

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Tyler tells me that we're about a mile from Tulum, the clifftop Mayan ruin, a popular tourist spot and according to Blanco Vigores, the one-time site of a catastrophic storm. That means they owe the taxi driver for a two-hour drive, at least.

"He wants three hundred dollars to drop us here," he says, "Two hundred more to drive us back. Or another hundred to go to Cancun."

Tyler and Vanessa opt to take the lift back to Chetumal. I'm in no state to start negotiating aggressive bus queues, they claim. As we drive back, they begin to tell me about their interrogation session.

Those NRO guys already know quite a bit. They know that Becan hides a secret entrance to some hideout. From what Tyler tells me, they've got it into their heads that there's some Bond-villain-type set-up down there.

'Where is the secret entrance to Ek'Naab?' they asked and 'Who has been feeding you information?' All they managed to get out of Tyler and Vanessa was some vague memory of the inscription on the Calakmul letter. Luckily, it was very vague, infuriatingly so. When they couldn't agree on the text, the NRO guys gave them a long rant. 'We'll find out who you're protecting and put them in jail', 'We'll extradite you to Guantanamo, you jerks, all we have to do is call you terrorists and then we can do what the hell we like.'

"So is it true?" Vanessa asks, looking deep into my eyes. "Is there a secret hideout under Becan?"

I hesitate for just a second before saying, "Yes."

They both gasp. "Aw...you lie!" Tyler says, giving me a shove. But he can tell I'm serious.

"Man, if this is for real then you've gotta come clean with it," he says. "Them NRO bums ain't never gonna leave us alone. They've got our names, addresses; they've copied our passports, our tickets. We can't leave the country without them knowing."

"They said that?"

Vanessa gives a slight, reluctant nod. "Actually, they did."

"I can't tell them anything," I say. "Not a thing."

Tyler looks astounded. "Look man, I've had enough of this! We come out here for a bit of a laugh and to support you with your *emotional* problems, and what happens? We end up spending the night in a Mexican slammer – with toilets that would make you actually spew mind you – with some bloody scary American agents who think we're involved in some big drug-lord operation..."

"They said that?" I interrupt. "'Drug-lord'?"

"They mentioned drugs, they mentioned arms dealing, I dunno what they think is going on."

Vanessa remains uncharacteristically quiet. "They think this about gangsters?" I ask her. She looks away without replying.

"Why would the NRO care about gangsters, Tyler?" I say, raising my voice. "A joint operation of the CIA and US Air Force? How is a bit of cocaine smuggling going to upset them?"

"I think they were trying to confuse us," Vanessa says in a soothing voice.

"I think they succeeded," I reply angrily.

There's a long, deeply uncomfortable silence.

"Where did you go, Josh?" Vanessa asks. "Who gave you the case? And what did you do with it?"

Ignoring her questions, I say "That guy in the blue Nissan, he was going to kill me, you know. After he'd tortured me to find out what I knew. He shot Camila, drove her car off the road. I almost drowned, and she died. These NRO people are dangerous. And you want me to go back to them?"

"They weren't like that with us," Tyler says. "They were all talk, no trousers."

"Because they could see you didn't know any more than them," I yell in frustration. "With me, it's a different story."

"With you, they know they can get real information," agrees Vanessa.

“The blue Nissan guy is called ‘Simon Madison’. Whether that’s his real name or not, I don’t know, but that’s what his passport says.”

Very curiously, Vanessa asks “How do you know that?”

“I just do.” I can see she’s not satisfied with that but I don’t care. “He wanted the case. And to know how to get into Ek’Naab. But I’m not sure I could get in again. They were waiting for me. They led me there.”

Tyler and Vanessa stare at me. “‘They’?”

I sigh. “I’ve already said too much.”

Tyler scratches the stubble on his chin. “Now you’re scarin’ me. Josh, I think you’re in danger so long as you keep this to yourself. Just tell ‘em. They’re on our side, right - the Yanks? What harm can it do?”

“I’m not sure I agree with you there,” Vanessa says carefully.

The taxi driver interrupts to tell us he has to stop for petrol at the next service station. Do we want to grab some snacks? He pulls in at the crowded service station, where half a dozen tourist coaches have stopped to refuel. Tyler and Vanessa go for the drinks whilst I visit the bathrooms. Washing my hands with pink liquid soap, I watch them on the other side of the concourse, talking to local people selling homemade cookies, crisps and fresh juice. There’s something too cozy, too familiar about the way they are together. He even feeds her a crisp, while she laughs at something he’s said. It makes my blood boil.

‘Who gave you the case?’ ‘Just tell them!’

If I didn’t know better I’d wonder if I could even afford to trust my two friends. But then, they did save me.

Or did they?

