

# CHAPTER ONE

## MEXICO CITY

Alex felt eyes boring into the back of her head. She was used to men staring at her, but this was different. She shifted in her seat. The hotel concierge had warned her not to travel outside of Mexico City alone, but today was the last day of vacation and her girlfriend, Kelly, was stuck in their hotel room with Montezuma's revenge. Alex had learned about the beautiful holy city of Teotihuacán back in college, and it had taken hold of her imagination in the way that some people felt about Machu Picchu. She was determined to see it in person before her trip was over. Surely she couldn't get into trouble on a public bus.

She looked behind her. A stocky, bull-shouldered man stood at the back of the bus, looking directly at her. Another man was beside him, taller, dark-skinned with a six-inch puckered scar dissecting the left side of his face.

The back of her neck prickled. She shrank into her seat and focused on the scenery, ignoring the men. An old mission, a farmer's market, the small houses of a sprawling barrio flashed by the window. She tried to memorize the scenery. In two days she'd be back to the hectic pace of her clinic in North Carolina with only fond thoughts of the warm sunshine and burnished gold of the Mexican landscape.

The bus slowed. Its brakes squealed. The tires ground in the dirt and the doors slowly opened. Alex strained to see why they'd stopped.

The people around her exchanged glances, shifting in their seats. When she tried to make eye contact, they looked away. No one stood up. The engine idled. Alex squirmed in her seat.

Something moved behind her. As she turned, she caught the full force of the stocky man's body, smashing into her, then yanking her up into the aisle.

She screamed, pulse racing, panic rising. She reached up and dug her fingers into the soft flesh into the man's eyes as hard as she could. He howled and grabbed her wrists, pushing her backward.

Scar-face grasped her from behind, wrapping his arms around her, crushing her against him. She choked on the strong mix of sweat and cologne. Her adrenalin surged. She kicked back, connecting with his legs, tearing at the skin on his arms.

The stocky man came at her and punched her in the stomach, knocking the wind out of her. She tried to breathe. Panic squeezed her like a fist.

She felt herself lifted by the arms and dragged down the aisle. She called out for help, reaching out to grab the seats as she passed, her fingers sliding across the slippery surfaces, unable to hold onto the plastic upholstery.

"Help. ¡Auxilio! Soy americana. Turista. Por favor, ayúdenme!"

The other passengers stared straight ahead, rigid in their seats.

She grasped the ankles of a woman passenger and hung on. The woman kicked until Alex lost her grip.

The men dragged her to the steps. Her head pulled along the floor until she thought her brain would explode. She clutched at the door frame. Hot spears of pain shot up her arms. She let go and fell forward, cracking her forehead on the edge of the door.

The stocky man picked her up like a rag doll, flung her over his shoulder, carried her down the steps, and threw her onto the dirt. She flung out her hands instinctively as she landed, flinching as gravel ground into her hands and knees.

The engine roared, the wheels turned, and the bus moved away, leaving her alone with her captors. She struggled to her feet. Her head pounded. Her heart thudded against her rib cage.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

Scar-face gave a mocking laugh.

"Is it money? You have my purse."

The stocky man smashed his fist into her temple, and the world swam around her.

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She didn't know where she was or how long she'd been there. All she knew was that she was hot and sore, and the floor beneath her was hard. Fluorescent lights flickered above, dim, but still strong enough to hurt her eyes. Her head throbbed. Her hands felt sticky and wet with blood that oozed from the cuts and gouges on her palms. Her knees were bloody too. She grimaced as she stretched her stiff legs. Where was she?

She breathed in air that was heavy with the stench of sweat and dirt. Unwashed bodies. She looked up, her heart racing. More than a dozen women crowded around her, murmuring to each other. Faces seemed to swim close, then recede. She strained to sit up. Her stomach muscles screamed in pain. She sank back onto the grit-covered cement.

"Lie still," a young woman said in a whisper. "You have a big bump on your head."

