

CASTAWAY

BOOK 1



CHRISSY PEEBLES

Agartha's Castaway

By Chrissy Peebles

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For:

My husband, Alex.

My two fantastic children, Faith and Matthew. I love you.

My dad.

My sister, Sarah, and my brother, Joel.

For: anyone who dares to imagine...

Dedications:

This is dedicated to my wonderful God and Jesus - There's no without you...(not a typo but my own personal expression)

* * *

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Book Trailer for the series: http://youtu.be/viwT0M8Ms_g

Episode 1

"Vanquish fear and panic. Value living. Remember your goal: getting out alive."

-U.S. Army Ranger Handbook

I strolled toward my two best friends, Mike and Jack, who were standing near the stern of the boat. A faint light flashed in the night sky from the east, and I pointed. "Hey, was that lightning?"

Mike poured a pail of chum into the sea before he offered a smile. "Nah, not on *my* vacation."

"Hey, that's our last bucket," I said.

Mike set the pail down and wiped his hands on his tie-dyed board shorts. "It's five a.m. Night fishing's over. I let the fish have the rest of the bait."

Jack rummaged through the colorful, flashy lures in my dad's tackle box. "With all that chum floating in the water, maybe I'll catch myself a 100-pound tuna."

He smiled as I grinned. I loved the way he could always make me smile. We'd known each other since we were babies, and I couldn't ask for a better friend.

Standing at the railing, I leaned over. Powerful deck lights above illuminated the green water of the Pacific Ocean. I smiled as streaks of yellow and silver swarmed around the sailboat.

Mike playfully nudged me with his elbow. "Aren't the tuna amazing? I just want to jump in and swim with them."

I blew a long strand of black hair from my eyes. *Yep. That's Mike for you—full of crazy ideas and too much energy he doesn't know what to do with. Of course he'd want to jump in.* And I had no doubt he'd do it.

A roll of thunder rumbled in the distance. *A summer storm? No, couldn't be.* I lifted my head. Nothing but twinkling stars filled the black velvet sky.

I grabbed Mike's arm as he swung his leg over the rail. If he jumped in, I was going to give him a piece of my mind. "Don't you even think about it!"

Grinning as if daring me to stop him, he jumped down and pulled me close. He placed his strong hands on my hips, his touch sending shivers down my spine. I had a secret crush on Mike for as long as I could remember.

He winked, lowering his voice. "Okay, fine. I promise, no free diving—at least not until daylight."

I arched a brow. "Are you crazy? I bet sharks all the way from Australia can pick up the scent from all those fish guts you just dumped. You barely survived your last run-in with Jaws." I pointed to the jagged scar on his calf.

"Hey now. My battle scar"—Mike toyed with the shark tooth dangling from a black cord around his neck—"and this nifty little souvenir here, make me who I am today." His lips curled up. "Let's not dwell on the marine life, okay? How about later today we hit the beach again?"

Jack gave him a playful punch on the arm. "Listen, Surfer Boy, that isn't happening. The only place Casey's dad can even try to control you is on this boat, far, far away from everyone else."

He rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

I grinned at Mike's miffed expression. Just because he was a teenage surfing star, even featuring on MTV's hit reality show *Surf's Up*, didn't mean he'd get any special treatment here—at least not from Jack or my parents.

Jack's sapphire blue eyes narrowed and his brown hair whipped around in the wind. "You dove off a ninety-foot waterfall when nobody was looking, you got us thrown out of a village, you—"

"Ah, come on!" Mike interrupted. "The chief had it all wrong. That little girl with the big brown eyes ran straight to me, and all I did was pat her on the head. She was the cutest little thing."

I pondered as I watched dark clouds roll in from the east. *Mike finds everyone cute—everyone but me.* My gaze dropped from the sky to meet his. "Yeah, but you know it's an insult to touch anyone's head in Fiji."

He ran a hand through his hair. "Guess I forgot that part. Anyway, we didn't deserve to get kicked out. And Casey, even your mom agrees with me."

Jack laughed and threw a wet rag in his direction. "You know that's only because our moms are all best friends, and—"

Smirking, Mike pointed the remote control at the CD stereo in the cockpit, increasing the volume until Jack's voice was drowned out entirely. I watched him inch closer, his hot breath brushing my cheek as he whispered in my ear, "C'mon. Let's jam to the beat of steel drums."

I felt my heartbeat speed up. Mike was just being flirty, as usual. To him, life was all about having fun, and nothing more. "C'mon, Jack!" I yelled over my shoulder, as Mike's hand clasped around mine, making my skin tingle. His warm, soft fingers rubbed against the back of my hand lightly as he pulled me toward the deck.

"Dance with Mike?" called back Jack. "No thanks, I'd rather put away our fishing stuff."

Well, to each his own. Now I could give Prince Charming my undivided attention. Mike smiled and kissed my hand before letting go.

"I'm beginning to feel the rhythm of the tropics." I swung my hips to the beat while my hands swirled above my head. I stared into Mike's piercing eyes. With eyes so green, it was no wonder four magazines had splashed his perfect face on their covers. Well, that along with his shaggy blond hair and that hip Malibu style.

A booming noise cracked through the air. I cupped an ear to hear above the music. *Was that thunder? No, that had to be a loud, thumping bass note.* The forecast hadn't mentioned rain; but then again, I swore I saw lightning.

Mike pointed up at a twinkling light in the Caribbean night sky. "Hey, what's that?"

I studied the odd light as it flashed red, green, blue, and white at regular intervals. Maybe it was a great and glorious sign from the cosmos, telling the world that Mike and I were meant to be together. I laughed at my own dumb logic. It couldn't be a plane, because it would've already flown over us. "It's a star...or maybe Venus."

His gaze swung back between me and the horizon. "I've never seen a star or a planet change colors like that. Have you?"

I shook my head. I'd never seen a star change colors at all. *Is that even possible?* "Weird, huh?"

"Totally. It almost looks like a UFO."

I playfully slugged him. Sometimes his imagination was over the top. "No way!"

"No? What is it then?"

I shrugged. "I've no idea."

"Why don't we go ask our very own walking encyclopedia?"

I chuckled. "Yeah, Jack knows everything." Jack had broken the "dumb jock" stereotype: what's wrong with being smart and a Heisman trophy sure bet all rolled into one?

Strong gusts of wind rocked the sailboat. My balance wavered and I grabbed onto Mike's arm. "Whoa. It's getting a little choppy out here."

He pulled me close. "I think it's going to rain."

I blinked. Overhead, a brilliant burst of light ripped across the sky. Thunder crashed. My pulse spiked as I broke Mike's embrace and looked up at him, our eyes connecting. His forehead creased in a worried frown, and for a moment, I knew exactly what he thought: *No way do we want to be on a boat in the middle of the ocean with a storm gathering above our heads.* We sprinted to the bow, where Jack and my parents waited.

Dazzling streaks of lightning crisscrossed the night sky, quickly followed by a howling wind. My breath quickened. Lifting my hands, I felt light droplets on my skin. I swallowed as I tried to calm my nerves.

My dad gripped the rail and struggled to keep his footing. Rain poured, and the waves grew larger. “Looks like this fishing trip’s over. Everyone downstairs. I’m taking us back.”

Upon hearing this, I thought about the ironic humor in being stuck at the hotel all day while my friends enjoyed ninety-degree weather back home in California.

A bolt of electricity branched across the clouds like a neon spider web. Another crash of thunder made my mom jump. She wrapped an arm around me as the boat shuddered. “Don’t worry, honey. You know your dad’s an experienced sailor.”

“Compared to other storms I’ve encountered before, this will be a piece of cake.” Captain Dad forced a smile and headed for the wheelhouse.

Jack bolted after him. “Need any help?”

“No. Just get yourself and everyone else below deck where it’s safe.”

“I agree!” shouted my mom, water streaming down her face and hair. “Let’s go!”

I heard my dad yell over the whine of the wind, “Everyone. Life vests on. NOW!”

Just then, a huge plume of salty white spray burst into the air and splashed over me. I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand as I motioned to Mike and Jack. “C’mon, guys!”

My mom charged through the sheets of rain, thunder crashing overhead. Me and the others followed. Angry waves exploded against the hull and filled the air with tumbling water.

The boat pitched as a wave broke over the side rail, ramming into my legs. I grabbed hold of a deck chair mounted to the floor to try and steady myself. Water, four or five inches deep, spread across the fiberglass exterior, threatening to wash my feet from under me. *Should I veer off course to get a life jacket and chance being thrown overboard? No way. There are plenty downstairs, and I want off this deck.*

I slowly made my way toward the cabin door. Just above me, another crack of thunder exploded. Goosebumps pimples my skin. There was more blindingly white light before the single streak of lightning broke into several branches. I breathed in and out deeply, hoping to make it to the cabin. Once I was behind that door, I knew I would be okay. I had no doubt my father could steer *Wind Dancer* safely back to the island.

The boat lurched again. Sodas and chunks of ice from the open cooler shot past me, barely missing my head. Shivering, I shielded my face with an arm, clenching my teeth as I inched forward. *Almost there.* Stinging rain pounded down harder. I took one more brave step and

slipped, falling on one knee. The pain surging up my leg made me bite my lip to stifle a scream. *No need to worry the others.*

As I pushed myself up, an enormous wall of water rose high above us, crested, and slowly fell over our heads like a collapsing building. I tried to scream and swallowed a lungful of bitter seawater as I slammed into something hard. I wrapped my arms around it—the rail—and clung with all my might. A shudder ripped through my body. Salt stung my eyes and throat, but I didn't dare let go.

“Casey!” My head jerked toward the sound of my mother's frantic scream. As the water passed over her, I caught a glimpse of my mom's face. My mother shrieked, terror in her wide-open eyes, her mouth gaping, her hands reaching out for help as she was torn from the boat and swallowed by the dark, furious sea. “Mom!” I yelled.

My heart lurched. *This isn't happening. It can't be.* In a blur, I scrambled up, coughing and choking. Crying, I screamed hysterically and scoured the undulating water. “Help! My mom's gone overboard.” I continued to peer into the rain, but I couldn't see a thing. My heart drummed harder against my chest, and when I could breathe again, I let out another horrified wail. I decided I'd do for my mother what I knew without a doubt that my mother would do for me: She would find me no matter what, rainstorm or not! I untied a red and white life ring, climbed over the rail, and positioned myself to jump.

Jack grabbed my shoulder, pulling me back. “What the heck do you think you're doing? Get down.”

Strong arms encircled my waist. I struggled against Jack's iron grip as he lifted me off my feet, pulling me back on deck. “Are you crazy?” he yelled above the crashing waves.

Another shot of adrenaline surged through my veins. “Let go of me! The wave! It...it swept my mom overboard. I've gotta help her!”

“No.” Jack refused to let me go, shaking his head adamantly. “You'll get yourself killed out there.”

I punched and kicked, hitting him hard. *Doesn't he get it? That's my mother out there!* “I don't care!” I shouted furiously through a veil of tears. “My mom needs me.”

“Calm down,” he said in my ear. “Would your mom want you to jump in there? No, she wouldn't, and you know it.”

I continued to struggle, but my attempts became less forceful, my body giving in before my will. I turned to face him. Water drizzled from his nose, chin, and hair. Letting out a breath, I said, “But my mom’s...she’s...out there.”

Jack leaned over the edge and yelled, “Mrs. Smith!” He glanced over, his eyes wide. “Where’s Mike?”

“I dunno.” I swiveled one of the deck lights directly at the ocean, swinging the yellow beam in a wide arc. My voice thundered through the storm, shaky as it was. “Mom? Mom? Mike? Where are you?” Even if they couldn’t hear me over the ocean roars, I hoped they might see the light and try to swim toward it. The wind whipped across my face as I cried out, “Do you see them?”

Jack shielded his eyes and peered out through the driving rain. “Nothing.”

Suddenly a muffled yell pierced the air. “Mike?” I shouted.

Jack’s head whipped around, and he pointed toward the bow. “Over there.”

A familiar figure emerged through the gloom. It was indeed Mike, and he hadn’t fallen overboard. I clutched my chest and let out a long sigh of relief. The thought of anything happening to him tore at my heart. Now I could focus all of my energy on finding my mom. I threw my arms around Mike, tears flowing down my face. I spoke between sobs. “I’m so glad you’re okay, but my mom went overboard”—I gripped his wet shirt tightly—“and we have to find her.”

“What?” said Mike, staggering backward. “Where’s your dad?”

“He’s in the wheelhouse,” I shouted. “C’mon!”

“If another wave hits, hang onto anything you can find that’s bolted down.” Jack was trying to be brave, but he could never fool me. I saw the fear in his eyes.

Something cold swirled around my ankles. Water. Rushing in. And fast. I gasped. Floating floorboards, cushions, charts, and magazines sloshed about the deck. *What if this boat sinks like a giant rock?* I froze, my breath caught in my throat.

Mike shook my shoulder, terror etched in his voice. “Crap! We’re sinking.”

I saw my own fears mirrored in their tense faces. “Keep moving!” I grabbed their hands, and we raced through the fierce wind and rain. When we finally reached the wheelhouse, I flung the door open and shouted for my father.

Lightning flashed, and in the brightness, I saw that the tiny room was vacant. The windows rattled, and heavy rain beat against the glass. The microphone dangled from the radio, almost touching the ground. My father's floppy fishing hat slid across the wet floor.

I trembled as a feeling of dread encompassed my body. "Dad! Where *are* you?"

Goosebumps covered my arms as *Wind Dancer* teetered on the crest of a mountainous swell. Tilting forward, the sailboat dropped through the air like an elevator in free fall. I clenched my teeth, gripping the doorframe till my knuckles went white. When the boat slammed into the trench, a towering surge of spray crashed over my head. Pushing back wet strands of tangled hair, I wiped my eyes. Jack staggered and grabbed hold of the steering wheel.

Mike stumbled to his feet and yelled over his shoulder, "You two stay here. I'll hunt for your dad."

Without me? No way! I opened my mouth to object, but Mike was already bounding down the deck. I let out a breath. "Wait, Mike! I'm coming with you!" A strong breeze swept over me, and I wondered whether he'd heard me.

Mike spun around as rain sheeted down, his drenched clothes clinging to his body. I dashed after him, not realizing he'd spoken until he threw up his hands. "What?" I shouted over the ear-splitting thunder.

"I said, you're the only one who knows how to use the radio." Mike cupped his hands around his mouth to make himself heard.

I flicked my long hair out of my face. As much as I hated to admit it, he was right.

"Okay, I'll get help. Find my dad." I shot a last pleading glance at him before I turned on my slippery heels.

"I promise. I'll look everywhere!" he shouted.

I skidded back to the wheelhouse, desperate to get to the radio. As I flung open the door, Jack scrambled to help me inside. Together, we battled the strong wind until the door finally clicked shut.

"I'll send out an SOS," I panted, my heart hammering.

