

Agartha's Castaway

Book 3

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.

Chapter 1

It was a long night, but morning had finally arrived. Jack boiled water and they dined on ripe berries before continuing their journey toward the glass city. Not much of a breakfast, but it sure stopped her grumbling stomach.

Casey, Mike, and Jack moved fast through the thicket, still aiming for the city in the distance, but they limited their noise to the inevitable thuds of their feet. The roar of rushing water filled Casey's ears as they followed the river. Eventually, they reached a large, thick tree filled with squawking tropical birds. Casey inched closer to get a better look, crushing a few twigs under her shoes. Most of the birds had red feathers, but Casey caught glimpses of orange, green, and blue as well.

She covered her head and ducked, startled by the swooping birds. In a rainbow of color and a choir of agitated chirps and squawks, they flew past her and rose into the sky like a giant red cloud. The rush of air from their beating wings caressed her cheeks. The shock from the dinosaur attack yesterday was still vivid in her memory, but she couldn't help smiling as feathers floated down and landed on her.

Mike also ducked as the last stragglers rushed past them. "Whoa!"

"We spooked them," said Casey.

Jack shifted his weight as he glanced around. "No, I've seen this in the rainforest when a predator approaches."

Predator? She groaned and punched his shoulder. *Does he have to be so calm and scientific about it?* He should have been paralyzed with fear or breaking down in hysterics, because it was likely that predators in that place were not the typical lions-and-tigers-and-bears-oh-my! types of predators. She shuddered and let her gaze wander over the area, searching for hiding places. *Now what?*

Anxiously, Casey brushed away the ferns, leaves, and vines, stepping over fallen logs—ever alert for signs of danger—when she emerged into a large meadow with tall grass that was desperately in need of a mow. The chorus of crickets hummed all around her. Something buzzed past her ear and she flinched. Hopefully, it was only a fly or a bee. Sunflowers in full bloom, standing on dark green six-foot stalks, painted the rolling field in front of her. A sweet fragrance, like candy or sugar, blew all around her. Casey let out a gasp as she walked through the sea of giant yellow and orange blossoms.

Wow! I've got to capture this on canvas. I'll use subdued hues to bring out the rich vibrant colors of the sunflower heads. Two different tones of green will capture the leaves and stems perfect. And the golden highlights from the sunshine will be just fabulous. Casey smacked her forehead. It was time to bottle up the artist inside of her because she needed to stay on guard in this freaky place. Something scared those birds...

Jack took a few steps before abruptly stopping. “There’s no giant trees here for protection. We’ve got the stalks, but still, we’re out in the open—easy prey for a giant pterosaurs. I don’t like this one bit.”

Now he was talking her language. He was just as scared of a predator as she was. “Too bad this field doesn’t have a giant scarecrow to scare it away.”

Jack laughed as a breeze ruffled his hair. “Yeah, tell me about it.”

“You two are worried about a giant lizard bird plucking us up from the sky?” asked Mike. “I’m more worried about a pack of velociraptors attacking us in this tall grass. You saw *Jurassic Park 2*, right?” He paused. “Remember that one line? ‘Don’t go into the long grass?’”

Casey gave his arm a yank. “We have to keep following the river, so we have no choice but to cut through this overgrown meadow. The faster we walk, the faster we’ll get to the other side.”

“She’s right,” said Jack, pushing aside hairy stalks.

Mike sighed. “I’m just trying to warn you guys the same way that hunter from India tried to warn the other hunters. But no, they refused to listen, just like you two. And what happened to them? They were eaten by ferocious raptors.”

Casey tried to put on a brave smile and pretend like his words didn’t bother her one tiny bit, but movie or not, Mike brought up a good point. On this island, anything was possible, and they had to stay on their guard. “Just keep your eyes peeled, okay, Mike? We all will.” He nodded, and she briskly walked ahead, the wet grass soaking her shoes and ankles.

As if by instinct, she scanned the area, unsure of what she was even searching for. Her gaze shifted upward to something strange in the blue sky: bright, metallic, and silver. For a split second, her mind pondered the possibilities. *Some kind of bright, shimmering bird?* It was too big for that, but she didn't know what else it could be—and big was becoming the norm wherever they were. She squeezed her eyes into thin lines and lifted her palm to shield them from the burning suns.

