them. Her mother wore a faded nightgown, her father a T-shirt and boxer shorts. Neither spoke as she took a seat.

"What's wrong?" Miranda said.

Valentina looked at her husband. "Tell her."

With a heavy sigh, Josúe lifted his eyes and said, "I lost my job."

Miranda tried to process the news but couldn't. Her father, a mechanic, enjoyed an excellent reputation with his boss at the car dealership. Furthermore, the dealership owner regularly praised his work. Just a month ago, he bestowed a surprise bonus on Josúe with the explanation that he wanted to keep his best mechanic happy.

Miranda said, "What happened?"

“They closed the dealership.”

“What? Why?”

“The owner was arrested. They say he’s been supporting the rebels. Giving them money, vehicles.”

“But why would that force the dealership to close?”

Josúe pressed his lips into a thin line. “Don’t you see? It’s a cash grab. It’s happening all over the country. Banks, insurance companies, now the car dealership. It’s an excuse to seize assets.” He dropped his head in his hands. “They let everybody go.”

“You’ll find another job,” Valentina said.

“I don’t know,” said Josúe. “Two shops turned me down yesterday when they found out where I used to work.”

Valentina rose. On her way out of the kitchen, she said, “Stop being so negative. Trust in God.”

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Miranda climbed the stairs to Berni’s apartment flush with excitement over the prospect of an evening out. She made her way along the second-story balcony and stopped at a weathered door with a plastic 7 tacked in place. Moments after she rapped on the cheap wood, Berni, clad only in jeans, opened up.

“Are we going topless?” Miranda said as she stepped inside.

Berni laughed and gave her a quick kiss. “I will if you will.”

“I better not. The other women would be too jealous.”

Berni laughed again and said, “Let me go get a shirt. You can grab a beer from the fridge. Get me one too.”

Miranda crossed the small living room into the kitchen. She could tell the place belonged to a bachelor. Dirty dishes jammed the sink.

The trash can overflowed with ramen wrappers and TV dinner boxes. She opened the refrigerator and chuckled at its meager contents. On the bottom shelf, an unopened block of cheddar cheese sat next to a plastic container of unidentifiable leftovers. Above that was a six-pack of Pilsener beer. She grabbed two bottles and returned to the living room.

Berni stepped out of the bedroom buttoning a blue shirt that clung tightly to his chest, his tight pectoral muscles rippling beneath the fabric. Miranda handed him a beer and said, "You look great."

He grunted. "Are those your best clothes? I expected you to wear something nicer."

"What's wrong with these?"

"They look cheap," he said, fingering her sleeve. "And your hair. I like it short. You should get it cut."

She laughed. Was he serious? This was only their fourth date, and he was criticizing her appearance?

"I'm serious. You should cut it."

"I don't think so. I like my hair."

"But I want you to." He wasn't smiling.

Miranda's cheeks ran hot. "My hair is my own business."

"No. Tomorrow, I'll take you to a salon. I'll even pay."

"I don't care. I'm not getting my hair cut."

He slapped her. Not too hard but hard enough to hurt, both inside and out. Outraged, she crashed her beer bottle against his skull, dropping him like a sack of cement. Blood streamed from his scalp. He pressed a hand against the wound and felt the stickiness.

"You hit me," Miranda said, eyes drilling into him.

"You fucking bitch! I'm bleeding!"

She ditched the bottle and headed for the door. "You'll live."

"You'll regret this."

“Go to hell.”

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The next morning, Miranda arrived at her aunt’s flower stand still fuming. Berni struck her. The bastard crossed a line that, to Miranda, separated a man from a beast. She didn’t regret her response. He should be the one feeling sorry.

Her aunt had already unloaded the flowers. Miranda helped her arrange them along the sidewalk. Five-gallon buckets stuffed with roses, asters, begonias, and more. She then erected a shade canopy while her aunt fetched a fold-up camping chair.

“I’ll see you this afternoon,” her aunt said as she climbed back into her van.

“No rush.” As far as Miranda cared, she could take her time. A longer day would help cover her father’s income loss.

The morning dragged. By ten Miranda had sold to only two customers, a college student looking to impress his girlfriend and a middle-aged businessman with a gold Rolex on his wrist. Why the businessman needed an expensive flower bouquet so early in the morning mystified Miranda. Probably for his mistress.

A grim-faced man in his twenties stopped at the stand. He paced along the row of buckets, taking his time without showing interest in any specific one. “Are you looking for something for your wife?” Miranda said. “Maybe a girlfriend? You can’t go wrong with roses.”

He shot her a look that said, “Leave me alone.”

She shrugged and returned to her chair. One thing she didn’t indulge in a customer was rudeness.

A school bus squealed to a stop. Miranda recognized it as one from a private school attended by the children of high-ranking politicians and military officers. She caught an adolescent boy on the bus looking at her. He smiled and waved.

A silver Toyota Passo roared up from behind and jerked to a stop. Four masked men with automatic rifles scrambled out of the vehicle and positioned themselves along the side of the bus. The rude man at the flower stand produced a pistol. He ran to the bus and banged on the door.

The door hissed open. The man fired his pistol and shot the driver dead. Children screamed. The man leapt aboard and ordered the children out. They obeyed, crying and hugging each other.

By now Miranda was out of her chair but her feet felt glued to the pavement. She wanted to shout at the men to stop, these were innocent children, but fear kept her quiet.

One of the masked men herded the children into a line against the bus. Their wailing was beginning to draw the attention of people on the street. The man hollered for them to be quiet. The boy who had waved at Miranda shouted something she couldn't hear. That's when the guns opened up.

Children collapsed in bunches. Bodies slammed against the bus as blood spewed forth to contrast with the light blue uniforms they wore. The gunfire blasted Miranda's eardrums until she thought her head would explode. The boy who had waved sprinted toward her. The man with the pistol dropped him with a shot in the back.

The boy lay mere feet from Miranda. He rolled over and they locked eyes, hers wide with horror, his with fear. A masked man dashed up and shot the boy in the face. Miranda stiffened, expecting the next bullet to be for her. The man said, "Don't worry, sister. They had it coming."

She turned and ran. Her mind froze as her legs carried her away. Out of breath after several blocks, she slowed to a brisk walk.

“Miranda? Miranda.” A pair of hands clasped her shoulders. “Miranda!” A man’s face loomed before her. “Are you okay?”

“Facundo.”

“Are you hurt?”

Her eyes followed his to the red spatters on her legs and feet.

“Miranda, come home with me. I’ll get you cleaned up.” He slid an arm around her.

“No!” She twisted out of his grasp. “Leave me alone.”

“Let me take you to my apartment. You can’t be out in public like this.”

Blood covered her legs. Blood from children. Children shot by rebels. Rebels like Facundo. “You bastard. Get away from me.”

“Please. Come with me. You’ve got to get off the street.”

“I said leave me alone. They were kids. They didn’t ...” Her voice trailed off. Tears clouded her vision as choking sobs escaped her throat.

He took her hand. “Miranda, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m going to take you to my place.”

She couldn’t think, had no idea what to do or where to go. Like a lamb being led to slaughter, she allowed Facundo to choose. She remained mute as he guided her to his apartment.

