

INTO THE FIRE



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Chapter 1

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 knew 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.

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.

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.”

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 had 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."

Chapter 2

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."

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.”

Chapter 3

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.”

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."

Thank you for reading *Into the Fire*, a prequel to my upcoming novel *Refuge*. If you enjoyed it, please tell your friends!

Let me know your thoughts by contacting me at

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