What if the NRO somehow got to them – made a deal? Maybe they just saved me from drowning so that they could make sure I delivered myself into the hands of the NRO again?

A sudden feeling of desperation sweeps through me and I have to grip the washbasin to stay upright.

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What if the NRO got to them?

I can hardly breathe. Standing over there they look so calm, relaxed. I watch them smile, choose bags of fresh potato crisps sprinkled with lime and chilli, watch them wait as a woman slices green-skinned oranges, lining them up to be squeezed for juice.

Between us, an aging yellow bus prepares to pull out of the station, blocking my view of Tyler and Vanessa. That's when I take my decision. I race out of the washroom and jump onto the bus just in time before its door closes. The driver isn't unduly surprised, just asks me how far I'm going. I ask "Where are you headed?"

"Valladolid," he replies. "Via everywhere."

I'm not sure where Valladolid is, but it sounds fine. Not on the beaten track, that's for sure. And I like the sound of 'via everywhere.' For what I'm planning, that sounds perfect. I peel off a fifty-peso note and wait for change. There's nowhere to sit on the bus, which is full of tired-eyed shift workers coming home from the tourist resorts and plantations hereabouts. I'm pretty conspicuous at this time of day. Backpackers carry backpacks and they don't show up anywhere before 10am.

I catch a final glimpse of Tyler and Vanessa as the bus drives off. They're tasting the juice. It looks good. I wish I'd thought to bring something to drink. How long, I wonder, until they work out that I've gone? Another bus pulls out almost at the same time, the destination listed as Cancun.

They must have chosen to chase the Cancun bus because my bus takes a leisurely journey through villages from Felipe Carrillo Puerto to Valladolid without ever being followed by a taxi containing two curious British teenagers.

The minute we're away from the bus station I take out the mobile phone, give it a hard shake and try the power switch again. Absolutely nothing – I'm disappointed again, but not surprised. I stand, legs still aching from exhaustion, and hang on to my leather bus strap, gazing out of the window. Like the road to Becan, this road cuts directly into the jungle. The sides of the road are littered with black patches which when we draw closer, I realize are made up of big tarantulas warming themselves on the early morning heat of the tarmac. They rear up as we rush past.

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I disembark at every bus stop to keep an eye out. I buy a drink from the omnipresent street vendor who'll sell you a fizzy drink cheap if you chug it straight down and return him the bottle. The bus isn't air-conditioned and by ten in the morning the temperature inside is 40 degrees, with almost 100 percent humidity. The sweat pours off my head and down my sides.

At Valladolid about two hours later, a crowd of scruffy-looking American and European tourists make an appearance. They argue loudly with locals about their position in the queue for buses to Chiquila. The point is that there isn't a queue at all, because politer people than they simply notice the order in which everyone's arrived. Turning to me, they ask about the Chiquila-to-Holbox ferry. Politely, I reply that I have no idea. A young Japanese couple in neatly pressed chino shorts and white linen shirts ask me if I speak Spanish. And would I ask the driver what the ticket they should buy to visit Coba and Tulum on the same day? Since they're nice enough to ask properly, I oblige them. While I'm talking to the driver, I look over his shoulder at the bus schedule. According to the schedule, there's a cross-state bus due within ten minutes: Campeche City via Merida.

Still keeping an eye out for Tyler and Vanessa, I walk into the little street market near the bus station. I buy a can of Fresca and sip from it as I walk around looking at the stall, thinking. It occurs to me that if my worst fears are correct, then it's not just Tyler and Vanessa I should be watching for. They'd surely alert their contacts in the NRO. There could even be a state-wide description of me out there by now. Which means that at the very least, I have to change my appearance.

I find a stall selling beach clothes and buy a pair of blue shorts and a blue T-shirt with the logo 'Xcaret!' – an eco-resort on the Caribbean – over a picture of a dolphin. I also buy some hair gel, a comb and aftershave. In the bathroom I have a wash and change into the new clothes, transfer the two defunct mobile phones (mine and the one from Ek'Naab) plus all the cash, throw my old clothes into a rubbish bin. I slick back my hair with a big dollop of hair gel and rub a handful of aftershave all over my face and neck. The difference isn't as dramatic as I'd hoped, to tell the truth. I just look like a dumb-assed version of myself. On the way out, I buy a pair of fake Raybans and a 'Pumas' baseball cap. I put the cap on backwards. Finally, I look reasonably unlike myself, but even more like a total jerk.

I'm just in time to see the cross-state bus leaving - early. I could erupt with curses, for the anger I feel, but there's a very pretty Mexican girl in front of me who does it so much more effectively, in Spanish too, that I simply watch her explosion.

When she's through, I say in Spanish, "Hey, couldn't have expressed it better myself."

