

# **Agartha's Castaway**

## **Book 2**

in

### **The Trapped in the Hollow Earth Novelette Series**

By

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**For:**

Faith and Matthew. I love you.

**To:**

My Father God in heaven.

**To:**

Jayde Scott. Thank you for reading this entire manuscript from start to finish. You're the best critting partner ever! Your advice, ideas, and suggestions were nothing short of amazing. I couldn't have done it without you!

**To:**

My brilliant editor, Autumn J. Conley.

**Book trailer for the series:** [http://youtu.be/viwTOM8Ms\\_g](http://youtu.be/viwTOM8Ms_g)

## **Episode 2**

The roars faded into the jungle. I let my shoulders drop and sighed in relief. What the heck were those scary sounds anyway? Letting out another sigh, I could only explain the upheaval as monkeys fighting over territory. Nothing else made any sense. I pushed the thought to the back of my mind and focused on the waves lapping at my ankles. I wriggled my toes in the glittering sand, enjoying the soft caress against my skin, but the roars kept nagging at me.

Jack sat on a large piece of twisted white driftwood, his messy brown hair blowing in the wind. I caught him staring at me and smiled. He looked away, a red blush creeping up his neck and face. *What's that all about? Does he have something to say?* I suspected he might have a crush on me, the way I had one on Mike.

Mike's voice suddenly pierced through my thoughts. "Hey, Casey."

"Yeah?" I said.

"I need to cool off for a minute." Wiping the sweat off his brow, he squinted at the suns on the horizon, the noise from before seemingly forgotten. He whipped off his shirt and dashed into the surf; scooping up a handful of water and pouring it over his head. Sparkling droplets rolled down his striking face, like multi-colored gems.

Talk about movie star hot! It was no wonder crowds of screaming girls flocked to every competition he surfed in, no wonder MTV had labeled him a bona fide teen idol and snagged him for their reality television show, Surf's Up. I couldn't help but feast my eyes on his rippling chest and six-pack abs. That body of his sold more surf apparel and merchandise than any other surfing star.

I began to think maybe it wasn't so bad being stranded on an island for a few days with such cute guys to keep me company, if I could only take spiders out of the scenario. *Maybe I can even get Mike to notice me. Yeah, right. What am I going to do? Hang on his leg and yell, "Yo, Mike, down here! In case you haven't noticed, I'm completely and utterly in love with you? Let's watch the sunset together, smooch a little, and sip on some coconut juice."* *Lame. No wonder I don't have a boyfriend. Oh well. One day I'll have the guts to tell him everything.* But I wondered if maybe it was better to stay away. After all, not only was Mike my best friend, but he was also the biggest flirt in the state of California.

"We should start making a shelter," said Jack. "I think we could make a base out of vines and logs and then use some large leaves for the roof."

I nodded. Knowing him, he'd probably build an attic, basement, and deck too. Having Jack there with me helped to ease my fear. I knew he'd keep us alive with all of his survival skills until help came.

Mike stood, knee deep in the water, and laughed. "Hey, give rescue a chance to get here before we go building a hut." With a mischievous smile, he pointed to Jack. "He needs to chill... maybe cool down a bit. Casey, are you thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?"

My arms ached from all the heavy logs I'd carried, but turn down one of Mike's playful schemes? Never! "Yep!"

At the same time, we scooped up handfuls of water and threw them at Jack.

Laughing, he raised his hands to protect his face. Droplets flew in the air, soaking his hair and dripping down his arms.

"Refreshing, huh?" asked Mike.

A smile curled up on my lips. "I bet it was. Hey, Jack, want another blast of the freaky water?"

He chuckled. "Ha ha. Keep that up, and you'll both be gutting your own fish."

Mike laughed and dove back into the water. Jack walked over to a nearby palm tree and came back. He handed me a coconut shell filled with water from the river. "I boiled another batch. It's been in the shade for a little while."

I couldn't stop the grin that formed on my face. "Thanks. I don't know what I'd do without your awesome survival skills."

He smiled.

I took a long drink before I pulled back, using my fingers to pick something off my tongue. I looked at the water and noticed black specks floating in it. Peering closer, I realized it was ashes from the fire. No wonder Mike wasn't rushing over for a drink.

"Are you two ready to get back to work?" asked Jack.

Mike stepped out of the ocean and folded his arms. "Look, Jack. The wood's stacked, and the fires are blazin'. Don't you think we've done enough for a while? Want us to get heatstroke? Let's cool off first, and then we can start making a shelter."

"Nice compromise," I said.

Jack took a drink of water from a coconut shell. "I agree that we've been working our butts off, but we need to get this done."

As kids, Mike and Jack had never fought, but now they often butted heads. Mike's carefree attitude clashed with Jack's workaholic, perfectionist personality. I set down the coconut shell and tried to cheer up the mood a bit. I met Jack's gaze. "You know what helps Mike relax?"

"Girls?"

I shook my head; Jack couldn't be more right. "No, his other love, surfing."

Mike's face brightened, and his tone was playful. "No way! It's forbidden. You can't wake up one day and decide you want to surf just so you can be cool. It simply doesn't work that way. You see, surfing is like a birthright. Either you have it when you're born or you don't. I started body surfing when I was, like, two."

"See? I don't have surfing embedded in my DNA like you do," said Jack.

Mike chuckled and slapped him on the back. "Don't feel bad. Not everyone can be that cool."

"You didn't just say that." Jack laughed, stepping toward us.

I stepped directly into his path to defend Mike. I held back a smirk while I crossed my arms and wrinkled my brow at him. "Not so fast, tough guy. You'll have to get through me first."

A playful smile danced across Jack's lips as he held my gaze, his blue eyes twinkling. "You're the most awesome quarterback I know, but I'm not so sure about a linebacker."

He was right. I knew he could easily tackle me into next week. What chance did I have against his broad chest and strong shoulders? Jack pushed his thick hair away from his eyes and grinned, almost like he'd read my mind. I loved his messy head of brown hair.

I grabbed Mike's arm with a giggle. "Run!" We spun around and sprinted down the beach. Loose, dry sand kicked up as we ran. I glanced over my shoulder at Jack, who was gaining on me fast. As I rounded a bend, something peculiar caught my eye: three-toed indentations, measuring three feet in length. I jerked to a halt and felt a shiver run up my spine. Bird tracks! Giant bird tracks.

Mike skidded to a stop, causing Jack to crash into him from behind. Jack, in turn, nearly knocked me off my feet. I stumbled, flinging my arms out to stop myself from falling.

"Look!" I whispered at the odd tracks stretched across the beach in a wide zigzag pattern, gleaming in the sand. I clapped a hand over my mouth. Mike stared wide-eyed, and Jack stood stiffly.

I shook my head slowly. At first, I couldn't believe what I saw. Squinting against the bright sunshine, I blinked hard, but when I opened my eyes, the tracks were still there. What kind of animal could leave those? Whatever it was, it had to be huge—really huge. "What the heck?"

"Whoa," said Jack.

"Wow! What're those?" Mike inched closer.

"Big, giant, glowing footprints," said Jack, stating the obvious as he dropped to his knees and touched the soft indentations.

"Duh. I can see that. What made them?" Mike placed his foot into one of the strange impressions. "Looks like a chicken to me."

"Yeah, if you're talking some kind of mega Jurassic Park chicken." In spite of my fear, I pictured the three of us battling a giant chicken and had to laugh. "How would we take it down? Rip out its feathers? Threaten to call Colonel Sanders?"

Mike laughed.

I suppressed my chuckling when I caught a glimpse of Jack's serious face bowed over the prints. "What're doing?"

Jack walked a slow circle and then squatted. "I'm making special note of their shape, arrangement, and the distance between the paces." Feeling the smooth sand at the bottom of the indentations, he glanced up, disbelief painted over his features. "These are fresh. My mom and I have tracked lots of animals to photograph them, but none like this. It's obviously something that walks on two legs, and judging from the size and depth of the prints, the thing's heavy. It weighs at least as much as an elephant."

"Wow!" I said.

His voice suddenly pierced the air as he pointed down at a footprint. "It has claws and three big toes that point inward."

I had no idea what he meant, but I knew the claws didn't sound good at all.

Mike's eyes widened. "Should we whip out Casey's cell phone and call animal control?"

"Ha ha," said Jack. "Animal control couldn't even begin to take on this thing."

Biting my lip, I pondered what Jack was suggesting. First the dragonflies, then the spiders, and now there was some humongous chicken-elephant creature on the loose. If he was right, we would have no way to defend ourselves, and that wasn't an uplifting thought.

"These prints are avian. How can a bird be this heavy?" Jack darted down the shoreline and examined the long line of unusual prints.

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. I decided it was time to be on guard and start taking things more seriously. We had no idea what we were up against, and it was best not to underestimate anything at this point. "Maybe the birds here are oversized, like the spiders we saw...and those dragonflies near the water. I'm sure a giant hungry bird could cause a lot of damage with its beak if it mistakes us for a nut."

"Maybe it's not a bird," said Mike.

"At this point, it could be anything."

"Up for a little adventure?" Mike's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Wanna follow the tracks and find out?"

"What, and be the other white meat?" For all I knew, we could be chasing some dangerous, elusive creature deep into the jungle. "Are you insane?"

"We all know the answer to that one, Casey."

I smirked. Mike was such a daredevil, thriving on danger anytime the opportunity presented itself.

His face hardened into grim lines. "I'm more worried about not having a hunting permit."

My eyebrows arched. "Seriously?" He was so full of it.

Mike burst out in laughter, and I couldn't help but smile. He was only trying to ease our fears with humor and keep us both distracted. It worked, to a degree.

"Hey, check this out!" called Jack.

Careful not to step on the tracks, I darted over. He pointed at the zigzag pattern stretching as far as I could see.

"Its stride almost doubled here, and the tracks are now going in a straight line." He paused as if to gather his thoughts before he continued. "And its three-toed feet are now pointing outward. It must've started running."

"After prey?" I said.

"Yeah, 'cause a thing this big wouldn't run for jollies," said Jack. "It'd conserve energy. And it wouldn't be scared of anything either. I think it was definitely chasing something for its breakfast." He shook his head and blew out a breath. "We need to face the fact that this thing could be a predator, which means—"

"This beach isn't safe," finished Mike in a grim tone.

I knelt down and placed my left hand inside one of the footprints. My long hair fell over my face. Stomach fluttering, I turned and met Jack's eyes. "That's a scary thought."

His eyes grew wider. "I know. The worst-case scenario keeps running over and over in my mind."

I recoiled. "What?"

"If we stay here, we'll become a banquet, and I have no intention of becoming part of that thing's midnight snack."

A monkey squealed, jumped down from a tree, and disappeared into the wilderness.

I flinched and held my hand over my heart. I rose to my feet. "I'm getting the creeps, big time. C'mon! Let's get out of this place." I peered around, unsure of which way to turn.

"Whatever this place is," whispered Jack.

Mike nodded. "Yeah, we definitely should cruise on out of here."

A pair of squawking birds flew into the jungle. I noticed deep imprints that came out of the tropical vegetation, crossed, and then re-crossed. Hundreds of marks shone brightly in the sand. It must've been running around in circles, or... I froze, my mind unable to form the terrifying

thought. My eyes widened, and my pulse raced out of control. No way! There's more than one. And they seemed to frequent this place quite often, like a favorite hangout. I pointed. "Guys, look!"

Mike took a few steps forward, and then gazed back at me and Jack with a bewildered expression. "Think there's a pack of wild animals running around here?"

"Either that, or they're having a big ol' square dance," I said. I nudged Jack. "So, whatcha think?"

His gaze grew intense. "I bet we're on its hunting ground."

"Hunting ground?" Horror flooded through me. "I don't believe this!"

Mike ran a hand through his hair. "Dude, I hate to say this, but I don't think we're in Kansas anymore."

Cliché, but true. In that instant, I realized how Dorothy must have felt when she opened her eyes in the middle of Oz, surrounded by things she couldn't explain. "We need to find help and get off this island before it gets dark."

Jack let out a long, slow breath. "Agreed. Spending the night would suck. Let's just hope it doesn't come down to that."

I focused on the sounds of the jungle around me, swallowing hard as I let my gaze dart toward the thickets and bushes. The whatever-it-was could be hiding behind the thick trees, stalking us at that very moment. Another high-pitched screech made the hair on my neck stand on end. "How about switching to Plan B and following the river?"

"I never wanted to stick around this beach in the first place," said Mike. "Help might be on the other side of this island."

Jack nodded. "Okay. Sounds like a plan. Guess those fires were nothing but a big waste of time."

I heaved a sigh. "Tell me about it."

"All right, let's move it then," said Jack. "We need to get as far away from this place as possible."

"One problem..." Mike glanced down and pointed at his bare feet and then at mine.

I gave Jack my best "puppy eyes". "I'm so sorry. I know we need to get the heck out of here."

Jack motioned for us to go. "Come on then."



“Thanks, ‘cause stepping on swarms of fire ants the size of my cell phone might not feel too good,” I said, heading down the beach.

Mike tugged at my tank top as he caught up. “Wait a minute. I wore sandals, man. What does it feel like to get bitten by one of those things?”

“Like burning flames scorching your skin,” I said. “Hope you have a fire extinguisher handy.”

He flashed me his easygoing grin. I could never get tired of that movie star smile.

The suns beat down, hotter than before. Sweat trickled down my temples and forehead. I wiped my brow with the back of my hand. “You know, that river takes us deep into the rainforest. Think it’s safe with that two-legged monster running around?” I shuddered.

“I’ll protect you.” Mike looped his arm over my shoulder.

