

Chapter 3

I attempted to wriggle free from the crushing burden of his frame but he only pressed harder. My arms flailed in between frantic swipes at my ankle. I desperately reached for the firearm concealed by my jeans. Thud! Thud! Thud! The pounding from outside continued. My P32 pocket pistol was within centimeters of blowing Lance into next week. One last swipe at my leg did the trick.

The screws popped out of the gold plated hinges and the door came crashing down along with the wood that bordered it. Two large figures dressed in dark coats stormed in. I lifted the barrel of the miniature pistol to Lance's ribs and squeezed. The grimace on his face spelled out the pain that followed the shot. *Ugh one!* I fired another to ease my compulsive conscience. He winced before rolling to the floor. Six bullets left, and two hit men standing. One of the goons threw open his pea coat and didn't waste a second in dumping aimless rounds from a semi-automatic Mac-10. Nearly every fixture in the room was hit. I took cover behind the bed and let off two blind shots at the gunmen. The second assassin was the unlucky receiver of my hail-mary. His blood curdling scream fetched no remorse from the barrel of the gun. The other killer cursed while struggling to reload his weapon. Perfect. I let off two more rounds through the heart of the window behind me. A shower of glass flurried into the room. Lance remained motionless on the ground in spite of the shards that were pelting his body.

I cleaned out the remaining glass that still hung on to the frame after the blast. I took a deep breath and made a desperate leap for freedom. My torso penetrated the opening of the self-made exit before all movement was cut short. Lance was on the ground with his hand clamped to my ankle like a pair of pliers. Apparently a couple of close range bullets to the gut weren't enough for him. His teeth were clenched so tightly that he could barely open his eyes. The harmonious sound of a magazine connecting with a gun came from the other side of the room. I flailed my leg trying to shake him loose, no luck. I raised my left arm up as high as I could and brought down the butt of the pistol to the center of his ring finger. He let go and pulled his arm to his chest in one motion.

I planted my hands in the moist grass outside and guided the rest of my body out behind. The gunman returned with another unruly round fire. My mouth shot open in agony. The isolated inferno tortured the nerves in the heel of my right foot. I crawled around the side of the apartment in an attempt to get out of plain view. My heart knocked against my chest while I sucked in erratic gasps of air. Before I fully struggled to my feet, the assassin was already climbing through the window. The street lights revealed a black single-hole ski mask that concealed the shooter's face. The only thing that was visible was a pair of grey eyes behind the red border that trimmed the opening of the mask.

I approached the side street behind Lance's apartment in a staggered sprint. Escaping on foot wasn't an option. My eyes locked on an '81 Torino parked off in the distance. Whoever had left it in such an isolated place was going to get really accustomed to walking. I shattered the driver's side window and got to work. Hot-wiring cars wasn't a skill I was proud of, but it was one of the first trades I picked up on my short list of survival tactics induced by the Hernan brothers. The engine sputtered on, I was dealing with less than a quarter tank of gas. I threw the

gear shift in drive and smashed the accelerator. Tufts of smoke escaped from under the peeling rubber on the tires. Both gun men wildly chased after me from behind. Bullets cut through the still air of the night, shells ricocheted off the body of the car. I stepped on the gas harder, and was quickly reminded of the agonizing flesh wound I took to the foot. The pain made me want to rip the steering wheel out of the dash.

I slowed the car to a decent speed once the distance between us grew to my liking. Free at last. Well at least for a brief moment before a black sports car swung into the rearview on my tail. "Damn it!" I cursed out loud. The vehicle ate at the distance between us. The Torino was no match for the car that it was nearly two decades senior to. We weaved through traffic in downtown, Buenos Aires. The spectrum of the city's vibrant lighting blurred. Beeping horns screeched at us, accompanied with shouts from aggressive drivers. The car got close enough to rear-end me. I glanced over to see that the body of the vehicle was riddled with gunshots from trunk to hood. It was the same car from my house the night before. The driver of the Audi rammed the back end of the outdated compact car once more. The turbulence aggravated my wound. I ducked down to keep my head clear of any gun fire and the flashing low fuel beacon caught my eye before I jerked a sharp right. When I looked up there was a swarm of headlights coming straight at me. It was just my luck to have turned down a one-way. My heart nestled into the pit of my stomach. The gunmen were still close behind.