A flash of lightning illuminated the night sky. I switched on the radio and picked up the microphone. I jumped when a violent clap of thunder cracked above me, as if someone had snapped a bullwhip just inches from my ear. With shaky fingers, I tuned in to Channel 16. My

voice broke as I forced myself to speak. “Mayday, mayday, mayday! This is *Wind Dancer*. Can anybody hear me?” I gripped the receiver tightly with both hands. “Somebody, please answer!”

No response. I threw a terrified glance toward Jack, who was pulling at his wet shirt.

“Do you have the right channel?” he asked, his gaze focused on the intercom.

I swallowed past the lump in my throat and nodded. Water streamed off my hair and down my cheeks. I steadied myself against the cockpit wall, using it to keep my balance as waves crashed violently over the bow.

“Try again.” Jack stepped behind me and rubbed an encouraging hand over my back.

Surely someone will hear us. I inhaled and kept trying, over and over, until the radio crackled, fuzzy with static.

“Vessel in distress, this is *Silver Bullet*. What assistance do you need?”

I gasped. *Thank God somebody answered.* I grasped the microphone to quell some of my trembling. “Please help,” I croaked, my throat dry and sore from shouting. “My mom fell overboard, and my dad’s missing. We’re sinking. Please send the Coast Guard...the Navy...anybody!”

Barely able to discern the radio chatter from the static, I held my breath as I tried to make out their message.

“I will notify...Fiji Navy...your location?” said the voice.

“What?” I shouted. “You’re breaking up!” The boat pitched, and I grabbed the back of the captain’s swivel chair. As it spun around, I fought to keep my balance. I hung on as another wave slammed into our vessel like a giant fist.

My breath came fast and shallow, misting the rain-streaked windowpane. My stomach twisted at the thought of what might be happening to my parents and Mike out in the storm. I shook my head, but the thoughts wouldn’t quite go away.

“Stay as calm as you can,” said the deep, comforting voice. “Make sure your EPIRB is operating so a satellite can pick up the radio waves and we can find you. Hold on. Help’s coming.”

“Jack, you know the orange walkie-talkie thing mounted outside the cabin?” When he nodded, I continued, “Take it out of the brackets and turn the switch on.”

“I’m on it!” Jack threw the door open and sped out into the blanket of rain as lightning flashed across the sky.

“You need to give me your latitude and longitude coordinates from your navigation chart or global positioning system,” said the voice on the radio.

I glanced down at the GPS nestled in the controls and gulped. A tiny crack ran down the wide digital screen. *Why now? It was fine earlier.* I glanced around; nothing had fallen. I pressed a red button. The small monitor blinked and turned black.

I screamed into the microphone, “GPS not working!”

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“Okay, I’m going to get you through this step by step,” said the man. “For starters, look at your compass.”

The needle on the deck compass spun around counterclockwise. I tapped on it, and the needle jumped back and forth erratically. *What’s going on? This isn’t the freaking Bermuda Triangle, right?* “It’s not working either. It’s just...going crazy.”

“Can you give me a specific landmark near you?” the voice asked.

“I know we’re south of the Fiji islands.”

“Which island?”

Jack appeared beside me and pushed his soaked hair out of his eyes. “There’re like 300 of them.”

I frantically looked around the cabin. I needed to keep my cool and think. My gaze fell on the far end of the wall. I darted over and ran my finger across the waterproof chart. The island was circled in red. In two steps, I reached the desk and grabbed the microphone. “Viti Levu.”

Silence.

A burst of static. More silence. I blinked water from my lashes, waiting, hoping. “Hello? Hello? Are you there?” No response. I tried once more, pressing the button in a frenzy as my heart jackhammered against my ribs. *No, this can’t be happening. Not now.*

Still nothing.

I dropped the microphone and whipped around to stare into Jack’s eyes. “It went dead.” He didn’t say a word. He just hugged me, his palm rubbing the hard knots in my shoulders.

Biting my lip, I tore away from him. I’d never acted like a damsel in distress before, and I wasn’t going to start playing the role now. Did the *Silver Bullet* hear what island we were near

before the radio died? Rescue couldn't waste valuable time searching around the wrong islands. My mom's life depended on that call; everyone's life depended on that precious communication.

Jack steadied himself against the wall, holding up the orange emergency beacon. "Don't worry. The transmitter's on. They'll pick up our signal and come get us."

The boat creaked and groaned, making me flinch. I wiped a circle clean on the fogged window. "Where's Mike?"

"I don't know, but he should've been back by now."

The lights flickered and went out. Every muscle tensed as I blinked, blinded in the sudden darkness. "Crap! We lost the generator." I ran a hand along the wall until my fingers wrapped around a metal handle.

I rummaged through the top drawer and fumbled for a flashlight, when a lightning bolt shot across the sky. A wave crashed over the bow and rolled down the deck with the momentum and force of a mighty tsunami. I ducked as the mass of water smashed through the large cockpit window, slamming into me like a semi-truck. I gasped, coughed, and then gasped again. The cold water reached my waist. Wind howled through the broken window, whipping my hair across my cheeks and eyes. I clutched Jack, burying my face into his chest. His arms encircled me in a strong grip. "I feel like I'm in a scene from *Titanic*. I don't want to die like this, Jack," I said, and found it somewhat fitting that his name was Jack in such a scenario.

Suddenly, out of the darkness, clad in an oversized yellow life jacket, Mike pushed through the door, with two more flotation devices draped over his arm. The waist-high water gushed past him onto the deck, leaving me in ankle-deep sea foam. He shined a flashlight beam toward the ground, his mouth set in a hard line. "I'm sorry. I can't find your dad anywhere."

My breath froze. *Oh my gosh! Where is he?* I squeezed my eyes shut, not wanting to know the answer. Burrowing my face in my hands, I hoped against all odds my mom and dad would somehow survive. The back of my throat felt dry, and a rush of heat swept over me in spite of the cold water soaking my clothes. I dropped to my knees, and Jack dropped with me, holding me.

Mike threw both of them a life preserver. "Put these on...pronto!"

I struggled into my jacket. The bright yellow stood out in the dim light. "We got a mayday out."

Inching nearer, Mike asked, "Help's coming, then?"

“Don’t know. Radio went dead,” said Jack. “Couldn’t finish the call. But I turned on the emergency radio beacon.”

Mike ran a hand through his wet hair. “Maybe we should head below deck until rescue comes. I was just down there, and the water’s not that high. If we stay up here, we’ll be swept overboard.”

“If this boat sinks, that cabin will be your coffin.” Jack squinted as Mike shifted his flashlight beam toward him.

He made a valid point, grim as it was. I sucked in a sharp gulp of air. “Meeting a watery grave in Davy Jones’s locker isn’t happening.” I adjusted my vest, pulled the canvas straps, and snapped the buckle around my waist. “We’ve got to get out of here. C’mon! Let’s head for the dingy.”

“It’s gone,” said Mike, letting out a long breath. “Waves got it.”

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. This was supposed to be a fun and relaxing boat ride. My stomach sank. I knew the waves were going to rip the boat apart board by board. I needed to come up with a plan, and fast. “Can you shine your light over here?”

He nodded. “What’re you looking for?”

I rummaged through more drawers, my voice growing frantic. “Our ticket out of here.” I pulled out a red plastic flare gun. The Fiji Navy was our only hope.

Is anyone ever going to come help us? I smeared the fogged window and pressed my face against the cold glass. My parents wouldn’t be able to survive much longer, wherever they were. I peered through the sheets of rain into the blackness beyond when a flash caught my eye. Multi-colored lights blinked in sequence, followed by a blue light that swept toward me in swinging arcs. My heart pounded in my ears. I listened, but the roaring wind and pouring rain drowned out any sound from the thundering helicopter. “Look! See that?”

Jack wiped the window with his arm and peeked out. “I see it!”

Rescue. Warm blankets. Hot chocolate. Thank goodness. My mom and dad had to be on the helicopter, and I was sure they’d be waiting for me with a big smile. I let out a sigh of relief. A beam of light cut through the rain and filled the room, momentarily blinding me. “Ready to get this rescue party started with some fireworks?” I dashed out the wheelhouse door into the furious storm.

Mike waved the flashlight beam frantically in the helicopter's direction. "Over here!" he shouted. Jack and I soon joined in the chorus.

As rain pelted down, I pointed the flare gun high into the air. I tightened my fingers around the trigger and pulled. A bright red flare illuminated the sky. I fired again and again, giving us a spectacular Fourth of July show.

The storm dumped another huge wave onto the deck, knocking my feet out from under me and sending the gun flying from my hands. Grunting from the sudden impact, I plunged into the sea. Water rushed down my throat and up my nose. I fought to keep my head above the surface. "Help!" Squinting into the darkness, I noticed the lights had disappeared. *No warm blankets, hot chocolate, or wire basket to ride up in? Where's the helicopter? Did it turn around and go back? Did it crash?*

I could hear Mike and Jack's incoherent shouts over the booming thunder. I screamed, my arms flapping to fight against the current. I forced my mouth shut to avoid swallowing any more water.

Looking up, I could only see the top halves of Mike and Jack's bodies ducking and rising out of view. They flung something over the side of the boat. Using all my strength, I propelled myself over to a rope. Panting, I swung out my arms. *Got it!* I gave it a hard tug, knowing it was securely fastened to an iron cleat.

A giant explosion of white water rushed over the vessel, followed by a loud *crack* and then a dull *thud*. The rigging and sails crashed to the deck, along with the eighty-foot mast.

Jack yelled above the roar of the wind. "Mike!"

Clinging to the rope, I screamed out both of their names. I wondered if Mike or Jack had been hit by a piece of heavy equipment, and every muscle in my body tensed at the thought. *Are they hurt?* I blinked but couldn't see a thing in the darkness. Several bolts of lightning danced across the sky, and I finally saw the eerie outline of Jack near the rail, but my lips trembled when I couldn't see Mike. *Did he fall in too?* I pictured Mike bleeding—or even worse, knocked out cold. *Oh, gosh! Please no.*

I glanced around in frantic disbelief but saw nothing but rising mountains of water. Gasping for breath, I tried not to choke on the salty foam being thrust into my mouth by the wild, tumbling waves. I focused my attention back on Jack until he disappeared from view. Water rushed over my face. My eyes burned, and my vision blurred.

“Casey?” I heard a voice call out through the storm and threw my head back. “Jack!”

A dark figure leaned over the rail. “I’m going to pull you up.”

The rope in my hands went taut as it lifted me out of the water. I hung in the air, gripped the rope tighter, and spun around in circles. I swear I was spinning faster than an ice-skater performing a two-foot spin for an Olympic gold medal.

The boat lurched, and I jerked hard as something crashed into me from above. It was Jack, who’d toppled from the deck. I tried to reach for him, but the impact knocked the breath right out of me. I gasped against the pain, losing my grip and falling back into the sea.

The force of the wave pushed me down, spinning me around in total darkness like a washing machine rinse cycle. I held my breath, my lungs burning for sweet release and fresh oxygen. *If I don’t get air soon...*

The pressure in my ears was unbearable. When the spinning stopped, my lungs were on fire, and I flailed my arms, trying to orient myself. *Am I upside down or right side up?* I forced myself to stop struggling, letting my body float. *Okay. Now I know the way.* Powerful kicks propelled me upward. Just before my lungs collapsed, I burst through the surface like a dolphin at a water theme park show.

Apart from the flash of lightning, I saw nothing but pitch black. My hands moved around me, frantic to grasp onto something—anything—but there was only water. “Jack!” I yelled, but he didn’t answer. A deafening roar like a passing train filled my ears, and I clutched my life jacket for dear life.

Flash after flash of lightning illuminated the sky, and something huge ripped through the water toward me. *The boat?* I used every ounce of strength to swim away, but a large, swirling body of water sucked me in.

I coughed, exhausted, my body trembling with the effort to keep myself afloat. There was no way I was going to let the undertow drag me down. Around and around I spun, faster and faster. I tried to break free of the fast-spinning, churning water, but vast jaws of swirling foam swallowed me up. I felt the tremendous force of the water washing over me, pulling me in, deeper and deeper. Spiraling down to the center core of the mighty whirlpool, I was tossed, turned, and rolled beneath the surface of the water. This was definitely not on my list of “Top 10 Things to Do in Fiji.”

I’m too young to die. I held my breath and prayed for a miracle.

Dizziness washed over me as I struggled to free myself from the spiraling water. Lungs burning, I opened my mouth to scream, but salt water rushed in. An explosion of bubbles surrounded me, brushing across my skin. A tremendous force pushed me upward, faster and faster. Bursting through the surface, I was catapulted high in a spout of water and spray. I landed with a splash and sucked in desperate gulps of air—wonderful, glorious, awesome air.

Spluttering and coughing, I pushed the tangled hair out of my face. The air hung heavy with the smell of damp earth. When I caught my breath, I kicked my legs around in the water and wondered how deep it was. As I clung to my tattered life jacket, I squinted as my eyes adjusted to the dim light. Anxiously, I looked across the enormous underground chamber for a ledge, or for some way out. Nothing but glimmering stalagmites rose out of the sapphire water and loomed high above me, as though the room around me had been completely flooded.

“Wow, it’s so beautiful,” I whispered, awestruck by the millions of crystals shimmering like diamonds along the walls. Carlsbad Caverns needed to take a seat, because it’d just been upstaged by whatever the name of this place was.

“Casey! Over here!”

My heart leapt in response to the familiar voice. “Jack! Thank God you’re alive.” Spotting two yellow life jackets in the distance, I sighed with relief. “Mike!” My two best friends bobbed in the water, and I couldn’t have been happier to see them.

I exhaled and wiped the tears away, overwhelmed with relief. Smiling, I forced my burning muscles to push me through the water.

“I can’t believe that whirlpool sucked you up too,” said Mike, meeting me halfway and throwing his arms around me. “Against all odds, we survived, man. Any idea how we could even end up down here? ’Cause me and Jack are completely clueless.”

Melting into his embrace, I said, “I dunno.”

Mike’s grip tightened around me. “You’re one tough chick,” he whispered in my ear.

Struggling to keep the tears from falling, I met his gaze and smiled. “You better believe it.”

His voice wavered and he stroked the hair from my face. “I was so worried about you, girl.”

“Casey.” Jack’s face lit up when his eyes connected with mine, exactly the same way as when he’d sunk that last-second basket to win the national championship. I eased from Mike’s arms and gave Jack a fierce hug. He held me close and cupped my cheek. “When I lost you—”

The cavern became silent except for the rhythmic sound of dripping water. I opened my mouth to speak, but the words wouldn't come out. Squeezing my eyes shut, I locked my arms around Jack and burrowed into the curve of his shoulder. We'd survived against all odds. When I opened my eyes, I felt the first sobs tear through my chest. "Do you think my mom and dad are okay?"