Jack rolled his eyes. “Oh, brother.”

“Listen, I don’t need your protection,” I said, flinging Mike’s arm off. “I’m not afraid of some giant rooster on the loose. And I’m definitely not some delicate flower. I’ve learned a lot in my karate class, and believe me, I can defend myself.” I smiled. “And you, too, Mr. Macho.”

Mike smirked as we hurried back around the bend. “I like my girls tough...” He pointed down at my painted toenails. “...but girly too.”

I smiled again, this time more widely. My fingernails and toenails matched perfectly with my carefully chosen outfit. I’d painted them turquoise, one of Mike’s favorite colors. “You love any color that reminds you of the beach or the ocean.”

He winked. “See? You do get me.”

“Yep, like nobody else.”

Jack scooped sand on one of the fires to smother it. A flash of yellow light sparkled, and then a large plume of black smoke rose high in the air.

I threw on my tennis shoes and hurried over to help with the other fires. I nudged Mike to get his attention and whispered, “Why’s Jack even bothering with the fires? I think we have bigger problems... like maybe being eaten.”

“You know Nature Boy. He’s probably worried about setting a fire or something.” Mike dropped to one knee and slipped into his sandals.

Kicking up another flurry of sand, Jack squinted. “Okay, fires are out.”

“Well, then let’s blow this popsicle stand,” said Mike.

Jack gave him a playful slug on the arm. “Just remember, it’s not going to be your kind of adventure. We’re just trying to find a way home, not an opportunity to wrestle with twenty-foot flesh-eating crocodiles in piranha-, snake-, and electric eel-infested water.”

He smiled, his bright green eyes flashing with pride. As usual, Mike took any sort of comment that referred to his adventurous personality as a compliment. “Let’s cruise out of here.” With a last wink, he walked away, swinging his arms back and forth like he would do on any beach vacation, worries seemingly forgotten.

“The faster, the better.” I headed toward the jungle. Bright red flowers grew against the curtain of dark green foliage. I pushed through the vines, my heart thumping like a bass drum, desperately hoping we wouldn’t run into any more of those spiders...or even worse, whatever had been roaring in the crazy jungle or whatever had left those giant eerie footprints.

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For the first hour of our trek through the jungle, we climbed over thick undergrowth and ducked under ferns in silence. I led the way, showing off my leadership skills, hoping they’d forget about my earlier screaming spider fiasco. I’d prove to them I was still tough, even if I had painted my toenails and shed my tomboy image.

“Whoa. Look!” Jack stopped short and pointed up.

I peered at the high canopy of trees rising above our heads. Little sunlight broke through the thick leaves, plunging the jungle into a land of shadows. I squinted, trying to figure out what he wanted me to see. “What?”

Jack turned, his brow furrowed. “Look closer.”

It had better not be spiders. Goosebumps rose along my arms. I glanced in the direction he pointed, but nothing jumped out at me. The leaves were pale green and fern-like—nothing unusual. But then my gaze fell on the bubbly bark. I dipped a finger in the sticky goo. It felt smooth like honey, cold to the touch. “Oh...you mean the brown stuff?”

“They’re coated in maple syrup or something.” Mike leaned toward the tree, sticking out his tongue. “Hmm. Should I give it a lick?”

Smirking, Jack gripped his arm. “Don’t you dare.”

“So, no dipping coconut in fondue?” I asked him.

He shot me a cute grin.

I ran my hand over the oily, wax-like substance. It had the color and consistency of chocolate. Rubbing my fingers together, I breathed in the earthy smell of pine. I hurried to wipe my hands on a leaf, but the goo stuck to my skin like glue. “Gross! Okay, so maybe this is one dessert that would even make a buzzard puke.”

We all burst out in laughter.

Jack stared upward, his brows once again knitted together in concentration. I loved it when that look came over his face. I was intrigued by his knowledge and passion for science and nature. I was glad he knew his stuff, and I couldn't have asked for a better person to be stranded with. If I weren't with Jack, I'd have been a total mess by now. He was my rock.

“This looks like a Jurassic conifer we studied at school,” said Jack.

Mike shrugged. “Who cares?”

“You don't get it, do you?” Jack stared at him. “This tree—it's been extinct for two hundred million years. How can you be so bored and nonchalant about it when you're standing in front of something that shouldn't exist—at least not here and not now?” He shook his head and shot me a questioning glare, the same expression he always gave me when he was about to give up arguing with Mike's logic.

“So what kind of place could be home to the oldest species of trees in the world?” I rubbed my sticky hands on my shorts. Unbidden images of deserted beaches, wild animals, and no civilization for miles and miles came to mind. I shuddered. “This place is really freaking me out. It gets weirder and weirder by the minute. What's next?”

Mike grinned. “Elves?”

“Maybe this group of trees survived extinction,” said Jack, ignoring Mike's comment. “It has happened before. Back in the nineties, I think. But it's still really, really odd.”

“Hey, Jack, do you know girls pay more attention to guys who—let's say—don't spend all their time learning about...” Mike cleared his throat. “...uh, prehistoric trees?”

I shook my head, angry at Mike's insensitive and shallow remark. With both hands on my hips, I glared at him. “You just *think* you're the hottest guy on the planet, Mike, don't cha? Well, take a back seat because Jack could easily pass for a model with his big white smile, wild, dark hair, and blue eyes.” Jack smiled as I continued.

“And lots of girls would be thrilled to go out with the hunky quarterback of the football team—and girls appreciate brains too.”

“So, whatcha waiting for, buddy?” said Mike, slapping Jack on the back.

“I’m not like you. I don’t want all females within a fifty-mile radius to faint as soon as they get a whiff of my pheromones.”

Mike laughed. “It’s not the pheromones. It’s my haircut.” He shook his shoulder. “C’mon, bro! Give me a better answer than *that*.”

Shrugging, Jack’s gaze lingered on my face. “Dunno. The right girl maybe?”

I smiled. Jack so had a crush on me. I could pick up on all the signs. I should just ask him, but now is not the time. The more I pondered, the more I was flattered. Jack was a hot guy who could get any girl he wanted. I knew countless girls with crushes on him.

“All right, guys,” said Mike, wiping the sweat off his face. “Let’s keep moving.”

\* \* \*

Following the river, I stayed a few feet ahead of Mike and Jack. The path was overgrown, and I had difficulty treading through the dense thicket and high grass. The footsteps behind me quickened. I turned as Mike bumped into me.

His arm slid around my waist, steadying me before I stumbled. “My bad.” He gazed into my eyes and grinned.

I tingled at his touch and couldn’t wipe off my big, dumb grin. I knew “accidentally” bumping into me was his way of flirting, because I’d seen him do it with others. I didn’t mind though. He could flirt with me all day long if he wanted.

Spinning in a slow circle, Jack asked, “Hey, you guys smell that?”

“Yeah, bro.” Mike waved the air in front of him. “Whew! I told you to cut down on the cologne.”

Jack let out a low laugh.

I stopped and inhaled deeply. The air smelled sweet, like perfume. I lifted my head and let the soft breeze caress my skin as I watched a nearby blooming bush sway in the wind, but the scent wasn’t coming from that. I peeked ahead through the tangle of vegetation and saw a glimpse of heaven—an explosion of color painting the lush green grass. I felt laughter bubbling

in the back of my throat. The scene reminded me of the poppy field in front of the Emerald City. “So when, exactly, were we carried by a tornado to the land of Oz?”

“I just hope none of us takes a long snooze,” said Jack, seemingly mirroring my thoughts.

Mike slapped his back. “No snoozes here, buddy.” He pointed at the beautiful sight. “Is that a Kodak moment or what?”

Jack pushed through the leafy vegetation. “It’s totally cool, man.”

Pushing low branches aside, I burst through toward the beckoning meadow. Swarms of red, blue, and orange butterflies danced above thousands of big, tulip-like blooms, stretching out as far as the eye could see. I gasped. I wanted nothing more than to try and paint every single flower and butterfly, to capture them on canvas. I debated between oils and watercolors, or maybe even painting with a palette knife. *Yes. That would be perfect, creating wonderful texture and catching the light in the most beautiful way.* Distant bell-like sounds filled the air. I stood still for a moment and pulled my hair up over my ear. “Can you hear that? Sounds like wind chimes.”

Jack blinked. “Where the heck is it coming from?”

“It’s coming from everywhere,” said Mike.

“We must be near a village.” My heart fluttered as Jack’s eyes brightened. I sucked in a trembling breath. “Civilization. Maybe we could get our hands on a cell phone.” How I needed to hear my mom’s sweet voice.

“Or...” Mike paused like he always did, for dramatic effect. “...it could be a tribe of cannibals waiting for us with a giant cooking pot or witchdoctors hunting for heads to shrink.”

I reached for his hand and patted it. “Do you need one of my “stay positive” pep talks, mister?”

Mike squeezed my fingers and pasted a charming smile on his face. “Do you promise to rescue me when they roast me over a fire?”

“Maybe.”

He grinned.

Jack dropped to his knees in the vibrant garden. “The bell sounds are coming from the flowers. I’d swear to it!”

“What?” I asked, confusion flooding through me. “I don’t see how that’s possible.”

Eyes wide, mouth gaping, Mike gingerly touched a blue petal. “Dude, you’re right! That’s sooo awesome.”

“No, guys! It’s got to be a wind chime on someone’s porch,” I insisted, smiling at the prospect of other people nearby. My smile faded as soon as I put my ear close to a big, pink blossom. All dreams of finding a village were now crushed. *No freaking way!* It was coming from the flowers. Clear as day, I could hear the soft tinkling echoing from the bulb. “I don’t get it. How?”

Jack shook his head and rose to his feet. “I don’t know. How is any of the weird stuff in this place possible? It all violates the laws of science.”

I put an arm around his waist. “Don’t worry. We’ll figure this out.”

He smiled and gave me a quick squeeze. I bent down and poked at a red flower. It made a high-pitched melody. When I touched an orange one, it made a low-pitched noise. I caressed a turquoise flower, and it made a different twang. Cocking an eyebrow, I ran my hands up and down an entire line of blooms. They sounded like a xylophone. Each flower was tuned to a specific pitch, like on a musical scale. “Can you believe this? I wish I had it as a ringtone for my cell.”

We all chuckled.

Mike picked a big bloom, as yellow as the suns, and put it in my hair, just above my ear. He flashed me a smile, showing off his perfect white teeth against his gorgeous tan. “This flower represents all the light you bring into my life.”

I grinned. It was corny, but he was ever the flirt. Even there, in that weird place where nothing seemed normal, he had to switch on his irresistible charm. He made me feel special. I knew it was all part of his game, but it felt good nonetheless.

A gentle breeze caused the flowers to ripple. I reached out to pick a purple-red bloom when a butterfly landed on my hand, tickling my skin. I laughed. The luminescent, metallic blue reflected by the sunlight shining on its wings took my breath away. I stood and stretched out my arm. The butterfly slowly opened and closed its delicate wings. With each flutter, it lightly sprinkled silver glitter into the air.

“Oh my gosh! Did you just see that?” I squealed, shaking their shoulders.

“No way!” shouted Mike. “It’s spraying silver stuff everywhere.”

An easy grin lit up Jack’s face, sudden excitement in his voice. “What the heck?”

My eyes flew open and I smiled, a sense of harmony washing over me. Striped, spotted, and squiggly-lined butterflies floated over the flowers, leaving long trails of sparkling glitter in their wake. Steven Spielberg himself couldn't have asked for better special effects.

Mike's smile grew bigger. "They remind me of—"

"Tinker Bell!" I said.

"Exactly." Mike dusted his hands on his board shorts, then gave me a once-over, moistening his lips.

My heart sped as I felt his gaze move from my eyes to my lips, down my body, and then back up to my eyes. *Is he...is he checking me out? No way!* Heat rushed to my face, and I turned to hide my embarrassment.

"It's absolutely amazing, but there's no such thing as Tinker Bell and pixie dust." Jack looked at us with a blank stare. Obviously, he couldn't explain the glimmering trail. "It's...it's..." He gasped and faltered. "I dunno."

I knew Jack desperately wanted to explain the strange place and put all of our minds at ease, but he simply wasn't able to. Everything defied logic and science and natural law, and that was hard on him, for understanding the world was his thing. He spent so much of his time studying and researching with his dad, but that island threw everything he'd learned right back in his face.

As if on cue, a butterfly landed on my nose. For a split second, it lingered there, and then it flew off toward the flowers, leaving a glittering trail behind as it passed over the sea of chiming blossoms.

"See?" Jack motioned toward the garden. "That, my friends, is just not normal."

My eyes focused on the scene before me. "Well, not normal doesn't necessarily mean bad."

Wide, velvet wings fluttered and shimmered everywhere, landing on my head, face, arms, legs, and clothes. Soft music echoed all around me. I couldn't help but smile. Nature sure knew how to put on a concert with all the bells and whistles. Still, I wondered where the heck we really were. Mike's words back at the beach rang through my head: *"For all we know, we could be in another dimension."* *Was he right? Could we have slipped through some kind of portal?*

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Jack stood, surrounded by color, reminding me of the brilliant, rich shades on my palette

when I painted. I watched as he tried to catch one of the fluttering butterflies swirling around him. The way he jumped up and down, a deep frown set between his brows in concentration, was just hilarious. I snorted as I tried swallowing the laughter bubbling up inside me.

Touching my arm, Mike chuckled. "See? Told you I'd rub off on him."

I sighed and brought my gaze back to Jack. He looked happy and seemed to forget about our problems, even if only for a moment. It almost seemed like we were in Fiji, exploring a tropical island and having loads of fun. It was exactly how our vacation was *supposed* to be. I bit my lip, knowing the reality of the situation: We were shipwrecked in the middle of nowhere.