It didn't take long for other drivers to spot us flying down the road in the wrong direction. Cars flew towards the sidewalks in desperate attempts to dodge collision. A semi came sliding down the street with the hitch and cabin angled in a V position, clearing out everything in its path. The myriad of head lights clouded my windshield. I couldn't see a thing. My demise was knocking at the door, but I wasn't going to open up that easily. I took a deep breath and gave the steering wheel another sharp jerk to the right. The sound of shattering glass and colliding steel pierced the night. Smoke from the burning pile of machinery filled the air. The engine of the Torino sputtered. The contents of the gas tank grew shorter and shorter. I adjusted the rearview mirror with my jittery left hand to look at the mangled frames of at least nine cars that were left behind. Luckily I escaped disaster, hopefully the drivers of the R8 hadn't.

"Morning, Daddy," I greeted my father on the other end of the laptop. My wound throbbed under the gauze that was wrapped around my foot. I was only grazed by the bullet so I figured I could nurse it on my own. Besides, telling a doctor that I got shot over dirty money wasn't an attractive option.

"I'm fine hun, tired are we?" he asked, his southern English accent was always soothing.

"I didn't leave the resort until late yesterday. We were working on inventory, you know how that can be," I lied.

"We miss you dearly when are you coming to visit?"

"Uhh, soon. Yeah, things are real busy right now. I'll book a flight when it calms down," I

replied. My phone rang, "Hey, I have a call, we'll talk later, love you."

By the time I closed the video chat the ringing had stopped. The number was unknown, blocked calls made me paranoid.

Going back home was the last thing on my mind. At the moment, my main focus was getting the hell out of Argentina. Living a double life was a constant struggle. Melissa Aspen, the luxury resort owner by day, and Blanca the heat toting rogue by night, such opposites. Not to mention a price tag on my head that was probably high enough to put a Ferrari to shame. Fortunately after all of the madness from the night before I was able to dig up something other

than a painful limp. Costa Rica was too close for comfort. I needed to go somewhere farther, somewhere that I could be a small fish in a big pond. The United States was perfect. After doing a little digging, West Palm, Florida fit the bill.

Marisol was ecstatic when she got the news about running the resort on her own. Packing up was simple. I only took the essentials, clothes, gadgets, and enough cash to open up a casino. Everything else could've easily been replaced. There was one last thing I had to do before leaving for good. A new life in a new country meant a fresh start. The trouble that tailed Melissa Aspen had to stay in the South.

The feeble screen door rattled after I tapped it a few times. I stood impatiently on the other side. "Que?" a small elderly woman answered from the opposite end. "Es Víctor aquí?" Before she could answer, Vick's shirtless lanky frame appeared behind her with his skin bearing more art than the Sistine Chapel. "Is it done yet?" I asked him. "Yeah, come in," his English was short and heavily accented. Vick was the hegemon of fake identification in the area. Tell him what you wanted, give him a day or two and you were set. I followed him across the creaking floorboards of the small house. The air inside was warm and dank. "So you're on the run huh?" he asked, polishing my new passport. More than a couple of people knew that I was walking dead. I had definitely over stayed my welcome in Buenos Aires. "Stacy Finderline? That's the best that you can come up with?" His expression grew solemn, "Take it or leave it." There was no way to argue with that. Stacy from, Greenville it was. The passport came complete with a phony birth certificate and driver's license. Marisol's cousin might've been a jerk but his work was undisputed.

"Any word from your brother?" I asked, changing the subject. "You are good. Same name and all," he glared at me, the eye-patch on the left side of his head lowered to his cheekbone. The few minutes I spent with him were more than enough. I gave his brother, Jo a call to get an update on the big move. They're businesses worked hand in hand. Vick had the documents, and his brother set me up with a spouse. Having a husband cleared any residency issues that could come up. Jo had gotten his hands on some guy named, Steve Finderline. "He was the best I could find, for your price range," the difference between his fluency in English and his brother's was bewildering, "Check the email address you gave me, I sent you some stuff." I kept the conversation short, thanked him for his services and went about my way.