Jack held me at arms' length. "They were rescued. I saw them being pulled up into the air."

I swiveled my head in Mike's direction. "Are you sure? You saw it? Both of you? They're...they're really safe?"

Mike nodded. "Yep. I saw it too."

I let out a deep breath, but the tears wouldn't stop flowing. I wiped at them, suddenly laughing through even more tears. It was the best news...ever. "They're probably dry, warm, and worried sick about us." I fingered the silver locket around my neck; it held my favorite family portrait.

Mike squeezed my hand. "You know it."

I shot him a smile.

"So where's the dim light coming from? The moon?" Mike spun in a circle through the water, gazing up at the high vaulted cave.

"I have no idea, but it's definitely coming from somewhere." My hand wandered across the ragged limestone. "There has to be a gap or opening in these walls." At least I hoped so, grasping at any glimmer of hope. I swam around, searching for a way out, when my life jacket scraped against the jagged edge of a stalagmite. I knew then that I'd have to be more careful, as one of those things could probably tear right through my skin.

"Whoa!" Mike's voiced echoed in the cave. "Check out the icicles."

I stared up at the massive stalactites jutting from the ceiling. My jaw dropped at their stunning beauty.

Jack pushed off the wall, staring at the sight too. "Wow! They gotta be thousands of years old."

"Oh yeah?" Mike nudged me and playfully rolled his eyes. "How do you know that, Jack?"

"Well, because, they only grow an inch every thousand years."

Mike smirked. "Is there anything you don't know? Since you're such an Einstein, why's everything glowing down here? Is the place radioactive or something?"

Twinkling pinpoints of lights dotted the roof like turquoise-green stars in the night sky. It was beautiful, but I knew appearances could be deceiving. My eyebrows shot up in recognition. “Wait! I’ve seen this before...on a trip to Waitomo Cave.”

Mike lay back and floated, his arms and legs stretched out. “I can’t believe we’re actually stargazing.”

“Stargazing? You seem to forget we’re in a giant cave,” I said.

“I know. So how’s this possible? Although I don’t mind spending a romantic moment with a pretty girl.” He winked at me.

Stuck in a cave and he still manages to flirt, I jested. “If you had one clue about what those “stars” really were, you’d know the romance had just been sucked dry.”

Jack leaned in, his arm brushing mine. “Aren’t those New Zealand’s “living lights”?”

“Looks like it. Do you think that’s where we are?”

He shook his head. “Could be, but it’s over a thousand miles away.”

“Living lights?” asked Mike. “Dude, are you saying those lights are *alive*?”

“Yep.” Jack nodded and motioned with his hand. “Millions of little, glowing worms, courtesy of the fungus gnat.”

And with my luck, a big fat one would fall off and land on my head, a new friend dropping in to say hello. The thought made my stomach squeamish, and now I might hurl.

“Glowing maggots, huh?” asked Mike, who didn’t seem fazed in the slightest. “They’re pretty cool. Got to admit, nature puts on one heck of a light show.”

I clung to Jack, watching the shadows dance and flicker on the dark limestone. I tried to swallow the sudden knot in my throat. “No, they’re *not* cool. It means they’re what’s causing the dim light, not moonlight.” I took a deep breath, my heart racing. “What if we’re stuck here?”

Jack gave my hand a reassuring squeeze. “There has to be a way out...and we’re going to find it. Besides, glowworms have to eat insects like moths and mayflies to survive, so they have to be able to come and go. So don’t look so sad. This is good news. All we need to do now is find their point of entry.”

I glided forward, using long strokes. “Okay, then let’s go find ourselves an exit out of this giant bug hotel.”

“Wait a sec. What’s wrong with the water?” Jack frowned, his eyes darting to and fro, as he jerked his hand back. “It’s changed colors three times.”

I scooped up the brown water and watched it trickle through my fingers. There was nothing wrong with it as far as I could see. I wouldn't be drinking it anytime soon since it looked somewhat like rusty punch, but apart from that, it seemed as good as any other.

"A little mud never hurt anyone," said Mike.

I focused my gaze on the brown water when it suddenly turned purple. My hand flew to my mouth. "Look! Are you guys seeing this? I swear it changed right before my eyes."

"Dude!" Mike's jaw dropped as his eyes flew wide open.

Jack laughed and slapped him on the back. "I told you! We didn't notice it before because we were so occupied with each other and the ceiling, and the colors really weren't that noticeable."

"There it goes again!" Mike couldn't stop staring at the strange phenomenon. "Whoa. Now it's green. Weird, huh?"

When the surface turned orange, Jack let out a gasp. "No way! The colors are switching like every twenty or thirty seconds. What kind of place is this?"

The words remained frozen in my throat. I could only shake my head in shared disbelief.

Mike swirled his hands back and forth through the multicolored sea. "This is crazy stuff, man."

"There's got to be a logical explanation." Jack struggled for words. I knew he was never comfortable with things he couldn't easily explain. He fidgeted with the buckles of the life jacket. "Maybe it's the bioluminescent glow of algae reflecting through the water."

"Like the blue algae I swam with in Puerto Rico?" I asked.

"Exactly," answered Jack.

I cocked an eyebrow. "That doesn't make any sense. The water there didn't change colors."

Mike nodded. "Yeah, she's right. I saw the vacation pics. Maybe it's best not to be so obsessed with cause and effect, Jack. You sound just like that chick Pam I dated last month. She had to have an explanation for everything."

"Pam? Hmm. Name doesn't ring a bell." Jack paused for a moment. "But then again, there're so many of them that I can't keep up."

Jack was right. Mike had a beautiful girl hanging on his arm practically every week. I wondered how I could ever compete with that.

“C’mon! Let’s find a way out of here.” I took the lead and swam through the large limestone room, followed by Mike and Jack.

Mike cocked his head to the left. “Hey, I think I see an opening. See that, Jack?”

He craned his neck and looked. “Nah. That’s only a shadow, man.”

I rounded a corner and stopped, gazing across the vast space, past clusters of towering stalagmites. Through a jagged opening high in the rock wall, I noticed something peculiar. Not one but *two* suns glowed in the sky. The rays pushed through the dark clouds. *Did I swallow too much salt water, causing me to hallucinate?* I gripped a rough rock formation until my knuckles turned white. The hairs on the back of my neck rose. “Jack! Mike! Come quick!”

Jack was the first to appear from around the bend. With powerful strokes, he swam toward me. “What is it? Did you find a way out?”

“Maybe. Look, there’s an opening!” I pointed straight ahead, across the giant room, at the long, narrow gap hundreds of feet above us. “I think I just found the *bug door* in this joint.”

His eyes widened. “That’s awesome!”

“Look closer,” I said.

Jack sucked in a deep breath. “What the—”

Mike started forward, and then swung back. “Twin suns? No freakin’ way!”

“I think it’s safe to say this isn’t New Zealand.” My stomach fluttered, but my gaze didn’t waver from the two suns across the horizon.

Jack paused for a moment before he continued. “This is just a phenomenon that makes it *seem* like there are two suns in the sky. You’re actually looking at two luminous spots caused by the bending of light, that’s all.”

I rubbed my eyes. “Are you sure? It’s just an optical illusion?”

“Yep. It’s called a “sundog” or “mock sun”. Incoming sunlight is bent at just the right angle and passes through a thin layer of ice crystals in our atmosphere. It’s best seen at dawn or dusk when the sun’s near the horizon.”

“Glowing algae and mock suns?” asked Mike. “Well, I think both of your theories are lame, especially the second one. Ice crystals would mean snow, and we’re not in Alaska. I know you’re a genius, but this time you’re wrong, Einstein.”

Jack’s gaze narrowed. “Got a better way to explain the freaky water and two suns?”

“Easy, dude,” he said. “Don’t you get it? None of this can be explained.”

I had to agree with Mike. Jack was the smartest person I'd ever met, but his explanations didn't make any sense...especially the mock sun. We were in the boiling hot tropics, not at the North Pole.

"Never mind." Jack's forehead wrinkled, and his dark eyebrows bunched. "We've got more important things to worry about, like how we're going to scale that wall."

I had no idea how we'd climb that high. If we could only find notches in the wall, we might have a chance. "We'll figure something out." Through the hole, a blur of green caught my eye. I blinked. In the far distance, lush green mountains sharpened into focus. I smiled, my heart pounding like a jackhammer. It was the miracle I'd been praying for. Emotion overwhelmed me as I pointed a trembling finger. "LAND!"

Mike shook my shoulder. "Where?"

"Look...there're mountains way off to the left," I said.

He did a double-take and threw his arms up. "Woo hoo!"

Squinting, Jack tilted his head. "Oh yeah! I see them now."

We laughed and hugged, Mike's arms tightening around my waist, his face pressing into the soft spot at the nape of my neck.

"Well, what're we waiting for?" I asked. "Let's swim across to the other side and check out that wall. My fingers are shriveling up like prunes." I disconnected our embrace, and with a lunge forward, pushed off the cave wall with both legs, my arms cutting through the green water.

"Wait for us!" called Jack from behind.

Mike said goodbye in his usual dramatic fashion. "Twinkle on, glowworms, twinkle on!"

I sped across the water to the far end of the cave and lifted my gaze. The gap was unreachable. We'd have to climb up a sheer vertical wall towering hundreds of feet above the surface of the water. There was no way we could do it without killing ourselves.

We all exchanged a look before Mike broke the silence. "I can do it." He flashed me his trademark cocky smile.

I prayed he could, but deep down, I knew he just wanted an excuse to pull a crazy stunt.

Jack's gaze swept over the ceiling and the wall. "With the proper equipment, maybe, but right now, it's a suicide mission. The last time I checked, you weren't Spiderman."

“Yeah, what’re you going to do?” I asked, half-smirking. “Get a radioactive spider to bite you? We’ll just have to find another way.” It might’ve helped if I’d thought to bring along a Mount Everest climber’s guide.

Movement broke the stillness of the lavender water. Tiny bubbles popped and then disappeared. I leaned forward and peered into the ocean. Something glistened and swirled beneath the surface. “Did you see that?”

“Oh yeah, baby!” Mike slipped out of his life jacket as his voice brimmed with excitement. “Maybe I can wrestle with a giant squid.”

I slapped his arm playfully. “Focus. Don’t let your imagination run wild again.”

“I’m kidding,” he said. “It could be fish, and if that’s the case, they’ve got to come from somewhere. Maybe we can swim our way out of here like frogmen.”

I pushed back a long strand of hair from my eyes and heaved a sigh. “We’re not trained Navy SEALs, but I see your point.”

“It’s a great idea,” said Jack. “I’m onboard.”

I nodded. “Me too. Let’s go for it. Mike, you lead the way.”

He threw up a hand. “Wait. When did you two learn to free dive?”

Jack’s brow furrowed. “We didn’t, but—”

“Then it’s settled.” Mike’s mouth stretched into a wide smile. “Since I’m the one who can hold my breath for five minutes, I’ll go search for an underwater way out.”

I had been cut from synchronized swimming last year. I let out a sigh at the remembrance of that embarrassing situation. *But come on! It was gymnastics, aerobics, and ballet all combined in one, requiring strength, flexibility, and precise timing all while holding your breath—and smiling too.* I sucked underwater big time and would certainly be of no use to Mike.

Jack cut into my thoughts. “Mike’s right. He’s the most experienced one outta all three of us. He should go.” Jack spun in the water to face Mike. “No crazy stunts, okay?” He slapped him on the back. “Be careful and hurry back, bro.”

Mike pointed to himself and laughed. “Me? Pull a crazy stunt?” He playfully rolled his eyes. “Never.”

They laughed and traded fist bumps.

My gaze connected with Mike's. "I hate it when you disappear underwater for long periods of time, especially now with all of this going on." I pointed around me. "We don't know where we are. What if it's not safe?"

"Don't worry," said Mike, scoping out the water as if he had some kind of brilliant plan playing out in his head. He probably imagined himself riding out of there hanging on to the dorsal fin of a whale, and I knew I hadn't signed up for that excursion. Dolphins, yes, but a fish as big as a submarine? Maybe not so much.

Mike gave me a quick hug and pushed his floating life jacket toward me. "Hang on to this for me, okay? And try not to look so sad. This isn't goodbye. Besides, what could possibly go wrong?"

"You want a list a mile long?" I retorted.

He smirked, then took several large breaths before one giant gulp, and dove under the water with a splash.

I called after him, my voice anxious. "Mike, no!"

A trail of bubbles trickled to the surface. Watching his toned, tanned body disappear deeper, I pressed my lips into a grim line. "We should go with him." I peered at Jack, waiting for an answer.

"Listen, we'd only get in the way. Mike's our best chance at finding a way out."

I stared at Mike's empty life jacket bobbing in the ripples. "What if the water changes to a dark color? He'll be as blind as a mole, a bat, and a sea cucumber all put together."

His gaze fixed on me. "It'll only be for thirty seconds. If anybody can do this, it's Mike. Remember, he's a skilled free diver. He's been diving on one single gulp of air for how many years now?"

I hoped he was right, but somehow Jack's reassuring words failed to convince me. I slumped on a nearby rock and closed my eyes, waiting for Mike to resurface. The seconds trickled slowly by. By the time the five minutes had passed, I couldn't stop fidgeting with the hem of my life jacket. The surface remained undisturbed, not a ripple or a bubble in sight. *Where is he?* I pushed off the rock and peered into the water. "Do you think he's all right?"

Confidence shone in Jack's weary face. "Caves can have lots of chambers. Maybe he's found one."

I clutched my yellow vest, my heart racing. I tried to think positively, but it wasn't an easy task. *What if he got lost, or there's been a cave-in right on top of him? Even worse, what if he's run out of air?*

"Hey, can you guys hear me?" Mike's voice echoed from the other side of the cave wall. "Are you two ready to make a prison break? I can see land, and it's—wow!—you're not going to believe it! It's awesome."

"Whoo Hoo!" shouted Jack. "Mike, you rock!"

I smiled, and the tears welled up all over again. "He's okay, and he found a way out."

Jack's blue eyes lit up as he grinned. "This is the best news ever!"

I cupped my hands like a megaphone and directed my voice toward the gap high in the rock. "Fantastic! You did it. Catch your breath and hurry back." I smiled even bigger as Jack's arms wrapped around my waist and spun me in the deep water.

Minutes passed before Mike emerged with a gasp. Letting out the biggest sigh of relief, I threw my arms around him and relaxed in his embrace. His risk had definitely paid off. He sucked in mouthfuls of air and caught his breath. His green eyes bulged underneath the disheveled mess of blond hair.

Meeting his gaze, I asked, "What's it like down there?"

"All I can say is...wow! The water turned crystal clear, and I saw everything—I mean everything! There were tropical fish, these cool-looking sponges, twisted rocks, amazing coral beds, and—"

Jack laughed. "Slow down, slow down. You're talking a million miles an hour."