Once inside, he had her sit on a footstool while he drew bath water. A bath. Yes, that would feel good. She untied her shoes, slipped them off. Something dropped to the floor. She picked it up, examined it. What was it? A rock? The truth hit her like a meteor. She flung the thing away, heard it click against the wall. A piece of bone. From the boy’s skull.

She sat on the edge of the tub. Facundo rinsed her legs, checking for injuries. Finding none, he towed her off and led her to the den. She dropped onto a second-hand sectional as he took the lounge chair.

“What happened?” he said.

She glared at him. “You don’t know?”

“I promise I don’t.”

She told him. Once again, she heard the staccato pops from the rifles, saw the boy being shot, felt his blood spraying her legs. “It was the rebels.”

“It sounds like you’re blaming me,” he said.

Was he dense? Of course she was blaming him. “*You’re a rebel.*”

“Miranda, I promise I had nothing to do with it.” After a beat, he added, “Come on, you know me.”

Did she? She did. And the man who had been her close friend for ten years would find it impossible to kill anyone, especially a child. Her face relaxed, but her eyes remained wary. “So, who did it?”

“I don’t know.”

They sat in glum silence. At length, Facundo said, “Why don’t you stay the night here? I’ll take you home in the morning.”

Even if she had wanted to leave, she lacked the energy to stand up. She leaned back on the sofa and closed her eyes. “All right.”

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She awoke the next morning in Facundo’s bed, having no idea how she had gotten there. Rolling over, she saw she was alone. She stood. One of Facundo’s T-shirts hung from her shoulders to halfway down her thighs, covering a pair of his running shorts.



Out in the den, Facundo lay sleeping on the sofa. She eased into the lounge chair and called his name.

He stirred and sat up. "Good morning."

"You didn't have to sleep out here."

Rubbing his eyes, he said, "I didn't want you to think we did anything."

"I trust you."

"I called your parents last night and told them what happened. I told them I'd bring you to the house this morning."

"Okay. I need to get dressed."

He rose and headed toward the kitchen. "No hurry. I'll make breakfast for you."

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Outside, a light drizzle greeted them. The drab sky matched Miranda's mood as they plodded along Calle Poniente. She dodged mothers with children, old women carrying shopping bags, three uniformed boys on their way to school. Why did everything look so normal when, for her, nothing would ever be normal again?

A blue Jeep tore around a corner and sped toward them. Facundo flinched and pulled Miranda into an alcove. The vehicle screeched to a stop in front of a phone store and two soldiers leapt out. They raced into the store and, moments later, reappeared with a paunchy, middle-aged man in tow. Each soldier clutched an arm as they dragged the man toward the Jeep. They shoved him into a seat and squeezed in on either side of him before roaring away.

"We should hurry," Facundo said.

Ten minutes later they reached Miranda's house, a one-story, yellow adobe building on the corner. Miranda opened the gate of the iron picket fence in front of the house and froze. Someone had kicked the door in. It hung at an odd angle by the lower hinge, the upper having been torn from the frame. Fresca lay motionless in the doorway, her fur matted with blood.

"Don't go in there," Facundo said, gripping Miranda's elbow.

She shook him off and stepped inside. She couldn't see at first, but as her eyes adjusted to the dim light a horrifying scene came into focus. Her parents sat on the couch, heads back, arms splayed to the side. Behind them, an explosion of blood, looking as if someone had hurled paint against the wall. A neat hole above the eyes on each lifeless face.

Ramón lay prone on the floor. At least Miranda assumed it was Ramón, for it was his head on the coffee table, a thick stream of blood oozing from the severed neck. Next to the head was a note. It read, "Death to traitors! I told you you'd be sorry." There was no signature.

Miranda's temples throbbed as she stared open-mouthed at the bodies of her family. What should she do? Were the killers still in the house? Why did they do this? She backed away from the horror. Knees weak, she leaned against a wall and slid to the floor.

Facundo said, "Miranda. We need to leave."

She looked up at him. Leave? Where would they go? No place was safe. Children, slaughtered by the score at a busy intersection. Her family, dead and mutilated in their own home. Even the dog, her beloved Fresca, shot and killed.

He hauled her to her feet. "Come on," he said, leading her to the door.

"No."

"We can't stay."

"Go if you want. I've got to take care of them."

“Don’t you understand?” he said, his tone more urgent now. “If you had been here, they’d have killed you too. They’ll come back to finish the job.”

A chill coursed down Miranda’s spine as the pieces fell into place. Facundo was right. She was a marked woman. It was too dangerous to stay.

She bolted into the hall. Reaching her room, she found her well-worn backpack and stuffed it with clothes. She had to leave. *Now!* Not only this house, but this life, this wretched struggle for existence in the city of her birth that had never felt like home. This country, that her father had dragged them back to after an arsonist torched his auto repair shop in Albuquerque. This fucking place, the one that had failed to provide the happiness she had known in the United States.

Out in the den, she spotted one of her mother’s sappy romance novels, *El Corazón de Victoria*, on an end table. The Heart of Victoria. Without thinking, she snatched it and stuck it in the backpack. “Okay,” she said to Facundo, trying to ignore the agony in her own heart. “Let’s get out of here.”

# Chapter 2

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## Death Train

The little girl had positioned herself behind her mother so that Miranda didn't have a good view of her. But now and then, her face would pop into view. Miranda would make a silly face and the girl would go back into hiding. Soon it became a game of peek-a-boo. The girl would sneak a quick look before giggling and ducking back into cover.

Miranda detected movement along the tracks. Was the train leaving? No, it was just a man squeezing between one of the boxcars to join the waiting throng.

The girl disappeared again. "What's your name?" Miranda called out, weariness in her voice.

Instead of answering, the girl buried her face in her mother's back. Her mother swung an arm around and pulled her forward. "Tell her."

"Luz." She buried her face again.

"Well, Luz," said Miranda. "I have something for you."

Luz lifted her face. Such a beautiful child. "What is it?"

"Let me show you." Miranda stuck a hand in a pocket on her backpack and came out with a red hair tie. "Here. Take it."

Luz wrapped a tiny hand around it.

“What do you say?” her mother prompted.

“Thank you.”

Luz handed the tie to her mother. The young woman pulled the girl’s hair into a ponytail and wrapped the elastic band in place.

“It looks pretty on you,” said Miranda.

Luz smiled.

Her mother said, “What’s your name?”

“Miranda.” She gestured at her traveling companion I. “His is Facundo.”

Facundo raised a hand. “Hello.”

“I’m Pilar.”

“What brings you to the Death Train?” Miranda asked, using the term she had heard from other refugees.

Pilar’s expression darkened. “Please. Don’t call it that.”

“The Beast, then.”

“I heard a man on TV call it ‘the Train of the Unknowns.’”

“You want to be unknown?”

“At least until we’re in the U.S.”

Miranda sat on a weedy embankment twenty feet from the railroad tracks. She and Facundo had arrived in Arriaga, a small town in southern Mexico, several hours ago. Facundo lay on his back, hands behind his head. Watching him, Miranda envied his ability to relax, a skill that had eluded her so far on their journey. Her heart hadn’t stopped pounding since they found the bullet-riddled bodies of her parents and brother in her family’s living room. The soldiers had even murdered her dog.