Mike crept through the flowers and pointed at a butterfly. "Check out the one over there."

I cocked my head and whispered, "Which one?" There were millions of them swarming everywhere.

With a wave of his hand, he motioned me over and spoke in a whisper. "Shhh. I don't want to scare it."

Smiling, I looked around. "Scare what?" The butterflies didn't seem too bothered by our presence. Mike waved me forward again. I turned my attention from Jack and followed him across the field.

Mike stopped and cupped a snow-white butterfly in his hands. "Isn't it cool?"

"Don't! You'll hurt it."

"I'd never do that."

I narrowed my gaze. "C'mon! Let it go."

Mike grinned, the same charming smile I'd seen on magazine covers. He was such a child at heart that I couldn't help but return his beaming smile. "It's fine. See?" As Mike slowly lifted his top hand off, the butterfly fluttered a few times and then stopped. He quickly cupped it again.

"Please just let it go already," I begged.

"What? Like my much-needed trip to the barber shop?" He peeked through his fingers at his precious catch.

"You wanna crush its wings?" I jumped up, reaching for his hands. His body twisted, and he tumbled back as we both fell into the soft grass. *How can I be such a klutz?* I'd just knocked Mike flat on his butt and landed on top of him like a sack of potatoes. We burst out laughing as the butterfly fluttered away.



My long hair brushed across his face, and he gently pushed it away. “I love it when a pretty girl knocks me off my feet.”

“What? You think I was throwing myself at you or something?”

“Feel free to do just that.” Mike winked. “But, uh, I’m going to need some sweet talk first.”

“You’re pathetic,” I teased. Despite the humor, I felt heat rush to my face. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to tackle you like that.”

He chuckled. “Apology accepted.”

A jolt ran through me as my arm brushed against his lean, muscular frame. I lowered my gaze to avoid his piercing eyes. I couldn’t figure out why I had that stupid crush on him. I decided I should swear off Mike forever. Yep, I was done and over with it. He would be my best friend and nothing more. I felt his gaze on me and made the mistake of looking up. My pulse skipped a beat when he shot me his easygoing grin, all dimples and bright teeth. His weapon was his astonishing good looks, and I couldn’t help but fall for him. I groaned inwardly at my dancing heart. *Yep, I’ll get over him...starting tomorrow.*

Mike jumped to his feet. He reached for my arm and pulled me up. The grin was still there, but something changed in his gaze as I stood before him, staring into his eyes, frozen as if time stood still. I cleared my throat and forced my brain into motion. I tried to think of something to say—anything—but nothing came to mind. The light caught in the green speckles of his eyes, taking my breath away. I drew in air, but more blood rushed to my face like a tidal wave. He looked so...so composed and unaffected, and I knew I was making a complete fool out of myself.

Stroking my hair, he whispered, “You should see yourself in all this glitter and sunshine. You look like an angel.”

“So...do...you,” I stuttered. My voice came raspy and thin, nothing like the way I meant to sound. I cringed and waited for his mocking laughter, but it never came. The way Mike sparkled in the bright sunlight, I could have sworn the make-up and costume artists from the *Twilight* set had dumped an entire bottle of glitter into his wild blond hair and all over him. It wasn’t just his skin; it was everything, from his clothes to his hair. When he shook his head, sparkles landed on the nearby grass and flowers, the air around us glistening like heaven. Even his eyelashes were beaded with the shiny stuff.

I smiled. “You know I have a thing for boys who sparkle.”

“Too bad I don’t sport a pair of fangs too,” he said with a chuckle.

Butterflies circled above as the song of tingling bells hung in the air. Mike held my gaze through the cloud of glitter falling softly upon us and wrapped his arms around my waist, drawing me closer, just as I’d daydreamt during class so many times. This time felt different though—real and right somehow. I leaned against him until I could feel the warmth of his skin against my racing heart, and I lifted my arm to touch his flushed cheek. He didn’t flinch or even react. He just smiled and kissed my fingers where they touched his lips. *Just friends...and nothing more...* The words echoed in my ears until I dropped my hand again, hesitating a little as regret washed over me.

His eyes fixed on my lips and moved closer. I moistened them, not sure what to do. *Is he...gosh, is he gonna kiss me? Or is he just playing games?* I knew my stunned reaction must have shown, because he’d never really been interested in me—ever.

His mouth lowered on mine. Our lips connected in a slow, gentle touch. In spite of the smoldering temperature, a shiver ran through me. I closed my eyes, savoring his sweet taste. Goosebumps rippled my skin as his strong hands wandered down my back to my middle, lifting my arms and guiding them around his neck, drawing me unbelievably closer; I was already standing so impossibly close. More sweet, romantic kisses on the lips followed. My heart drummed so hard that I wondered if Mike could hear it. If he could, I’d surely die from embarrassment. *Why does this have to be my first kiss? And why am I so nervous anyway? Is it because I’ve dreamt of this moment a million times?*

His arms squeezed me more tightly, but his touch remained soft, like the butterflies fluttering on the nearby blossoms. I stood on my toes and parted my lips, unsure of what else to do. Without warning, he pulled away, staring down at me, wide-eyed. I let my hands linger on his shoulders a moment too long before taking a step back, the magical moment broken and confusion taking its place. “*Did I...did I do something wrong?*” I wanted to ask, but I didn’t have the courage.

Mike cleared his throat and ran a hand through his hair. “Sorry. I...I don’t know what came over me. I just...”

I gaped at him, speechless. *Apologizing? It was absolutely perfect, but...I guess it wasn’t good enough for him.* I looked away, ashamed that I’d thought I could keep up with all the experienced girls he usually dated. I was nothing like them at all.

He cupped my face and kissed me on the forehead. “You’re my best friend. I shouldn’t be crossing the line. It’s just...I can’t stop thinking about you.”

My jaw dropped. I realized he might just be making fun of me, but it still felt great hearing him say it. I stared at him, still speechless, waiting for him to laugh and tell me he was just joking. When his lips didn’t even flinch, I wondered what had changed between us. *Is it because I shed my tomboy image? Because I got rid of my ponytails and caps? My baggy shirts and holey jeans? Maybe it’s just because we’re stranded on some weird island, and there are no other girls around...yet.*

I reached back into my memory to try and get a grasp of what might have sparked his interest in me as a girl. Recently, I had been making efforts toward being more mature, more girly, and more hip. I’d even shown up at his seventeenth birthday party a month earlier dressed to kill in a red dress, matching jewelry, and high heels, with long black curls tumbling down my back. It was the first time I had ever used a curling iron and make-up, but the results were stunning, and Mike and Jack had sworn I’d walked right off the pages of a fashion magazine. *Maybe that did the trick.* But that didn’t explain why Mike seemed so interested in me now, when I was all dirty and sticky and had sand in my shoes and marks on my arms and legs from spider battles and collecting wood.

“Your eyes are as blue as the summer sky,” Mike whispered as he took a step closer and wrapped his arms around me. “They take my breath away.”

“Thanks, you’re so sweet.” My skin prickled, and my heart began to race again. I began to wonder if that would ever stop. I doubted I’d ever get used to Mike’s affections. If all I ever got was that one chance—that one precious kiss—I’d treasure it forever. I grinned at him, ready to get back my magical moment, because I was tired of drawing stupid arrow hearts on my folders, papers, and even on the giant oak tree in my backyard.

He suddenly frowned. “You’re okay with this, aren’t you?”

“What?”

He looked uncomfortable as his fingers fidgeted nervously across my skin. “I’ve been thinking about this for weeks, but I wasn’t sure...well, I had no idea how to tell you. We’ve got a connection. I...I...” He sighed. “I don’t think we can be friends.”

“What?” I repeated.

“What I’m trying to say is that I want more than friendship, Casey.”

I looked at him, my head reeling. *Am I dreaming? Did some tropical bug bite poison me into some kind of stupor?* My crush was finally giving in to the attraction I'd been feeling for years, and I couldn't believe it. I took a deep breath to calm my nerves, hoping I'd be able to finish the conversation without passing out.

My knees threatened to buckle. "I've felt the spark too." *Spark? More like a raging forest fire.* My voice seemed barely more than a whisper. I cleared my throat, forcing myself to hold his gaze.

He echoed my thoughts. "I think it's more than a spark, don't you?"

I gasped, ready to blurt out the secret I'd sworn to keep to myself forever, but he didn't give me any time. Leaning forward, he brushed his warm lips against mine—and wow! The chemistry between us was hotter than the two blazing suns above our heads. I locked my arms around his neck as his fingers drew soft circles on my lower back. It felt so good that I leaned into him, letting him hold my weight when my own knees wouldn't. Before the kiss could deepen, I heard the call of a familiar voice.

"What the heck's going on?" Jack's mouth fell open, and I saw hurt, shock, and confusion flash across his face.

I jumped back like a startled cat. *Crap!* I was so caught up in the moment with Mike that I'd forgotten all about Jack. My head swam. Blinking several times, I broke away and smoothed out my hair, waiting for my mind to kick into action, but it took its time. Finally, I said, "We'd better get out of this rain...I mean, this...this glitter storm."

Mike smiled and winked as he brushed off his clothes. "We'll, uh...*chat* more later."

I gave him the biggest grin ever. I felt like I was walking on air, giggly and floating, as I scrambled over to Jack, the heat in my cheeks scorching my skin.

"You two having fun?" asked Jack, sarcasm filling his voice.

I could only hope he wouldn't start asking too many questions, because I had no idea what to say if he did. I put on a smile—the best way to downplay the situation—and laughed as I gave him a tap on the shoulder. "Just clowning around."

But my hopes that he wouldn't interrogate me were pointless. "Clowning around? Is that what you call it?" Jack asked, frowning. "It looked to me like you were Super Glued to his lips." He looked angry, but that was nothing new these days, particularly when Mike flirted with me. "Why, Casey? Why *him*, of all people?"

I shrugged, hoping he'd drop the subject, but judging from the way he was clenching and unclenching his fist, he wasn't about to let it go that easily. By way of explanation, I offered, "Everything happened so fast. I mean, I'm just as surprised as you are." *Surprised? More like flabbergasted, but he doesn't need to know that.*

"I don't believe this!" Jack blew out a breath and shook his head. "Are you seriously into Mike?"

Mike stepped forward and straightened his shoulders. "And what if she is?"

I elbowed him and shot him a shut-up kind of glare. "Hey, me and Jack need a minute. Okay?"

Hesitating for a moment, he huffed a sigh. "Sure thing," and with that, he turned and walked away.

Guilt flooded through me, forcing me to stare down at my toes, embarrassed. I realized how horrible it must have been for Jack to see us kissing. The hurt look in his eyes turned my stomach into knots. I just wished he approved, but I knew he never would. *Why would he?* Jack cared about me, and in spite of the fact that Mike was my best friend, we both knew he was also the biggest player in town—heck, in California or the whole United States, for that matter. Getting involved with him was a *bad* idea. I knew it, but I didn't care. I reasoned that Mike was worth the risk, whether Jack liked it or not.

Jack snorted and shook his head again. "You can't even deny it! The way you look at him like some..." He gestured about with his hand, trying to find the right word. "You're like a freaking lovesick puppy! You're playing with fire."

"You think I don't know that?"

"I know Mike's our best friend and I shouldn't be talking about him like this. But he's crossing the line. I won't stand by and do nothing... and watch you get hurt. Mike makes a fantastic friend, but that's it. And you, of all people, should know that guy's nothing but trouble. Do you really want to be one of *those* girls? Because I think you deserve a lot better than that."

Of course I didn't want to be one of Mike's girls, the groupies that hung all over him at the beach and lingered on his every word. That was Jack, big brother to the rescue. He could come up with a list a mile long why me and Mike shouldn't date. The first pang of doubt started to nag at the back of my mind. *Maybe he has a point. Maybe Mike is playing me like all the others. But why would he risk our wonderful friendship over something he's not even serious about?*

“You’re making a big deal over nothing. It was innocent—a little kiss on the lips. Me and Mike are *just* friends,” I said. *For now.*

Jack frowned but said nothing. Somewhere behind us, feet shuffled in the dirt and leaves. We turned in time to see Mike approaching and pointing to the meadow, unfazed as usual. “Hey, you guys, see those crazy-looking trees by the river?” he asked.

“She’s not into bad boys, Mike.” Jack grabbed Mike’s arm with one hand. “Let me stress that your so-called “best friend” isn’t interested.”

“Oh, brother.” I slapped Jack’s arm and let out a loud huff. *Since when does he get to screen my potential boyfriends?* There was no way I was off limits, unless I decided it was going to be that way. “Stop it, Jack. I’m a big girl, and I can make my own decisions.” I thought maybe I didn’t sound convincing enough, because Jack didn’t seem to react. But I knew being angry with him wasn’t going to help. I took a deep breath, trying to calm down. Jack’s intentions were good, and he meant well. He was only trying to protect me from a guy who could possibly break my heart. *But I can handle things myself. I’m sevenTEEN, not seven.*

Mike’s gaze fell to Jack’s hand. “It’s her choice to make.” He flung off his arm.

“Any particular reason why you’re hitting on *our* friend?” asked Jack, clenching his jaw.

Mike met my eyes and smiled. “Not only is she hot, but *she gets me.*”

“Yeah, and how many times did you practice that line in the mirror?” retorted Jack.

Hearing those words out of Mike’s mouth sent a jolt through me. *Wow. He actually thinks I’m hot...and I do get him.* Few people did. Jack was as thrilled over this news as he would be jumping out of a plane without a parachute. So, flattered as I was by Mike’s admission, I decided it was best to change the subject. I linked my arms between the two of them, squinted in the direction Mike pointed, and said, “Yeah. Let’s go check those trees out.”

