

JUNGLE FIRE

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The most powerful weapon on earth
is the human soul on fire.

—FERDINAND FOCH

CHAPTER 1

Nina never imagined her life would end on a bus.

Not a dilapidated bus filled to groaning, departing the soggy Guatemalan town of Solitar, three hours from the Mexican border. Not sitting next to a dark woman with a haggard face and oddly green eyes who gazed at her with peculiar intensity from under lowered lids, peppering her with questions about her destination.

Especially not, she thought as the uniformed soldier raised his automatic weapon, *one short day after her missionary furlough began*.

Maybe she should have anticipated just such a thing. Violence was part of life in Central America, deeply rooted like the thorned Kapok tree. Victims had been carried through the doors of their small clinic suffering a range of injuries from snake bites to stabbings. Some would walk out healed, and some would not walk out at all.

Still, perhaps the malice she saw in the gunman's demeanor was a product of her exaggerated imagination or the attitude she'd picked up from virtually every Mayan she'd encountered. Soldiers were to be regarded warily. After thirty-plus years of brutal civil war which staggered to a bloody end in the mid 1990s, the suspicions were not easily shed. The soldier, standing atop a grassy knoll on the side of the road with his dripping cap pulled low over his face, might just be looking to collect valuables from unwary passengers, especially Americans. It had happened before when

they arrived at the clinic some four autumns prior.

“It’s just money,” her father had whispered to her, her fingers squeezed between his as the men pushed through the vehicle collecting valuables with eager smiles on their faces. “More will come when we need it.”

Bruce William Monte, a veteran of two tours of duty in Vietnam, had tasted fear but never bowed to it—at least as far as Nina knew. He’d certainly never lost his cool for a moment when the bandits held up the passengers.

The terror she’d felt then had taunted her with shame. Fear was against the rules; not just the written ones recorded in the Bible, but also within the precepts upon which her father lived.

I will trust and not be afraid. Isaiah 12:2.

Still, she’d been ice-cold terrified and sick with fear.

Now, however, as the small collection of passengers stared at the gun-wielding soldier through the mud-spattered windows and the bus rolled to a stop, a surreal sense of detachment embraced Nina. Not courage, really, but disbelief. She felt as though an old movie unfolded before her eyes.

The man with the gun did not smile. He stood with slouched shoulders, braced against the wind that whipped the clouds into long roiling columns so common to *el invierno*, the Central American winter. He appeared to reconsider his situation, turning slightly, as if to walk away.

Juan Carlton, a fellow missionary who had served with her, shoulder to shoulder for the past six months, gave her a relieved, good-natured smile.

The soldier outside paused again. After a moment more of consideration, he lazily switched off the safety and opened fire. Nina noted the smile frozen on Juan Carlton’s face in spite of the horror that blazed in his eyes.

In a deafening display, bullets punched through the windows like a stream of angry hornets, sending glass rocketing in all directions. Shards sliced into worn seat covers around Nina and

skimmed her long brown hair.

“¡Dios mío, perdóname!” wailed the woman.

God forgive me.

Nina saw the driver’s head snap forward. As he slumped over the steering wheel, the bus began to drift toward the side of the graveled road as if the driver’s foot had lost contact with the brake. They drew nearer to the road’s edge, where a sharp drop preceded a rugged boulder-strewn slope and bushes clung to the rocky soil with long roots like clawed fingers.

“Hold on,” Nina yelled in English, her Spanish forgotten as the tires skidded sideways on shuddering axles.

“No, no, no,” the woman cried, fingers pressed to her mouth.

Nina tried to grab her in vain as she flew from the seat. Bodies, bags, and glass eddied around her in a violent storm.

Something cut into her cheek, then her shoulder. Her body collided with the leg of Juan Carlton. The breath hammered out of her as she hurtled against a seat.

Still, Nina did not feel the surge of fear that should have accompanied the scene. It was odd that she felt no pain, even as blood washed across her field of vision. Odd too, that the screams from the handful of passengers stopped as the bus toppled one final time on its way to the bottom of the ravine. Strangest of all was that the green-eyed woman had, a split second before the soldier began to fire, given him a smile, the gentle smile of . . . *a woman in love.*

* * *

The clouds rolled across the sky above the cluster of ramshackle buildings optimistically regarded as a town. As Shaw Wilder exited the crooked shed that served as the town garage, he looked again along the graveled road crowded with tangled vegetation.

Axel whined, and Shaw calmed the big German shepherd.

The dog paced in a restless ebb and flow in the sticky ground around Shaw’s feet as Shaw’s own muscles tensed. He knew

enough to trust the dog who had proven infinitely more perceptive than any human he'd met.

Axel generally sensed much more than the presence of the land mines he sniffed out, and this was no exception. His nose quivered as he looked out across the hills turned phosphorescent by the continual rains. Shaw had arranged a meeting with his friend and employer, but he saw no sign of the man.