"I catch that bus every week," she complains, "And it's always late. Every time, for two months. What's so special about today that he has to go early?"

"Maybe his wife promised him something special if he finished early?" I suggest.

"What, a loser like him with a wife?" she laughs. "A girlfriend maybe, but a wife?"

"So when's the next Campeche bus?"

Not for two hours, she tells me. And even then it's the Veracruz bus. Fewer stops and more expensive. She's headed for a hacienda hotel on the outskirts of Campeche City. "A vacation?" I ask innocently, to which she replies with scorn, "You don't look much like a strawberry but I guess you are one after all," "Strawberry?" I ask. "Si, *fresa*," she replies. "One of those stuck-up preppy types." I close up my mouth with a simple "Oh."

She walks off in something of a huff, disappearing into an ice-cream parlour. After a second's hesitation, I follow her. "Did I say something wrong?"

"Are you thick or something?" she says. "Do I look like a tourist? What do you *think* a girl like me will be doing in a place like Hacienda Los Reyes?"

The girl, who looks to be around my age, is dressed in a sleeveless white cotton dress with just a thin pink shawl. She's slim but sturdy-looking, with toned arms and shoulders. Her clothes and shoes look very simple now that I look more closely, the kind of thing you find in any supermarket. She wears them so stylishly, with such a coquettish air that I'd taken her for a something other than what she evidently is: a hotel chambermaid.

"Okay, so I made a mistake," I say. "So what? It's not the end of the world is it?"

"Oh, what do people like you know about the end of the world? I bet you've never worked a day in your life."

“More’s the pity,” I say, smiling. “Think *people like me* enjoy having to study Latin and maths? I’d rather be cleaning house with a girl like you.”

“Don’t go trying to seduce me with your preppy charms,” she says. “Just shut up and buy me an ice-lolly. Then maybe I’ll forgive you.”

Her tone may be cross but by now she’s grinning, showing perfectly even, white teeth. I open the door of the shop’s chest freezer, brush aside the clouds of icy mist above the stacked slabs of frozen juice and ice-cream. They’re arranged by colour, starting from the milky whites of coconut cream, rice milk, lemonade, through the entire rainbow ending with the red spectrum: strawberry in both water-ice and milk, and the geranium red of redcurrant. I buy us each a stick of frozen redcurrant juice (her choice) and we return to watch the buses. The flavour is unexpectedly strong; sharp, tart, sweet and quite unusual.

“Mmm,” I say, doing a Homer Simpson impression. “Curranty...”

She replies with a laugh that actually makes my stomach do a little flip.

“Where are you headed?” she asks.

Until now I’ve just been running, no thought of where to go. But my pockets are stuffed with enough money to get as far as Mexico City, where I know I can find friends of my father’s – my only hope for a safe-house in the nation. And then? Somehow, I have to fix that phone and call the Mayans in Ek’Naab.

“Mexico City,” I tell her. “But I’m in no rush.”

“Mexico? Should have guessed.” Imitating the cry of the Mexico City University soccer team’s fans she shouts “Puuummass!” and laughs. “Not just a preppy,” she giggles, “But a *chilango* as well!”

“I’m not from Mexico City,” I say, a little too defensively.

She rolls her eyes. “You don’t say – with that accent? Sheeesh, but you’re easy to tease!”

“You don’t like Mexico City then?”

“Who knows? I’ve never been.”

“What, never?”

"I'm a country girl. Mexico scares the heck out of me."

"Yeah, me too. Just a bit." I've never been alone in Mexico City. In fact this bus journey represents my longest stint of independence in the country, ever.

"So what's a preppy like you doing out here in Yucatan with no baggage, on his way to the capital in no particular hurry?"

"Running away from home," I reply on a whim, thinking of Ixchel. "Concerning a matter of principle."

The girl reaches out, touches my cheek, traces her finger around my jaw.

"I believe you," she says quietly. "There's something of the 'little boy lost' about you."

We stare at each other; she with a coolly appraising eye, casually looking me up and down; me trying to manage a nonchalant, distant grin.

"You know what?" she says eventually.

"No, what?"

"You know what I think would be nice? If we could ride a bus together. Sit at the back. And fool around a little. Just as far as Campeche. What do you think? Would you like that?"

I gulp, the blood drains from my face. It must show, because a slow smile spreads across her lips.

"Would you like that?" she asks again.

We catch the next bus that's going vaguely in the right direction: the Maya Route Special stopping at Chichen Itza, Mayapan, Uxmal, Edzna. Being a tourist bus, it's more expensive than the regular service, but I persuade the girl to let me pay the difference.

We go straight to the back of the bus and without any pretense or preamble whatsoever she slides her arms around my waist.