The height reminded me of our redwood forests back home. I found the blue color of the leaves odd, but even stranger, the tree trunks had foot-long, cone-shaped protrusions sticking out of their bark. The trunk almost looked like a Hercules-club tree I had seen once on a trip to Louisiana.

Mike pushed past giant green leaves with dark red blotches and scanned the jungle. “Hear that noise? And I’m not talking about the river.”

The roar of a waterfall echoed in my ears. “Yeah, sounds like a waterfall is close by.”

Jack picked up a blue leaf and held it up to the sunlight. “There’s no autumn in the rainforest. *None* of this makes any sense.”

“You’re telling me.” I sat down and leaned against a moss-covered log.

Mike laid his head in my lap, twirling a thick blade of grass between his fingers.

I glanced down at him. “Comfy?” I giggled as I brushed a piece of hair from Mike’s cheek. I couldn’t get over how smooth his skin felt, how much I liked caressing his face.

Mike grinned, knowing he had me hook, line, and sinker.

I began to fantasize about our relationship. *Can we really be girlfriend-boyfriend? Better yet, will he ask me to the Prom? Ooh, I’ll dazzle those snotty Barbie girls with one of my mom’s designer dresses, just like at Mike’s party. Okay, so they’re from a secondhand shop, but no one can tell, right? And I know...I could even arrange my long hair in some elaborate up-do loaded with tiny curls, because bouncing curls are all the rage when it comes to up-dos.* I grinned at the thought of it.

Jack met my gaze and frowned. “You know, I’m having a hard time accepting any of this.” He sat down on a fallen log across from me.

Mike seemed to think Jack was just talking about the oddities surrounding them in that strange place, but I knew better. I blew out a breath as I stood and looked at Jack. I was still angry, and we could have cut the tension with a knife. As far as I was concerned, Jack needed to get over it. One day, I’d find the nerve to tell him so, but until then, I’d just have to smile and force the thoughts to the back of my mind, pretending everything was all right.

“You know, we could climb one of these trees, using these cone-looking things.” I put my hand on one of the protrusions. “They’re sort of like hand- and footholds, like on a rock-climbing wall. They could get us up to the lower branches, and then we could get a better view of the island.” Squealing monkeys scrambled above me from limb to limb, branches snapping beneath their feet, sending blue leaves sailing in the air. “I hope you’re not scared of those little guys,” I said.

The problem wasn’t the monkeys, but heights. Jack was deadly afraid of them. Jack jumped to his feet and walked to the strange tree. He stepped on one of the cones protruding from the trunk and bounced a little too eagerly, as if he had something to prove. Maybe it was a guy thing. He tried several more protrusions. “I think they’ll hold our weight. Great idea, Casey!”

“Thanks,” I answered with a wide grin. “Now, let’s climb this bad boy.”

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Shafts of glimmering sunlight penetrated the jungle canopy. I had no idea what time it was, but I felt as if I’d been on the island for days already. I hoped that climbing the tree would provide us with a more helpful view of the landscape so we could figure out where the heck we were. My attention drifted upward and landed on Mike’s toned calf muscles as he began his ascent.

“Careful!” he called down. “Some of these cones are rotted out.”

“Thanks for the heads-up, bro,” said Jack.

“Why don’t you wait here?” I touched Jack’s arm to get his attention. As much as he thought he could climb that tree, he’d be more comfortable with his feet planted on the ground. Heights just weren’t his thing. He shook his head, but I tightened my grip to silence him before he started to disagree. “I’ll go up there, okay? And, uh, when I get back down, we’ll describe everything to you.”

“*We’ll?* You’re going up there with *him?*” Jack shot a glare in Mike’s direction, causing me to sigh inwardly. “Do you think that’s such a great idea?”

I shook my head. It wasn’t like I had a choice. I couldn’t climb up alone, and Jack would probably freak out halfway up, and then we’d have to figure out a way to get him back down. Jack would just have to deal with it. “Get a grip, Jack. Whatcha think we’re gonna do? Make out on a branch? Mike may be open to the idea, but breaking my leg and hobbling around through the jungle on crutches we’ve gotta make with knotty sticks isn’t my idea of fun.” I tried to make it sound like a joke, but my heart sped up in my chest, excited at the prospect of being alone with my could-be boyfriend, if only for a while.

Jack blinked and then quickly turned away, but I didn’t miss the betrayed look in his eyes, and I felt a twinge of guilt for taking such a tone with him. Jack was only concerned for me. He didn’t want to stand by and see me hook up with somebody who had such a bad reputation.

“Listen…” I took a deep breath and waited until he turned to face me. “Jack, all I want is to find a way out of this place. Don’t worry so much.” I pinched Jack’s cheek, and he smiled, but it seemed fake, as if it was plastered there to fool me. If that was the intent of it, it failed miserably.



“Just be cautious. Every girl’s chasing Mike, TV star and champion surfer. Maybe Mr. Cool is bored with getting anybody his heart desires, and now he wants a challenge, like trying to date his best friend.”

“That’s not true, Jack!” Mike shouted down. “You’re sooo not my type.”

Jack snorted. “Eavesdropping? What, you afraid I’ll sway her?”

I couldn’t believe the nerve of Jack, claiming that Mike only wanted me because he was bored and needed a challenge. I was sure Mike would never risk our friendship for a summer romance, some kind of conquest. I assumed that maybe Mike’s relationships didn’t work because he never bothered to become friends with the girls he dated. But Mike and I had known each other since the day we were born. We’d spent countless hours talking about everything from school and our future to our dreams, and I was sure we knew everything about each other. I convinced myself that our relationship would be different because it had a stronger foundation.

Clearly disgusted, Jack shook his head. “Is that your only comeback, Mike? A joke? You should be angry at what I just said. Why aren’t you even trying to convince me—or even Casey—that she means more than anything to you? You should be yelling at me, telling me how you’ll never treat her like the others and how this isn’t a game to you, because she’s special and the most wonderful thing in your life! That’s what I’d be doing if...oh, never mind.”

Mike stretched his arms out and gripped another cone-like handhold. There was still a leisurely smile plastered on his face, but something crossed his perfect features. It was either annoyance or stubbornness or a little of both, but whatever it was, I couldn’t quite place it.

“I don’t have to explain myself to you,” said Mike. “Last time I checked, you weren’t exactly in a long-lasting relationship either. There’s nothing wrong with kissing a few frogs to find the princess.” He placed his foot on the next protrusion and pulled up his body weight.

“A *few*?” asked Jack. “You kissed the entire pond, moved over to the stream, then the river, and finally the lake.”

I was beginning to feel insulted. I grabbed Jack’s arm and asked in a sad tone, “What’s so wrong with me that you think he couldn’t actually like me for me?”

Jack’s voice became somber and soft. “Absolutely nothing. It’s not you. It’s Mike. He can’t stay faithful to anyone. I just don’t want to see you upset when things turn sour, ’cause that’d kill me more than anything.”

I wouldn't allow myself to get hurt like all the others. I wondered why Jack couldn't accept the fact that Mike might actually like me. I swallowed past the lump in my throat. "So are you staying or coming with us?" I flashed him a look, but it hurt too much to let my gaze linger.

"I'm going with you. This is something I need to see for myself. My dad taught me how to deal with panic attacks. Just let me go up last. That way I can come back down if it gets too bad." Jack drew in a deep breath. "I'm going to get over this stupid phobia one way or another. One day, I want to fly a fighter jet, just like my dad did."

For a moment, I just looked at him in shock. Jack had always avoided situations that involved heights. I couldn't quite shake off the feeling that he was just trying to prove something, but I wasn't sure what that could be. Still, I was proud of his determination to face his phobia head-on. Smiling, I rubbed his shoulder. "If you need to come down, it'll be okay."

Jack gritted his teeth and stared at the ground.

"You can do this, Jack," I said.

He glanced at my hand on his shoulder for a second before smiling and saying, "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Anytime," I said. "Okay. So let's go." The bark felt cold and smooth to the touch as I grabbed hold of a cone-like protrusion and lifted myself up. Somewhere behind me, Jack groaned, but I knew it wasn't from exhaustion. "Don't look down!" I yelled, but I got no answer.

One by one, we shimmied up the trunk until we reached the blue leaves. I stopped to take a deep breath and then continued clambering upward, branch by branch, until my arms felt sore and my legs threatened to buckle underneath me from the effort. I climbed as far as I could until the small limbs became too thin to support my weight.

The dense rainforest stretched over high mountains as far as I could see. A soft breeze blew over the colorful canopy of autumn, rustling leaves on the high tops. I had to remind myself that it wasn't October, but my eyes couldn't deny the dazzling display of color splashed across the jungle—colors like turquoise that shouldn't even exist in fall.

I yelled down to Jack, "Are you doing okay?"

"I'm right behind you."

Holding on to the trunk, I gazed down at the breathtaking view in stunned silence. I cupped my hand over my eyes to shield them from the glaring suns. Just over the treetops, a waterfall cascaded from a mountain into a lake of blue water, the water shimmering like glass.

Mike's voice came from behind me. "Isn't this awesome?" His hand slid across my waist as he reached for a branch to hang on to. His warm breath caressed my cheek.

I smiled with a nod, trying to calm my suddenly racing heart. "I'm going to paint it when we get back home, using every single color on my palette. The view's just... incredible." I turned and smiled at him—a shy smile that I hoped wouldn't give away my nervousness.

When Mike gazed into my eyes, my heart melted. Always knowing just what to say to a girl, Mike leaned close and whispered into my ear, "But no view is more incredible than the one I'm looking at this very moment."

I beamed at Mike as my gaze wandered toward his biceps bulging against the short sleeves of his t-shirt. Guys my age usually didn't come with such muscle definition—or at least not the ones I'd dated so far. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach as I watched him cling to the opposite branch. He was such a hottie, and judging from the leisurely smile on his face, he knew that all too well. I winked and said, "The view I'm looking at isn't bad either." I couldn't believe the words just slipped out of my mouth. Mortified, I turned away, but Mike's attention shifted to Jack, as if he hadn't heard.

"Hey, you okay?" called Mike.

*Oh, gosh! Jack! He was fine only a moment ago.* I glanced down at the pale figure drawing in deep, ragged breaths, sweating like he'd just run a marathon. He closed his eyes and didn't answer. I knew all Jack needed was a little time, and he hated being fussed over. A few long minutes passed before he slowly looked around.

The wind blew dark strands of hair across my face. I sat straight, leaning against the thick trunk, as I listened to the squeaking and chattering of the jungle animals. "I knew you could beat it, Jack."

He gave a weak smile back. "I haven't. I'm just controlling it."

"Well, you're doing great," I said.

Jack nodded. "Thanks. See anything yet?"

"I can't see behind us 'cause there's way too many leaves blocking our view. We'll have to climb over there and take a look in a minute. But so far, straight ahead of us, all I see is just jungle, a big lake, and that waterfall we heard."

"Dude! Do you see that?" asked Mike. "Something really big's swimming out there in the lake. I think it's diving for fish."

I focused my gaze. It looked like a huge, raptor-like bird gliding through the water, but something seemed off. The creature reminded me of a giant plucked turkey with a long crest on top of its head. “Weird, huh?”

“Yeah, the entire head is bald. Shouldn’t it have feathers? What the heck is it?” Mike leaned forward on the branch and glanced down. “Hey, Jack, get your butt over here! We need an encyclopedia.”

“Yeah, very funny.” Jack sounded annoyed, but his huge smile said it all. He was proud to have his smarts going for him. “I’m trying to make out the species. Maybe it’s a turkey vulture? Those guys are the biggest birds around.”

Mike pushed aside some leaves and squinted. “Okay. That’s one *ugly* bird.”

Jack craned his neck. “Maybe it’s a California condor. They have the largest wingspan of any bird in North America.”

I glanced up, meeting his nervous gaze. “Where *are* the feathers?”

“Maybe the bird’s sick and lost them all,” said Jack.

Mike’s brows arched before he shifted his gaze back to the bird. “Jack, it has a freakin’ horn.”

My breath caught in my throat as my mind raced. Jack was in denial again, just like with the twin suns. *Since when is there a bird covered with glossy brown skin?* It looked more like some kind of cold-blooded vertebrate that had been extinct for millions of years. *Am I seeing things?* I began to think that maybe I’d swallowed too much saltwater and was hallucinating from being dehydrated. I squeezed my eyes shut and then opened them as realization hit. I gripped Jack’s arm tightly, my nails digging into his skin. “It’s a reptile—like the ones hanging down from the ceiling at the Museum of Natural History.”

“Impossible.” Jack shook his head vehemently. He could be so stubborn at times, always probing and questioning. “Don’t even think about it, Casey.” He closed his eyes and then opened them again, staring at the odd creature. “A pterosaur? I don’t think so. Those died out millions of years ago.”

I couldn’t explain it, but I knew what I was seeing. “I’m telling you, it’s exactly like the ones at the museum,” I insisted. “With only one *big* difference.”

Jack’s gaze narrowed. “What’s that?”

Terror gripped me. “This one’s *alive!*” I watched in horror as two giant bat-like wings unfolded in slow motion and lifted up into a V formation, like a vulture basking in the sun. Shaking Jack’s shoulder, I yelled, “See? I told you!”

Jack’s mouth gaped open.

“Casey’s right, man.” I could hear the panic in Mike’s voice even through my racing heart drumming in my ears. He pointed down. “I say that thing’s a dead ringer for a...uh, I can’t remember the name, but I know the one in the museum looks exactly like this one, only a lot deader.”