Mike tilted his head, as if straining to listen. "What's that humming sound?"

"I have no idea, but it kind of sounds like bees," said Jack.

Craning her neck, Casey gaped at silver discs skimming the towering treetops, heading directly toward her. Was she hallucinating? "Guys!" She tugged at their sleeves. "Check it out."

Mike's gaze shot up. "Whoa! Those things are the size of a house!"

Jack took a few steps backward, stammering, "Are those—"

"UFOs?" Casey finished for him. She grabbed Mike's and Jack's hands and dragged them underneath a tangle of giant sunflower plants. Granted, it wasn't the best place to hide, but it wasn't like they had much choice. They crouched low in the high grass and peeked through the large, bristly leaves.

The first UFO passed over her head, then the second, and then the third...and they kept coming and coming. There had to be hundreds stretching out into the distance. They flew in a straight line, in perfect formation, never changing speed or altitude. On the bottom of each craft, rings of lights changed color in a slow, synchronized sequence. The spherical objects produced no clouds of exhaust or smoke of any kind.

How is this even possible? UFOs don't exist. Those people who claim to see them out on the desert highways and stuff always sound like nutcases. Wait...does that make me a nutcase too? She blinked several times.

She shaded her eyes against the glare reflected off the fleet of shiny discs drifting by, 300 feet overhead. Casey couldn't pry her gaze from them. She felt her skin prickle. "What in the world?"

"You know, after fighting off prehistoric animals, UFOs don't seem so far-fetched," said Mike breaking through her thoughts.

"Only in your world, buddy," whispered Jack.

Casey motioned upward. “You know we’re staring at a supermarket tabloid headline, right? So yeah, I’d say this is pretty far-fetched. Although, I do see your point.”

“You know, it looks like an army of Goodyear blimps,” said Mike, nudging her. “Doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, if you take a magic wand and turn them *galactic*.”

Mike shook her shoulder. “Hey, let’s flag ’em down and get their attention.”

“I don’t like that idea one bit. Let’s go,” said Casey.

“No,” said Mike. “Wait a sec.”

She thought maybe she should run, but she wasn’t about to leave Mike’s and Jack’s sides.

“What are they?” asked Jack.

Casey’s pulse drummed in her ears. “I think we’re looking at a fleet of spacecraft controlled by our government...or maybe the Russians, Japanese, or Chinese? What else could it be?”

“Aliens,” said Mike.

A shiver ran down her spine as she thought about little green men with big black eyes. She knew people lived their whole lives searching for such a unique moment. Why did she have to experience one when she had never actually joined in the alien-craze? She knew she needed to come back to her senses, and she convinced herself that all they were seeing were sophisticated military airplanes.

Mike shrugged. “I dunno, but seeing is believing, and you can’t deny the proof floating above your head. I wish I had my camera! But then again, who’d believe me? They’d just say I photoshopped it.”

Jack’s gaze didn’t leave the ships. “I wish I could explain them away as stellar bodies, weather balloons, airplanes, or clouds...but I can’t. There’s no way I can even wrap my head around this.”

If Jack—the one with explanations for everything—was stumped, Casey knew something was definitely going on. The one thing she did know was that those crafts were piloted by someone—or something—and she wondered if the pilots were friendly.

As much as she didn’t want to see the ships, she even dreaded more the possibility of meeting whoever was flying them. “It has military written all over it. I bet it’s top secret. You know what they do to people who see stuff like this? They disappear.”

Jack met her gaze. There was no need for words. His wide eyes conveyed the message perfectly.

She nodded. “Yeah, let’s keep low and get outta here. Hanging around is a dumb idea. Remember the duckbilled dinosaur incident?”

One of the discs dropped out of formation and hovered even closer above them. Brilliant red, blue, green, and yellow lights raced around its rim. A sudden wind grabbed at Casey’s clothing and whipped across her skin. Flowers shook and wobbled. Dirt swirled. Panic fluttered in her stomach. “We’ve seen way too much. And *they* know it!” She searched for an escape route and took a few steps back, her long hair flying wildly about her face.

“Into the jungle!” said Jack.

