

He nervously reached over to grab her hand...and met it in midair. She'd had the same impulse and needed comfort from him as well. He glanced at her and smiled just as the lumbering bus hit another rut and pitched his head forward towards the seat in front of him. It was an ancient Bluebird bus circa 1970, possibly the same one that used to take him to school in rural Alabama. But the brilliant blue paint and dozens of artistic embellishments were new. It was the public transportation of choice in this part of the world and while it didn't suit his lanky frame, he wasn't complaining. There was a slight rain falling in the darkness and even over the roar of the engine the sucking of mud on the tires could be heard. They are lucky enough to have paid and bullied their way onto this bus fleeing the fighting, heading deep into the jungle towards Costa Rica. He was utterly exhausted but none of them had had much sleep as they kept moving through the night on the packed bus. The air was so thick and smoky from too much humanity and cigarettes that he gave a slight cough every few minutes. In the half glow of dashboard lights he glanced towards her again. Her slightly exotic features seemed beautiful to him and he was sure he had fallen in love during the two and a half days that the group had been moving through the jungle on the tiny mud trail. The driver was taking his only valuable possession away from the fighting and Nick was lucky enough to have tagged along. He had been heading towards the Corn Islands on the coast to do some SCUBA diving, part of his adventure summer in Central America, when the fighting began. She was a bit older and said she was researching rural livelihoods in these remote regions. Not that there was going to be much of that in the future. The Honduran Army seemed to have gone mad – they wantonly killed everyone and seemed intent on eradicating every living soul in Nicaragua no matter what their beliefs or leanings. Nick didn't understand, he just wanted to get back home and start his nice safe job as a home framer again and let these strange people have their world back.

“Are you hungry” he asked, knowing they had only a couple of packs of cookies left but wanting her to not suffer.

She sighed and smiled but didn't reply. Alexandria was terribly hungry, like everyone else, but knew that their food was limited. She had been on enough research expeditions to the jungles and deserts of the world to know when to conserve food. She was surprised at how charming she found his earnest concern for her. She thought it was silly because Marko had burned love out of her life and this boy was a lot younger than her. Still...he was sort of cute and had that charming accent. Not that now was the time to be thinking about boys she smirked at herself. She had known that the Hondurans were growing increasingly angry at the kidnappings for the illegal organ trade and that they had been developing their army over the last decade. Some of the former drug runners had found organs even more lucrative and had been operating from Nicaragua and the shambles it remained socially after the long revolutions and civil wars incited by the US and then Japan. She thought it was so ironic that ten years ago Japan was helping to rebuild the bridges and roads destroyed during US-fostered fighting but had changed policy when they had found that social disruption allowed them to more easily extract the cheap organs needed by their ever aging but ultra rich population. The world had talked about demographic shifts as the developed world aged but no one had realized how desperately the citizens of the rich countries would cling to life or to what lengths they would go to ensure the supply of medical necessities including organs for transplant. Japanese, and other multinationals corporations to be fair, had coldly calculated the

economic costs and benefits and had fostered the social upheaval in many countries around the world where such things would not be countered. Areas where the US and Europe's strategic interests (oil she thought bitterly) were not threatened. She had seen the storm brewing but had assumed an armed conflict was in no one's interest. The vague rumor that the richest man in Honduras had had his family captured and butchered for spare parts while on a jungle retreat made a lot more sense. There were people in the world who had enormous ability to bend governments and armies to their wills if they so chose. But the random atrocities she had witnessed before being forced to flee were more than mere anger driven by an overly rich man. She had also heard rumors of new US battle drugs being tested in the armies of some of its major foreign aid recipients; far from Congressional oversight. She wondered if perhaps things had gotten further out of hand than anyone expected. Either way, the shiver down her spine one day told her to get out and get out quickly. She had been gone for thirty minutes when the dark smoke behind her told her that the Pech Indians that she had lived with for the past eight months were either scattered and fleeing into the jungle or dead. She felt cold and realized that life's harshness around the world had jaded her and made her inured to such thing. She had seen hurricanes and tsunamis, drugs out of control and earthquakes destroy the people in her study areas and she didn't have much grieving left in her. But she felt a subtle warmth when she turned and looked at Nick again and he flashed that innocent, wholesome grin at her. He seemed oblivious to the potential carnage all around them and she found that refreshing.