Just about everything was in place. I had all of my paperwork, a place to live, and a husband. The only thing left was to catch the next flight out of, Buenos Aires. Considering that everything else was taken care of, boarding the plane in one piece was the biggest step. The email from Jo read no subject with an array of attachments. He didn't even bother to drop me a line, strictly business. There was no other text from him in sight aside from the links. The first one I clicked on turned out to be a snapshot of, Steve Finderline. He appeared to be in his mid to late forties. I couldn't tell if he was tall or not, but he was undeniably husky, possibly a muscular powerhouse back in his prime. A beady pair of black eyes was spread unusually far apart from his crooked nose in between them. Simply put, the guy wasn't a looker at all. But aesthetics wasn't the main objective, I just needed a scapegoat, and in that case Steve was a perfect ten. The other links were a couple of photos of his house, cars, and a phony marriage license. Assuming from his assets, Steve had his ducks lined up pretty nicely. His home trumped my place in Argentina, and the cars parked out front were worth enough to feed a small village for weeks. All of that for fifteen thousand pesos was virtually a steal.

I snagged about thirty minutes of sleep the night before the big jump. Was I really doing this? Packing up and leaving everything behind *again*. Running off to the United States without telling a soul (aside from the forgers of my phony papers), and starting over completely? It was the reality of my situation regardless of the stark consequences that were associated with the risk I was taking, and the alternative of staying in Buenos Aires made the gamble well worth it.

I had to catch a taxi to the airport after selling both of my cars. I looked back at my house for the last time. The ‘EnVenta’ picket stood firmly in the well-groomed lawn. The driver had a heavy foot and could’ve got me around town with his eyes closed. On more than one occasion I found myself gripping the handle on the back door bracing for a collision. We pulled up in front of Ezeiza International shortly after departing my old home. The gracious driver helped me unload my luggage from the trunk. I caught him stealing a glance at my breasts in the process. There was no offense taken on my end. I couldn’t blame him. I could’ve pried a stare out of a Grenadier with the top that I was wearing. I thanked him for his generosity and gave him a tip that was probably larger than his salary for the rest of the week.

The airport was even larger and more beautiful than I had remembered. When I first arrived to Argentina I was able to appreciate the aesthetics of the spacious dome-shaped structure and the abundance of natural lighting. Now the lot open space served as nothing more than an opportunity for someone to slip in and stop my escape. Despite that it was unlikely for anything to happen within the twenty minutes of downtime I had before takeoff, I was still alert.

*Un vuelo con salida a cero cinco.* The warning of my flight’s departure rang through the vast terminal. *Un vuelo con salida a cero cinco* the announcement blared once again. I hobbled over to the check-in struggling with my bags. A dark haired man spotted me with the luggage, and took the burden off of my hands before taking an opportunity to try his luck. After escorting me and my bags to the gate I let him down softly. I told him my husband was waiting on me in Florida. It felt nice to be reminded that I still had it every now and then.

The time I was dreading had come. It was going to take a lot of composure to make it through security. After handing the forged passport over to the guards, I put my purse and other belongings on the conveyor belt leading to the x-ray. My cell phone slipped out of my bag and crashed to the ground. Keeping a low profile was definitely out of the picture. The back cover and battery detached instantly. Dozens of eyes watched me kneel to retrieve the pieces. The security guard at the check point turned and whispered to his co-worker that was standing next to him. He used the metal detector wand to cover his mouth while he spoke. Both of their eyes quickly focused on me then the passport before continuing their conversation. My chest heaved up and down in between deep breaths of air. Angry patrons waiting behind me scoffed at the inconvenience. Judging by the reaction of the guards, I was sure that they were going to chalk me up for further screening. Defeat might as well have grabbed me by the hand and escorted me out. My plans had been foiled, I was busted.