I loved seeing Mike so excited, especially since he'd found a way out. "Sounds neat."

He flashed his trademark smile. "It's awesome! There're colors down there that Crayola crayons has never even invented! And there're all kinds of fish I've never seen before in my life." He gave my hand a squeeze and then clapped Jack on the shoulder. "C'mon, guys. I found a hole about two minutes away. There's an air pocket halfway if you need it."

I gripped his hands tightly. "Are you sure? I can only hold my breath for a minute. What if I pass out?"

Mike grinned. "Hmm. In that case, I guess I'll have to carry you out the rest of the way and give you CPR on the surface."

"Wouldn't you love that?" said Jack.

“I won’t be loving it so much if I have to suck your face too,” shot back Mike.

Jack gagged. “Gross.”

Mouth-to-mouth CPR? Well, that would be one way of getting Mike’s affection. It sounded like a brilliant plan, minus the passing out part. I didn’t want to spend another minute in that cave. “Okay, let’s do this thing.” I slipped off my life jacket, and Jack followed suit.

The water changed to sky blue as Mike turned toward us. “On the count of three. One...two...three!”

I took a long, deep breath and ducked my head under the water.

Mike held my hand, and we dove deeper under a rocky curtain into a gigantic subterranean chamber. The visibility there was awesome. The high walls were beautifully decorated in a kaleidoscope of marine life; from clusters of colorful anemones to large sponges, coral, and starfish. Thick carpets of strawberry anemones covered the bottom, and Jurassic-sized sea fans swayed in the current, like branches in the wind. I noticed every light and shadow and thought how wonderful they would look captured on canvas.

I grinned at passing tropical fish in startling reds, blues, greens, and yellows. There had to be zillions of them. My eyes opened wide as I noted their sparkling appearance, complex patterns, and vibrant coloration. The spots, stripes, and shapes were all different. I couldn’t identify most of them. *Have we discovered some new, unknown species?*

Mike’s blond hair flowed out, waving back and forth to the rhythm of the sea. A stream of bubbles came out of his mouth as he smiled, his eyes wide. He picked up a huge stingray measuring at least five feet across, from wingtip to wingtip. Mike tugged my arm and pointed directly above them to a swirling hole.

Good. It must be the halfway point where I can catch my breath. I reached out and touched the gentle giant as it swam out of Mike’s hands and disappeared into the sandy sea bottom. *Too cool!* It felt soft and slimy, like a big, wet Portobello mushroom. I resurfaced in a large air pocket and gasped for air.

Leaning back against the hard rock, Mike asked, “You guys doing okay?”

I kept my arm raised so my head wouldn’t hit the sandy-colored and white marbled roof that looked like melted candle wax. “I’m doing good, thanks.” No way was I going to admit fear. Besides, I was an adventurous girl who was willing to try anything—at least once. “Jack, are you alright?”

He nodded and said between breaths, “This place...it’s incredible...the colors...the fish...” He let out a soft groan and turned away.

I touched his shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“I cut my leg on one of the stalagmites, but it’s no biggie.”

“Oh, man, sorry you got nailed,” said Mike. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I shouldn’t have swam so close.” Jack’s voice echoed in the small, confined place.

“Especially since I left the needle and thread at home,” I said, trying to distract his pain with humor.

“You sew about as good as I do painting portraits in your art studio,” he retorted with a smile.

“That bad, huh? But if I saved your life, who’d care about crooked stitches?” I inched closer. “Let me see your gash.”

Jack clung to the wall, holding back a grimace. “I’m fine. Besides, it’s the least of our worries.”

Minutes passed. I didn’t like the pressure on my lungs, but I trusted Mike. The sooner I got going, the sooner I’d find myself in an open space again. “The water’s clear. You guys ready?”

They both nodded.

I inhaled one last time and dove back down again. I kicked hard to propel myself forward, gliding over a beautiful coral garden. The formations offered vivid patterns, fantastic shapes, weird textures, and unique colors I’d never seen before: bolder, brighter, and more brilliant than any I was used to from what I’d seen on previous dives. I couldn’t resist touching a colony of green coral as I swam by. In an instant, the entire colony changed color, from green to red.

The pressure on my chest increased, and my lungs burned. I gave Mike’s arm a hard tug. He pointed upward to a giant hole in the ragged rock. I struggled, swimming as fast as I could through the natural doorway, and burst through the surface. Sucking in long gulps of air, I noticed radiant sunbeams glinting in Mike’s golden hair and Jack’s blue eyes. We were officially out of the dreary bug hotel and into the beautiful sunshine, and nothing could feel better.

Jack caught my gaze. “We did it!”

My breath came in quick, shallow heaves. “Yeah, and I’ve never seen anything like that. Those fish—”

“Told ya!” Mike pushed back his dripping hair from his eyes. “I would’ve taken you down there kickin’ and screamin’ if I had to.”

“Yeah, and you might’ve ended up with a nice shiner,” I said. He laughed, and I turned my attention upward. Unmistakably, dual suns hung in the sky. “That’s no optical illusion, you guys.”

“It’s a mock sun. I’m sure of it,” Jack insisted.

Mike pounded the water with his fists, splashing it in all directions. “Isn’t it awesome? Now, let’s go find a burger joint—and hopefully not a mock one.”

I smirked. “It’s morning, you goof.”

Drifting clouds floated above them, turning from gold to brown, and then to purple, pink, and orange. I stared at the surroundings in awe. Morning mist hung over a landscape that stretched for miles and miles. Palm trees lined the beach, and in the distance, green mountains dotted with color towered high into the sky. Canopies of leaves in the glowing hues of autumn decorated the dense trees. Where the sun seeped through, the skyline seemed to sparkle, like something right out of a fairytale.

“What’s up with the leaves?” asked Mike. “‘Cause I swear it’s July, not October.”

Fall in the tropics? Even if it was, the leaves usually dried, dropped, and fell to the ground without any brilliant display of colors. “I dunno, but I’m going to paint this when I get back home—all of it! It’s going to be a masterpiece.”

Jack touched my elbow and smiled. “I know it will be, but for now let’s get to shore.”

“Race ya!” I called over my shoulder.

“Ohhh, you’re on.” Mike submerged and breached the surface a few feet past me, then cut the water with expert precision. He was so competitive and could never resist a challenge.

Jack gave me a push-off and yelled to Mike, “You’re going to need that head start. She’s gaining on you!”

I heard Jack’s chuckle and a big splash behind me. I glided through the pink water in pursuit of Mike. *That’s it. Remain focused. Good body position and kicking.* All I had to do was roll my head easily to the side to breathe. *Nice, smooth, long, powerful strokes. Steady rhythm. I can beat these guys.*

As I picked up speed, something brushed against my legs. I came to an abrupt halt, my gaze darting left and right as I scanned the surface of the water around me. I opened my mouth and took a huge breath. “What was that?”

A surge of water crashed against my legs. The beach was still about 400 feet away, but at least land was in sight. I blew out a half-breath as I flung one arm out to try and swim for the shore. My stomach knotted as something gritty, like sandpaper, brushed across my ankles...again. I instinctively jerked back and swallowed hard, hoping it was something harmless, perhaps a sea turtle? “I felt something.”

Jack treaded water a few feet behind me. “You mean, like a fish?”

“I...I don’t know. The water’s too dark to see.”

“It’s rocks, man. I just nailed one with my knee, but don’t worry, I’m fine.” Mike pumped his hands as he rose three feet out of the water, presumably standing on one of the underwater rock formations, all covered in slimy seaweed. I’d better start watching for jagged rocks since we were getting closer to shore.

“C’mon, Mike!” I said. “My feet are dying to touch land.”

His gaze darted about. “Hey, something’s not right.”

“You’re sinking,” I noted.

Mike’s brows twitched as the water swirled around his knees, his waist, his chest, and then his neck. He flapped his arms about as if struggling to keep his balance.

“Whatever it is, it’s starting to roll like a submerged log...and I’m no lumberjack!”

The ocean changed to a turquoise hue and my breath caught in my throat. Mike was standing on a twenty-foot fish! *A whale?*

At the same time, I heard Jack gasp next to me. “That’s no rock. Get off!”

Why isn’t Mike swimming for the hills? A rush of bubbles surrounded him and his eyes widened. I flailed my arms to get his attention. “It’s alive, Mike! Get outta there!”

A giant tail slashed past his legs with a *whoosh*, and then the thing was gone. Mike had been thrown aside and disappeared under the waves.

“Mike!” I said, my heart racing. The water turned emerald green. It was so dark, I couldn’t even see my hands and feet. “I’m going to go find him!”

With perfect timing, as always, a blond head burst through the surface. “Whoa!”

I let out a sigh as I hugged him hard. “Are you okay?”

“Don’t worry. I’m fine,” he said, inhaling deeply.

“What was that thing?” I asked.

The line of Jack’s jaw set. “A shark...and judging by its size, I bet it was a Great White!”

I covered my mouth with my hands to stifle a scream. Only one word flashed in my head: *shore*. All I wanted was to feel the soil under my feet again. “I’m soooo outta here.” I took off with a vertical kick and a fast-paced hand-over-hand stroke.

“Slow down, Casey!” Mike yelled.

“But it’s...it’s a freaking shark! I want to get away from it,” I yelled back, my heart pounding.

Jack caught up to swim beside me. “Try to use smooth strokes. You don’t want Jaws thinking you’re a wounded fish. Splashing around is like ringing a dinner bell and screaming, ‘Come and get it.’”

My stomach turned at the scary thought.

“The the last thing we wanna do is invite Jaws to dinner,” said Jack.

“Gotcha!” I slowed my arms and legs, controlling each movement as I headed for shore.

“Hey, guys. I’m afraid the dinner invitation’s already been sent out,” came Mike’s voice from behind me.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Who invited the shark?”

“Well, by accident...Jack sort of did. Sharks could’ve picked up the scent of his blood from that gash on his leg.”

Before Jack could reply, a *splash* in the distance caught my attention. Tiny ripples moved across the surface. My pulse quickened. I had to get out fast before... The water turned to a greenish tone of light blue. A dark shape headed straight for us—slow, careful, deliberate. A triangular gray fin broke the surface about thirty feet away.

I froze, the sound of my breathing carrying through the eerie silence. I tried to hold my breath, certain that the shark would attack. Instead, the shape disappeared. My gaze darted back and forth, but the ocean was calm, without a ripple in sight. “It’s gone. Swim!”

“It’s back,” roared Mike, “and coming right for us!”

The fin approached, and it was now only a few feet away. I screamed. Would this be my final moment? The beast slowed down and sank underneath us like a submerging submarine. A

shudder ran through me. I watched in disbelief as the menacing shadow glided below. *So I make it through a horrible thunderstorm and lose my parents only to be eaten by a shark in the end? Oh, this can't be happening.*

I clutched Jack's arm and gasped. "It's so...it's as long as a school bus." Pulling my legs up as high as I could, I blinked. It looked as though the giant shadow had split in two. I blinked again and pointed a shaking finger. In a high-pitched voice, I began to count more monstrous fins breaking the surface of the ocean. "I see two...four...ten..." More monstrous fins rose out of the ocean. "Guys! Guys! We need to get out of here," I screamed louder as the sharks circled. "We're in shark-infested water! They're...they're everywhere!"

"Crap! Keep on swimming," Jack shouted.

I waited for Mike to take off, but he didn't move. "What are you waiting for?" I asked him in a strained voice.

His eyes bulged. "They're blocking our path to shore!"

I gasped.

Jack held up a clenched fist. "Fight! If one attacks, give it a hard blow on its snout, eyes, or gills."

A large dorsal fin passed inches from my feet. I shuddered as the shark glided through the water like a torpedo.

"Casey, ditch your silver ring!" said Jack.

"What?" I gulped. "Why?"

"It's too shiny. They'll mistake it for fish scales."

Without any further questions, I slipped the band off.

"Lose the necklace too!" added Mike.

"My locket? But—"

He nodded. "Hurry!"

With trembling fingers, I ripped the chain off. I held my locket and my ring tightly in my hand. The water turned clear, and I could see long, sleek shapes darting past us.

Mike stroked the skin of a passing shark. "Its belly's white."

"It is a Great White," whispered Jack.

"What're you doing, Mike?" I asked, my stomach clenching.

"If it's going to eat me, then I at least deserve a chance to touch it."

“You’re nuts!” I yelled. It was official: Mike would continue to be reckless, even when faced with death.

Giant locomotives swam past me. My hands closed into fists, and I was prepared to fight. This has to be a dream, some kind of nightmare. I pressed my eyes shut and reopened them, but the sharks still surrounded me.

SMACK! When the shark hit, I felt a crushing blow to my chest, like getting sacked when I played football with the guys. I sank a few feet beneath the surface and noticed the glint of silver as my locket and ring sank into the depths below me. Sharp pain radiated through my body, and it wasn’t until a salty rush of water gushed into my mouth that I jerked back to reality and began kicking and flailing my arms. I emerged, sputtering water.

“You okay?” Mike asked, his lips pressed together in a hard line.

“Casey!” shouted Jack, eyes wide.

My chest heaved and I sucked in giant gulps of air. I touched Jack’s chest gingerly. “I’m okay...I think. Why the games? They keep swimming around us, and bumping into us. Why haven’t they just eaten us?” I shuddered at the thought. “Not that I want them too.”

“They don’t know what we are,” said Jack. “They’re curious. It’s how sharks investigate.”

Every horrible shark story I had ever heard or seen on the Syfy Channel about mega-sharks played out in my head. I glanced at the circling dorsal fins. “We’ll have to swim past them. It’s our only chance...or else we’re dead!”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” said Mike.

With a giant kick, I took off through the water. As I did, a shark rose out of the water and swam toward me, filling my vision with its beady black eyes, huge fin, and flared gills. Its giant tail sliced the water with slow side-to-side strokes. I had planned on getting up close and personal with numerous sea creatures while on vacation, but a close encounter with nature’s most efficient killing machine wasn’t one of them.

Terrifying jaws stretched open, revealing three rows of razor-sharp teeth. My heartbeat doubled—no, tripled—as I stared helplessly right into the creature’s jaws. My eyes widened as I let out a long, piercing scream. The beast’s body arched upward and then slammed fiercely back down into the ocean. Spirals of water shot high in the air, and then rained down over me. The deluge of water created intense waves that rocked me back and forth. I gasped as the monster disappeared into the ocean depths.

“Stay where you are, Casey!” Mike shouted. “Its instinct is to go after scared animals, the ones that run away. I’ll throw it off by swimming right up to it.”

I gripped Mike’s forearm and shook my head. “That’s a crazy idea.”

“No way! Quit being an idiot, Mike!” said Jack. “If that shark doesn’t get you, the others will.”

Mike took off his shark tooth necklace and held it like a dagger. “If I have to, I’ll blind the sucker with one of his uncle’s teeth!”

