

Vanished

by Hank Barone

Available Soon!

Kidnappers would board Jake Brandon's bus in four minutes.

1

All six feet one of Jake Brandon, wearing ratty old Levis and a faded sky blue shirt, folded like an accordion into the cramped bus seat. He cursed his height as he angled his clunky hiking boots into the aisle of the crowded bus.

A young mother sat beside him in the window seat, her tiny baby wrapped in a blanket despite the day's heat. The young woman sang softly to her baby. Everywhere, passengers laughed and called to each other.

Ranchera music blasted from crackling speakers. A few men, drinking Carta Blanca beer from the bottle, sat in the back of the second-class bus.

The ancient bus creaked and swayed on the curvy mountain highway. Jake's seat mate touched his shoulder and, without a thought, handed him her baby. Jake cradled the infant, half afraid he'd drop it.

Reaching into the overhead bin, she dragged her backpack down. It brushed Jake's head.

“Lo siento, señor.”

Seated again, she fumbled in her pack and pulled out a brown bag lunch. Taking back her baby, she offered Jake a burrito.

“Gracias, pero no.”

The bus careened around a curve high above a jungle river, pushing Jake toward the young woman and the window. His stomach lurched as the bus leaned out over the drop-off, hugging the road's edge.

Jeez, no guardrails.

He braced himself as he stared down the rocky slope.

The driver hit the brakes. Jake's chin snapped down to his chest.

Jerking his head up, Jake grabbed the seat in front of him as he pitched forward.

The brakes screeched and the bus's backend swung toward the abyss as the driver wrestled the front toward the road's center.

Uh, oh. Now what?

A battered army truck squatted across the two-lane highway. Five rifle-armed thugs in faded camouflage fatigues and ski masks stood shoulder to shoulder in front of the truck. Jake's sweaty hand slipped from the seat's back.

A husky bandit aimed his rifle at the driver. The music stopped.

The bus ground to a halt ten yards from the highwaymen.

No one spoke. A minute before the bus had sounded like a party. Now, it was as quiet as a funeral. The girl hugged her baby closer. Jake touched her arm.

This is going from a happy day, to possibly the worst day of my life.

The masked men strode toward the bus. One motioned the driver to open up as he continued to point his rifle at the man's head. The hydraulic door opened with an eerie hiss.

The lead hijacker, a dark skinned Indian, climbed the stairs, rifle ready. Two others followed.

The young mother scrunched down in her seat and shushed her baby. Jake held his breath.

The man paused at the top of the steps. His searching gaze settled on Jake, the only non-Mexican on the bus. Jake kept a poker face, but his stomach churned like a cement mixer. He gripped his hands hard to stop the trembling. Jake had heard about kidnappings and robberies, but never expected to be the victim of one. He rubbed his sweaty palms on his jeans.

The man strutted straight for him and thrust his left hand in front of Jake.

“Dame los documentos.” He pointed the rifle at Jake's face. His dark brown eyes blazed through the ski mask's eye slits and his pinched, thin-lipped mouth barely moved through the mouth hole.

While Jake handed the man his papers, his gaze fixed on the gaping bore of the rifle's barrel, only inches away. His heart thudded against his chest so hard he thought it would burst.

The bandit ripped out Jake's iPod ear buds and grabbed a fistful of shirt. He yanked Jake to his feet and propelled him staggering toward the door. His sidekick shoved Jake to the top of the steps.

As the leader's powerful arms had jerked him to his feet, it sent chills down his spine. He'd been afraid lots of times and that had never stopped him. But this was a little more serious than fighting the school bully who had terrorized his best friend.

Halfway down the steps, the cold gun barrel pressed against the back of Jake's head brought home the danger he was in. The cords of his neck throbbed. The barrel jabbed into him, producing sharp pain, but anger, too.

This is crazy. I won't go peacefully. It's better to act now than wait.

Jake had recently won a New Mexico state wrestling championship. He hoped that the discipline he'd learned and the strength he'd gained from training year-round would help him now.

The roadway's hot surface burned through his hiking shoes. He stopped, ready.