“No!” yelled Casey, sprinting. “The forest is way closer.” She cast a nervous glance over her shoulder. Jack followed right on her heels, but Mike didn’t move. He still stood beneath the UFO with his head tilted all the way back, as if he was in some kind of weird trance. “Mike, move your butt. NOW!” She stopped and turned, waiting for a reaction from him, but none came. She frowned. *What’s wrong with him? He can’t be that mesmerized...or stupid.*

A kaleidoscope of light flashed on Mike’s face as he stared up.

She whistled and shouted, “Jack, stop! Mike’s not coming. We can’t leave him.”

Jack turned and tore back through the field, annoyance marking his features. Casey ran over to Mike, yanking his arm. He stood dumbstruck, his eyes wide and his jaw hanging. If she wasn’t so scared, she would have rolled her eyes at him. *Why can’t he just run like any other sane human being?*

“Mike, let’s go, right now!” Jack jerked his other arm.

Loud clicking sounds emanated from the bottom of the ship, like a bicycle being pedaled backward. A metallic door on the bottom slid open. As much as she hoped it was the Welcome Committee with homemade cookies and milk, she was rather certain that wasn’t going to be the case. Casey clutched Mike’s hand and blinked against the churning dust that stung her face and eyes. Her heart pounded, and she had no idea what to expect. She thought she should run, but leaving Mike behind wasn’t an option. “C’mon Mike!” she chanted over and over again, pulling at him, but he didn’t move from the spot.

“Oh, man... this can’t be good,” whispered Casey.

A red beam suddenly zapped the ground just inches from their feet, as if Zeus himself was throwing his trademark lightning bolts around.

Mike snapped back into reality and screamed, “RUN!” He pulled Casey along as he raced toward the forest, and Jack grabbed her other hand.

A second beam of light whirled past Casey, and mushroom clouds of dirt flew up around her. Heat scorched her legs, and a pungent, acrid smell assaulted her nostrils.

“Step on it!” yelled Casey.

* * *

Inside the Glass City

Red alert lights flashed on and off as alarms blared inside the control room. The large screen in front of General Ashtar changed focus from the UFOs over the city to three teenagers running toward the forest. “Thorn, are you seeing this?”

Thorn shook his bald, pear-shaped head. “Indeed. Where did they come from?”

“I have no idea, but the enemy’s closing in fast. Zoom in on them.”

“All scans indicate that they are humans from the surface,” said Thorn.

The general watched on his view screen. A grin twisted his lips. “Hmm...then I have the perfect plan for them. Save them from the rebels and get them out of that wildlife preserve before they’re torn to pieces...and then bring them to me.”

Thorn straightened. “I know what you’re thinking, General sir, but they’re only teenagers. I can’t have their deaths on my hands. Besides, it’ll never work.”

General Ashtar pondered for a moment. Running a hand through his short blond hair, he stared down at Thorn with his piercing blue eyes. “With millions of lives at stake, Thorn, I don’t think we have a choice.”

A frown crept across Thorn’s green face. “I don’t like this one bit.”

The general smoothed out a wrinkle on his black and silver one-piece uniform. “I know you’re not from Earth, and I understand your reservations, but this is a race against time, and the stakes are high. We’ll send Orthon to retrieve the children while we work together on my idea.”

Thorn nodded. “Yes, sir.”

General Ashtar touched a blue crystal on the control panel. “Orthon to the control room...”

* * *

Casey took off through the field with Jack and Mike at her heels. Granted, she was trespassing in a foreign land. But she wasn't familiar with the shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later policy they had in place. The sunflowers grew sparse as she neared the forest, clearing the way for a perfect view of the towering pines. *Why do they look so far away?*

After fifty more feet. Casey leapt forward, her gaze fixed on her target destination as she put her body into gear. *Run faster. Thirty feet? Ugh. Why does it feel like a hundred?* There was no time to look back, but she had to take a tiny peek over her shoulder to see how close they were. She turned when her foot caught on something hard, almost tripping her up. Before she toppled, she regained her equilibrium, but her ankle throbbed, slowing her down.

Twenty-five more feet...just fifteen more... Her leg hurt so much she was almost hopping, as if she was trying to skip rope on one leg, and she'd never been any good at *that*. Her lungs whizzed with the effort, and a sheen of fresh perspiration ran down her back.