Jack’s terrified voice cut through the air. “It’s coming back this way!”

“I’m sure this’ll work,” Mike mumbled as he plunged after the creature.

“No!” I said.

Jack yelled for him to come back, but Mike didn’t.

A flash of blue-gray glided under me. I leaned forward in the water, scanning the depths. With great speed, a massive and distorted image shot toward me. My heart lurched. Death was imminent. *This is it!* The shark’s huge mouth hung agape, exposing those terrifying, gnashing teeth. Its mouth was so big that it wouldn’t even have to chew; I’d be eaten in one gulp.

Suddenly, a blue-gray creature popped its head out of the water, sprinkling droplets on my face. Opening its great mouth, it emitted a *squeak* and a series of rattling sounds, like someone clicking their tongue. Instantly recognizing the beast as a friendly one, I let out the breath frozen in my lungs. I giggled with relief; it wasn’t a shark, but a bottlenose dolphin.

Mike swam toward me, his loud voice piercing the air. “The shark I was chasing...it’s gone.”

I smiled as more dolphins breached high out of the water like acrobats performing a show. A large adult dolphin squeaked louder than the rest. It slapped the water with its tail and urgently nudged Mike.

“Okay, okay! I’m going back,” said Mike. “Bad idea to face the shark.” The mammal herded him back to me and Jack, in the same way a cowboy rounds up his cattle.

I wrapped my arms around Mike. “What am I going to do with you?” I hugged him tightly. *Why does he pull such crazy stunts? If something happens to him while he’s trying to protect me, I’d never be able to live with myself.*

I felt a shove on my arm, like bumping into a wet inner tube, followed by a gentle poke in the side. Turning, I saw a dolphin. It seemed to be smiling at me, and unlike the mouthful of teeth on the shark, the dolphin's just looked like a big, goofy grin.

It was as if the friendly dolphins knew we were in trouble and needed help. The other dolphins drew closer, pushing me, Mike, and Jack toward one another. Slapping their tail flukes against the surface of the water, the creatures swam in tight circles, closing us off from the sharks and creating a defensive barrier, like offensive linemen protecting their quarterback. The sea bubbled and splashed as more *clicks*, *whistles*, and *squeals* filled the air. I threw up an arm to shield my face from all of the saltwater.

My mouth dropped as I watched the scene unfold before my eyes. Other dolphins made clapping sounds with their jaws and ganged up on the sharks. Repeatedly, they used their long, pointed snouts to ram the sharks, poking them in their gray gills and massive white bellies. A wave of relief swept over me as the sharks turned and swam out of sight. I took a few deep breaths, trying to calm my racing heart.

When I turned to face Mike and Jack, their smiles said it all: Against all odds, we'd survived. We all slapped each other on the back, giving out high-fives. The dolphins squeaked and leapt high into the air; they somersaulted and dove back into the sea, their waves splashing over my entire body. It reminded me again of some spectacular show at Sea World.

I let my fingers run over the smooth skin of a passing dolphin. "I owe everything to these guys. Gazing down the throat of a shark wasn't on my to-do list for this trip, that's for sure."

Mike laughed and gave one of our newfound marine friends a pat on the head. "Yeah, it's funny. I guess Flipper saved us from Jaws. If I had any fish, I'd give him and his friends like a million of them."

"There are stories of dolphins rescuing humans, clear back to the times of ancient Greece," said Jack. "No one knows *why* they protect us, but for some reason they do."

A hopeful smile danced on Mike's lips. "Do you think one will give me a ride through the waves? You know...like, I could hang onto its fins."

"Seriously?" asked Jack.

"Yeah." Mike flashed his perfect smile.

I couldn't help but smile, too, as the dolphins swam circles around us before taking off. I waved goodbye to my good Sea-maritans as they quickly vanished into the distance.

“C’mon guys, let’s get moving.” I started swimming for shore, with my two friends right behind me. We’d been saved once, but those sharks could come back any minute and there’d be no second chance.

After what seemed like hours of slogging through the waves, I broke into a smile. “Hey, I can finally touch the bottom!”

“Me too!” Jack shot me his easygoing grin.

The sand felt thick as it oozed over the top of my tennis shoes. “Nothing’s more wonderful than feeling solid ground under your feet.”

Mike moved swiftly through the water. “Totally. I’m starving after all that swimming.”

“Yeah, me too,” I said, “but I’m in no mood for seafood after almost becoming it.”

“Right. First thing I’m going to do is find a burger joint.”

Flapping wings, buzzing, and sudden movement caught my eye. “Look!” I pointed to the three glittering jewels flying in the sky.

Jack whipped his head around. “What the heck?”

I couldn’t believe my eyes as the marvelous colors drew closer and closer at incredible speeds. A loud *buzz*, like a swarm of a million bumblebees, grew in volume. Elongated bodies, transparent wings, and multifaceted eyes glistened in the glow of the two suns. I gasped. “What’re those?”

“Dragonflies,” said Mike, his voice filled with awe. “Big, giant ones.”

Every muscle in my body tensed. The miniature helicopters had to be the size of remote-controlled airplanes with three-foot wingspans. A blast of wind and spray hit my face, and I ducked my head as the red, blue, and green insects buzzed past me.

Mike’s jaw dropped. “Man, did you see them? One of their bodies had to be as thick as my arm!”

“We’ll talk about this more on shore.” With a burst of energy, Jack took off.

“C’mon on...let’s catch him!” said Mike, overflowing with enthusiasm.

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. “But...guys...we’re...we’re heading straight where those giant bugs came from.”

Pebbles shifted under my shoes as I waded to shore. My arms felt heavy and numb. The pain in my legs intensified with the stifling weight of my wet clothes. I panted from the effort. *Only a few more feet to go.*

When my feet touched land, I shouted in victory, then collapsed from exhaustion. A surge of relief flooded through me, tinged with regret that my parents weren't there. I thought of my locket at the bottom of the ocean, and wished I'd thought, in my moment of panic, to place it in my pocket for safekeeping, especially since it was a family heirloom, passed down to me from my grandma. My mom and dad had taken the necklace to the mall and inserted my favorite family portrait as a sixteenth-birthday present. I longed to see their faces again. At that moment, though, all I could think of was to get out of the water; how great it would feel to lie on a warm beach and dry off. My labored breathing eased, though my lungs still burned and my head pounded.

Gentle waves lapped at the shoreline, inches from my face. I felt the gritty sand against my cheek. Rolling onto my back, I drew in a lungful of fresh air and let the suns beat down on my skin. My eyes fluttered open against the glaring light. I knew I had to get up, but I just lay there, unable to move.

Mike crawled out of the water and fell, face-first, into the white sand. Jack struggled to stand and tumbled down next to me. I inhaled the salty scent of the ocean, with its hint of coconut. Cheerful bird songs echoed through the air. Monkeys squealed, and a symphony of insects sounded in my ears.

"We're here... wherever 'here' is." Mike stood but then stumbled to his knees, spitting out sand and wiping it from his cheeks. He turned and faced the unbroken stretch of shoreline. "Looks like nobody's been here for ages."

I searched the skies for a helicopter or plane, any sign of human life. *Surely someone has figured out our location and will come for us soon. It's only a matter of time, right?* But with no supplies, time wasn't on our side. My muscles ached from fatigue, but I forced myself upright. "Where's the search party? I don't want to be stuck on this rock with those huge bugs."

"It's early in the morning." Jack reached over and squeezed my hand. "They're probably scanning the water first since they knew we were in a boat. It'll take time to search the islands. Besides, knowing your parents, we're plastered all over the news by now."

His words gave me hope. I admired the breathtaking beauty all around me. Coconut palms dotted the sand, and the sweet scent of flowers wafted in the breeze. It was a tropical paradise like the kind you'd see on a postcard or some commercial for suntan lotion. A dense jungle peered out from beyond the sandy beach. "It's like a Caribbean Eden. What country do you think we're in?"

"I wish I knew." Jack stood and surveyed the unfamiliar area all around him. "An island was circled in red on the boat's map. If we go by that, then we were by the main island of Viti Levu, but there's no telling how far the storm blew us off course."

Mike's gaze swept over the rainforest. "So, uh...you're saying we could be anywhere?"

"Just about," said Jack, his jaw clenched.

I scooted backward into the hot sand and sprawled out. It felt warmer than any winter coat I'd ever owned. The sugar-white sand glittered like snow in the sun on a cold winter day. I scooped some of it up and let it slip through my fingers.

Mike stared as if hypnotized by the beautiful sand. "It sparkles."

I wiggled my feet, watching the sand gleam all around us. "Yeah, just like at Coronado Beach. What mineral causes this neat glitter effect?"

"Mica," said Jack, dropping next to me, "and there's a high concentration of it here too."

"Mica crystals, huh? I love it when you talk nerdy to me," I said, nudging Jack, who then smiled. He loved it when people admired him for his smarts rather than just his good looks and athletic ability.

Mike stripped off his wet shirt and wrung it out. When he did, I couldn't help but stare. The sand wasn't the only thing shining on that beach: Mike's golden skin glistened, his chest thick with muscles. He playfully flicked water droplets from his shirt at me. "I wish I could Facebook or tweet all this craziness."

The only social networking I dreamed about reaching was a team of Navy SEALs or Army Rangers with a giant helicopter or an even bigger boat.

"The two suns are pretty weird, huh?" I squinted at the bright horizon.

Jack turned to face me, shading his eyes from the glare. "Those have to be mock suns. I'm sure it's only an optical illusion."

"Yeah," Mike snorted, "keep telling yourself that, Jack. You know what? I might've even bought your story if I hadn't seen the strange water or all those weird-looking fish or the giant

dragonflies,” he added with a dramatic tone to his voice. “For all you know, we could be in another dimension.” Mike’s imagination had a tendency to run wild.

Jack stood, shaking his head. “What...we’ve crossed over into the *Twilight Zone* or some ‘long time ago in a galaxy far, far away’? That’s a little extreme, isn’t it?” He wrinkled up his brow at Mike and twisted the front of his shirt with both hands, sending droplets of water plummeting into the sand.

“So Casey, is my theory really that far-fetched?” asked Mike.

“You mean, like the whirlpool being some kind of magical portal?” I laughed, unable to hold it back. “Sorry, Mike, but I haven’t believed in stories like that since I was five.”

“I can’t tell you guys for sure where we are, but I do know one thing,” said Jack.

“What?” I asked.

“We should stay right here in this spot and wait for help.”

Jumping to my feet, I turned in a slow circle and scanned the landscape. My frown deepened. There were no people, no helicopter, no sign of anyone hurrying to our rescue; not even so much as a house, boat, or car; not even a sun-bronzed native hacking coconuts open with a machete or slicing up pineapple in a bamboo beachside fruit stand.

The jungle beyond showed no signs of civilization either. Wherever we were, the brochure would have been more likely to say “Undiscovered Paradise” than “Tourist Beach Resort”.

“Where is everyone? There’s no litter on the beach—not even a pop can or bottle cap.”

A strong gust of wind blew Mike’s untamed hair. “Yep, this place is deserted as a ghost town.”

“Think the whole island is like this?” I asked, cocking a brow.

“We won’t know for sure until we explore the other side. Wanna hunt for a village or something?” Mike reached down, picked up a coconut, and shook it. “There’s no point sticking around here wasting time. We need to find help.”

“But the jungle’s an easy place to get lost in,” said Jack. “The number one rule of being lost is to stay put.”

I nodded. “I agree. We should stay here for now.”

Mike stripped off the husk of the coconut, and then pounded it against a sharp rock until it burst open, splitting in half and revealing the milky white flesh.

I was always amazed at how quickly Mike could split a coconut. He was the king of coconut cracking back home on the beach.

Mike stopped fussing with the coconut and glanced up, frowning. “Why do you guys think it’s such a great idea to hang out here? What if there’s help on the other side of this island?”

“And what if there isn’t?” I said. “We don’t want to miss a plane. It might be our only shot at going home. Leaving this spot is stupid, not a chance worth taking. You guys do whatever you want, but I’m staying right here.”

“So am I,” said Jack.

Mike scooped up a chunk of fleshy white fruit and popped it in his mouth. “Well then, it’s settled. If you and Jack are staying, then I am too. Splitting up would be a bad idea. And I’m not leaving my two best friends in the entire world.”

Jack grinned and gave him a fist bump.

Smiling, I slipped an arm around Mike’s waist and glanced up. “That’s so sweet.”

Mike smiled, putting his arm around my shoulder and giving me a squeeze. He tipped the coconut back and took a gulp, then handed it to me. “Thirsty?”

“Are you kidding? I might down all the juice in one swig.”

Mike laughed. “Save some for Jack.”

I took a long drink, made a face, and handed the coconut to Jack. “Ewww. It’s bitter.”

“The brown ones always are.” Mike placed his hand on the rough bark of a palm tree. “I’ll have to shimmy up and snag us a green one. They’re way sweeter and have more juice.”

Jack sipped from the coconut and glanced up. “We might need to think about setting up a camp if help doesn’t come in a few hours.”

“Wait...you mean, like, spending the night? Here? On some deserted island beach?” My stomach fluttered. I watched the waves crash against the shore. “In a place with two suns like some science fiction movie? With those huge things flying around? No way, Jack!”

Touching my shoulder, his gaze softened. “It’s not like we have a choice.”

I forced back the quiver in my voice. “We can’t survive out here. We don’t have any supplies—no food or water. All we have are the shirts on our backs and a bunch of bitter coconuts. Not to mention, we’re going to be eaten alive by mosquitoes. They’re probably as big as birds out here.”

Jack took a thin piece of driftwood and poked through a mound of dried mud on the side of a palm tree. He shoved his hand inside the hole and slowly pulled it out. A squirming mass of termites climbed up his hand.

I jumped back. “My gosh, Jack. Have you lost your mind?”

Mike nodded at me, rubbing his chin. “The dude’s got guts. I’ll give him that.”

The crawling army was obliterated into a brown goo as Jack rubbed both hands together. I cringed as he smeared it all over his face, arms, and legs like suntan lotion.

Mike flashed him a smug smile. “Maybe Casey could get your back, lather it up really good.”

“After I do yours first,” I retorted. “So what’s with the bug juice anyway?”

“It’s bug repellent, courtesy of Mother Nature.” Jack grinned, wiping his hands on his shirt and shorts. “Natives throughout the world have used it for centuries.”

Smart, sharp, and savvy. Guess he really is a Jack-of-all-trades. It was a great idea, not that I’d be trading in my mosquito repellent for squashed bugs anytime soon.

Jack’s expression grew serious. “The point is, we *can* survive out here if we have to, so vanquish fear and panic. Value living. Remember your goal, getting out alive.”

“That’s so motivating,” I said.

Mike gave Jack a fist bump. “Dude, that rocks. Where did you get it from?”

“It’s a quote from my dad’s *U.S. Army Ranger Handbook*.”