“It’s called a pterodactyl.” I wrinkled my brow as I pondered. *Could this flying monster have somehow survived extinction?*

With a splash, the monster scooped up a fish in its claws like some modern-day pelican. It had to have a huge appetite because the fish must have been at least the size of Mike or Jack.

I couldn’t stop staring at the squirming fish with its creepy characteristics: big black eyes the size of a baseball, sharp teeth, and the body of an eel. I turned to Jack. “Okay, hotshot, explain this. Your condor or vulture or whatever it is just caught a live fish. You know they only eat dead, rotting stuff, right?”

Jack didn’t answer, but a look of fear lingered in his eyes.

I just shook my head again. Surely the creature was no condor because the word “huge” didn’t even do it justice. The aerial predator resembled a small airplane—a living, breathing airplane. Its gargantuan size and pointed wings almost reminded me of the mythical dragon on the pages of one of my childhood picture books.

The pterodactyl suddenly flipped the enormous fish high into the air, threw its head back, and swallowed its lunch head-first.

My jaw dropped and Mike shook my shoulder shouting in excitement. How could the pterodactyl even eat something that huge in one giant gulp?

The giant winged lizard flew toward us and glided on the air between flaps. Glowing red eyes penetrated through me, sending waves of panic flooding through my body. I had watched the creature swallow that huge fish whole, and my breath came in ragged gasps as I imagined a toothless beak ripping through my shirt at any moment.

Mike gave a loud cry and fell forward on the branch. “Incoming. Everyone duck!” A loud, horrible screech carried through the trees. The beast’s wings fluttered nearby, snapping violently like a tarp in a hurricane, shaking the leaves and branches above our heads.

“Oh, man.” My body tensed as I looked up and strained my eyes to see; those cursed twin suns were too bright. The flapping of wings echoed in my ears. The creature swooped over our heads—a mere shadow on the horizon, but I froze to the spot, my hands clasped around a branch for support.

The pterodactyl dropped a few feet, blocking the rays of light. Through the leaves, I gazed at its leathery, membranous wings. Its skin was so thin, like that of a bat, that I could see the light shining through. For a few seconds, I thought the creature would descend and swallow us up, but instead it let out a screech and disappeared into the clouds.

I let out a sigh of relief. “That was one big bird.” I was trying to make some kind of joke, but my words were far too shaky to be humorous.

Mike nodded. “Yeah. Freaky, huh?”

“I’ve never seen anything like that before...ever,” whispered Jack.

Neither had I. I’d never been one to believe in ghosts, goblins, portals, or monsters. But after all I’d seen on this strange island, I started to doubt the judgment of my analytical mind. “I think it was just grabbing a snack.”

“Okay, but if a snack’s a five-foot fish...” Mike took a deep breath and paused, as if to gather his thoughts. “...then we’re in big trouble. One of those things could just pluck us right up.”

We knew now that we’d have to take more precautions while hiking through the vegetation. There would be no more hanging around in open fields, gazing at butterflies and flowers. We all knew those odd tracks on the beach were a sign of trouble, but it didn’t seem real until we witnessed actual proof with our very own eyes. Now we knew for a fact that the place was more dangerous than we’d thought before.

Jack’s jaw dropped as he gazed out into the jungle, speechless. Mike shook his head, eyes wide open in astonishment.

I tried to calm my racing heart, but it was no use. Something else besides seeing the pterodactyl made me uneasy: its live catch. “That fish was creepy, ugly, and bordering a little on the *prehistoric* side.”

“Yeah, it definitely had a prehistoric vibe going on,” said Mike.

Slowly, the words came out of Jack’s mouth. “If I didn’t know any better,” he said through a trembling breath, “I’d say we just saw the largest pterosaur ever—an extinct flying reptile called quetzalcoatlus. But how is that even possible?”

Mike let out a long whistle. “Is that crazy or what?”

The creature had been extinct for millions of years, but somehow, it had found a way to survive in that jungle. It was truly amazing, but scary at the same time. I felt privileged to see such an extraordinary creature, even if I knew no one would believe my tale. Another thought flashed in my mind. *What if we’ve entered some kind of portal that has taken us back in time millions of years?* I bit my lip hard. *We...we’ll never get home! No way. I refuse to believe that.*

Jack touched my shoulder. “Are you all right?” he asked, always so sweet and sensitive.

I snapped out of it with a fake smile, figuring there was no need to worry Mike and Jack with my insane theories. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Blue eyes swept over me, and he squeezed my hand. Jack could always read me like an open book. “You know you can tell me anything.”

I caught a glimmer of light from the corner of my eye and turned in that direction. Blinking, I craned my neck and peered through the blue-colored leaves. I scurried across the branches to the other side of the giant tree. My heart skipped a beat. “Oh my gosh. Is that a...a city?”

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I felt tears well in my eyes as relief washed over my fatigued body. Civilization was right there, within reach. Help was in sight, and my parents would soon learn I was alive. Still, though, something didn’t feel quite right. It just couldn’t be *that* easy. I leaned forward, straining my eyes to take in what my intuition was trying to tell me.

Jack interrupted my thoughts and smiled, his blue eyes twinkling. “Isn’t this awesome?”

I flinched as Mike’s screams rang in my ears. I feared he was going to wake up the entire jungle, including every single meat-eating bird and disgusting giant spider. I couldn’t really blame him for being excited, though, and at least we found somebody who could possibly help us. With a sigh, I focused my attention in the distance, noting a huge obstacle in their way. As

was becoming par for the course for us, there was something to stop us from marching right in there and finding rescue. A brown stone wall wound up and down the landscape—over mountains, across valleys, plateaus, grasslands, rivers, and cliffs—just like The Great Wall of China. I grunted and rolled my eyes. *Surely there has to be a way past a barrier like that. There just has to be.*

“I can’t believe it,” said Jack, inching closer to me.

I thought maybe Jack shouldn’t be so close, but I couldn’t seem to move to the next branch. I felt his hot breath caress my cheek and looked into his eyes. He smiled, and his face reddened. Jack was so adorable when he blushed.

I gauged the distance between the tree I clung to and the city. I heard Mike muttering something about wishing he had a Jeep. It didn’t exactly look like a stroll on the beach—more like a seven-day march through tough terrain without food, water, or giant insect repellent. Ah, the joy of the wilderness. Maybe seven days was bit of a stretch, but it was still a good hike, nonetheless.

Turning my gaze, I noticed the sunlight reflecting off the glass city on the other side of the wall. I shielded my eyes and stared in awe at the brightness fracturing into a spectrum of colors.

I let my gaze drift over thousands of spires, pointed arches, and soaring towers. Thousands of glass cathedrals stretched out endlessly before me in the distance. The structures varied in shapes and sizes. My mouth dropped, rendering me unable to speak, as I tried to make sense of what they were and who could possibly have made them. There I was, seeing the most marvelous display of human civilization, and I had no camera to capture the moment. Without proof, no one at home would ever believe me. The next best thing I could do was to etch it all into my memory and re-create it on canvas. Painting tricky subjects like glass proved challenging, but I knew I could make it work, catching the reflections and translucency at the same time.

I wondered how the people managed to construct an entire city out of glass. One thing was for sure: They were more like exhibitionists who weren’t keen on their privacy. I snorted. *Mom would go ballistic...unless it was some high-tech glass nobody could see through.* Who would live in such a beautiful city, smack-dab in the middle of a tropical jungle? Surely, the brilliant architects would understand our dire circumstances and help us get home. Now, all we had to do was figure out a way past the giant wall and into the city. “Who do you think lives there?” I asked.



“You mean, even though they built a sophisticated city, how *civilized* are they?” Jack frowned and then stared straight ahead. “I don’t know, but those buildings look eerily familiar, like something out of medieval Europe.”

I scooted through leaves and branches for a better view. The buildings looked like a cross between Gothic and Romanesque. “I’ve seen this before... in Italy, Spain, and France, but they were made out of stone, not glass.”

“I bet we stepped into another dimension,” said Mike.

Jack shifted his weight on the branch as he peered ahead. “I guess once we talk to them, we’ll find out if your theory holds any weight. I wish I could see people...or something. I’d kill for a pair of high-powered binoculars.”

“Think they’re even human?” asked Mike. “What if they’re from another universe or something?”

Aliens? Really? I had never believed in them and wasn’t about to start. The closest I’d ever come to an alien was when Mike dressed up for Halloween in a green latex body suit with a matching mask sporting bulging black eyes. I tried to maintain my composure and gave Mike a weak smile, but he could always see right through me. The thought of aliens made me a nervous wreck since it went against everything I took for granted to be true.

Jack softly touched my arm. “Don’t worry. I’m sure it’s not aliens.”

“Yeah, I know.” The idea was plain ridiculous, and I wouldn’t give in to Mike’s crazy thoughts. And that was exactly what they were: crazy. I knew if people could build amazing structures such as the pyramids, then they could also construct a glass city in the middle of the jungle. *What does Mike know anyway? It isn’t like he cares about anything other than girls and surfing.* To him, even the giant stone statues of Easter Island or the pyramids of Giza must have been created by alien forces.

“Well, there’s only one way to know for sure.” Mike looked at them, an adventurous gleam shining in his eyes. “Guys, we have a wall to scale.”

I smirked. “Shouldn’t we worry about getting there first?” I pointed at the dense tree canopy stretching out for miles. “By foot, it’s gonna be like hiking to Timbuctoo.”

Mike paused for a moment, his smile even bigger than before. “C’mon. There’s bound to be some shortcut. We’ll be eating burgers by nightfall, and I can’t wait. I’m freakin’ starving.”

I blew out a breath as my stomach grumbled. “Why did you have to mention burgers?” A big, fat, greasy, mouthwatering cheeseburger loaded with all the fixings—especially loads of mustard—sounded so delicious.

Jack ripped off a big, plump blueberry. “It’s no burger, but how about a little snack?”

I cocked a brow at him. Just because the berries *looked* delicious, that didn’t mean they wouldn’t kill me. “You try first.”

A smile grew across Jack’s lips, and he pointed to a monkey hidden in the leaves. “See that little guy over there? He’s been chomping away on them for a while. If they’re monkey approved, they must be okay.” He threw some berries in his mouth. “And they don’t taste bad either.”

I smiled, but just in case, I waited until Jack chewed and swallowed, and then another two minutes to ensure he wasn’t going to turn green or keel over. With a sigh, I took a bite. It tasted nothing like a juicy burger, of course—more like that healthy stuff that advertised “five a day for a strong heart”—but beggars can’t be choosers, and if fruit was all we had, fruit was what I would eat. I picked another handful of berries and munched away, my tongue getting used to the juicy, sour taste.

“They need sugar, big time, but at least they’ll give us enough energy for all that climbing.” Mike pointed to the wall in the distance.

Jack tore off another cluster of berries. “The problem with getting over that wall is the same problem we had back at the cave.”

“And what’s that, bro?” asked Mike.

“We’ve got no equipment or gear, and last time I checked, none of us are Spiderman.”

“We’ll find a way...and trust me, it won’t be Mike’s,” I said. I was sure there had to be an easier solution than climbing. Walls always have gates or entrances of some sort. If we came across it, we might meet a guard that could help us. I shook my head as a breeze ruffled through my hair. Leave it to Mike to suggest the hardest way possible, just so he could show off his thrill-seeking nature.

Jack echoed my thoughts. “We’ll have to find the main entrance.”

“I say we stick with my plan and improvise as we go along,” said Mike. “All right. Then let’s get a move on.”

“Wait!” Jack took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I want to study the lay of the land a bit longer.”

I knew if we hurried and kept up our diligent pace, we could reach the city in a couple of days. (maybe sooner) There, we could get the answers we longed for, get help back to California, and be out of the nightmare once and for all. As much as I hated to pressure Jack, I knew we had to get moving, and I was about to drag him down that tree. “Don’t you want to get out of here?”

Jack groaned and rubbed his neck, his other hand clutching the branch, his knuckles white with effort. “That’s not fair, Casey. It’s not like I don’t want to. I’ve never wanted anything so badly in my life. I just... We can follow the river. It’ll take us straight to the city and—”

I noticed Jack’s fingers shaking. He wasn’t just scared; he was terrified, even though he tried to play it down. I put my hand on his shoulder and squeezed gently. “Jack? It’s okay.”

As Jack stared over the treetops, his grip around the branch tightened. His face paled, and his breath came in labored rasps.

I turned to nudge Mike. “Uh, how good are you with first aid?”

He looked at me like I was speaking Chinese, and by the look on his face, Mike would definitely be no help if Jack’s attack worsened. Mike blinked as if waking up from a trance. “We need to get him down...pronto.”

“Jack?” I rubbed my fingers lightly over his arm to help him relax. “Can you hear me? Look at me. Everything’s fine.” I grabbed Jack’s wrists and spoke in a soothing tone. “C’mon. Just step down. We’re not going to let you fall.” I helped Mike guide his ankle toward a lower branch, but Jack didn’t seem keen on cooperating.

Sighing, I said, “C’mon. Let go of that branch. You’ve got to help us out a bit.”

Every step down proved to be a challenge, but as we moved closer to the ground, the branches became thicker and stronger. Jack began breathing more easily and cooperating more.

From somewhere below, I heard the *crunch* of leaves and the *snap* of twigs, followed by loud wheezing ripping through the air. I strained my neck to see under branches as my heart skipped a beat. “Guys, stop!” My voice became a whisper, and my stomach fluttered. “Do you hear that? Something’s down there. What is it?”