The two remaining bandits stood beside the truck smoking and laughing. They paid no attention to Jake and his captor.

The rifle poked him forward.

Now. Act now. Jake willed himself into action.

The gun's barrel slid away from his neck as he spun left. He grasped the barrel and drove his right fist straight into the man's Adams' apple. The man clutched his throat, releasing his rifle and gagged for breath. Jake kicked him in the knee and the kidnapper collapsed on the roadway.

Jake spun the weapon around into a firing position and glanced up at the blue bus's windows. The other two kidnappers had their backs turned to him as they worked down the aisle of seats. The two men by the truck were absorbed in talking. Jake kicked the fallen man in the head, stooped over and jerked his gun belt off. He slid it across his own chest and grabbed the man's sheath knife, jamming it into his leather belt in the small of his back.

One of the smokers, noticing his fallen companion, yelled for his friend to look, "Mira! Mira!" He pointed to Jake and raised his weapon.

Jake fired. The man spun around and catapulted head first into the truck's side. Jake didn't wait. He bolted for the woods, zigzagging to dodge bullets that sliced through the air around him. Feet flying, he scrambled down the slope to a wide, fast flowing river, grabbing saplings, sliding and stumbling. Fear-induced adrenaline surged through him and kept him on his feet.

At the water's edge, he turned downriver and sprinted along the shore. He leaped over low brush and scooted around trees, his ground-eating stride gobbling up the river's stony shoreline. Three hand made wooden canoes bobbed in the water, prows pulled onto the shore.

Jake shoved two boats adrift and piled into the third. He dropped the rifle in the bottom beside two paddles. Grabbing one, he plunged it deep into the swift moving water.

A rifle cracked from the trees and the blast gave him added strength. He drove the paddle into the river and the boat hurled downstream.

Another rifle shot rang out and he felt the slight movement of air as the bullet whirred past his head. The dugout neared a curve in the river. Jake cut right, as close to the shoreline as possible.

A bullet thudded into a tree on the riverbank, not more than two feet away. He powered the boat around the curve, safe for a moment and slowed, gasping. He couldn't maintain such an insane pace for long.

I wish I'd had time to sink those other boats.

Jake had canoed many times, but this dugout was heavier and rode lower in the water than the aluminum versions he was used to. In no time, he got the hang of it. While his heart slowed its jackhammer pounding, he settled into a steady rhythm.

Now Jake took time to look at the river and the jungle surrounding it. Early that morning, his trip had begun in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula headed for the state of Chiapas. Jake had planned to meet his father in the city of Oaxaca, another eight-hour bus ride. His dad, a magazine publisher, often worked in Mexico where one of his monthlies was based.

In the distance, a monkey's piercing cry cut across the water, drawing him back to the present.

Where's this river taking me? I need a new plan.

Once around the bend, the narrow waterway widened to the width of a football field. He paddled downriver through the still water and the silent, red mangrove forest. To someone who had grown up around evergreen forests, the mangroves created an other worldly atmosphere, their massive root systems thrusting up high above the river into their trunks. In the thick jungle growth, saw grass clustered around the tree roots, along with sword ferns and strangler vines. Jake hoped he wouldn't have to travel through that mess. Not without a machete, anyway. He studied his newly acquired M14 service rifle. It contained a 20-round magazine, had a web sling, a 22-inch barrel and a walnut stock. Old, but well kept. He remembered about military weapons from his Marine Corps uncle.

Far off, a frightening roar brought images of big cats and feeding frenzies. The howler monkey screamed again. As he paddled deeper into the jungle, birds sang in the forest's canopy. They were not familiar bird sounds. Some sounded like painful human wailing. He shivered, reminded of the horror of his escape.

Jake had never seen a man shot before, let alone shot one himself. The bandits deserved it, yet he couldn't help but feel sorry for the man he shot. His stomach turned as the image of the man plunging head first into the truck replayed in his mind. He shuddered as the bile rose, gulping it down.