Fearing she would meet the same fate, Miranda fled. Facundo had planned on leaving anyway. You don’t stick around when you learn your name is on an army list of suspected rebels. Not in a place like war-torn San Salvador, where each sunrise finds a fresh crop of dead

bodies on the street. "I'm coming with you," she had blubbered as they gaped at the carnage in the living room.

He wrapped his arms around her. "I'm so sorry."

They shared their weedy stretch of ground with at least a hundred other desperate people. Mostly men, but a few women like Miranda Young. Knees pulled up, chin resting in the crook of an elbow. Eyes down, unblinking, tearful. Just trying to survive. Some carried duffle bags, but most traveled only with the clothes they wore. All were searching for the same thing, a place to exist without being murdered.

Then there was Pilar, the young mother who had glommed onto them after trudging up to the tracks a half hour ago, a young boy and girl in tow. Miranda couldn't tell who looked more frightened, Pilar or the children. The boy, whose name she didn't know, appeared no older than ten. His younger sister Luz couldn't be much above eight.

"Are you two married?" It was Pilar, fixing Miranda with an impassive stare.

"No, we're just friends." Not just friends, thought Miranda, but best friends, intertwined in a platonic relationship that stretched back years. But why would Pilar need to know that?

Pilar said, "Where are you from?"

"San Salvador."

"We're from Chancuva."

"I never heard of it."

Pilar emitted a sardonic chuckle. "Nobody has. It's small."

"How many people live there?"

"I don't know. Not many."

Miranda grunted and turned away. Chancuva. Just one tiny village among hundreds. She wondered how many others in El Salvador were feeding its citizens to the Beast.

Pilar said, "I didn't want to leave. One day ..." She cleared her throat. "One day, soldiers came. They started arresting people. I don't know why. They took my husband from the fields." She looked at her children. "Their father."

"What happened to him?"

"They wouldn't tell me. I checked every day. Then one day they posted a list at the town hall. It said, 'These traitors have paid the price for their crimes.' Jorge's name was on it." She glanced at her son. "I was afraid they'd take Mateo and put him in the army. I heard they were doing that in other towns."

"But he's only a child."

She stroked the boy's head. "I know." During the ensuing silence, Miranda braced herself for the question she knew was coming. Sure enough, Pilar delivered it. "Why did you leave?"

Miranda took a deep breath and steadied herself before she replied. "I lost my family. My brother was with the rebels. I would have been next." She flicked a hand at Facundo. "Him too."

"I'm sorry."

Miranda sighed and looked away, hoping Pilar would take the hint. Too tired to talk, she had no desire to rehash the terrible recent past. She swept her gaze along the train. There were so many cars, mostly boxcars, but a few tank cars farther up. A seemingly endless chain of rolling steel. A train so long she couldn't see the engine that would pull it.

Miranda eyed the ladder on the nearest car. Two lengths of steel attached to the corrugated siding with thinner crosspieces bolted in place as rungs. All of it caked in flaking rust. Would it hold? And if it did, what would they find on top? Probably more rusting, sunbaked metal. A precarious perch atop a freight train rumbling 600 miles to

Mexico City. Beyond that, more trains, more danger, until they made it all the way to Ciudad Juárez, 1600 miles north.

A man shouted from somewhere up the tracks. A distant roar reached them. Metal screeched against metal, and the train lurched forward. Fighting aching muscles, Miranda stood. It was time to go.

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Along the tracks, people popped to their feet. Pilar touched Miranda's arm. "Can you help us get to the top?"

"Of course."

Facundo shot her a look of disapproval. "We'll have trouble enough as it is," he whispered. "She should ask somebody else."

Miranda swallowed hard and repositioned her backpack. He was right. What did she know about hopping freight trains? This was her first time. But she couldn't refuse now. She looked back at the young mother and gestured for her to follow. Another metallic blast rattled her eardrums and the wheels on the cars began turning. The motion brought the crowd surging forward. Reaching the ladder first, Facundo took hold of it and looked back at Miranda. "Hurry."

Pilar and her children crowded in from behind. Miranda picked up the girl and hoisted her onto the ladder. "Go!" she shouted. The girl found a handhold and pulled herself up several rungs before stopping near the top.

By now, the train was creeping forward. Facundo snatched the boy and held him up so he could grab hold of a rung. He did, but then froze. Pilar pushed past Facundo and shoved the boy from behind. "Go! Go!" She leaped onto the ladder and, still shouting, used a hand to prod him again. He began to climb. Seeing him coming, Luz scam-



bled up and out of sight. With Pilar close on his tail, the boy made it to the top and disappeared.

The train picked up speed and Miranda had to break into a jog to keep up. Wrapping her hands around the ladder's side rail, she jumped. Her feet landed on the bottom rung but, as she started to climb, she slipped. Redoubling her grip, she pulled her legs up, and this time secured a foothold.

As the train moved faster and faster, Miranda feared Facundo might be left behind. She hauled herself up a few rungs to make room for him and looked back over her shoulder. Running at a fast jog, he managed to slip his hands around the side rails and hurtle onto the ladder's bottom rung. Looking up, he jerked his head as a signal for her to keep moving.

After reaching the top of the ladder, Miranda swung her legs onto the car's roof. A pang of anxiety shot through her when she saw that the surface was not level. Instead, it sloped down from a midline spine at an angle that, although not steep, filled her with dread.

She caught Pilar looking at her and gave her a thumbs-up sign. Pilar returned it. Mateo's trembling chin belied his attempt at calmness, while Luz's eyes were like saucers and her cheeks glistened with tears. Whispering in the child's ear, her mother pulled her close.

They passed a man with two young children looking up at them from the ground. One child was crying. The man ignored the boy as he watched their missed opportunity speed by.

Miranda took stock of their situation. Their car was sixth from the end. In the other direction, the cars stretched seemingly for miles. There were two engines to pull them. People clustered atop cars for almost the entire length of the train. Miranda shuddered at the sight of the people on the round tank cars, which offered even less secure seating than her box car.

She swung her legs around and slipped off her backpack. Pushing her bottom against the midline beam, she planted the soles of her feet against the roof itself. The metal was uncomfortably hot, but she felt secure, at least as much as possible on top of a moving train.

The train picked up speed. The rooftop rattled, but it was the occasional bounce to one side that unnerved Miranda. A brisk wind massaged one side of her face. Trees and buildings became a blur as they whizzed past. Telling herself that there was no danger, Miranda hung her head and stared at her backpack.

Facundo said, "Look at all those people."

She barely heard him over the wind.

He leaned closer. "There will be a lot more by the time we reach Mexico City."

"How long will it take?"

"Who knows? At least 17 or 18 hours."

He tapped her shoulder and pointed. A man on the next car was walking upright along the length of the roof. Fearful of him falling, Miranda looked away. The countryside flew past. Green fields of corn and beans, dusty crossroads, adobe huts with corrugated metal roofs, fleeting glimpses of rural life in the Mexican state of Chiapas. In the distance, blue hills loomed like the lift of a roller coaster.