“Señor Wilder,” Tito said, gasping for breath as he approached at a rapid clip. “¡*Tenemos un problema!*”

Trouble in any other language still sounded the same. “¿*Qué pasó?*”

Tito rattled off the information. The basic facts Shaw already knew. Otto Solis—the larger-than-life character with the lush black mustache and heavy silver pocket watch who had brought him to Solitar, hired him and Axel to rid his newly-purchased land from explosives left over from the tortuous civil war—was missing.

Overlooking an appointment in San Francisco or Paris was one thing; missed appointments in middle-of-nowhere Guatemala had more than a whiff of disaster about them. Death waited around every hill here and lurked in the quiet caves, nestled in clumps of trees on solitary roads. He'd come to expect it from the country that had destroyed his sister, her life drained away like the chicle sap that oozed from raw gashes in the sopadilla trees.

Perhaps Otto had gone to his plantation, a wild sprawl of oil palms nearer the mountains. He opened his mouth to ask Tito, and then thought better of it. Otto would have told him. The man was as reliable as the sunrise when it came to business. He'd gone to town with the promise of meeting Shaw upon his return at ten o'clock. It was now ten-thirty. Not surprising for the relaxed Central American attitude toward time, but Otto had never shared that philosophy.

“I'm a Guatemalan, born on New York time. Who can figure it?” He'd often said it with a characteristic chuckle. Otto was indeed a puzzle.

Shaw sent Tito to start the phone calls to Otto's regular business contacts and headed for his truck, Axel trotting along at his heels. He called Otto's satellite phone from his own once more. No answer. He gunned the motor and headed straight for the neat brick house Otto called home. The gravel pinged against the wheel wells as they progressed. For a moment, he thought he heard a rattle of gunfire. Stomping on the brakes, he waited, ears straining.

Nothing. His imagination. He continued on.

Mud sucked at the tires, splatting at the undercarriage where the gravel on the road had worn thin. Rolling down the windows did not allow for any refreshing breeze. Humidity reached in and squeezed the breath out of him.

Four years and counting, and Shaw hadn't yet gotten used to the weather. Winters brought daily drenchings and the threat of hurricanes while the long summers sank into stifling heat, stinging insects, and adventure-seeking tourists eager to visit the ancient Mayan ruins of Tikal. The topography still confounded him, too. The massive jungle region of Petén flowed into cloud forests and dumped into coastal areas along two oceans, a continent as diverse as the people who lived there. Guatemalans were by nature a— if somewhat wary—people, but the *ladinos* of Spanish European heritage were so different from the indigenous Mayan, that they might as well be from two different worlds. And Shaw supposed they were.

It's not the location, Shaw. It's you.

True enough. He felt at home precisely nowhere since his sister had died trying to be some sort of missionary zealot like her friend Nina Truman. As far as he could tell, being a missionary was like shoveling sand uphill; useless. Beth never should have stayed in Guatemala, never should have married a man so much older than her that he could have been her father. She never should have died there.

He pictured Beth, with his sandy blond hair and eyes caught somewhere between gray and blue, and the ball in the pit of his

stomach tightened. He should go home, return to the States where he didn't have to look over his shoulder for pit vipers and drug smugglers, but Beth was buried deep in the heart of this wild place, a fact which stuck him in the gut with the sharp force of an ice pick. He'd desperately wanted to take her body home, but her husband, a wealthy and powerful man with his fingers in every money pot in Guatemala, would not hear of it. She was trapped there and, in some ways, he wondered if he was too.

Axel seemed to sense Shaw's mood and pulled his head inside the window to give Shaw a wet nose poke to the thigh.

"I know. It doesn't pay to live in the past. Maybe we'll go back to the States soon, get ourselves a boat and a couple of corn-fed T-bone steaks."

Axel ignored the comment and shoved his head back through the open window, shaking off the rain droplets that fell with a gentle whoosh. Shaw rounded the twisting road, mercifully graveled, the engine grinding in complaint as he took the steep grade.

The smell got him first. A mixture of fuel and something much more frightening. The tang of a newly-fired weapon.

The hair on the scruff of Axel's body stood on end, as if charged by an electric current. Shaw was more electrified by the sight of Otto's Jeep pulled off to the side of the road.

He hurtled out of the truck and ran to it. Empty. The feeling of foreboding hiked up a notch.

Axel didn't bother with the Jeep. He took off running up the slope, lanky shepherd legs quickly outpacing his master and carrying him out of view in a moment.

"Come, Axel," Shaw shouted to no effect.

Shaw hastened back to the truck and retrieved a sheathed knife from under the seat. He jammed it into his waistband before he took off upslope after the dog.

Quickly covered in sweat despite the rain, a noise came to him over the sound of the pattering droplets. He stopped to listen. Again, he heard nothing but rain hitting leaves and his own harsh

breathing. The quiet didn't soothe him. The silence rang with an unnatural alarm, stripped of everything, even the squawking of ever-present jungle birds.