"Let me tell you a secret," she says after our first chilly, redcurrant-flavoured kiss. "I always wanted to make out with a preppy. I just never found one as sweet as you."

Well, as it turned out she had something I'd always wanted too. Talk about looking for love in all the wrong places.

Fresa y Chocolate

She called me 'fresa' which literally means 'strawberry' but she didn't mean it that way: she used it in the more derogatory sense, i.e. stuck-up preppy. We sucked on frozen juice bars that were so good we decided to buy one more for the road. "Ice-cream sticks this time," she suggested. "For dessert." I chose strawberry, she had chocolate.

I didn't have a name for her; she insisted that we didn't use names and anyway I couldn't think of a good nickname. Redcurrant Lips? Pink Shawl? White Dress? None of them quite announce her in a way I'd want to remember. By default, I've ended up thinking of her as 'Bus Stop Girl'.

We met at the bus station at Valladolid and within ten minutes we had our arms wrapped around each other and our lips locked in the kind of kisses I assumed took a lot of practice but in fact don't. When we first began to kiss (which was all her idea) our mouths were cold from ice-cream bars, but we soon warmed up. Bit-by-bit the warmth returned to my lips and tongue; bit-by-bit I lost a carefully held assumption about girls, namely that you have to work yourself up to declaring an interest over weeks and even months.

This girl liked me within minutes and I liked her. We told each other as much and that was that: down to business.

However, there are limits, not only to what you can get away with on broad daylight on a bus, but to what a guy of my limited experience can stand. After a while I had to ask her to stop and I didn't dare say why. "Just because," I whispered, stroking her hair and pulling away, my heart pumping fit to explode.

We rode the bus through the stops for three famous Mayan ruins, Chichen Itza, Mayapan, Uxmal. I'd visited all three at some stage in the past five years, always with my father. She knew them all too, like the back of her hands, she claimed. "I might train to be a tour guide one day," she said, "But first I have to finish high school." She worked as a hotel maid at weekends and on Mondays. Midweek, she worked in a restaurant. Evenings, she went to night school. We were the same age but she was burning through life at twice my rate. She was happy to talk and I was happy to listen. It felt good not to be questioned, hassled, not to be the focus of anyone's tension and anxiety. As she talked I kissed her neck and shoulders and felt the incredible warmth and softness of her skin under my hands. I've

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never held a girl for ages like that. It was amazing, made me want to forget everything, absolutely all of it.

“Come with me to the Hacienda,” she breathed against me. “Stay with me. I can get you a job there. We’ll have so much fun.”

“I really can’t,” I whispered. “There’s something I have to do.”

She didn’t ask again. When we reached Edzna I happened to mention that I’d never seen it. “Then you really, really must,” she insisted and led me through the bus stop to where her bus left for Campeche City. “Edzna is un-miss-able. Totally. As for me, I have to make the afternoon shift at the hotel. I guess this is where we’ll say goodbye.”

It was all so unreal that it didn’t seem believable we could part so soon after meeting. When she stepped onto the Campeche bus it finally hit me: she was going and I was letting her.

“Why me?” I asked, holding on to her hand as with the other, she rummaged for her bus ticket.

“I saw you go into that bathroom and come out in different clothes. You looked like you wanted to be someone else. And you looked sad.”

“Do I look sad now?”

Her eyes filled with tears. I couldn’t speak.

She climbed aboard the bus and found a window seat, pushed open the window and we just stared at each other, stumbling to find any words.

“Do I look sad now?” I repeated, louder, almost desperate.

“You look lost,” she admitted. “But you’ll find yourself again.”

I wanted to ask her if I’m one of many boys she picks up and drops as she criss-crosses the Yucatan peninsula. Or if it’s possible that I’m the first? The bus pulled away; she waved and wiping a tear from her cheek, she forced a smile.

I watched the bus throw up chalky dust and disappear into the distance. I was in such turmoil that I could hardly stand still. Walking from the bus station to the entrance of the archaeological site, I bought a ticket and a little map of the ruins. I wandered aimlessly

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around Edzna's incredible pyramids, ball courts and plazas, in a virtual daze. Eventually I slumped behind some trees, my back against a small grassy mound. I stopped resisting the tide of desolation. It was like imploding, being torn apart from inside.

My sobs attracted the attention of a stocky, elderly Mexican woman, a tourist wearing tight-fitting clothes that looked hot and uncomfortable. "Poor lad," she said, shaking her head in sympathy. "It'll be about a girl, am I right?"

I couldn't tell anymore. The threads of my life had become wrapped around me in a messy tangle. Holding Bus Stop Girl, I felt as though I'd escaped those suffocating strands. Now they were back.

I felt their blood run hot inside me; my grandfather's and my Dad's. I felt the inescapable call of a destiny I couldn't and didn't want to understand.