Were there mountains on the way to Mexico City? Maybe. Not that it made a difference. They had to get there, no matter what stood in the way. But the thought of steep cliffs, sharp curves, and long drop-offs chilled Miranda to the bone. It was one thing to thrill to such scenery from the comfort of an enclosed passenger train, quite another to experience it with the wind blasting your face while you tried to keep from falling from a sloped boxcar roof.

A child's cry reached Miranda's ears. Luz. Sobbing. Pushing up against her mother. Pilar doing her best to console her. Trying to

reassure her they were safe when all senses said otherwise. The boy, doing his best to put on a brave face. Wiping away an occasional tear.

Miranda fought against her own urge to cry, but grief, fatigue, and fear threatened to overwhelm the effort. She clasped her hands together and squeezed until they turned white. This was madness. They wouldn't make it to Mexico City. Even if they did, they would still have such a long way to go. And if they survived the trip to Juárez and somehow made it across the border, that would only bring a new set of dangers.

A hand massaged her shoulder. Facundo. "Are you okay?" he said. "What?"

He cupped his hands. "I said, are you okay?"

She forced a smile. "I'm fine." But she wasn't fine. She should be at home feeding her dog or arguing with her brother or helping her mother with the dishes. Instead, she sat atop a train hurtling through a foreign landscape on the way to an uncertain future. As the wind whipped her hair and the boxcar roof rattled beneath her, the dam broke, and the tears surged forth.

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How could Facundo look so relaxed? Lolling on the boxcar roof as if sunning himself at the beach. Legs crossed, arms back, blank expression on his face. His body swaying with the rhythm of the train, his mind apparently unconcerned with the prospect of pitching over the side to a gruesome death. Did that ever happen?

Facundo attempted to stretch, but his arms froze, and a small cry escaped his lips.

"What's the matter?" Miranda asked.

He frowned. "Hurt my shoulder lifting the boy."

"Is it bad?"

"I'll live."

Was he blaming her?

"How much water do you have left?" he asked.

"A liter."

"Me too. I hope that's enough."

The train slowed as they entered a more populated area. Rural huts gave way to more substantial buildings of brick and steel. Lines of idling automobiles waited at the crossings. Pedestrians hurried along streets crammed with stores and houses. They passed a block of low-slung apartments and pulled into a flat expanse of train tracks and stacked cargo trailers. With a screech of protest, the train ground to a halt.

"What town is this?" said Facundo.

"I have no idea."

They waited. A relentless sun beat down, causing sweat to run down the back of Miranda's neck. Shading her eyes, she wished she had brought a hat.

Miranda flinched when a low rumble gave notice of something approaching from their rear. A short train, only four boxcars, with an engine pushing the cars toward them. It slowed as it drew near. With a loud bang, the lead car knocked into the rear of their train and the couplings locked into place. A man emerged from a nearby shack and ambled over. He waited while the engine reversed direction to stretch the couplings. Once satisfied they would hold, he stepped in and connected the air hoses. He waved an arm when finished, and the engine chugged away from them.

Miranda's heart leaped into her throat when she saw three uniformed police officers striding toward the train. They fanned out as

they approached, each one heading to a different car. One of them aimed straight for her. Unsmiling, the men plodded toward the train like automatons. Pistols loomed large in the holsters at their waists. Would she have time to scramble down the other side of the boxcar if they decided to use them? She nudged Facundo's arm, but he had already seen the men. "Whatever you do, don't get off," he said.

One officer cupped his hands. "Okay, folks, let's go," he shouted.

His colleagues each scaled a ladder. The face of the man on Miranda's car rose into view. "You can't ride up here," he said. "It's dangerous." His hard tone and cold eyes gave no hint of concern for their safety.

No one moved. The man waved his arm. "You have to get off. Now."

A loud shout from the next car drew Miranda's attention. The police officer there pulled himself onto the roof and placed his hands on his hips. A shirtless man stood to confront him. "It's against the law to ride up here," the officer said. "You must leave."

"Fuck off."

"What did you say?"

"I think you heard me. We're not getting off."

The officer put a hand on his sidearm. "I mean it. You can't stay here."

Two other men stood. One of them said, "Just leave us alone."

The officer slipped his gun out of its holster. The shirtless man produced a gun of his own and pointed it at him. "I will blow your fucking head off."

They glared at each other for several tense seconds. The cop blinked first. "You're crazy. This isn't safe."

"What the hell do you care?"

The cop holstered his weapon. Mumbling and shaking his head, he descended the ladder and marched away from the train.

Miranda looked over at the police officer on her car. “We can’t go back,” she said. “They’ll kill us.”

He spat and said, “Motherfucker” before dropping out of sight.

The car jumped and Miranda flung out an arm to keep from falling over. Wheels rumbling, the train rolled out of the freight yard, picking up speed as the buildings thinned in favor of corn fields. Miranda made herself as comfortable as possible and tried to forget the police officers. Would there be more?

“I wish I had brought a book,” said Facundo.

Books. How could he think of books? She dropped her head. “Shut up.”

“You don’t have to be rude.”

“We’re on top of a fucking train.” Why wasn’t he frightened like her?

He stared hard at her for a moment before looking away.

He hadn’t deserved that. Still, did he have to be so damn calm? She nudged his foot. “Hey, I do have one.”

“Don’t trouble yourself.”

She fished it out of her backpack, a tattered paperback depicting a beautiful woman in a blouse that sagged perilously close to her nipples. Behind the woman were two men, one strikingly handsome but dressed in the clothes of a beggar, the other outfitted in finery, but glaring at the reader with the eyes of a tyrant. *El Corazón de Victoria*. Victoria’s Heart. Why had she grabbed this of all things on the way out of the house? Stepped around the body of her father to snatch it from an end table, trying to ignore the bullet holes stitched across his chest. Beside him, her mother, a neat hole in her forehead, her eyes still wide with surprise. And her brother, dear, sweet Ramón, with whom she had played hide and seek and hunted Easter eggs. His decapitated corpse unrecognizable save for his favorite Denver Broncos T-shirt.

His head, propped up on the coffee table between two bottles, glassy eyes staring into oblivion. How was this stupid book supposed to replace them?

She held out the book. "Here, take it." When he hesitated, she said, "Come on, I'm sorry I snapped."

He accepted it, glanced at the cover, and flipped it over to read the back. As if confirming its worthlessness, he handed it back and said, "Thanks, but I'm not that desperate."

As Miranda returned the book to her pack, she noticed Luz watching her. The child had stopped crying but, like Miranda, remained tense, her body rigid as she leaned against her mother. Miranda found a bag of dried apricots in her backpack and opened it. She held one out to the girl. "Are you hungry?"

Luz said nothing, just stared with doe eyes.

Miranda popped the fruit into her mouth and chewed. "It's good." She brought out another.

Luz stretched out a hand to take it. Biting into it, she allowed herself a quick smile before slipping back into a gloomy stare. A moment later, her eyes brightened, and she slipped a hand into a pocket. From it, she produced a piece of unwrapped hard candy, which she held out for Miranda.