The woman, little more than a girl, spoke in Spanish with an accent that Alex could barely understand, despite her years of supposed fluency.

"My name is Cristina."

Alex looked around, trying to make sense of her surroundings. Dust motes danced in the sunlight that seeped around the door and through seams in the metal walls. She managed a feeble smile. "I'm Alex. Where am I?"

"You are in a bad place."

A chill gripped her. She looked around the warehouse, shivering despite the brutal heat. She had to get out of here. She sat up, rolled over onto her hands, and cried out. White spots flashed across her eyes, merging into a single light. When she woke again, she was still on the floor, and only the girl, Cristina, was beside her.

Cristina's fingers touched the streak of white that swirled from Alex's forehead through her straight, chestnut hair.

"You are pretty, like someone in the movies. Are you famous?"

"I'm just a tourist. I run a health care clinic in a place called Dalton in North Carolina. *El Norte*."

The girl gave Alex a skeptical look, then helped her stand and take a few tentative steps.

"Who are all these women?" Alex asked. "How did they get here?"

"Bad men brought us all one by one from many places. I came here two days ago. They keep us here. Give us little food. They take women away. Some come back. Others do not."

A wave of nausea washed over her. Her sweat-soaked blouse was cold against her skin. She tried to control her panic, taking big gulps of air. No one knew where she was. Kelly was most likely still asleep back in the hotel and wouldn't miss her for hours, and the bus driver and passengers would be either too afraid to call the police or wouldn't even care. She was on her own. She tested her legs, taking small steps, then, feeling stronger, began to look around the warehouse for a way to escape.

"We have to get out of here, Cristina."

"Those who try to escape die. The men shot two women yesterday."

Alex looked at the other women. Many seemed very young, still teenagers or in their early twenties. Some appeared dazed. Others were curled on the floor, asleep. Only Cristina was paying attention to her and trying to communicate.

"It will be worse if we stay here."

She had to get ahold of her rising terror. The men who had brought her here could come back at any minute. She didn't dare try the front entrance. She limped to a side wall and began feeling along the corrugated metal for any weaknesses. The metal was solid, and the seams were tight. She continued pressing. Nothing. She moved to the back and tested the wall there. It held. She worked her way across the entire expanse to the other side of the warehouse before she found a rusty place where rainwater had dripped from a hole in the roof. She poked at the rust. Her finger went clear through to the outside.

She turned to Cristina, who had been following her through the warehouse.

"If we can break through here, we can get away. Help me find something to smash the metal."

"We can't. The bad men will hurt us."

"It's our only chance. Hurry, before they come back."

Cristina followed with hesitant steps as Alex searched through empty bins and cardboard boxes until she found a broken-handled shovel under a pile of old rags.

"This is exactly what we need."

Alex had grasped the shovel and swung it over her head, ready to smash the wall, when the front door to the warehouse began to roll open. She dropped the shovel and pushed Cristina back into the shadows.

The door opened, and the two men from the bus came in and stopped, their eyes traveling over the women.

"You." The stocky man pointed to a plump woman in a red blouse. "And you," he said to a slightly built young woman beside her.

The men seized the two trembling women. The plump woman cried out and tried to hit the stocky man; he slammed his fist in her face, knocking her to the floor. The slight woman shrank back, tears streaming down her cheeks. The men grabbed both of them and shoved them through the open door. It closed behind them. A motor turned over, and the truck drove away.

One woman started to sob. Others joined in.

Alex seized the broken shovel and ran to the rusted-out corner, propelled by rage and fear. She smashed the shovel against the rusty metal wall with all her strength over and over, sweat pouring off her until at last she'd ripped a hole in the metal large enough to crawl through.

She called to the women. "Come on. We can get out this way. Hurry before the men come back."

They looked at her. No one moved.

"They'll kill us," a woman called back.

"Please. We have to save ourselves. We'll die if we stay here."

The women turned away. A few covered their ears.

Exasperated, Alex turned to Cristina. "You'll come, won't you?"