Pulse pounding, he sprinted up the road. Cresting the top, he didn't see anything unusual at first glance . . . until his eyes traveled to the path. Deep ruts in the mud filled in the picture and he ran to the edge of the road. Looking down, he spotted the battered remains of a chicken bus, one of the many decrepit old school buses that carried everything from people to poultry. The metal body stretched like a dying animal halfway down the ravine, wedged against an outcropping of rock. Bullet holes showed in the few windows that remained intact. He scanned the tree line, the rock above and the tangle of shrubs below. The shooter was long since gone.

Disgust rose thick in his throat. Shaw didn't consider himself a man of great imagination, but the scenario played out in his mind's eye, and he winced at the broken bodies, moans of the dying, or worse, the all-encompassing silence that might greet him inside the ruined bus.

He started down the slope but stopped after a few steps. The police would be there within minutes, he could hear their approach. Best to stay away from anything involving the authorities. The lengthy explanations that would be required, the money that would likely need to change hands to end the questioning. Otto would have made the same decision. He was well-to-do by Guatemalan standards, but he could pinch a penny until it yodeled. And he had no love for the police.

"Axel!" he hollered. An answering bark came from somewhere in the deep screen of trees. He wondered what the dog had gone after. Mud stuck to his boots as he took a step toward the bus again. For the second time, he stopped.

Leave it to the police, he told himself, or the almighty missionaries who came to this nowhere jungle to shine their light in the darkness, or whatever it was they did.

“It would take a massive inferno to change the smallest thing about this place,” he grumbled.

His attention lassoed by a delicate bloom of orange from inside the bus, Shaw squinted at the light playing crazily behind the broken shards of glass still clinging to the frame as the flames sprang suddenly to life.

* * *

Nina’s face pressed against something rough. Her mind fought the return to consciousness as flickers of pain shot up her arms and legs. A crackling noise buzzed in her ears like some enormous jungle insect. She opened her eyes and blinked against the blurriness. She pushed against the stuff that scraped her cheek.

Cloth. Strange.

Realization jerked her upright with such force that she nearly passed out. The cloth on her face materialized into someone’s sleeve; her missionary friend, Juan Carlos. He was dead. Even without her nursing background, she would have known from the odd angle of his broken neck, the lifeless pallor of his dark skin.

She thought it odd that she didn’t feel grief. Nor anger. Nor anything. All she could manage was to stare at the man who had been alive only moments before, clutching a guidebook and a cheap ballpoint pen in his hands and reading snippets about the Mayan ruins they intended to visit before she returned to the States. She’d only planned to remain in Guatemala for two more days, tops. Just long enough to welcome the incoming team of missionaries. Oddly, she’d had to fight her father on that point. He’d wanted—demanded, really—that she fly out with him, leaving their precious clinic untended. But Nina had prevailed in her objections, and Juan Carlos had cheerfully agreed to stay and assist where needed.

Juan Carlos. The affable, easy-going, humble man who did the dirtiest jobs without complaint and never lost his wide grin.

Now he was dead, and the world had turned upside down.

Pray, Nina. That’s what you should do.

But she couldn't.

She could do nothing but stare at him as the rain washed over his face, coursing down the laugh lines around his mouth, and dripping off his chin.

Someone pulled at her arm.

“Vamanos, por favor.”

The green-eyed woman. A trickle of blood snaked down her forehead, glistening black against her skin.

Nina allowed herself to be pulled to her feet, fighting a wave of dizziness. She understood now that she'd been thrown clear of the bus which was turned over, stuck on a clump of rock halfway down the slope, wheels still turning lazily. Nearby, two men laid curled on their sides, mercifully still breathing. An old woman cradled a whimpering child in her arms, stroking his hair and shielding his face from the rain with her body.

Someone caused this. Purposefully. Her mind whirled, following the rhythm of the spinning tires. *Bullets. Ruined people. Ruined bus.*

She stared into the windows through the jagged teeth of glass. A shadowed head appeared, a small hand thrusting through the wreckage. A child. At the same moment, she watched smoke rise up around the tiny figure, wreathing him in a black shroud.

A child. A child. A child!

Her mind screamed, but her body refused to move in the right direction as the green-eyed woman pulled her away toward the trees.

“We must run,” she said in accented English. “He will come back.”

Nina finally found the strength to resist the woman's strong grip. “There's a child,” she managed, stabbing a finger toward the bus. “There. In there.”

“There is no time,” the woman continued, her grasp surprisingly strong on Nina's arm.

A dog barked from somewhere deep in the trees. One pane of

glass from the rear window of the bus suddenly exploded into hundreds of glittering missiles. When the green-eyed woman flinched, Nina used the moment to wrench her arm away, and she took off running toward the small hand that had begun to slide slowly down the window.