Miranda said, "That's okay, you should keep it."

The girl whimpered and held the candy even closer. Miranda took it from her. "Thank you." She stowed it in a pants pocket. "I'll save it for later."

Mateo pointed at the apricots. "May I have one?"

Miranda handed the bag to Pilar. "Here."

"Thank you."

As Pilar doled out the apricots, she said, "Have you ever been to the United States?"

Miranda nodded. "I used to live there." Noticing the puzzled expression on Pilar's face, she added, "We had to leave."

"Why?"

"Bad things happen there, too."

"Like what?"

Miranda ignored the question.

"What was it like?"

Miranda allowed her mind to drift back to her childhood. Watermelon in the backyard. The swing set her parents gave her for her birthday. Soccer games at the park. "Mostly it was nice. Then someone burned my father's shop. He was a mechanic."

"That's terrible. Did they catch the person who did it?"

Miranda knew who had done it. Everybody did. After all, the man bragged about it in a photo he posted on Facebook. But no one cared. Not the police detective, who asked only a few listless questions before snapping his notepad closed and stalking off. Nor the insurance investigator, who cited a hitherto unknown clause in her father's policy as he explained the denial of his claim. Certainly not their neighbors, who feared the same might happen to them.

"No, they never caught him."

The train lurched into a turn, causing Pilar to drop the apricots. The bag skidded away, just out of her reach. Mateo made a move for it, but Pilar caught him and said, "No." Bouncing with the roof's vibrations, the bag slid closer and closer to the roof edge before slipping over the side.

Facundo leaned in and said, "We don't have a lot of food, you know."

The train lurched again, this time hard enough that Miranda had to place a hand on the roof to steady herself. Luz shrieked and buried her face against her mother. Miranda felt her center of gravity shifting



so that she had to lean forward to stay upright. Glancing toward the engine, she saw the train sloping upwards and understood what was happening. They were entering the mountains.

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Darkness fell, and Miranda found herself gripping the roof's spine so hard her fingers ached. She could feel the change in pitch as the train began yet another ascent. She had dreaded this part of the trip for hours. Would she rather experience the fear of staring into a thousand-foot drop or the anxiety of knowing it was there but being unable to see it?

Displaying his usual annoying calm, Facundo lay on his back and watched the stars. Luz and Mateo dozed beside their mother. Pilar sat erect, her eyes searching the dark as if looking for a means of escape. "Only a few hours to go," Miranda said, as much for herself as for Pilar.

Pilar leaned in so she wouldn't have to shout over the wind, "Tell me about America."

Would this woman ever stop talking? "What do you want to know?"

"What was it like to live there?"

America. It had once been home. And, while life there had been good, it hadn't been perfect. Miranda dug through her memories, discarding those that she knew Pilar wouldn't want to hear about. Especially those related to American society's undercurrent of racism, best illustrated by the boy who had asked her to the Valentine's dance only to back out when his father objected to her family's ethnicity.

But there had been good to offset the bad. Miss Tucker, fresh out of school, who had consoled her and wiped her tears on Miranda's first day of kindergarten. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, whose house her mother cleaned. They had given Miranda and Ramon bicycles one Christmas. Camila, her best friend.

"You will love it there," she said. "We had a house. My parents had jobs. I went to a good school."

"It's too bad you had to leave."

An image of orange flames engulfing her father's shop flashed through Miranda's mind. "Yes, it is."

Miranda had always wanted to visit Mexico City. Stroll the Zócalo, climb the massive pyramids of Teotihuacan, wander the grounds of Chapultepec Park. Maybe have dinner at a fancy restaurant before taking in a show at the Palace of Fine Arts. That she would fulfill her wish as a refugee instead of a tourist came as a bitter pill to swallow.

By her reckoning, they had at least another three hours to go. She and Facundo would then abandon this train for one heading north to Juárez. If they could find the right train, that is. There would be no ticket agent to help them.

From Juárez to Albuquerque was another three hundred miles. Because there would be no freight train to hop, they would need some other mode of transportation. And, of course, there was a border to cross. A border that had become almost impenetrable thanks to rising American xenophobia. Miranda had grown up in the United States. That should count for something. Anyway, Facundo had a cousin who told him about a secret tunnel. Was it safe? What if it was run by a drug cartel?

Pilar had fallen asleep an hour ago. Her children snuggled against her, the boy against his mother's body, the girl against his. Should she wake her? Wasn't it dangerous to fall asleep? But plenty of other

people, Facundo included, now dozed atop the train. The boxcar's roof had to be at least 10 feet wide. Surely that provided enough of a safety margin against rolling off.

Miranda had intended to stay awake until they reached Mexico City, but now her eyelids sagged with a heaviness she could no longer resist. She lay down with her back against the roof's spine and her backpack wedged against her abdomen. Laying her head on an arm, she knew she would wake up with a sore shoulder. The urge for sleep outweighed the thought, though, and soon she drifted off.

She awoke to a loud scream, an anguished cry that she first thought was part of a dream. But she opened her eyes, and the noise continued. She jerked upright in search of its source. Pilar. Hands clutching her cheeks, terror emblazoned on her face, spittle dripping from her chin.

"What's wrong?" Miranda asked, her heart pounding.

Pilar stared past her as if she was invisible. "Luz." She clutched Mateo to her chest so tightly that Miranda feared she would choke the boy. But Luz was gone. "Luz!" Pilar shrieked. "Luz! *Luz!*"

Like everyone else on the train, Miranda had suffered great loss. She had experienced its raw pain, felt it pierce her heart, stumbled through the void it left behind. But in Pilar, Miranda witnessed a new phenomenon. She couldn't name it. She couldn't even imagine it. But there it was, a wicked beast with claws sharp enough to shred Pilar's soul. And the insatiable beast had swallowed Pilar, had swallowed Luz, had swallowed them all. Devoured them and bound them in chains for a hellish journey on the Train of the Unknowns. On the Beast. On the nightmarish ride that had lived up to its name: the Death Train.

# Chapter 3

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## End of the Line

Three days were not long enough for Miranda Flores to accustom herself to riding atop a moving freight train. When she and Facundo began their journey in far south Mexico, she had comforted herself with the thought that her fear would diminish with time. That didn't happen. Her heart still leapt into her throat with every bounce, every jerk, every change in pitch of the boxcar's roof. The mountains were the worst, but even rumbling through the flat terrain of the Chihuahua Desert fed the terror lurking in her mind. Terror made even worse by Luz's fate.

Luz. Cute little 8-year-old Luz. Miranda helped her climb onto the roof of the boxcar in Tapachula three days ago. Her brother and mother scurried up the ladder after them. The mother, Pilar, shared Miranda's terror. She too had fled violence in El Salvador for perceived safety up north. As the sun dropped, she nestled her children against her body and fell asleep. So many others atop the train, Miranda included, had also given in to fatigue. But Miranda and those others woke up the next morning to continue the journey. Luz did not. Her mangled body now lay somewhere along the tracks in the mountains south of Mexico City. Sobbing, Pilar and the boy climbed down from

the train when it stopped, agonized beyond what a person's heart should be expected to bear.