Snorts and grunts drew close. I held my breath, my mind racing. Whatever it was, it was moving below. Something big, with heavy, powerful steps crushed through, each one louder than the last. *Waiting to pounce? Coming to get us? What kind of animal could make that much*

*noise?* I didn't want to stick around to find out. I struggled to climb faster. "Quick! Back to the top."

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I heard air being blown by something huge, followed by a louder grunt. Grabbing the closest branch, I pulled myself up. I was sure, for a moment, that no animal would find me in such a huge tree, but then a thought crossed my mind: *Leopards, jaguars, tigers, and bears are all excellent climbers, not to mention that ptero-bird thing that we saw earlier that could fly right up here and snatch us. Crap! Did I forget those huge spiders could easily climb trees too?* I tried to ignore the knots in my stomach. "Is that a...some kind of wild animal or what?"

"I dunno, but I'm going to check it out," said Mike.

I reached toward him, my fingers brushing his arm. "What are you? Crazy-stupid?"

"More like crazy-brave," he shot back in a low voice.

I rolled my eyes. There was nothing brave about it; he was just asking for trouble going down there, and the worst part was that he knew it. I couldn't understand why he'd leave the safety of the tree, knowing it could be that beast from the beach. The last thing we wanted to do was draw its attention. "Listen, Mike... whatever that creature is, it doesn't know we're up here." I tried to keep my voice from shaking. "Let's leave it that way."

"Mike, you're going to get yourself killed," said Jack.

"Yeah? That's all I've heard this entire trip, like some kind of broken record."

No matter how hard Jack and I tried, we weren't going to win an argument with Mike. He was a lost cause. If Mike was willing to face off with a shark, there was certainly nothing to keep him from climbing down the tree and facing whatever was down there. Mike climbed down to the next branch. "Don't worry. I'm just going to sneak a peek."

"Yeah, there ya go." I flung my hand in the air, my tone sarcastic. "Draw its attention over here. Fantastic idea, Mike. You sure haven't had one of those in a while, and I was starting to worry that you'd lost your touch."

"Start climbing!" commanded Jack.

Mike twisted a leafy branch until it snapped. “Why? I’ve got a weapon right here.” His face didn’t show an ounce of fear.

“Hey, if you’re gonna fight that...that thing, you may want to find a bigger fly swatter,” I said with a roll of my eyes.

Before Mike could reply, a head, covered in reddish-brown fur, burst through the leaves. My jaw dropped as I stared down at the cross between a bear and a sloth—only WAY bigger. *What the heck was that thing?* I opened my mouth to warn the others, but my voice remained trapped somewhere in my throat.

Jack’s voice cut through the sudden silence. “Casey, get away from it!”

I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t move. Every muscle tensed. I grunted at Jack. *Does he really think the thing won’t notice me moving around? Doesn’t he realize it might bite me—or worse—if I even so much as try to breathe?*

The beast stretched its furry neck and snapped at the nearby leaves. Its yellowed teeth almost grazed my knee. I flinched, ready to scream, as more terrifying thoughts raced across my mind: *How could it possibly reach that high? Will it attack? Does it like the taste of...people? This isn’t good—not good at all.* At least it didn’t sniff the air, growl, or snap in my direction. I thought that maybe if I stayed still, it wouldn’t notice me. I could feel its warm saliva dripping down my leg. *Gross!* I decided if it moved any closer, I’d just kick and hope for the best. The creature smacked its thick, moose-like lips and moved closer.

“*Stay back!*” I screamed in my head but dare not say aloud, not wanting to startle it. A muscular black tongue licked the top of my hand, leaving a layer of sticky slime on my skin. My heart thrummed like the beating wings of a humming bird. A pair of green eyes stared back at me. Its long, menacing claws slowly passed by my face. I gasped. I was the star of my very own horror movie, and I only hoped it wasn’t a slasher flick.

“Keep still,” whispered Mike, even though I was already acting like a statue. “Don’t spook it.”

The beast pulled down a branch heavily laden with fruit. My mind raced. It didn’t seem the least bit interested in me, only the blueberries. I considered that a stroke of luck and hoped I could sneak away. I moved very, very slowly, trying to get away before it changed its mind and found out I *did* taste better than the berries.

I backed off as the monstrous beast opened its mouth, revealing pointed teeth that needed a good scrub or two. As it let out a loud bellow, a horrible stench filled the air, like that of rotten meat, fish, and eggs all combined together.

As I scrambled to the next branch, I slipped and almost toppled forward. I held on tightly, draping my leg around the branch to steady myself. While the creature didn't seem interested in devouring me in the tree, I was sure it would attack if I fell on top of it, if only to defend itself.

Suddenly, the creature yelped and retreated a few feet back, its head disappearing into the leaves.

Jack thrust out his hand. "Casey!"

I took hold of it and pulled myself up, fighting to catch my breath as I peered down through the branches, wondering if the animal was gone.

"Are you okay?" asked Mike, eyes wide, mouth gaping.

I let out a murmured "Yes" and then met his gaze. "What *is* this place?"

His eyes lit up, curiosity brewing. "Isn't that the million-dollar question?"

I pushed my way up to the next branch before I dared another look down. The animal was still there, sweeping its head toward another bunch of ripe berries. It plucked them with its wide lips, stripping the tree with rake-like teeth. Without the stench invading my nose, it looked kinda cute—all fluffy and chubby, eating like some overgrown giraffe. *How could something so adorable be dangerous?* And it didn't seem to care much about its surroundings either.

"It's a..." I heard Jack mumble something to himself, stopping in mid-sentence, as though trying to make sense of his own thoughts.

"Wh—" I opened my mouth to ask, but Mike cut me off.

"You recognize this big eating machine?"

"Yeah. I don't believe I'm going to say this, but I can't deny what's right in front of my eyes." Jack took a deep breath for effect. He sure liked to keep his audience on the edge of their seats. Eventually he continued, "It's an animal called *megatherium*."

A light bulb flickered to life. I remembered studying the prehistoric animal in school when I did a class project on the Ice Age. These things weighed close to ten tons; they were *huge*.

Mike shot him a questioning look. "So are we prime rib or what?"

"Nah. It only chows down on petals, leaves, and berries," I said before Jack could let out another remark. "It's really a gigantic ground sloth."

“One of the largest mammals to ever live,” added Jack.

“Incredible. I’ve always wanted to have an exotic pet like that.” Mike scooted closer and reached out his hand. “Maybe we could pet it.”

Jack laughed. “Don’t be an idiot.”

Mike cocked his head and seemed to be studying the creature. “I know this giant fur ball’s supposed to be extinct.”

“Yeah, like one and a half million years ago.” Jack’s gaze lowered toward the animal. “It must be standing on its hind legs to reach up here.”

First a pterosaur, and now a giant prehistoric sloth? *How is this even possible?* My mind reeled as I tried to make sense of it. *Dinosaurs were wiped off the Earth by a giant meteorite... weren’t they?* A shudder ran down my spine as the same irritating thought slammed through my head. *If we’re even on Earth...* I could picture Mike asking how much more proof I needed. There had to be an explanation for the weird glass city and all the other wild stuff. *What if the impact from the giant meteorite explosion that happened sixty-five million years ago somehow created a parallel universe that sucked us in through the whirlpool?* I shook my head and let out a sigh. *Gosh, could I sound any more ludicrous?* I felt just as crazy as the science fiction and fantasy I loved to read.

Short bleating cow-like sounds snapped me out of my thoughts.

The sloth nudged Mike’s knee with its snout. “Still hungry?” asked Mike. He ripped a branch off and held it out. “Hey, big guy, I hope you don’t bite the hand that feeds you.”

If Mike was scared, he sure didn’t show it with his huge smile and relaxed posture, like he was feeding some harmless goat at a petting farm.

The sloth didn’t seem to be spitting fire or trying to bite Mike’s head off, so I began to think that maybe it was friendly. I picked blueberries and held out my cupped hands, smiling as I watched the creature’s black tongue sweep out and gulp down the fruit before its head vanished under the thick leaves again. “Eww! I’ve just been slimed... again. Still, this is absolutely amazing.” I wiped my hands off on clusters of leaves and finally on my shorts.

Loud, thudding footsteps echoed as the humongous sloth lumbered away. As fascinating as the sloth was, we had to keep moving and make our way back to the ground. I turned to face my friends. “Time to get to that city, guys.”

Jack sighed, but he followed without any more drama.

At the bottom, I scanned the jungle in every direction. There were no weird extinct or overgrown animals anywhere in sight.

“Coast is clear.” I clutched a hand over my heart. “I can’t believe this place.”

“Makes you wonder what else is out there,” said Mike.

My stomach clenched at his words. “Yeah, but let’s not go there right now.”

Jack leaned against the tree and blew out a breath.

I could see he was going to need a minute to regain his composure, and so was I. Also, I thought it would be a good idea to rest with him for a quick minute too.

Looking up at Mike I said, “My ankles hurt, and I’ve got a cramp. I’m not used to climbing like that.” I sat down on a moss-covered log. My entire body seemed to be on fire.

Mike cupped my calf muscles and rubbed his thumbs downward in a circular motion.

“Where’s the cramp?”

“Left ankle.” I held back a moan as his strong fingers massaged the pain away, gliding over my skin like he’d done it a million times before. “Thanks.” I caught his gaze and smiled. “That feels wonderful. You’re hired.”

He winked. “I give killer back rubs too.”

I stood, my lips parting in a smile. “I’ll have to take you up on the offer some other time, Romeo. Right now we need to save our butts first.” Large extinct creatures roamed the jungle, and a back rub was the last thing I wanted—even if it was from the hottest guy on the planet. We needed to get moving and be on guard, but Mike never seemed to take anything too seriously.

I walked over to Jack and offered my hand; he clasped it tightly. I wasn’t sure what terrified Jack more—heights or the existence of a giant lizard bird and Mr. Fluffy on steroids. “C’mon, we have to get outta here,” I said.

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I took the lead through the dense foliage, following the meandering river at a distance. The tree canopy rose high and thick, and the ferns grew sparse, giving the jungle the impression of a great green cathedral. Birds chirped overhead while insects hummed in the thickets and grass. I could smell the cleanness of the air; there was no pollution, no cars, no smog—just pure oxygen.



My breathing came labored but steady as we moved farther, twigs scratching at my bare arms as I pushed through the thick undergrowth. I only realized the sound of birds had stopped when thunder cracked in the distance. I froze mid-stride and lifted my hand, motioning the others to stop. “Hear that?”

“Yeah.” Jack glanced around the towering trees.

I peered ahead, a chill running down my spine. High-pitched squeals carried through the eerie silence. I could have sworn a herd of wild horses was stampeding in our direction, but I knew horses didn’t make that sort of cry. It was more like the trumpeting of elephants.

I stood on my toes, trying to see as far as the bushes would allow me. The noise seemed to come from all directions. *Crap! We’ll be trampled to death if we don’t find a safe place.*

“Take cover!” Jack shouted.

I hid behind a thick tree trunk and peeked through the ferns. “I don’t see anything... yet!” I shouted so the others would hear me against the rising volume of pounding, thundering feet. I tried to still my heavy breathing, but my pulse wouldn’t stop racing. “Something’s coming! We’re safe on this side of the river, though, right?”

Jack drew his breath sharply and then said, “Not a gamble I’m willing to take. We’ve got to get to that city... fast!”

“Look!” Mike’s eyes widened as he pointed a finger. “Is that what I think it is?”

I turned and followed his gaze. I found my voice, but what came out of my mouth was barely more than a whisper. “Oh my gosh. Are those... *dinosaurs?*” I was sure they couldn’t be. Yet, I couldn’t deny the proof staring me right in the face. They were a large herd of hairless, brown-and-white-striped giants heading toward the river, some of them as big as a San Francisco trolley. I clapped a hand over my mouth, blinking hard.

“Look at them!” yelled Mike. “This is crazy! I swear we went through time. I don’t know how, but somehow we did.”

“It’s... it’s—” I stared at the heavy bodies with their strong limbs and muscles visible beneath a thick skin, contracting as they moved. Black, sailboat-shaped crests shot back from their heads. Some walked on four legs, and others ran on two, honking like commuters in rush-hour traffic. *Where did they come from? What are they doing in a civilized world? Didn’t dinosaurs die off a long time ago?* I shook my head slightly and then looked some more. The beasts stretched up and down the river like a long line of buffalo I’d once seen in Wyoming.

I had no idea what they were, but I knew they had been extinct for ages—just like gigantic sloths and pterosaurs. Wiping sweat off my brows, I peeled my gaze from the dinosaurs. My thoughts returned to Mike’s argument, sending shudders through me. *If we are in some other dimension, will the people in the glass city be...human?*

From the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of movement. Jack had sprinted 100 feet to the water’s edge. I wanted to scream for him, but my voice just wouldn’t obey. I was sure Jack was too freaked out to think clearly. There was no other explanation as to why he wasn’t trying to hide. I was sure if one of the animals noticed him, they’d come across the river, and on those giant legs, it wouldn’t take them long. They’d take Jack out with one bite before he even realized what was happening.

I mustered my strength and crept up to the muddy bank. I placed a shaking hand on his shoulder and squeezed hard to get his attention, my voice wavering as I whispered, “I think Mike is rubbing off on you.”

“What?”

“You bolted over here like a lunatic. They’ll see us...and then we’ll be prey. You know—lunch. I hope that’s not what you want, ’cause I sure don’t.” My voice came coarse as tears welled up in my eyes, but it wasn’t fear that made me feel that way. If something happened to Jack, I’d... I couldn’t even bear to complete the thought.