Jake paddled hard and the wooded banks slipped past as he looked for a place to beach the canoe. He needed time to rest, but a solid wall of mangroves barred his way. He coasted close to shore. A few feet away, the reeds wavered, catching his eyes. A bulbous, unblinking amber eye peered through the thick underbrush. Moments later, a twelve-foot crocodile slid across the muddy riverbank and plopped into the water. Within seconds, the croc submerged without a trace. Breathing fast, Jake searched for others waiting in the swamp grass. He shifted course toward the river's center.

Mud tugged at the hull and the boat clung to the silt. Tired now, Jake slipped his shoes and socks off and swung his bare feet into the water. He inhaled sharply as the stupidity of what he'd done hit him. His legs were bait for whatever might lie in wait in the river; the crocodile, water snakes, maybe piranhas. Not knowing what lurked in the tall grass and muck made it worse. His body trembled as if he'd gotten a chill.

Jake seized the boat and dragged it off the mud bank. While he towed it to a tiny beach, a shout from upriver stopped him. Two canoes rounded the last bend in the river.

Oh, no. I knew I should have sunk them. Now what do I do?

Two kidnappers paddled each dugout. If that wasn't enough, something slimy slithered over his bare feet.

Uh, oh. What next? I need to get to land.

2

Jake beached the canoe with a mighty heave, jerking his feet from danger.

Phew. I made it and I still have both feet.

Dropping to his knees on the pebbled beach, he yanked the M14 from the dugout. He squinted, shielding his eyes from the harsh sunlight. A rifle shot cracked. A canoe streaked toward him. He flung himself behind his dugout, poked his head over the bow, caught a glimpse and ducked. Moving to the other end of the boat, he peered over the stern, aimed his rifle and fired. A bullet thunked into the boat.

Close! Oh, no. I left my boots and socks in the canoe. I won't get far without 'em.

He gritted his teeth, popped up and grabbed his footwear. Jake dove back to the beach, rolled to his side and slipped them on. He would have to run for it.

The bandits closed in and held their positions in the river's center. Jake fired, this time over the bow. He missed his target, the bullet hitting the hull of the approaching dugout.

I've got to take more time and make every bullet count. Last winter, I had no trouble bagging that deer. But it wasn't shooting back.

From behind a cedar tree came a soft husky voice. "You! Come." Startled, he twisted and looked over his shoulder. In the mangroves' shadows, a dark form beckoned. "Hurry."

Jake swung around with his rifle and scooted into the dense brush on his hands and knees.

I don't think they saw me. I hope not.

He stood behind the thick tree trunk in time to see someone vanish down the faint trail, moving in silence, like a human hovercraft. Jake followed, breaking branches and stepping on dead wood. The kidnapers' dim voices echoed across the water and into the thick jungle. As he plunged deeper into the moss-bearded trees, they faded away.

I can't see the path anymore. Where is he? Jake stopped, spun in a circle, but his eyes couldn't penetrate the vegetation. Am I lost already?

A dark form emerged from giant ferns. After the phantom stepped forward, she halted ten feet in front of him.

Wow. That's definitely not a he.

There was no hesitancy about her. She looked him up and down, but he couldn't tell if she approved or disapproved. Older than Jake, but still a teenager, she stood about five feet eight inches. She had smooth muscles and cheekbones so high and sharp he feared they might puncture her skin. Interwoven black hair hung down her back close to her scalp in a single braid, an arrangement that emphasized her smoky gray eyes.

Except for those eyes, I'd think she was an Indian. Maybe half.

Below a narrow, straight nose, a sensuous mouth widened into a bewitching smile.

"Come. We have to be gone when they get to shore." Her song-like voice was intoxicating. Pivoting, she led the way into the lush, green rain forest. Her long, slender legs rippled with muscles. Giving no feeling of haste, each motion flowed into the next. Her machete was out of its sheath and grasped in her hand, her bow and arrows slung across her back. She moved so fast he huffed and puffed to keep up. He'd never met a girl like her before. Only when she paused to hack away the thick undergrowth did Jake, chest heaving, have a chance to catch his breath. She melted through brush he had to push aside and she made no noise.