Pushing such thoughts from her mind, Miranda dropped a hand onto the uncomfortably hot roof to steady herself and withdrew a water bottle from her backpack. The long, cool drink she took refreshed her. Facundo lay nearby, head near the center spine of the roof, feet toward the edge. He looked as relaxed as ever. His calm in the face of their situation annoyed her. She wanted to see his eyes widen when the train made a sharp turn. She wanted to hear him gasp as they passed over a rickety bridge spanning a bottomless gorge. She wanted him to share her fear.

But he did not. And, as much as this annoyed her, she also found his presence a calming influence. Nothing fazed him. Nothing shattered his composure. Nothing disturbed him enough to crack his serene façade.

She wondered what direction their lives would take in the United States. No romantic bond held them together. They had been friends for years, yet their lips never touched, and their embraces were those of friends, not lovers. Would they follow different paths once they crossed the border? She hoped not. In the week since her family's murder, she had come to rely on Facundo's strength and couldn't imagine a life without her best friend in it.

Facundo stirred and sat up. Miranda offered him the water bottle. He accepted and took a quick sip. "Thanks."

"I think we're almost there."

"God, I hope so."

"Do you know how to find your friend? Ciudad Juárez is huge."

Facundo pressed his lips together. "He's not really a friend. More like an acquaintance. We did some stuff together when we were young, but not so much in high school."

“Why not?”

“He started hanging out with a really rough crowd. Stealing cars, selling dope, that kind of thing. Some of them are in prison now. At least one of them is dead.”

Miranda’s heart sank. She had assumed Facundo’s connection in Juárez was a good friend, someone who would be eager and willing to help them. “When is the last time you saw him?”

“It’s been at least five or six years. He went north with a friend from Mexico.”

“Do you think he’ll help us?”

Facundo drew a deep breath. “We’ll find out.”

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As Miranda descended the boxcar’s ladder an immense weight flew from her shoulders. No matter what lay ahead, never again would she have to cling to the top of a moving train. She dropped to the ground and stretched. “It feels good to be on solid ground.”

Facundo stomped a foot. “Good old terra firma.”

They followed other refugees away from the tracks to an open patch of barren ground. At the far end a row of tractor trailers terminated at a metal shack, in front of which stood three men in hard hats. The men watched with evident disgust as the small horde streamed onto the site. Miranda and her fellow travelers kicked up enough dust to drive them into the shack.

The crowd halted. Some people broke into small groups, while others kept walking until they reached a four-foot brick wall bordering the freight yard. Coils of razor wire spoiled the first man’s attempt to

climb over. He dropped back to the ground and made his way toward a distant gate.

Miranda noted the confused faces milling about them and wondered where she and Facundo should go. As if reading her mind, Facundo said, "We're not far from the river. We should reach it if we just follow the tracks."

Miranda shouldered her backpack. "Let's go."

They trudged north toward the Rio Grande. The cluster of tracks in the freight yard converged into a single line. See-through iron fences topped by barbed wire converged from either side, funneling them closer and closer to the rails. At the point where the fences turned to follow the track, a uniformed man raised a hand. "You can't go past here."

"Why not?" Miranda asked.

"It's not allowed."

"Where can we go?"

"Anywhere you want except along the train tracks."

Facundo tugged her arm. "There's a gate over there."

Miranda looked through the gate at a wide street, and then back at the uniformed man. "Does that street go to the river?"

The man shrugged. "All the streets end at the river."

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Once outside the freight yard, they plodded along Avenue Francisco Villa, a bleak thoroughfare split by a weed-choked median lined with scrawny palm trees. They passed a bull-fighting arena, after which a brick wall adorned with graffiti and cat murals stretched for several blocks. When the wall gave out, shops and office buildings took over.

Ten minutes later, Facundo touched Miranda's arm and said, "Look." Off to their left, two men labored to remove what looked like a dead body hanging from an overpass.

Miranda jerked her arm free. "Let's keep moving."

They hiked another few blocks and the street dead ended at a broad avenue. Looking to her left, Miranda saw the busy roadway dive beneath an overpass. "That must be the International Bridge," she said, pointing.

Facundo said, "Without papers, they won't let us across there."

Having no other plan than to find a place to rest and regroup, they turned right. Soon they reached an area devoid of permanent buildings. Instead, dozens of makeshift tents dotted the ground. Scores of refugees sat or squatted among them. Here and there a cooking fire sent a thin ribbon of black smoke skyward. Squealing children darted to and fro.

Miranda gazed on this tent city with despair. How long had these people been here? Judging by the elaborate setups she saw, some families appeared to have arrived days, or even weeks ago. What were they waiting for?

By now the sun hung low in the sky. Miranda unslung her backpack and found a place to spread out between two tents. Facundo dropped down next to her. "What do you have to eat?" Miranda said.

Facundo dug around in his backpack. "Some dried apples, a box of granola bars, and an orange. You?"

"Granola bars, raisins, and beef jerky."

Spreading his supply out on the ground, Facundo said, "Let's have ourselves a feast."



The packed earth of the encampment made for an uncomfortable bed. Nevertheless, Miranda was thrilled to be able to go to sleep without fear of plunging to her death from the roof of a speeding train. She lay on her back trying to pick out constellations among the stars. Finding she couldn't keep her eyes open, she propped her head on her backpack and fell asleep.

She dreamed of her parents and brother. All now dead, murdered by government soldiers because her brother had joined the rebels. All now lying in unmarked graves in the burial ground outside of San Salvador used by the government to dispose of the bodies of its victims. She'd be lying there too if she'd been home that fateful day. Sometimes she wished she had been, so strong was the ache in her heart.

A noise pulled her from her dream. She sat up. What was that? A distant popping noise. Then, not so distant. Then, far away again.

She saw Facundo was also awake. "What is that?" she said.

He propped himself on his elbows. "Sounds like gunfire."

"The cartels?"

"Probably."

"I'll be happy to leave this city."

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After hours of fitful sleep, Miranda awoke to a clear blue sky. She lay there for a minute or two watching birds dart across her field of view. A low rumble of conversation brought her fully alert. She sat up. Dozens of people stirred around her, some still rubbing their eyes, others striding toward...what? A man in a nearby tent poked his head out, saw her, and said, "What's going on?"

“I don’t know.”

She nudged Facundo awake. He looked at her with questioning eyes.

“Get your pack. Something’s happening,” she said.

They shouldered their backpacks and merged with the thick stream of people heading toward the river. After crossing an empty expanse of packed dirt, they encountered a fifteen foot fence of vertical metal poles. Across the top ran an ugly tangle of barbed wire. Men and women from the camp were pressed up against the fence to watch something going on across the river.

Miranda slid through a gap in the crowd to find an opening from which she could see. At first, she observed nothing out of the ordinary. Traffic zoomed past on the highway beyond. Cars stretched out behind the checkpoint on both sides of the International Bridge. In the distance the city of El Paso, a sprawling urban mass nestled against the Franklin Mountains, sprang to morning life.

Then she saw an object floating in the river. What was it? It rolled with the current and she emitted an audible gasp. It was a body. A man, judging by the clothes, but she couldn’t be sure.