She finally looked at him again and he felt that strange burning in his chest and belly that he assumed was love. He wasn't sure what was going to happen but growing up in the woods, he was sure he could take care of himself and her if she would let him. From football to basketball to hunting deer, nothing had stopped him when he was motivated and knew what he wanted. Of course that was always the problem, he could do lots of things but never knew what he wanted out of life. He had been spinning his wheels after high school. Dating halfheartedly and wondering if there was more to life somewhere. Now he was dazed by this beautiful Norwegian woman sitting next to him and felt he was awaking to a new world. The trip into San Salvador to start his trip had ripped the veil of ignorance from his eyes. He had never left the South previously and now understood that there were vast bodies of knowledge that he ignored in school as he drank and played sports. There were worlds and cultures beyond his comprehension. At first he had found this discovery incredibly stimulating as he wandered through the mighty town square in the heart of the city and then through the markets and then on buses and in small towns. It had been a crash course in the Spanish and geography and anthropology and had been wonderful. But the sight of bullets ripping apart an old man and his tiny wife had torn the innocence from his eyes and he fled the Honduran army. The worst part had been the utter helplessness and ignorance. Why were they doing this? How could people just go crazy like that and kill for the sake of killing? He had seen snippets about civil wars in Africa and stuff before he could change the channel to something more interesting but had ignored them. Now he sort of wished he had watched the news and understood a bit more. He thought that the woman whose hand he was holding could tell him more, but he was afraid of sounding like a dumb hick and couldn't ask. Instead he vowed to protect her if she would let him, knowing such a vow was somewhat hollow as he was unarmed and in a strange land. Nonetheless, he felt

energized in her presence, like anything was possible, and felt that he could fulfill his vow.

Pow, pow, pow, pow. Explosions ripped through the front of the bus turning the driver and the people in the front seats into a red mist mixed with glass that spread backwards through the bus. Nick didn't even think, he pulled Alexandria's head downward and once the bus crashed to a halt, pivoted his body and kicked out the bus window. It was now complete darkness except for the flashes of firing. He knew there was no time, no time at all. So without hesitation he grabbed Alexandria and bodily threw her out of the window and plunged after her. Once on the ground, he grabbed her hand without looking and pulled her to the nearest tree and began softly running through the dense trees away from the gunflashes. She followed without a sound and ran easily behind him.

She disentangled her hand to run more easily. She felt her heart pounding and was stunned at how quickly everything was happening. She also felt a warm surge in her heart at how quickly he had reacted and brought her to a relative safety. She had been in danger many times before and recognized cowards and heroes. Fortunately, Nik (as she thought of him) seemed to be neither. Rather he was a survivor and that was what saved them. He didn't charge the guns but he didn't mindlessly flee either. He moved quickly to protect her and she appreciated what he was doing. Owwww. As she stubbed her toe again, she realized wryly that he saw in the dark far better than she did. He didn't hesitate as he ran and wended his way through the trees easily. She could barely make out his white t-shirt but he reached backwards every few moments to ensure that she was with him. She worried that her fair coloring would attract the soldiers and be more visible in the night. She was so fair in coloring as to almost be an albino and the platinum blond hair and deep blue eyes had kept her safe on many occasions because many peoples thought she was holy or sacred or a child of the gods or spirits. Of course it attracted more worldly peoples as well but she had always managed to survive thanks to years of Kempo karate training. After being brutalized as a child during a robbery, she swore to never be helpless again. But in the face of so many guns, there was little she could do here.

He realized the firing could no longer be heard and figured that that they had been running for twenty minutes. He slowed to an easy jog as they crested a third low ridge. He doubted that anyone would follow them. Running in full military gear had to be hard for anyone and there was little incentive to chase a couple of people when there was a bus to loot. He shifted the packs unconsciously and realized at that moment that he had them. He must have reflexively grabbed them on his way out of the bus. He glanced down and saw that he had both his and Alexandria's. He stopped and turned to her to give her the pack and plan their next move...