"Not much farther and we'll take a rest," she said, glancing at Jake.

Jake's body, soaked in sweat, trembled. The oppressive heat and humidity plus lack of water and food were doing him in. It seemed they had been slogging through the jungle for hours. The sight of his tireless new friend slipping through the trees ahead of him kept him going. She moved with the swiftness and ease of a jungle animal. Also the wariness.

Come on, Jake. Find that something extra. Look at her go.

He had psyched himself up to keep going when they stepped from the thick foliage into a clearing facing a waterfall and emerald lagoon. Water cascaded over a rocky cliff jutting up fifty feet. The falls thundered down throwing a fine mist over their faces. Jungle vegetation spread out on both sides of the falls and surrounded the clearing. The cool and inviting green pool appeared to be deep enough to swim in.

Sunlight streaked through the green canopy's opening made by the pool, but the rest of the perimeter was dark from the denseness of the jungle cover and undergrowth.

"We'll cool off, now." She dropped her weapons in the tall grass, stripped off her Levi shorts, denim halter-top and a pair of dark running shoes and waded out to the falls, clothes in hand. She rinsed them out and tossed them on the grassy bank. Jake's heart skipped a couple of

beats at the sight of her flawless, fine-grained brown skin. Her midriff showed the kind of abs he'd always wished he had. She had small hips and firm breasts.

He followed and peeled off his clothes down to his shorts, rinsing them and tossing them near hers and his rifle. Wading out, he plunged beneath the cool water and surfaced, energized. The escape from the bandits and the trek through the jungle had left him drained.

"The water's pure. You can drink it," she said.

He drank too much, holding his mouth open under the falls. His belly bloated. It was not a new experience. He'd done the same thing after dehydrating to make weight to wrestle and being unable to control his thirst anymore.

"Let's go behind the falls. It's cool and hidden there." She waded through the deep pool and led him behind the veil of plummeting water and mist. They sat side by side on a natural stone bench. Jake caught an occasional glimpse of the outside through the thick wall of water.

This is fantastic. Feels 100 degrees cooler here. He looked at his incredible companion.

"Who are you?" Jake blushed at the bluntness of his question and added, "I'm Jake."

"Chanti. Short for Chantico. My dad named me after the Aztec goddess of fires and volcanoes."

"Thanks for your help. I don't know how I would have gotten out of that mess."

"No problem. I watched. You should take more time aiming. Too big a hurry. You'll get better. Why're they after you?"

"They tried to kidnap me from a bus. I shot one of them while escaping. I'm on my way to Oaxaca to see my dad. I stayed in Cancun for a week visiting a local Mexican family my dad knows. They have a son my age, Rafael, who showed me a lot of Mayan ruins like Tulum and Cobá."

"Why you?"

"Dad's wealthy. Maybe they knew his name. Maybe they were looking for me. What're you doing in the jungle? You seem to know it like you've always lived here."

"I have. My dad came from the U.S. and my mom was Lacandon Indian, pureblooded Maya descendants. I grew up speaking English to Dad and Maya to Mom. I learned Spanish, too."

"Haven't you ever lived in the U.S.?"

"No. Dad never went back to the States. He loved the jungle's challenge and the simplicity of life here. Two years ago, he and Mom died in a river accident. Most of the time since then, I've been living by myself."

"How old're you?"

"Seventeen. You?"

"Fifteen."

"You look older."

Jake blushed. He had a hard time keeping his gaze on her face.

Chanti looked into his eyes while a mischievous sparkle gleamed in hers.

"Let's get dressed." They both rose.

He stood about five inches taller, broad shouldered and small waisted. Jake had short, sandy hair and dark eyes, the opposite of Chanti.

She admired his lean and well muscled form. "You look like you can handle yourself, not like some of the fat gringos I've seen. One thing you must remember . . . the jungle's unforgiving. One mistake and you're dead. Consider everyone and everything an enemy until he's proven to be a friend. Now, let's go. Those bandits could track us." Chanti led the way from behind the falls.

The padding of big feet rustled over the noise of the water. A branch cracked and through the trees a dark form stole by.