Downstream of the dead man Miranda spotted more bodies. A woman, whose hair drifted along behind her like a long, black ribbon. A man in a white T-shirt, his ample paunch protruding out of the water like a whale blowing its spout. Another woman, this one old and gray. Two more men. A child.

American Border Patrol agents used long poles to fish the corpses out of the river. They laid the bodies out in a line, the dead on their backs, staring lifelessly at the same beautiful sky that had greeted Miranda when she woke up. A sky they would never see.

On the far bank, one of the bodies crawled out of the water and collapsed, face first. A Border Patrol agent jogged up to him and turned

him over. As the man extended his arms, the agent raised a rifle. Miranda heard a staccato pop. The man's arms dropped.

Miranda spun around and staggered away from the fence. Facundo caught her. Turning her face toward his, she opened her mouth to speak but no words came out.

Facundo said, "We don't have to risk this."

An image of her brother's headless corpse lying on the living room floor in a lake of blood flashed through Miranda's mind. Returning to El Salvador meant certain death. Albuquerque promised life, maybe even a return to normalcy. There must be a way across the border that avoided the deadly gauntlet at the river. Steeling herself, she looked Facundo in the eye and said, "Yes, we do."

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The street held no sign of life. There were no cars, no pedestrians, not even a stray dog looking for scraps among the rotting garbage on the crumbling sidewalk.

Sweat dripped down Miranda's face and neck as she fought to stave off the gloom clouding her mind. The building they sought appeared abandoned. Flaking green and blue paint covered the cinderblock walls. A sliding door split the two colors, above which strands of barbed wire promised pain to anyone attempting to peer over its dirty white metal. Cavernous potholes peppered the street. A dirt alley separated the building from another cinderblock structure, this one unpainted. Sitting catacorner, sticking out like a choir boy at an orgy, was a freshly painted church. "Are you sure this is the place?" Miranda asked Facundo.

He fished a scrap of paper from his pocket. "Yes. This is it."

Miranda rapped on the door, eliciting a hollow metallic sound. Nothing happened. Had the four-mile slog through the grimy streets of Juárez been wasted? She banged a fist against the rusty surface, once, twice, three times. A distant shout sounded. Running feet approached the door. A man's face appeared in the gap.

“What do you want?”

Craning his neck, Facundo looked up and said, “We’re here to see Efrain.”

“Who are you?”

“Facundo Crespo. We knew each other in school.”

“He went to school in El Salvador.”

“I know. That’s where we’re from.”

The face vanished. More running feet from within. Unintelligible conversation reached their ears. Another face appeared above the door.

Facundo shaded his eyes. “Efrain?”

Rollers ground through rusting tracks and the door slid open. There stood a young man in faded brown T-shirt and torn jeans. His face was tight, and his eyes burned with suspicion. His right hand held a gun. He stared at Facundo for several seconds before his face relaxed. “Motherfucker, it is you.”

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They sat in a garage on overturned wooden crates that had once held auto parts. It wasn't a large space—maybe thirty by forty feet—but large enough for a mechanic to work on a vehicle of almost any size. A thick layer of oil and grease covered most of the concrete floor. A filthy workbench along one wall was home to dozens of tools. Pegs protruded from another wall, on which hung new tires. A third wall

was devoted to belts, hubcaps, shelves stocked with motor oil, and tattered posters of scantily clad women. The look and smell of the place reminded Miranda of the auto repair shop her father had once owned in Albuquerque. The destruction of that shop by an arsonist ten years ago was the final straw that had driven him to take the family back to El Salvador.

“You came at a bad time,” said Efrain as he wiped sweat from his brow. “Two of the bosses are fighting. We’re expecting an attack any day.”

“What happened?” Facundo asked.

“I don’t know. Until last month everybody got along okay. Then their boss got pissed at ours and everything went to hell. We’ve lost two guys already. We’ve gotten one of theirs.”

“What are they fighting about?”

Efrain shrugged. “Who knows? Territory? Money? Maybe one of them was screwing the other one’s wife. All I know is, we can’t be too careful these days. We spend our days in here sitting on our asses waiting for things to cool down. At night we go home.”

Miranda and Facundo looked at each other and said nothing.

Efrain said, “Why are you in Juárez? I never expected to see a guy like you up here.”

Facundo filled him in on events in El Salvador. The civil war with its rebel attacks and heavy-handed army reprisals. His fear of being sucked into the conflict, either by being drafted or by being forced to fight with the rebels. The murder of Miranda’s family. He finished by recounting their hair-raising rides atop a succession of Mexican freight trains to reach Juárez.

A soft whistle escaped Efrain’s lips. “Shit, bro, you’ve been through a lot. Still, you can’t stay here. This town is a war zone too.”

Miranda said, "We were hoping you could help us get out. We'd like to get across the border."

Efrain shot her a look that suggested she was out of her mind. "Do you know what those motherfuckers across the border are doing? Ever since that new guy was elected president, they've gone crazy. They shoot anyone trying to cross the river."

"We know. We saw it."

Efrain shook his head and spat. "It's fucking crazy. Malcolm Price. Man, that guy hates Mexicans."

"No problem," said Facundo with a shrug. "We're Salvadoran."

Ignoring the jest, Efrain said, "Don't expect that to help you."

"So," said Miranda, trying to refocus the conversation, "can you help us?"

"No. But I know a guy that can."

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Neither Efrain nor his companions had any interest in leaving the safety of the garage until nightfall. They lolled away the rest of the afternoon drinking beer and watching a soccer match on an old-fashioned vacuum tube television. Efrain introduced them to his two companions, a young man named Mateo, and an older man they called Chaparro because of his short stature. Both men were armed, Mateo with a pistol, Chaparro with an automatic rifle. Neither seemed eager to make small talk, so Miranda contented herself with watching the game.

Efrain sent Mateo to a taqueria for their supper. He waved off Miranda's offer to pay. "The boss pays us well," he said. "You will need your money."

When Mateo returned, Miranda savored her first hot meal in several days. Reluctant to interrupt her chewing, she allowed the warm grease to drip down her chin and drop into a napkin in her lap. She caught Efrain grinning at her and blushed.

With the tacos dispatched, Chaparro stood. "I need to get home. Marta will have my balls in a vise if I'm too late." He picked up his rifle and tugged the door open.

A burst of gunfire caught him in the chest and drove him back into the shop. He fell on his back, blood spewing from countless holes. Five men armed with rifles and pistols charged through the doorway. Miranda dove to the floor as Mateo returned fire with his pistol. A bullet caught him in the head, and he dropped.

Efrain sank into a crouch and, with impressive accuracy, dropped two of the intruders. When the others turned their weapons on him, his pistol was no match for their automatic rifles. His body spasmed as the bullets slammed into him. He fell, dead before he hit the ground.

Expecting to die at any moment, Miranda lay prone with her hands covering her head. She glanced to her left to see Facundo in the same position. She gritted her teeth and whimpered a quick prayer.

Ominous silence descended around them. Footsteps approached. Miranda risked a look up, expecting to see a rifle barrel in her face. Instead, she saw a man holding a pistol at his side. He regarded her with curiosity. Raising the pistol, he said, "Who the fuck are you?"