Jack met my gaze. “They only chomp on —”

“Don’t even tell me!” I said, holding up a hand. “Wait. I gotta know. Lay it on me. What do they chomp on?”

A smile played across Jack’s lips. “Plants.”

“Plants? That’s it?”

“Yep,” he said.

Relief flooded through me as I stared at the giant herd. “You know what? Now that I think about it, I’ve seen these dinos in the movies and stuff.”

“Yeah, they’re duckbilled dinosaurs. Pretty cool, huh?” Jack hugged me, as if relieved they weren’t T-rexes, and then rubbed the knots in my shoulders until I could feel my racing heart slow down a bit. A wave of relief swept over me. Not being on the bottom of the food chain was definitely a plus. Jack wasn’t freaked out; as long as he remained calm, I could, too, because from all the people in my life, I trusted Jack’s judgment the most.

I blew out a long breath. “I really wonder where the heck we are.”

“I’m guessing around 10,000 BC.”

“You might be right,” I said.

“I’m kidding.” Jack grinned, but I didn’t fail to notice his expression clouding. He couldn’t explain what we were seeing, and what Jack couldn’t explain, he didn’t like. In his perfect world, there was a reason for everything.

I gently pushed his hair out of his face as I placed a peck on his heated cheek. “You’ll get the answers you want soon. I don’t doubt that for a minute.” I forced my mouth into a cheery smile. *But what if there are no answers or we don’t like the ones we find?*

Nodding slowly, Jack peeled his eyes off the large herd and glanced at me. “I hope you’re right.” His blue gaze lingered on me as he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. When he smiled, his white teeth gleamed.

I smiled back. “So, they’re like a herd of Jurassic cattle? Kind of like...the cows of the dinosaur world?”

“Yeah, they’re...” Jack stopped in mid-sentence. “Wow! They’re just...amazing.”

I heard Mike’s footsteps behind me and jumped back, startled, suddenly feeling guilty for standing so close to Jack. There was nothing to feel guilty about, but I couldn’t help but peek at him to take in his expression.

Mike didn’t seem to notice my blazing cheeks as he scanned the river, flattening a giant fern with his foot and then grinding it under his sole. “This would make a great Facebooker!” That was his nickname for any fantastic picture he deemed “worthy” to share with the world.

I laughed. “Yeah, post this pic along with ‘Hanging out with dinosaurs on some weird island with two suns’ and see if your friends list isn’t dramatically cut in half by morning.”

Mike leaned in, his arms drawing me closer. “Just look at them! This is, like, way beyond awesome.”

He wasn’t kidding, because being here with him was definitely that. I slipped my hand into his. He grinned and tightened his grip. There I was, shipwrecked in God-knows-where, in a world teeming with dinosaurs. I should have been scared to death and totally freaked out, but instead I couldn’t stop smiling. Mike wasn’t holding my hand in a playful way: He locked his fingers with mine, his thumb brushing over my skin, sending shivers down my spine. It was real.

I looked up at him when some of the creatures let out eerie bellows that changed in pitch. He grinned. It was absolutely amazing to be surrounded by the wild calls of real, *living* dinosaurs.

It sounded like a thousand foghorns or wind instruments being blown, like some sort of mystical orchestra. I held back a giggle. It almost sounded like our school band. And boy, did they have some pretty bad trombone players. In spite of that, the performance in front of us was incredible to witness. Holding Mike's hand just made it all the better because I happened to experience it with *him*. That moment would be etched in my mind forever.

"I bet some vocal warm-ups would help these guys big time," I said with a chuckle.

Jack laughed, and a gleam lit his eyes. I always loved how he laughed at my jokes, no matter how lame they were.

"Man, I wish I had a camera." Mike raised his hands to peek through and made a clicking sound.

"Who needs a camera when we have Casey?" Jack couldn't hide the proud smile on his face. "She can paint all of this when we get back."

I beamed at him and gave his arm an affectionate squeeze. Jack always said the nicest things, and not in Mike's cheesy way. "You get me."

He returned the smile and rolled his eyes playfully. He did know all about how much I loved to paint, especially nature scenes...and I was pretty darn good at it too. My painting *Angel Wings in the Meadow* even received a gold medal in the National Scholastic Art Awards competition.

*If Mike could only be half as gallant as Jack...but he wasn't. And he doesn't have to be,* I reminded myself. Mike has his own attraction thing working for him.

Mike wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me away as he pointed back to the herd. I let myself fall against him and silenced the thoughts in my head, letting go for a moment.

"Come here, boy!" Mike called out to one, before he whistled with both hands.

I lightly smacked his arm. "It's not a fluffy dog that'll come when you call it."

"Just kidding. Hey, check it out. They're going in for a dip!"

Water splashed as the herd waded and jumped into the river. "Since when do dinosaurs swim?" I spun to face Jack. "Are you sure they only eat plants?" After having been on the menu more than once that day as fish bait and spider food, I had no intention of repeating my experience. One time was one time too many.

Jack nodded. "Well, uh, according to textbooks, yes."

His wishy-washy response was not reassuring enough. This place was not textbook, and the people who wrote those textbooks that Jack always had his nose in had never seen a dinosaur in person. I wasn't quite willing to put their theory to the test.

The herd paddled their webbed feet like geese. One turned and swished its tail back and forth like a giant oar.

"Sweet!" shouted Mike, punching the air with his fist. "One's coming over."

"Maybe the dino's a huge MTV fan, and it's coming over for your autograph," said Jack.

Mike let out a low laugh. "Ha ha." He fixed his eyes on the river, always eager to meet a fan.

I couldn't believe it, and I glared at him with my mouth agape. I wondered if he really was looking forward to a personal meeting, just to get the adrenaline pumping, when he really didn't know much about the creatures at all. With clammy hands, I reached for a nearby branch and lifted it. Even though the creature didn't *seem* very threatening, holding on to the branch made me feel as though I wasn't quite so helpless. Beads of sweat rolled down my back as the creature swam in our direction. "That thing's getting closer. Time to go."

"Yeah, you're right." Jack tilted his head to the side. "But look how they alternate movement with their two back legs. They're swimming just like aquatic birds."

I squinted, my grip tightening around the branch. I sized up the creature, taking in every detail, the way artists always do. Large, pale blue eyes stood out. Pebbly-textured skin, like that of an elephant, covered its giant brown and white muscular frame. The dinosaur's snout ended in a wide beak that reminded me of a duck or a platypus. Startled, I jumped as it blew air through its dark crest, making the distinctive trumpeting sound of an elephant. I frowned when the other creatures began to make loud calls and musical noises in response. I only hoped it wasn't some kind of signal to attack.

Jack shook his head. "Paleontologists have been wondering for a long time why they have those bony crests. And now we know. They're for communication."

*The kind of communication declaring war?* I anxiously bit my lip and stared into the river, meeting the creature's gaze. It let out a long snort. It dawned on me that I was less than twenty feet from a real live dinosaur. "I don't like this one bit. Let's go!"

Mike smirked, his voice nonchalant. "Remember, this thing isn't dangerous. It just eats leaves."

“C’mon!” said Jack, grabbing his arm. “Casey’s right. It’s best to cruise on outta here before that big guy gets any closer.”

Mike nodded. “Yeah, you’re right, bro.”

Jack pointed past a cluster of large rocks and granite boulders. “Let’s head this way.”

“Okay,” said Mike, turning toward the thick brush and towering trees.

Finally, they were starting to listen to reason. I walked a few steps when my foot slipped into a rabbit-sized hole. The more I wiggled, the more my ankle sank into a tangle of what I presumed to be roots. I pulled and pulled, but my foot wouldn’t budge. *Crap!* I was stuck. I swallowed hard. If the spiders were oversized, I wondered if the snakes would be too. I only hoped the resident snake wasn’t home, because I was sure it’d make an anaconda seem like a lovable teddy bear.

Mike glanced over his shoulder at me. “Coming?”

I let out a heavy sigh. “Can’t! My foot’s stuck.”

“You fell into a hole?” asked Mike, eyes wide.

“Yeah. Call 911 and get me the Jaws of Life, pronto.” I wasn’t exactly stuck in a mangled car or a collapsed building, but a set of hydraulic rescue tools sounded like heaven at the moment. “Hey, maybe warn them there’s a dino lurking nearby, too, so they can bring the tranquilizer gun.”

Jack turned his focus to my foot. He thrust his hands into the hole and tried to manipulate the dirt around my foot. “Pull with everything you’ve got!”

Fists clenched, lips pursed tight, and eyes squeezed shut, I pulled harder.

Nothing happened.

I let out a frustrated grunt and tried again.

“Okay, stop for a minute,” said Jack. “Let me dig some more.”

“That thing’s been staring at me like I’m some sort of delicacy. We shoulda left the second this thing started swimming over here, but noooo...you had to say it was harmless.”

“It *is* harmless,” Jack said, hesitating, “as long as you’re not invading its territory.”

I lifted a finger. “You could’ve mentioned *that* tiny detail before.” The duckbilled dinosaur let out a raspy breath that made me shudder. *How close is that thing?* I glanced over my shoulder and gasped. It now swam only inches away from the riverbank. I desperately struggled to free my foot. “Maybe the dino will just stay in the water.”

“Hard to tell. Wild animals are just unpredictable.” Jack wrapped his fingers around my leg and tried to pry my foot loose. When his attempt failed, he stuck his hand deep into the hole and ripped the roots that were wrapped around my foot. Jack’s calm demeanor helped to keep me from totally freaking out, and I wondered again what I would do without him.

A big *splash* made me flinch. Mike’s jaw dropped, and I dared another look over my shoulder. The duckbilled dinosaur waddled out of the water, like a hippo, with a loud snort. My stomach lurched. Water dripped off the creature’s column-like legs and bulky body, looming as large as a freight car. Piercing eyes glared back at me as it opened its mouth and showed off rows and rows of teeth. My lungs constricted. I couldn’t breathe, and I thought I might faint. Those choppers looked great for slicing and dicing vegetation. Surely, no plant stood a chance. Would I?

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Cowering on the damp ground, I froze as I stared into the eyes of a modern-day living dinosaur. My heart jackhammered against my ribs. The towering creature had a gigantic curved crest atop its head and a spoon-shaped beak, along with what must have been a 1,000 teeth.

The dino stood way too close for comfort, less than thirty feet away. I tugged and twisted my foot, but it wouldn’t come loose from the hole. If I could have opened my mouth, I would have screamed at the top of my lungs—not only at the animal, but at Jack for ensuring us the gigantic thing was as sweet as a kitten and at Mike for calling it over.

Mud flew everywhere as Mike dug into the soil. “This thing hasn’t made one aggressive move. I think it’s just curious.”

*If he says so.* Nothing scared Mike. If I could hear fear in *his* voice then... well, I just wasn’t going to go there. There was no need to freak myself out even more. I frantically flexed my foot and wiggled my toes to loosen the mud some more.

I gulped as grunting and snorting rang through the air. “Listen, you guys don’t worry about me. Just run!” If this was the way I was meant to die, then I wasn’t about to let my friends become dinosaur bait along with me.

Jack’s gaze kept darting over to the dinosaur, as if he was monitoring every move the creature made. “You know I’ll never leave you, Casey! We fight until the end.”

“Exactly what Jack said...and then some,” proclaimed Mike in a victorious knight-in-shining-armor voice.

I clenched a fist. “Oh, you better believe I’ll fight. I don’t plan on going down this easy.”

Digging at the dirt around my ankle, Jack said, “Once your foot’s free, I’m going to distract the dino and get it to chase me. When I do, I want you and Mike to run as far as you can in the other direction.”

“Hey, I’m supposed to be the crazy one here,” said Mike. “If anybody should do it, it should be me.”

My mouth dropped. *The heat must be frying both of their brains.*

Jack gazed directly into my eyes. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you or Mike. That’s a promise.” He spoke with heartfelt sincerity.

“No Mike stunts!” I said. “We stay together. You got it?” I waited for an answer, and when none came, I let out a huff. Obviously, his mind was already made up.

Mike cleared his throat. “Hey, Jack, I know you want to play hero and save the day, but I’m going to have to pull rank. We need to distract the dino...like right now! That thing’s huffing, puffing, and stomping like a raging bull. In my book, that’s attack mode. You work on getting Casey’s foot free while I draw its attention down the riverbank. Maybe I’ll even scare it back into the water.”

“No way!” I said, not giving Jack a chance to reply.

Mike darted toward the creature, stabbing tentatively at its body with a long stick, as if engaging it in combat. “Come and get me!” he taunted the beast.

The duckbilled dinosaur let out a roar and advanced a few steps toward him. My heart jumped into my throat; it was like watching Mike play King Arthur against a dragon. If only I could get my foot free, this Queen Guinevere would fight too.

Jack wrapped his muddy hands around my leg and yanked as throbbing pain raced up my thigh. “Put your body and power into the pull!” He started digging like a madman, sending a muddy shower of dirt and pebbles flying everywhere.

Beads of sweat dripped down my face as I pulled with every ounce of strength I had. I closed my eyes and exhaled as my foot loosened, and finally, I managed to break free. Jumping to my feet, I tensed my muscles and prepared to take off when the creature turned in my



direction. A chill shot through me. I took a long, slow step backward, avoiding eye contact so the creature wouldn't feel threatened and challenged into a fight. *Nice and easy. No need to spook it.*

Letting out a deep roar, the dino reared up on its hind legs, towering over me like a two-story building. The creature's gaze moved toward me as it dropped on all fours with a thunderous *thud*.

"RUN!" shouted Mike in warped slow motion.