Jack spoke with such confidence I almost believed him, but the doubts nagging at the back of my mind wouldn’t shut up for long.

Jack pointed to the termite nest. “Anybody care to try it?”

Crushed termites? I shuddered. “No way am I rubbing dead bugs all over me.”

“You will if those mosquitoes are as big as those dragonflies.” Mike’s mouth tightened into a grim line. “Heck, I’ll even do it.”

My stomach dropped. Swatting at those freakishly huge insects with my bare hands wasn’t going to cut it. “This is all so crazy. I wish my mom were here. She’d know what to do.” Tears welled up in my eyes as I stared at the termites scurrying along the tree bark. “You’re sure you saw my parents being picked up?”

Jack pulled me into a comforting hug. “Positive.”

My body trembled in his arms. “But you didn’t even see the helicopter. How do you know they made it safe inside? The waves were so high...” I paused and swallowed. “...and the wind reminded me of a hurricane. I—”

Mike cut in, his tone gentle. He brushed a strand of hair from my cheek. “Now’s not the time to think about it, Casey.”

There was no need to argue with my friends when they were only trying to help. “You’re right. My parents wouldn’t want me to worry about them.”

“Exactly.” Mike took off the black cord with his prized shark tooth hanging from it. “I’m going to let you borrow my good luck charm.”

“Really?” I couldn’t believe it. Mike didn’t even take off that necklace for showers, let alone let anyone wear it. When he nodded in response, I swiped my hand over the white, smooth surface and the jagged, serrated edge. “You’re so sweet.”

He stood behind me and fastened the clasp around my neck. “This is a symbol that you can survive anything.” Mike had survived a shark attack the previous year. The tiger shark had taken a giant bite out of his surfboard, leaving behind a souvenir—one of its sharp triangular teeth, which Mike had worn on a cord ever since.

“Oh, Mike, I know how much this means to you.” I touched the necklace and closed my eyes. It meant the world that he would trust me with one of his most prized possessions, a tribute to his courage, resilience, and survival. My voice wavered as I thanked him.

“I’ll be back,” said Jack. “I’m going to head into the jungle and look for fresh water.”

“What?” I grabbed his arm, noticing the flush in his cheeks. “You said we should stay here.”

Without even meeting my gaze, Jack took a deep breath and blew it out. “Don’t worry. I won’t go in deep.” He turned and walked away, almost in a huff.

What’s he mad about? Mike letting me wear his necklace? Big deal!

Mike ran after him, pulling me along. “Go without me? I don’t think so. I’ve been dying to check this place out.”

“Yeah, we’re coming too.” I wasn’t going to let Jack contract some tropical virus or flu all by himself. Besides, I didn’t exactly like the thought of staying on the mutant bug-infested beach without one can of Raid at my disposal.

Birds nosily chirped and monkeys squealed as I pushed through a tangle of elongated dark green leaves. My jaw dropped in awe. Monstrous purple and pink begonias, bromeliads, and

orchids lined the rainforest floor. A gentle mist hung in the air and insects swirled in the rays of light filtering through the towering vine-draped tree ferns growing in groves like giant umbrellas on sticks with ten-foot leaves.

“It’s like we’re in a Tarzan movie,” said Mike.

We forged our way through and hiked deeper into the dense jungle. The thick aroma of fresh earth and exotic flowers lingered in the air. As I marched along, my shoes squished in the soft, spongy earth. Something skittered and squeaked near my foot, jolting me into a small jump and stumble. “What was that?” I said.

Mike sidestepped. “Hopefully something cute and cuddly.”

I gaped at him. Only Mike would consider a disease-ridden island rodent, like some overgrown rat, a cute or cuddly pet.

“Just imagine the soft fur and those shiny red or black eyes staring at you as it inches closer, waiting to be cuddled in your arms.”

Deciding to ignore him, I took a few steps through the vegetation until I slipped and fell sideways, bursting through clusters of large leafed plants and down a rocky hill. Somehow, I needed to slow my descent. Reaching out my hands, I desperately tried to grab a tree, a log—anything to stop my gravity-induced momentum. Rocks flew up from under me, and branches slapped my face, arms, and legs. Finally, I stopped rolling when my back and head hit something hard, the jolt sending shudders through me. I drew in a sharp breath and reached behind me, running my fingers along the bark of a tree. I rubbed my pounding head and blinked, groaning, with stars spinning in my vision. I gazed up at the humongous maroon colored leaves with tiny green flecks looming over me.

Jack and Mike’s shouts echoed through the jungle. “CASEY! Casey? Are you okay?”

I had just opened my mouth to answer when I felt a tickling sensation on my head. Looking up, I let out a bloodcurdling scream. Multiple hairy legs slowly twitched, eight beady eyes glared with menace, and gigantic pinchers wiggled. The spider was ridiculously big, the size of a basketball—the Godzilla of arachnids. When it lurched forward, I gasped, pushing back on my elbows until my back smacked against the tree trunk.

I screeched as the mammoth-sized arachnid hissed and barreled toward me, its snapping mandibles only inches from my face. I swung around to grab a stick and then thrust it upward, right into the bulbous underbelly of the eight-legged freak. I wasn't into hurting any kind of critter, but I wasn't going to let that thing sink its giant fangs into me either. Hot, green liquid burst from its body and splattered on my face. The noxious stench of ammonia assaulted my nostrils. I covered my nose and mouth with my hand and gagged. If only I could lather myself into a frenzy with soap and water—anything to get the spider juice off of me.

Mike and Jack burst through a patch of ferns. I jumped to my feet, my gaze connecting with Mike's. My stomach churned. *Oh, gosh! I'm gonna puke right on their feet! What will Mike think?*

Mike grinned. "Looks like you took care of business."

"Yep." Sucking in a deep breath, I gripped my stick tightly, just in case that spider-thing came back over for Round Two.

He wrapped his arms around me in a bear hug. "You sure have *guts*, girl."

"So do you." I laughed inwardly. I knew he was talking about being brave, but after that hug...well...he now wore spider guts too.

Jack's voice rang through the air. "What the heck is that thing?"

I shrugged. "I dunno. You tell me."

"I'm not sure, but let's get away from it." Jack wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me in the opposite direction as the nearly dead spider lay upside down, twitching and squealing most grotesquely. In one swift move, it flipped right side up and crawled away into the brush.

"This is just crazy," said Mike. "Have you ever seen a spider that big before in your entire life?"

Jack shook his head. "Nope."

"Gross," I muttered, wiping the slime off my face with my shirt. I took a deep breath and stared, horrified, at the sticky stuff. My heart still pounding hard, I wiped off the extra goop with a giant maroon leaf, pushing the giant creepy-crawly to the back of my mind.

Jack pulled me into his tight embrace, not paying any attention to my green, slimy clothes. "Are you okay?"

"My head aches, but otherwise, I'm fine. Thanks for asking, and sorry for giving you guys such a scare. I didn't even see the hill in all those humongous jungle leaves."

“Are you sure you’re okay?” asked Mike. “Cause you took quite a spill.”

I forced a smile. “I’m fine. Really, I am. Just got myself slimed, that’s all.”

Suddenly, the screech of a bird made me jump. Slowly turning, I noticed a small flock caught in the giant webs, fluttering their wings, struggling like crazy. They looked so cute, and I couldn’t just leave them to their spidery fate. “Let’s take a sec and help these little guys out. They’re going to get eaten.”

I threw my stick down by my feet. I lifted my hand and slashed through the sticky mesh, freeing one blue bird after another. Sticking around to face my fear of spiders made me shudder, but the thought of the little birds being mummified and sucked dry made my stomach churn.

Jack reached for a squawking bird, whispering, “Shush now. It won’t take long, little guy.”

“You can’t save them all,” muttered Mike.

“Watch me,” I said, scooping another one up. “And you know, Mike, if you’d help us out, it’ll go faster.”

“Fine, if it’ll get you two moving so we can get out of here, then I’ll help with Operation Bird Rescue.”

Jack stretched his hands and pulled down another bird, limp from shock and exhaustion. He gently pulled off the webs. Who knew how long the little guy had been there trying to escape? Jack smiled as it ruffled its feathers and stretched out its wings. The bird shot off overhead, disappearing into the sky.

I smiled at Jack. *At least somebody has a heart and cares.* Taking a deep breath, I grabbed another bird, using the tips of my fingers to unwind and peel away the sticky web from its feathers, beak, wings, head, and feet.

Minutes passed, and finally Mike declared, “That’s it. The last one’s free. Can we go now?”

“Yeah.” My hands felt all sticky, like I’d been eating cotton candy at the fair. Grimacing, I wiped my palms on my shorts and picked up my stick. “Good work, guys.”

Soft chittering, like that of hundreds of insects, moved closer, coming from all directions. I glanced around, but I could barely see more than a few feet through the impenetrable bushes. Goosebumps rose up my arms; the hair on the back of my neck stood. “Wh-what’s that noise?”

Something moved in the towering bushes. The maroon leaves speckled with green parted, revealing what hid behind. Spiders the size of a beach ball, even larger than the one I’d tried to

smash, crawled on the tree directly in front of me. Gripping the stick, I turned in a slow circle. Spiders now crawled on every single tree around me. A shiver shot up my spine.

“What the—” Jack’s mouth dropped.

Mike’s gaze darted everywhere.

I clutched my chest as I racked my brain for an escape route and a possible battle plan.

A hairy-legged spider rappelled down its thread and hung upside down just inches from my eyes. I screamed again as three pairs of glossy black eyes bore into me. Stumbling backward, I tripped over a log and fell as the spider’s pincers clicked. I quivered at its shovel-like jaws, menacing things probably used for digging into soil, leaves...and flesh. I gasped and swatted at the thing before giving it one big kick. It tumbled from its web and scurried into the bushes.

Mike flailed his arms, knocking a spider off his shoulder. “Why are they only interested in Casey and me? Not one is messing with Jack!”

I jumped up with a yelp. Sweat gathered above my brows and trickled down my face. Even thinking about creepy-crawlies made me cringe—and the more legs they had, the worse it was. I’d take mice, rats, and snakes any day over spiders (though I wasn’t sure yet if sharks were worse). The army of arachnids brought back the memories of the week I’d spent in a hospital after being bitten by a black widow. Ever since that horrible day, the mere sight of any kind of spider drove me into a panic.

I gasped and felt the blood draining from my face. I shook my hair and swatted at my body in a frenzy. The feeling of something crawling over my skin lingered. I shuddered. “Get them off me!”

Jack appeared at my side and swiped at my back. “You’re clear.”

I spun again, my mind unable to believe him. My skin tingled. Scanning the trees, my eyes focused on the squirming black clusters. *Yeah, those spiders better keep their distance if they know what’s good for them.* I had a stick and wasn’t afraid to use it.

“There’s nothing on you,” said Jack. “I swear.” His words finally sank in.

“Thanks.” I shivered at the thought of one of those hairy monsters crawling on me, but I pushed the thought to the back of my mind. I wanted to focus on getting out of there before another one decided to attack. I pointed my long stick to the left. “Let’s head this way—not so many spiders.” When Jack nodded, I took slow, measured steps, my gaze fixed on my feet so I wouldn’t spook the darn things.

“How can they even get this big?” said Jack.

Mike let out a weak chuckle. “Maybe it’s that weird neon water they’ve been drinking.”

“Hey, we swam in that water!” I retorted.

Jack heaved a sigh. “Yeah, don’t remind me.”

“I have no idea,” said Mike. “Maybe it’s ’cause we’re in the tropics.”

I cringed as I pushed through thick, tangled webs. They hung between leaves and branches, streaming down around me like a haunted forest on Halloween, whipping against my skin.

“Okay...I think I picked the wrong way.”

“We’re not turning around now,” said Mike.

I shrugged. “It’s not like I have a GPS with me.” Suddenly, hundreds of high-pitched chirps rose again through the air, and I glanced around.

“Guys, look!” said Jack.

Crap. All around us, the ground had been transformed into a black squirming mass of spiders. The spiders had left the shelter of the trees and teamed up together. That could mean only one thing: They were on the prowl for a new meal.

“We’re surrounded!” My worst nightmare had come true, and terror consumed every cell in my body. Armed with nothing but a stick and two clenched fists, I inched closer to Jack. I clung to his hand with one of mine while swatting spiders with the other. I tried poking at their backs with quick jabs, but they didn’t budge. “Seriously, what’s with these things? Any other bug would run for its life. It doesn’t make sense.”

Glittering drops, off to the left, caught my eye. A large, thick, spiral-designed web was strung out the entire length between two trees, like a hammock or some kind of rope bridge. “The webs!” I yelled. “We can climb them.” Without waiting for an answer, I yanked on the strings of silk and started climbing into a net of crisscrossed threads. They bounced slightly, reminding me of the cargo net at the fair, but they seemed strong enough to hold my weight.

Jack’s voice pierced the air. “Are you crazy? I’m not going up there.”

“Suit yourself. But there’s nowhere else to go.” Mike shrugged and hopped on, clambering about twenty feet.

I rolled my eyes. “Jack, forget your fear of heights! Start climbing, or you’re gonna be spider bait!”

The spiders let out another round of high-pitched notes and Jack jumped back.

“Hey, Jack, sure you don’t want to join us?” yelled Mike.

“On second thought...I might as well.” With a giant leap, he scurried up to us.

Mike suddenly slipped, and the layers started to split, the white mesh collapsing. “Wait. This isn’t working! Three elephants can’t pile onto a spider web.”

I felt myself sinking, slipping as the threads stretched inch by inch, dropping me down to millions of beady-eyed attackers, like some kind of bad horror movie. I froze, wide-eyed, my pulse spiking by the second. *What possessed me to climb onto a spider web, straight into a trap, like those little birds? Maybe we can try to reach the tree. But won’t the spiders just follow us up there?* After all, that was where I had first seen them.

Jack was climbing a few feet away from me when the thread snapped, sending him tumbling to the ground, only to land on his back with a moan. My heart jumped into my throat as the spiders pounced on him. I ignored the terror flooding through my body and forced myself to retreat down again.

“Casey, wait!” yelled Mike, grabbing my arm. “They’re scrambling away from him, like he has the plague or something. Look!”

I leaned forward to peer at Jack’s face.

Jack let out a long breath. The spiders were backing away and creating a buffer zone around him. “Mike’s right!” called Jack. “Get back up there!”

I bit my lip hard as I watched Jack in action. Wherever he took a step, the spiders would immediately scurry back, like he was Moses parting a black, living sea. I could have sworn he held up an invisible can of bug spray.

“Nice show, buddy. Now move it! It’s time for some tree-hopping,” said Mike.

“No, look! Something’s repelling them. I bet it’s the termite juice I rubbed on earlier.” He whipped off his shirt and motioned me to come down.

“What’s the plan? A striptease?” I asked, trying to keep my voice from quivering.