Cristina's brown eyes widened. Her face was white, her hands shaking.

"Trust me. We'll be gone before they come back."

Cristina took a deep breath and nodded.

Alex climbed through the jagged opening, taking care not to cut herself, and turned to help Cristina. They emerged onto an area littered with broken glass and plastic containers and stood together, squinting in the bright sunlight. The putrid smell of rotting garbage made Alex gag. She put an arm around Cristina's shaking shoulders and led her around to the front of the building. She looked around. Neither of the men was in sight. She could hear the sounds of the highway in the distance.

"We're going to be okay, Cristina. We'll keep low until we reach the highway. Someone will help us. See that pile of rocks? It must be about halfway. We'll run to the rocks and hide. As soon as we're sure no one's coming, we'll go the rest of the way to the road."

Even as she said it, her stomach lurched. None of the marathons she'd run had been as daunting as the expanse of land between here and the road. She took Cristina's hand and led her through the rubble to a rough patch of dirt.

"Come on, Cristina. This is our only chance."

She started to run with Cristina close behind. Tall, spiky grass tore at their legs. When they reached the rock pile, they stopped. So far so good. She turned back and looked at the warehouse. A worn picture of a beer bottle and the logo for a brewery covered much of the front. Once they were safe she'd get the police and come back for the others. She tugged at Cristina's arm and started again, crossing open flatland, closing the remaining sixty yards or so to the road.

They were halfway there when she heard the squeal of brakes ahead. A rickety truck slowed and turned into the warehouse driveway. Alex felt her throat closing. She pulled Cristina down into the tall grass and turned to look at the truck. She could just make out four figures, two in the cab and another two in the back.

Cristina knelt and closed her eyes. "*Dios te salve, María.*"

The truck stopped, the men climbed out and went inside.

Alex helped Cristina to her feet. "Come on. It's not far to the road. We can make it."

Cristina's knees folded. Her body shook. "They're going to kill us."

"Not if we run."

Alex took off as fast as her battered body would let her, dragging Cristina with her. When they were within twenty yards of the road, she heard a man yell.

Four men were racing towards them from the warehouse.

"*Dios mío, no puedo,*" Cristina said, freezing.

"We're so close, Cristina." Alex grasped the girl's wrist.

Cristina didn't move.

The men were coming fast.

A bullet whistled past their heads, then a second and a third.

Cristina cried out and fell forward.

Alex bent down and slipped a hand under the girl's arm, struggling to support her body.

The men kept coming. A bullet whooshed by Alex's ear.

Cristina slipped from Alex's grasp and slumped to the ground, blood staining her blouse and the ground beneath her.

The men were almost on them.

Alex tried to lift Cristina, staggering under her weight. She couldn't carry her. She had to get help. She took off, zigzagging away from the gunshots, toward the road, stopping only when she reached the highway. She looked back. Cristina was trying to crawl away. One of the men raised an arm and hit Cristina with his fist over and over.

The two men from the bus were coming for her.

She raced across the busy highway, choking on exhaust fumes, barely able to see through her tears. The roar of the traffic was deafening. Horns blared. A speeding car swerved to miss her, tires screeching. Her heart pounded. She waved her arms and prayed that someone would stop.

An ancient truck rattled to a stop beside her. From the truck bed workmen hooted at her. The passenger door swung open. The driver leered. "*¿Hola, pretty lady. Looking for business?*"

A bullet pinged off the metal door frame. She leapt onto the running board, jumped into the truck, slammed the door shut, and flattened herself against the seat.

The driver looked at her wide-eyed. A second bullet hit the window above her head. Glass showered the front seat.

"Go. They're trying to kill me."

The driver's foot hit the gas. Gravel spun. The truck jumped forward and merged into fast-moving traffic. Alex leaned forward and looked in the rearview mirror. The two men were standing at the edge of the highway. The stocky man was talking on a cell phone. Scar-face stared after the truck. She ducked down as if the man could see her through the back window, and tried to stop shaking.