I got the message loud and clear, and nobody needed to tell me twice. With my top glued to the sweat on my back, I sprang into the overgrowth and sped deeper into the jungle, leaping over giant logs and slippery rocks along the way. My frantic mind forced my feet into action, allowing me to ignore the burning sensation in my legs.

Behind me, a loud screech rippled through the air. Branches snapped, and the ground shivered as the beast gave chase.

*How far away am I? Do I dare look back?* My breath came in short, shallow rasps as I glanced over my shoulder at the heaving prehistoric thing turning rogue. *Plant eater, my butt!* I gasped and jumped over a loose branch. The animal still thundered behind. *Crap!* It was gaining on me—and probably not to seek my lifelong friendship either.

I assumed Mike and Jack must have split off in different directions. Of course it would go after the smallest of the trio. *I'm easy prey.* Who wouldn't want only a light afternoon snack in these temperatures? While I dodged through the thick vegetation, the dinosaur plowed right through it like papier mâché.

I gasped for air. My lungs burned. It was time to employ a new strategy. Hoping to slow down the creature's pursuit, I made a left toward a thick cluster of trees. Even if the prehistoric beast could squeeze through the humongous trunks, the extra work might make it reconsider whether the meal was worth the effort. I had sprinted a few hundred feet when suddenly, every step became a battle. My foot became stuck in the thicket as my hands clawed through the tangle of vegetation, desperately trying to break through. I let out an exasperated sigh. *Where's a machete when I need one?*

The beast stood a few feet away, sniffing the air like a trained bloodhound, as if it were trying to capture my scent. Dodging behind a tree, I gasped for breath. If the dinosaur turned the corner, it would see me, but I had no energy left for another sprint. I began to wonder where my knights in shining armor had gone. *Probably sunbathing and sipping juice out of a coconut with*

*one of those fancy little umbrellas stuck in it, wondering what's taking me so long.* Massaging my temples, I forced my attention back to the situation at hand. If I didn't come up with a plan soon, I'd never experience the gratification of kicking their butts for deserting me.

Jack had told me that duckbilled dinosaurs were peaceful, gentle herbivores. Either he was mistaken or it was some kind of innocent misunderstanding. Maybe all this thing wanted to do was snack on my arms because it mistook them for long tree branches. *Naw. Who am I foolin'?* That thing was hungry, and if Jack's assumptions were even remotely true, it must be looking for a change in diet. I dared another peek around the tree and held in my breath. There it was, its glaring blue eyes scanning the area like it knew exactly what it was looking for. *Does it?* My heart started to race again.

I hoped it would eventually lose interest, turn around, and leave, but something told me not to raise my hopes too high. The thing was like a missile homing in on its target. After years of eating nothing but salad, who wouldn't want to cash in on some juicy Christmas turkey?

I jumped as a loud *crack* echoed through the air. The duckbilled dinosaur butted at the trunk I stood behind like some kind of angry ram. The ground trembled and the trees shook, sending fan-shaped leaves tumbling toward the jungle floor. I could have sworn I was smack dab in the middle of a mini-earthquake.

Bolting in the other direction through the towering ferns, I sucked in huge lungfuls of air. I swerved around a couple of twisting trees, and then suddenly a blow hit me in the back with full force. Toppling forward, I crashed to the ground and fell face down in the dirt, the impact knocking the breath out of me. I gasped as a stabbing pain shot through my body; it felt just like when that horse had thrown me off a year earlier on a trip to Montana. Scrambling to my feet, I spit out earth and turned to look at what had caused me to fall. I shouldn't have, for the dinosaur met my gaze, its eyes wide like it was staring at the most curious thing it had ever seen.

I shrieked as a stream of sticky saliva rained down on me. I grabbed a long, thin branch with a sharp, spear-like end and waved it about frantically as I pressed my mouth tight. I had to scare the thing, so I tried to look mean, deadly, and dangerous all at once. It wasn't much of a defense, but I decided if it moved an inch closer, I would punch out its huge eye. "Get away!" I shouted, jumping on the spot to make myself look bigger. Best-case scenario, the animal would think I wasn't worth the trouble; but in the worst case, my jumping antics would trigger its killer

instinct. *Oh boy.* Sweat gathered above my brows; thinking negatively wasn't helping much. I swallowed and pushed the thought to the back of my mind.

Looking up, I stared straight into the dinosaur's eyes. I could barely reach its middle, I was so small by comparison, but I refused to be afraid anymore—at least not until I lost a limb or two.

The creature roared and whacked the stick out of my hands with one swipe of its foot.

“Oh, c'mon, big guy!” I scanned the ground for something else—a stone or anything—but apart from a few oversized leaves, there wasn't much of an arsenal to choose from. There was no way I was going to win against that angry creature in unarmed combat, let alone outrun it. I blinked the dust out of my eyes and screamed, “Mike? Jack? Time to save the damsel in distress, guys!”

No response.

*So much for a guy showing up when I need one. But that's okay. I can handle this myself, right? Right. But how?* And then a thought struck me. *The next time it swipes, I'll just play dead...and hopefully I won't end up that way.*

The creature swiped again, missing, and I fell backward. I curled up into a ball, clasped the back of my neck with my hands, and pretended to be dead. I squeezed my eyes shut as the creature's breath brushed my skin. The smell of moldy vegetables assaulted my nostrils as it breathed near my face. As it sniffed me, I wondered if it would be able to hear my racing heart. I desperately hoped my split-second decision was worth the gamble and would pay off. Otherwise, I'd make sure to rise from the dead and haunt Jack and Mike for the rest of their lives.

The ground shook with each passing step the creature took, circling me. Then the animal let out a roar. *What was I thinking? Playing dead? This isn't anything like a bear. Geesh, what a dumb idea,* I scolded myself, but it was far too late to do anything about it.

Something cold prodded my hip, followed by more pressure and then another shove. The dinosaur easily flipped me over and pushed me along like a ball with its giant feet. My lips parted in silent pain when another sharp cramp hit my leg and a thorn bore its way into my flesh. Oh, how I wished I were rolled up in bubble wrap, because rolling through a prickly garden wasn't my idea of a good time. *If only the dino would agree...*

My skin burned, and a tremor traveled up my spine. The dinosaur had rolled me at least thirty feet, or so I presumed. I clenched my hands into tight fists to keep myself from

whimpering. It would be nothing compared to the pain I'd feel if that duckbilled thing sank its endless rows of teeth into my body.

When the rolling was finally over, I just lay helplessly on my back, feeling like someone had just spun me in a washer or dryer. I opened one eye slightly and peered through my lashes. The creature hovered over me, with its huge mouth agape. I couldn't help but wonder if this was my last breath, my final moment. I didn't want to die.

Thoughts of my parents learning the news of my death broke my heart. If my two best friends didn't live to tell their story, my mom and dad would think I had died in the storm. They'd never get the chance to know I had survived, if only for a little while, and that bothered me more than anything. If Mike and Jack did somehow survive, would they blame themselves for this horrible tragedy? I hoped not.

I closed my eyes and waited...praying...hoping for a miracle. Slime dripped on my face, and I inhaled foul-smelling stench. My heart thrummed harder. I prayed to God that several tons of dinosaur wouldn't come bearing down on me, crushing me to death like a pancake. My ears strained for any clues that the dino might be on its merry way.

Exhaling carefully, I pried one eye open, and then the other. The duckbilled dinosaur snorted, turned, and lumbered back toward the river. It was all a bluff! The thing was only defending its territory from a potential threat, like some all-powerful alpha male, or maybe it decided that it just liked its monotone diet better after all, because a brief gratifying moment wasn't worth the bloating afterward.

Still shaking, I leaned on my elbows and tried to control my labored breathing. Late for their curtain call, Mike's and Jack's shouts pierced the air, making me jump. I cleared my throat and whispered, "Guys, over here." I planned to do some serious shouting later, but for the time being, I didn't want to risk drawing the creature's attention back over for Round Two.

Mike broke through the ferns, his face ghost white. He knelt and placed his warm hand against my cheek. "Casey, what happened? I heard screams."

Tears shimmered in Jack's eyes as he wrapped his arms around me. "Are you okay? We came after you, but we couldn't find which way you went, and we...I..." His emotion-filled voice drifted off.

"Don't worry. I'm fine. It knocked me down, but I played dead, and it left." I shook my head. "That's one ticked-off dinosaur."

Mike touched the shark tooth necklace I was wearing. "See? This represents the triumph of life over death. The Hawaiian guy at the surf shop told me that when he pulled the tooth out of my surfboard after my shark attack. That was why I had it made into a necklace."

"Thanks for letting me wear it," I said, playing with the black cord, "but next time you're trying to make friends with the local wildlife, tell me so I can stay home."

He drew in a sharp breath. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to call it over here. Jack said it was harmless."

I shot Jack a glare and cleared my throat. "Yeah...about that..."

He gave me an apologetic look as he squeezed my hand. "I'm so sorry. I swear I'll make it up to you."

I gazed into his blue eyes. "Apology accepted." I could never stay mad at him for long. Darn those big, blue eyes. They got me every time.

"Again, I'm sorry too," said Mike.

I turned to face him. "Don't even worry about it. Let's focus all of our energy on getting to that city."

Jack peered down at the scratches on my legs. "We better get those cleaned up ASAP."

I brushed off a few strands of grass that were stuck to my leg. "With water? No way. I'm not about to face that river monster for a rematch."

"You're right. I've got another idea. I'll be right back." Jack darted off into the woods and soon returned, snapping a thick green leaf in his hands. He squeezed out a syrupy gel and rubbed it on my legs.

I flinched and closed my eyes. "Really, this isn't necessary. I can take one for the team. How many bumps and bruises have I gotten by hanging out with you guys? Millions?"

Jack smiled. "Yep, and you've always held your own."

"This isn't any worse than the time I broke my ankle on that hike." Jack had carried me back home for three long miles without one single complaint. He was such a saint.

I took a deep breath. "What is this sticky stuff anyway?"

"Aloe vera. It'll kill germs and act like a natural herbal Band-Aid."

Again, Jack knew his stuff. Without him, I'd probably would've accidentally used poison ivy. "Thanks for the first aid. You have any other advice, Doctor?"

Jack winked. “Sure. Next time you go on a hiking excursion, wear pants—especially if you plan on being chased through the prickly bushes by a dinosaur.” He grinned and helped me up.

I smiled as a breeze ruffled through his dark, messy hair.

“Let’s get outta here before that thing comes back,” said Mike.

I nodded, reaching for his hand. “Or brings back its friends for dinner.”

“Hey guys, it’s going to get dark soon,” said Jack. “We really need to set up camp. ‘Cause walking around the jungle at night with predators on the loose isn’t going to help us one tiny bit.”

I cringed. He was right, but the last thing I wanted to do was stay the night in this crazy place. “Okay. But first, let’s put some distance between us and these duck-billed dinos.”

Mike nodded. “Agreed.”

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I stared into the roaring fire. Hopefully, it’d scare away any predators that could easily sneak into our camp under the cover of darkness. I also stunk to high heaven because in order to keep *all* man-eating spiders away, I was forced to lather up in Jack’s termite juice/insect repellent. But then again, he had lathered up in the gross stuff, too, which only meant one thing... *we both* reeked.

Mike agreed to take the first watch just in case some uninvited guests decided to join in on our slumber party. (the kind of slumber party with no pizza, no soda, no pajamas, and no sleeping bags) Mike had clambered up a tree and said that he’d keep a close eye on things.

Crickets, unfamiliar birds, nocturnal monkeys, and distant frogs sang unique melodies all around me. The heat from the crackling fire felt good on my face, but it didn’t stop the chills flooding through my body. I’d give anything to have my leather jacket right about now.

“You’re shivering,” said Jack. He dropped down next to me in the leafy vegetation where I had made my bed with monster-sized palm fronds.

I chuckled, trying to stay upbeat. “Me shivering? Just because I’m lying on the freezing, cold ground. Nope! No way.”

Jack wrapped a comforting arm around me. It felt awesome. He was so warm, so sweet, and so caring...just truly amazing.

“I guess I’ll just pretend like we’re camping under the stars next to a campfire,” I said.

He chuckled. "Got S'mores?"

Those pretty blue eyes of his caught mine and we both burst out in laughter.

Things couldn't get any worse, yet, Jack could still make me laugh. I curled up tightly next to him, absorbing all of his wonderful body heat. In this scary, crazy place I felt safe in his strong arms. "We're going to get through this," I whispered.

He gave me a squeeze. "Without a doubt."

I nudged him. "Hey, what's the first thing you're going to do when we get back?"

"Order a hot, steaming pizza. How 'bout you?"

"Take a hot, steaming shower." I glanced up and met his gaze.

He tried not to burst out laughing which made him look absolutely adorable. "What? Not a fan of my gooey bug repellent?"

"Well, it did save our butts back with those huge spiders, but still, I'd rather spray a can of Off! any day."

He laughed. "Me too. But don't worry, we'll be home before you know it."

"Yeah, and then we'll be laughing all about this little adventure." I stared up at the patch of glittering stars shining through the towering trees.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?" asked Jack.

Jack never failed to notice the beauty in nature. It was one of the many things I loved about him. My finger trailed across the sky. "Yeah, they're like diamonds in the sky. So breathtaking." I tried to calm my nerves with the serene picture of the night sky. Maybe if I forgot about my problems and quit missing my parents for one minute, I might be able to drift off to sleep. "Well, I better get to bed. I have the next shift so Mike can get some sleep. Goodnight, Jack. I'll wake you up when it's your turn."

"Okay." He softly kissed my head. "Sweet dreams, Casey. And don't you worry. We'll be eating burgers by lunchtime tomorrow."

I hoped so. "You betcha."

**To be continued...**