Moving with caution, Miranda brought herself to her knees and held the man's gaze. "We're not with those men."

The man laughed. "Then what the fuck are you doing here?"

"My friend," she nodded at Facundo, "went to school with one of them. We came here hoping he would help us cross the border." When the man said nothing, she added, "We're from El Salvador."

"Get up," said the man, waving the pistol.

Miranda did as she was told.

“You too.”

Facundo climbed to his feet.

“Where did you live in El Salvador?”

Miranda said, “The capital. San Salvador.”

The man aimed the pistol at her chest. “What’s the name of the main square downtown?”

“Plaza Cívica.”

“No. The person it’s named for.”

Miranda drew a blank, but Facundo said, “Gerardo Barrios. He was president a long time ago.”

Satisfied, the man lowered his weapon. “You want to cross the border? You’re fucking crazy.”

“I used to live in Albuquerque,” said Miranda.

As if that explained everything, the man nodded and said, “Come with us.”

\*\*\*

One of the gunmen packed the two wounded men into a white Nissan pickup and drove off. Miranda and Facundo were herded at gunpoint into the back seat of a silver Kia Rio. The man who had interrogated them drove, while one of his companions rode in the front passenger seat.

After several blocks of silence, Miranda said, “What’s your name?”

“You don’t need to know that,” the driver said.

“Where are you taking us.”

“You’ll see when we get there.”



They rode the rest of the way without speaking, arriving at a one-story, red adobe house situated on a corner lot. Metal bars covered the windows. A rolling metal gate blocked access to a patio that appeared to lead to the only door. The driver parked in the street and killed the engine. “Get out.”

Miranda and Facundo exited the vehicle. The man patted the gun at his waist and said, “Don’t ask anybody their name. Don’t talk in there unless somebody asks you a question.”

He rolled the gate open and beckoned them toward the house. As she entered the grounds, Miranda noted a short picket fence atop the wall surrounding the patio. With only a single crosspiece, it looked like a neat row of white crosses, reminding her of the military cemetery in Santa Fe.

Ten minutes later they sat at a dining room table with the driver and his boss. With his salt and pepper hair and beard, the boss looked older than the driver by at least 20 years. The contents of Miranda and Facundo’s backpacks lay strewn on the table, clothes, various food items, and a paperback book, *El Corazón de Victoria*, that Miranda had mindlessly picked up as she fled her house in San Salvador. Next to the paperback was a stack of American dollars, which represented all the money Miranda and Facundo had with them for their panicked flight to America.

“You can call me ‘Dragón,’” the man said, leering at Miranda.

Miranda squirmed. His expression reminded her of a creepy college professor she had taken a class from in San Salvador. “I’m Miranda. This is Facundo.”

He picked up the paperback and studied the cover. Tossing it aside, he said, “My sister reads shit like this.” He refocused on Miranda. “My friend tells me you want to go to America.”

“Yes.”

“Why not stay here? We could find work for you.”

Miranda took care in choosing her next words. She did not want to anger this man. “I grew up in Albuquerque. It feels like home.”

Dragón nodded. He looked at Facundo. “And you?”

“I’m with her.”

“Okay.” He sorted the bills into two equal stacks. “I will take only half. You can keep the rest.”

“What?” The word came out louder than Miranda intended. “I mean, that’s all the money we have.”

“And I am only taking half. I’m also letting you live.”

Miranda kept quiet. The man was right. Their lives were in his hands.

Dragón raised a finger. “Also, this is a better deal than you realize.”

“And why is that,” said Miranda, still fuming.

“Because I know someone who can get you across.”

\*\*\*

The man who had driven them earlier bade them to squeeze into the back seat of the Rio once again. They clutched their refilled backpacks in their laps. Dragón and the other man stayed behind.

They rode through narrow streets of cinderblock houses and shuttered shops. Other than an occasional lighted window, the city was dead. Miranda shook off her nervousness and, in as pleasant a tone as she could muster, said, “Is the man we’re going to see a friend of your boss?”

“He’s my father, not my boss.” His voice was flat.

“So, it’s your father’s friend?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“What is he, then?”

The man glanced over his shoulder. “You ask too many questions.”

Fifteen minutes later, the driver parked in front of a windowless brick building. He led Miranda and Facundo up a raised platform to reach the door. A mournful Vicente Fernández ballad serenaded them from the other side. Miranda recognized the singer’s voice, as he had been popular with some of her high school friends in Albuquerque.

The noise and life inside the building contrasted starkly with the emptiness of the street. The music streamed from an ancient juke box by the door. A bar ran the length of one wall, along which sat half a dozen men. The four booths along the opposite wall were packed with animated men and women talking and drinking. Three men played pool at a table with a torn and lumpy felt surface. Nearby, a drunken couple swayed out of rhythm with the music.

The driver led Miranda and Facundo to the bar. He said something to the bartender, who fetched a bottle of tequila and set it in front of him. The driver nodded at Facundo and said, “Pay him.”

Facundo laid a ten-dollar bill on the bar.

“Fifty,” said the bartender.

“Twenty,” the driver said.

The bartender nodded and Facundo gave him another ten. The driver snatched the bottle and, without speaking, headed around the bar toward a back room. Miranda and Facundo followed.

They reached a closed door. The driver rapped on it. A voice from within said, “Get the fuck out of here. I’m busy.”

The driver said, “It’s Cheo. El Dragón’s son.”

A bustle of activity reached their ears. The door opened and a heavily made-up woman buttoning her blouse charged past them and disappeared. A middle-aged man with days-old stubble and an over-

hanging gut rose from behind a desk. He zipped up his fly and looked at the driver. "Hey, Cheo."

Cheo handed over the tequila and nudged Miranda and Facundo forward. "They have a favor to ask." He left.

The man gestured at two battered chairs. "Have a seat." He returned to his place behind the desk. "I'm listening."

Miranda said, "We need to get across the border."

The man gave a mirthless laugh, exuding a stink of booze and cigar smoke. "Sure. It's your funeral."

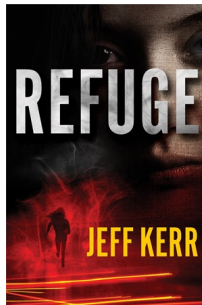
Miranda disliked him already. If he were that callous, could he be trusted to follow through on any promises he made? "So, you can help us?"

He opened the tequila bottle, took a long pull, and banged it onto the desk. "For the right price."

# Thank you ...

**F**or reading *Into the Fire*, a prequel to the pulse-pounding action thriller *Refuge*. The novel launches July 17, 2023. Click on the link to reserve your copy now!

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# About Jeff Kerr

I am an author in Austin, Texas. I began writing some twenty-odd years ago and don't plan on stopping anytime soon. When not working on the next story, I can be found floating a river or battling cedar on my small slice of Texas Hill Country land.

Drop me a line at **[jeffkerr@jeffreykerrauthor.com](mailto:jeffkerr@jeffreykerrauthor.com)**. I'll write back!

Twitter: <https://www.twitter.com/jkerr50>

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