“The shirt’s for Mike. Would you settle for a piggyback ride?” Jack half-smirked, but the smile seemed forced somehow, as if it was plastered on for my benefit.

I nodded, not failing to notice the terror in his eyes. “That’ll work.” I thought back to Jack’s termite-gut insect repellent, the one I had laughed at. *Why didn’t I just lather up in that stuff?* I scolded myself. Given my options, a bunch of dead termites was a lot better than a bunch of overgrown live spiders.

Mike and I made our way down the thick mesh of silky web. Jack crouched, and I jumped on his back, clinging onto him with everything I had. I pressed my cheek against his bare skin and clenched my teeth. If those things attacked, I wasn't going down without a fight. I'd squash as many as I could before they took me out.

When Jack took a step forward, the spiders scurried back, just as before. He tossed his shirt to Mike, accidentally hitting him in the face. "Use it to wave them away. The scent will repel them," coached Jack.

Mike took the lead and started waving the smelly shirt back and forth in giant arcs. The spiders let out a chorus of high-pitched squeaks and moved away, dispersing in all directions to give him a clear path.

I clung to Jack's strong shoulders as we walked slowly through the black sea of squirming spiders. Something brushed against my ankle, and I kicked as hard as I could, sending the spider, as big as a soccer ball, tumbling into a nearby bush. I tried to shake off the heebie-jeebies, but I knew any one of those bloodsuckers could drain the life out of their prey, probably in milliseconds. Each breath I took rattled in my chest. Just up ahead, I could see the most beautiful sight in the world: the jungle floor.

Jack raced through the brush, his feet pounding over crunching leaves and snapping twigs.

I gripped his shoulders even tighter, not daring to jump off just yet. "Think they'll leave us alone?"

Mike peeked through a frond behind him, groaning.

My gaze darted over my shoulder. There were spiders galore. At that point, I realized Jack needed to put me down so he could run faster. A cold chill washed over me as I shimmied down his back.

Jack turned and clapped my shoulder, his eyes flashing with fear. "RUN!"

His wise words and worried tone registered a second later. If Jack was panicking, that meant the situation was serious. He was usually Mr. Calm Cool and Collected. My stomach lurched. Forcing my muscles into action, I raced through the ferns, hopping over logs and darting around moss-covered boulders. My breathing came in labored gasps as I sped forward, not daring to take another look back. I could hear the weird hissing, chirping sound through the jungle behind me, and it sent shudders down my spine.

I jolted to a stop when I saw a deep crevice in the ground. I peered left, then right. The hole was several feet wide, spread out as far as I could see. I figured if we could leap across it, we'd be safe from the cold-blooded web heads. There was no way the spiders would follow us across the chasm. I glanced over my shoulder; the arachnids weren't in sight...yet. Backing up to gain momentum, I bounded forward, jumping five feet to the other side. Mike and Jack followed right behind me.

I knelt to catch my breath. "Most spiders can't jump. I think we outsmarted them."

Jack looked around, trying to get his bearings. "Let's head back to the beach. We have to figure a way to get off this island."

I nodded when Mike pointed. "Um, guys, they really want a taste of their new protein shake."

To my horror, the red-flowered bushes started to quiver and rustle as spiders emerged, leaping across the gap, much like a grasshopper, with no effort at all. I rolled my eyes at my own naivety. *Did I really think those nasty things would give up so easily when we let their breakfast go? Geesh.*

I bolted through the vegetation as ferns and branches slapped against me. After a few twists and turns through the brush and into a small meadow, Jack yelled for us to stop. I came to a halt, almost stumbling flat on my face.

Jack threw his hand up and gasped between breaths. "Dead end! Canyon..."

I eyed the ravine—a vertical drop of hundreds of feet. It was at least a good thirty feet to the other side. The steep, rocky formations of the two opposing cliffs made me frown. We'd break our necks trying to climb down; or worse, one wrong step, and we'd be impaled on one of the millions of razor-sharp red-stone spires lining the canyon floor. I scanned the trees, bushes, and ferns for a more viable escape route. There were none. Only spiders slowly advancing like the old-fashioned monsters in some kind of B-grade movie on a Saturday night at the drive-in. *Turn off the projector already!* I bit my lip. "They're coming! We need to stall them while we figure out what to do."

"I'm on it." Mike charged toward the line of spiders, yelling like a banshee and swinging his arms in a wild frenzy. He frantically waved Jack's shirt at the arachnids, like a flaming torch to ward off ravenous animals. The spiders scrambled back, hissing like a thousand angry snakes. How long would this ploy work?

At the bottom of the canyon were several trees resembling California redwoods; their tops towered over her head. I pointed. “We could shimmy down one of those!”

“Good idea,” said Jack, “but that’d be like climbing down a thirty-five-story building without proper equipment.”

Mike shook his head. “Plus, don’t you think those eight-legged freaks will follow us in a heartbeat? Want to be mummified to the side of a tree?”

“Of course not,” I said, though I wasn’t sure what other choice we had. I peeled away my sweat-drenched shirt, scanning the area for another way out.

Mike handed me a long vine, thick as a rope, from one of the trees growing close to the edge. “Well, then...it’s Tarzan time.”

“What, you’re gonna swing across this gorge? You must be delirious. Are you sure one of those spiders didn’t bite you?” I looked over my shoulder and gasped. The army of agile hunters were still stalking and pursuing their prey, probably counting down the seconds until they could sink their fangs into their feast. Being wrapped up like a mummy and having my blood sucked out wasn’t an option either. I gripped the vine, praying it wouldn’t break, and hoping that Mike’s crazy plan would work.

Jack took a deep breath and threw his shirt back on. “Ready?”

My legs shuddered beneath me, but I wouldn’t admit to fear. Mike and Jack expected me to be strong, like one of the guys. I wiped my forehead and then nodded; ready to do whatever it took to save our lives.

Beads of sweat trickled down my face. Being chased by spiders and swinging across some canyon on a vine that could snap at any given second took “nerve wracking” to a completely new level. It would be a leap of faith...literally.

Jack gripped a vine tightly, till his knuckles turned white. He gave it a hard yank and then turned to face me. “It’ll hold your weight,” he assured me. When my lips pressed together in a grim line, he gave my hand a reassuring squeeze. “You can do this.”

“Of course I can,” I whispered. I nodded and glanced over my shoulder one last time. Only feet away now, a myriad of eyes glared at me, and in an instant, the spiders sprang. In one fluid movement, I clutched the vine, pushed off, and swung through the air, cool gusts of wind rushing

against my face and whooshing in my ears. The rubbing of the vine and the creaking of the branch from the stress of my weight made me groan. *If this thing breaks...*

Mike's shouts echoed in the air. Extreme sports was always his thing, not mine. Relief flooded through me as I landed on solid ground on the other side. I hadn't been liquefied into spider food, and I hadn't splattered like a watermelon at the bottom of the canyon. Letting go of the vine, I fell on the soft grass, thanking God I was okay. My gaze drifted over to the spiders on the other side of the canyon edge. "Yeah, I'd like to see you try to jump that one!"

Jack smiled and held out a hand to help me up. Triumph flickered in his blue eyes as his dark, wild hair was tousled by the wind.

Standing a little too close to the edge, Mike shouted, "I don't know what you are, but I'll be sure to Google you when I get back. So long, suckers." His strong arm hooked around my waist, making my heart flutter. "Isn't gloating fun?"

I smirked, squeezing him back. "C'mon. Let's go." I focused all my energy on walking straight ahead and refused to look at whatever else might be in the trees. The thought of anything squirming made me shudder. I scanned my surroundings again: just lush, green jungle. There was no sign of spiders, but that didn't mean they *couldn't* be somewhere there, hidden in the thickets. I shuddered at the thought and grabbed Jack's arm.

He gave me a pat on the back. "Let's try this way. We can't let spiders keep us from finding water."

Mike nudged her shoulder. "Hey, Casey. How's your throat?"

My throat? "Huh?"

"Well, you were screamin' pretty loud back there." Mike put on his concerned look, but I could see the amused glint in his eyes. "If you want, I can take you back to the fires."

I could have slapped myself for acting so wimpy. What would Mike think? Okay, from now on I'd put myself in Lara Croft mode and show off every single tomb raiding skill I knew. After all, I had a blond-headed Indiana Jones to impress.

I put on a brave front and slugged him. Mike liked his girls cute, but he also liked them to have guts—the kind of guts I used to have when I was pure tomboy and had no problem dangling creepy-crawlies in their faces. "No way! I'm game if you are." I pushed past Jack and stomped down on some enormous green and purple leaves. "Tell ya what. I'll even lead the way."

"Tough, strong, and fearless. Now that's the Casey I remember," said Mike.

Yep. Lara Croft all the way. I hiked through ten foot tall ferns and clusters of giant oval-shaped leaves and finally found a way to cross back over, without negotiating a huge gap in the canyon. While trekking through the jungle, I breathed in the salty air.

“Smell that? We’re back by the ocean.” I smiled when the sound of rushing water echoed from our right. I craned my neck, trying to see over giant blooming plants. I parted the large fronds and peered through. My heart jumped. Winding deep into the tropical rainforest was a magnificent river. Crystal clear water trickled over moss-covered rocks. Tiny red and blue fish—normal-sized, thank God—darted about. “Check it out!”

Jack gave me a high-five.

Mike grinned, picking me up and swinging me around. I felt dizzy when he put me down—and not just from being spun in circles. Wasting no time, Mike knelt down and cupped water with his hands, taking a long drink.

Jack held up a hand. “Wait! Shouldn’t we boil it first? Maybe we could use coconut shells or something.”

Small, smeared animal tracks lined the riverbank. I pointed down. “Look. There’s footprints everywhere. If these animals are drinking it, then it must be safe.”

“I don’t recognize these tracks,” said Jack, studying the imprints in the mud.

“Because they’re smeared.” I scooped up handfuls of water and let the refreshing liquid slip down my parched throat. Then I splashed my face.

“Just to be on the safe side, maybe we should still boil it,” said Jack.

I shot him an exasperated glance. “Okay, but I highly doubt the size of those spiders has anything to do with this river. This is an awesome find.”

He nodded. “Yeah, it is. You can go up to three weeks without food, but only three days without water. And another thing...this could be our Plan B. You’ve just got to have a Plan B.”

“Plan B?” asked Mike, washing his muddy sandals in the water.

“Yeah. We can follow the river if help doesn’t come. It might lead us to civilization, like a village or something.” Jack knelt down and swirled his hands in the water. He had probably come to the conclusion this was the closest thing we were going to get to a sink...a tub...or even a shower.

“Works for me,” said Mike.

I dipped my hands into the cool river and rinsed off my arms and face, and then splashed water on all the dirty spots on my shirt. The gross green spider goo came right off, and it was a good thing, because the thought of spider guts being smeared on me made me gag, Lara Croft or not.

Jack's gaze swung to me. "Whatcha think of my plan?"

"Sounds like Plan B to me, as long as we don't run into any more of those spiders." I bit my lip as a thought occurred to me. Following that river wouldn't help us one bit if this island was uninhabited, but I was sure that didn't matter. We'd be rescued soon anyway. My parents would be relentless, hot on the Coast Guard's tail. *Unless... Wait! Does the Coast Guard even come out this far? Maybe it'll be the Fiji Navy.* My mom and dad would be hounding someone until their daughter was found.

As I bent to tie my shoe, a hard object jammed into my hip. I reached into my pocket to retrieve my cell phone. My heartbeat sped up; I'd forgotten I even had it. If it worked, then there'd be no need for boiled water, coconuts or a Plan B or anything! I flipped it open and stared at the black screen. Even pressing the ON button didn't work. I felt like crying and screaming and tossing the useless cell on the ground, all at the same time—maybe even stomping it to pieces. "It's dead...completely waterlogged," I said aloud.

Mike's shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Guess texting for a pizza is out of the question."

"I was thinking more along the lines of an exterminator myself." I smirked as I removed the battery and dried off the phone with my damp shirt. "All kidding aside, there's still a chance the phone might dry out. It's a waiting game now."

Leaning against a tree, Mike blew out a breath. "What does it matter? No way we'll get a signal out here in the middle of nowhere."

"We can still use it to flag down a rescue plane," said Jack.

Mike gave him a puzzled look. "If it's fried, how's that going to happen?"

Jack reached for the phone and ran his fingers over it. "The outside is silver. The suns will reflect off of it, and we might be able to signal a plane. A flash of light can be seen from fifty miles away."

"Really? That far?" I asked.

"Yeah, and you can use anything shiny too, like a belt buckle or canteen." He handed the cell back to me.

I slipped the phone and the battery into my pocket. “There’s nobody else I’d rather be stranded with than you, Jack.”

Jack wrapped his arms around me. I could feel his heart racing. He put on a good show, but I knew he was scared to death. “It won’t be long before we’re back home,” he said, squeezing me tight.

“The sooner, the better.” I held back a sob, knowing that crying would only make things worse. I had to stay strong. “Okay guys, so what’s the very first thing a group of castaways should do for survival?”

“Find a volleyball and name it Wilson?” retorted Mike.

I couldn’t help but smirk. “No, Tom Hanks.”

Jack brushed his dark hair out of his eyes and smiled. “Start a fire.”

Grinning, I met his gaze and held it. “You got it.”

His grin grew even bigger.

I motioned around me. “Let’s start collecting some tinder, twigs, and lots of wood. We’ll make a big, giant, blazing fire—so big that even a satellite from space will see it.”

“Great idea. Let’s get a pile going.” Jack began picking up some smaller-sized logs.

Mike blinked. “Tinder?”

“You know...grass, leaves, bark—stuff to start a fire. You do watch *Survivor*, right?”

“Yeah, but we won’t need a fire until tonight when it cools down...if we’re even here that long.”

“Fire will scare away any spiders or predators—not to mention that smoke can be seen for miles and miles during the day.” I paused to pick up an armful of dry, twisted branches and then continued. “The sun—or make that the *suns*—will set, and then what? Nothing sucks more than making a fire in the dark, especially with no matches or a lighter. So let’s get started, ’cause I swear I’m not staying the night out here.”

Jack took a few steps forward and motioned toward the beach. “The international distress signal is three fires in a triangle thirty to fifty feet apart. Doesn’t matter what country we’re in. Every rescue worker knows it. At the first sign of a plane or helicopter, we’ll smother them with palm leaves so they’ll smoke up good.”

“Wow,” said Mike. “You have that Mr. Einstein thing nailed down.”

Jack smiled, a twinkle in his blue eyes. Because of his easygoing nature, he never took Mike seriously. He was proud to be a jock as well as a brain.

I reached for another branch. My shoulders ached, and I could barely see over the high pile in my arms as my thoughts drifted back to my family. I would never have dreamt in a million years that I'd be torn away from my parents and be shipwrecked. I bet my parents were worried sick. *How could a vacation go so wrong?*

"Hey, do you need any help?" Jack's biceps bulged as he pulled at a heavy log embedded in the forest floor.

"Nope. I can carry my own weight." I tried to hide the quiver in my voice but didn't quite manage. No way did I want to be labeled a whiny, helpless girl.

Jack let go of the log and called over to Mike. "Hey, one more thing... Don't forget we need a fire if you plan on eating. So if you don't help, Casey and I will be eating hot, grilled fish. And you—" He paused and then continued, "I really hope you love sushi."

"Ewww, gross!" I gave him a weak smile, thankful for the diversion. Jack always knew how to distract my worried thoughts. I turned my head and caught Mike's smirk.

"Cold, raw fish?" he asked. "Is that supposed to scare me? You know there's nothing I won't try once." He walked toward the beach with a load of wood.

"Wait...I'm coming! My arms are about to fall off." I ducked under the tangle of vines and made my way out of the jungle.

"Hey, looks like we're further down the beach," said Mike.

I nodded. "Yeah, that explains why we didn't hear the river when we first got here. Well, that along with all those loud waves, chirping birds, and noisy insects."

As Mike staggered ahead, his footsteps started to give off light—lots of it. "Whoa! Mike, look at the sand."

He smiled. "Didn't we discuss this already?"

"Time to discuss it again. Your footsteps are lighting up. Check it out."

"Whoa! Has to be from the suns really beating down on all those mica crystals."

I squinted and set down my load. "Yeah, but how does it give off light like that?"

"You're right. Something's up," said Mike, kicking the sand around with his shoe.

Jack appeared beside me, carrying a long, heavy log. I glanced at his powerful body and broad shoulders. Thrusting his shoulders back, he adjusted the weight. "Like I said before, it's plain old sand mixed with tons of mica."

"Good old mica, huh?" Mike threw up handfuls of the white, sparkling stuff.

"Awww." I covered my head as the sand rained down on me. As much as I liked Mike, he could be so childish sometimes. A sparkling flash in the air blinded me. "Did you guys see that glare?"

Mike shook Jack's shoulder. "Is this all crazy or what?"

He hesitated. "That's... Wow! Do it again."

I brushed my clothes off. I grabbed two fistfuls of sand and threw them toward the ocean.

"Check it out!" said Mike. "Are we still going with that mica theory?"

A barrage of shimmering particles flew through the air, reminding me of a bright, white flash in a fireworks display. "No way is that plain old sand. That's paranormal sand of the freaky kind," I said.

Jack threw his log down on the rest of the pile and then wiped the bark and debris from his hands on his shorts. He dropped to his knees, swirling his hands around. "The sand's hotter now. It's like the heat from the suns is somehow activating the mineral compounds. They're glittering like crazy, even lighting up when stirred." He picked up a nearby stick and scribbled his name in the sand.

To my surprise, the grains of sand twinkled. "I've traveled around the world, and I've never seen anything like this." I raised my eyebrows. "Let me try."

Jack tossed me the stick and I wrote, "*Casey was here.*" Sure enough, the words started to glisten.

His eyes locked with mine. "It's glittering like some sort of neon billboard."

I leaned closer to the scratched letters. "Yeah, it...it's like an electric sign. I can't believe what I'm seeing. What's going on?"

"I haven't a clue." Mike plopped himself right down in the freaky sand, like he was back home in California, trying to get a tan.

Jack's eyes widened, his tone urgent, as he took the words right out of my mouth.

"Are you crazy? Get up. We don't know anything about this sand, and you're lying in it!"

Undeterred, Mike stretched out his arms and legs and flapped them back and forth.

“Jack’s right.” I nudged his leg with my foot. “Stop rolling around in that stuff!”

“We were lying in this stuff after we swam to shore.” Mike raised a hand to shield his eyes. “Listen, the damage’s done. If we were going to turn into zombies or sprout some kind of superpowers, it would’ve already happened. As far as I know, I don’t have X-ray vision,” he said with a smirk.

Mike scrambled up and took a step back from his creation. The sand angel sparkled as if it were sprinkled with thousands of tiny diamonds. A moment later, the sand particles began to sparkle and shimmer, slowly at first, but then very quickly, until it reminded me of an animated logo. He dropped to his knees, his mouth gaping wide. “Now...*that’s* a sand angel.”

“Wow!” I said.

Mike shook my shoulder. “You’ve got to paint this when we get back home!”

“Yeah, man. It’s on my list with all the other freaky stuff.” I bent closer to examine it. The particles were as fine as dust as they scattered through my fingers. I’d never seen anything like it; but then again, the entire island and its odd two suns seemed like something my mind could have conjured up. I glanced over for Jack’s reaction, but he looked away.

“How does it do that?” Mike kept shaking his head, his voice filled with awe.

“I just...I dunno,” said Jack.

Jack seemed a little freaked out by it, but I knew exactly how to divert his attention: We had to focus on how to use this stuff to our advantage, rather than dwelling on all the weirdness.

“Hey, guys, why don’t we write a humongous SOS or something?” I asked.

A smile lit up Jack’s stern face. “Oh, wow! That’s a great idea. We’re bound to get someone’s attention.”

I picked up a long stick and traced giant letters in the sand. I could only hope the SOS message was big enough for a helicopter to see from the air, if anyone even bothered flying in that direction. I pushed the thought to the back of my mind, together with nightfall and giant man-eating spiders. I swallowed and forced a smile. “Guys, I’m going to make it bigger—waaaay bigger. Why don’t you two dig some holes for the fires? We can’t waste precious time.”

Gazing out across the sea, Mike picked up a palm-sized flat rock and threw it. It skipped ten times along the glossy surface. He pumped his fist in the air. “Oh, yeah!”

I lifted the hair up off my neck. It was only morning, and the suns had scorched my skin already. What would we do come midday? A trace of irritation rose up inside me at Mike’s

childish behavior. Jack, on the other hand, seemed able to focus. Why couldn't he? "Mike, what's wrong with you?" I said. "Don't you *want* to be rescued? 'Cause it kind of seems like you don't."

Jack nodded. "Yeah. Stop screwing around, man. We need your help here."

"Okay, I'm coming." Mike dropped his handful of rocks and dusted off his shirt and shorts.

It was a good thing he was getting the message, because skipping stones wasn't going to get us off the island. I raised my voice slightly to get my point across. "We've got one chance if a plane flies by. That's it...just one chance."

Mike sauntered over and picked up a few pieces of driftwood. "Point taken." He shot me a gleaming smile. "Besides, I can never say no when you flash those gorgeous baby blues," he said, as smooth and charming as ever.

My heart skipped a beat. *Was that a compliment? Naw. He always says that. It means nothing...right?* I knew flirting was as natural to Mike as breathing. I placed my hands on my hips. "Those lines won't work on me. I'm not one of your love-struck fans."

"Immune to my charm?" he asked, dropping his wood into the pile I'd created.

Punctuating my words, I jabbed a finger in his chest. "Yes...I...am." But I wasn't, and for that I could have kicked myself. *Why can't I just tell him about my feelings? Would he really laugh at me? Could he possibly take me seriously?*

Mike winked and pulled me close. "But I'm irresistible."

He was. His strong arms felt good—so good. I gazed up into his eyes—those sparkling green orbs. My breath froze as I watched the suns glint off his tousled blond hair. He stroked his thumb down my cheek and smiled, and I smiled back. I knew I was playing with fire, and I wondered if Mike would burn me the way he burned all the others. Closing my eyes for a brief moment, I wondered how it would feel to have Mike as more than a friend. *But why dwell on something that'll never happen?* He was all talk and had no problem flirting endlessly with any and all girls, including his best friend. He couldn't be serious about getting them rescued, and he couldn't be serious about having feelings for me. It was hopeless.

"Don't you dare treat her like one of your groupies," said Jack.

Yeah, Mike had lots of those—beautiful girls lined up at his feet, begging for his autograph and catering to his every whim, like he was some famous movie star.

“Chill out, okay? I’m sorry.” Mike’s gaze shifted to my SOS. I smiled as he whistled. “Whoa! I’m blinded. Where’re my shades?” He took a step back and covered his eyes. “It’s shining like a Las Vegas banner. They’d have to be blind to miss that! And I don’t think they hire many blind pilots these days.”

Jack dropped another piece of driftwood into the giant pile. He brushed sand off his hands. “Your award-winning masterpiece is going to get us rescued. Guess we don’t call you Picasso for nothing.”

I smirked. “Thanks.” I watched Jack’s muscles flex underneath his t-shirt as he went back to work. He was a star athlete, and he’d led their California high school teams to countless victories in swimming, football, and basketball. But Jack wasn’t vain like Mike, who held countless titles himself in the world of surfing. Mike and Jack were as different as day and night, even though they shared many common bonds: dirt bike riding, videogames, snowboarding, hiking, and breaking records of every kind, both with a roomful of trophies and ribbons and medals to prove it. Jack smiled when he caught my gaze, and I returned the grin. He had the prettiest blue eyes! If I didn’t know any better, I’d have sworn he wore blue contacts.

Mike fell to his knees and threw a pile of sand over his shoulder. “I got the last hole for the fire pit.”

A soft, cool breeze blew over my face. It felt wonderful against my hot skin, but I hoped it wasn’t too windy for them to get a spark. “So, what’s the best way to get these fires blazing?”

Jack shrugged. “The old-fashioned way, I guess—rubbing sticks together.”

I grinned and nudged his arm. “Great! So we should have fire by sometime tomorrow.”

Meeting my gaze, he smiled. “I know a bunch of different ways. It’s primitive, but eventually we’ll get a spark.”

* * *

Jack placed piles of palm leaves next to each of the three fires. “We should stay right here on the beach. This area’s open, and a helicopter will have a very good chance of seeing our distress signals.”

The suns shined brightly and the cool morning breeze felt good on my face. I threw another log into the fire. I thought about rescue. *How long will it take them to find us?* Other questions

haunted me too. *Will we really have to stay the night here? Where will we sleep?* I assumed we'd have to make a mattress and blanket out of dry vegetation. Palm fronds and tree bark sounded kind of itchy, though, and sharing my bed with freakish bugs that would latch onto my skin and suck me dry of every red blood cell in my body...well, that wasn't going to happen either. I decided I'd gladly shower in that termite juice of Jack's to repel every living insect or arachnid within a fifty-mile radius.

I wasn't worried about food anymore. Mike and I could catch fish with our bare hands, and Jack could skin them. We had water to drink, plus a fire to stay warm at night and cook with. The flames reached into the air like long fingers as I turned the crackling logs with a stick. Sparks danced like erratic fireflies. The rising heat scorched my arms, and I stepped back. "I'll start looking for some bigger logs so we can—"

A loud sound in the distance interrupted our conversation. The wailing shriek echoed, like a cry from some savage beast. I whipped my head around as I jumped. "What was that?" Shivers ran down my spine, and Mike and Jack exchanged worried glances.

"Hey, Jack. You've been around the rainforest with your mom on all those photo shoots," said Mike. "What kind of animal was that?"

"Can't be sure. I need to hear it again."

Mike shook my shoulder. "Dude! It sounded like a lion."

That was something I didn't want to hear. The hair on the back of my neck stood at attention again. "No, it can't be. They're only found in Africa or India...aren't they, Jack?"

Eyebrows raised, Jack stared at the direction of the sound. "Pretty much."

Mike bounded toward the jungle without a second thought.

I shot Jack a look, and he just shook his head and shrugged. *Why does Mike always have to prove something? Or does he really crave excitement and risk that much?*

"Yo, Mike!" I yelled. "Where the heck are you going?"

"To check things out!" he yelled back.

Jack huffed out a breath. "We better go get him."

"Yeah, or he'll hunt that thing deep into who-knows-where." I ran after Mike, twigs and branches snapping under my feet as I trailed through the tropical foliage. He didn't get far before I reached him and pulled at his shirt to get his attention. The last time he'd tried something so idiotic, he was four years old. He'd chased two deer into the woods, and a search party found

him six hours later. I guessed he hadn't changed his thrill-seeking ways, or maybe it was just bred into his DNA. "Are you insane?" I gripped his arm to draw him closer, but he quickly pulled away. "This isn't the time or place for playing big game hunter. Listen, we need to stay close to the fires."

Mike pushed branches aside, took another step into the dense vegetation, and then straightened to listen. "I can't see anything."

I stepped in between the towering tropical plants that sported large elephant ear-like leaves. I scanned past the black and green, splotched vegetation. "I don't see anything either."

Another roar. I swallowed, my pulse drumming. "What is it?"

"I think it's a howler monkey." Jack shifted his stance as he peered through the giant leaves. "I heard them in Brazil. You can hear them from miles away, and their calls sound more like a roar than a howl. I bet it's fighting over territory."

I blew out a loud breath. "So why's it over here? We're not in South America."

Jack shrugged. "I have no idea. Mike, whatcha think?"

"Maybe a pet got loose."

I placed a hand over my racing heart. "Anything's possible. If it's nothing but a monkey, then I'm not going to get all stressed out over it." The chirping of birds intensified, overshadowing the rhythmical crashing of waves against the shore, and I took that to be a good sign. I knew wildlife usually clams up when a predator approaches. The birds were just more proof everything was A-okay.

I touched Mike's shoulder. "I can't believe you're out here chasing wild animals. Do you have a screw loose?"

He smiled, shaking his head. "You make me sound like a lunatic."

"Aren't you?" I asked, playfully slugging him.

"As one of my ex-girlfriends put it..." He winked. "I'm beautifully flawed."

I laughed. Beth used to say that about him all the time. Every guy at their school dreamt of dating *the gorgeous Beth*. It was funny that he labeled her a "girlfriend" when they'd called it quits after only two months. But that was a record for Mike. *If Beth couldn't hold onto Mike*, I thought, *then how could I possibly tame him?* Beth was right about him being "beautifully flawed," as those flaws made him individual and unique. "How do you stay so calm, anyway?"

"I think of something funny, like Jack's haircut," Mike whispered in my ear.

I smirked, staring at Jack. *What girl wouldn't want to run a hand through Jack's wild tangle of dark hair?* With that hair, those blue eyes, and that athletic build of his, he was definitely a catch. But then again, so was Mike, complete with his shaggy surfer hair that girls love so much.

Another thunderous roar echoed through the jungle. This time, everything became silent, except for the ocean.

Mike's eyes widened, and his head slowly turned to face the direction of the roar. "I'm really hoping that monkey has had its rabies shots."

My heart leapt at the noise. It didn't sound like any monkey I'd ever heard. My imaginings of what it might be twisted my stomach into knots. I so much wanted to believe Jack—that it was just a harmless monkey, howling from miles away—but in a world of two suns, colored water, monster dragonflies, glowing sand, and basketball-sized spiders, who knew what kind of crazy creature was out there waiting to attack?

To be continued...

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Agartha's Castaway

Chrissy Peebles



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