A red beam crossed the air with a high-pitched whistle, landing pretty darn close to her feet. Letting out a shriek, Casey covered her head with her hands as flying clumps of earth hit her from every angle. *What lunatic tries to kill a girl anyway? Just ten more feet...five more...three more...almost there...one more foot, and...*

She darted around the huge trees as fast as the burning muscles in her legs would allow, dry leaves and twigs crunching beneath her feet. More beams whizzed by. Was there a whole army shooting at her like she was some sort of national threat? A tree burst into flames and toppled over with a *crash* in front of her, the blazing flames scorching her clothes. *That was a close one.* A few inches to the right, and she would have been toast—literally. She spun and found an alternate route, squeezing through the clustered trees in hopes that the firing squad might not see through the dense canopy above her head.

She exhaled sharply and placed her palm on her chest to calm her racing heart as she bent forward to rest against a tree trunk. Mike and Jack would catch up any second; at least the ship had quit using them for target practice. She had the nagging suspicion, though, that it wouldn't be long before they realized they were bad losers after all and wanted another try.

"It's...still...it's still...following us," huffed Mike between breaths.

Jack reached for Casey's hand. "C'mon! We're not safe yet."

Chapter 2

Casey bounded through the forest, gasping for breath, but the craft followed behind, skimming the trees. A piercing roar tortured her ears as the ground trembled beneath her.

"What the heck!?" yelled Mike.

What now? She turned slowly, following his line of vision. *A dragon?* Okay, so maybe she had read one too many fantasy books. *No. A real-life sauropod—a brontosaurus!* Casey closed her eyes and blinked before she dared another glance. It had to be at least one hundred feet long, fifteen feet tall at the shoulder. The creature wasn't green like textbooks said it should be; rather, it was reddish brown, with black stripes. It reared up onto its hind legs like a wild stallion and let out an ear-bursting shriek while swiping at the UFO with a forefoot. The disc plummeted out of view, black smoke rising from it. *At least the ship's not coming this way.*

"Look out!" said Jack.

Huh? Look out for what? Casey spun in time to see the dinosaur's massive tail swing toward them like a giant baseball bat. With a *thud*, she plunged forward, falling flat on her face as the red blur shot past her and smashed into a tree. Pieces of bark spattered across the thicket, some landing in her hair.

Mike dropped next to her, spitting out black sand. Jack lay sprawled somewhere behind him.

Casey's heart pounded. She knew they couldn't stay in one place for too long because that tail would definitely be coming back. "Get up!" Casey shouted. "Keep moving!" Not chancing another look, she jumped to her feet, hoping the others got the message.

Adrenaline pumped through her body with each step she took. Ignoring the pain in her side, she ran until nausea bubbled up inside her, forcing her to consider stopping before she broke down in a helpless heap. "There!" Casey pointed to a giant tangle of branches and moss-covered logs. She crawled through the thick foliage and undergrowth, gasping for breath. Gagging, she placed a hand over her nose and mouth. The moldy, musty odor of decomposing wood overwhelmed her. Mike and Jack squeezed in. She tried to calm her racing heart. *Is this a good enough hiding place? Will they find us? Is that dinosaur nearby?*

Casey squeezed her eyes shut as they all huddled close together. No one moved a muscle or spoke a word. It was surprising for Mike to shut up for a change, instead of being his usual reckless self. More sweat dripped down her back, biting and itching in all the wrong places.

She had no idea how much time passed. Eventually, birds started chirping again, and the forest came to life. Hearing nature's symphony orchestra was a good sign, because it meant they weren't about to be gobbled up like an afternoon snack. The singing crickets reminded her of a family camping trip to Sequoia National Park; it had rained all day, and everyone was soaked and miserable, but the beautiful sounds of nature lifted their spirits—just like now. She peered through an opening in the vegetation. “Do you think it's safe yet?”

Mike blinked. “Give it a sec. I mean, did you see the freakin' brontosaurus zapped straight out of Bedrock?”

Blowing out a breath, Jack shook his head. “Yeah, it was kind of hard to miss.”

Jack crawled back to the narrow opening and flicked the ferns to the side when Mike grabbed his arm, wide-eyed. “C'mon, bro! You can't go out there by yourself. This place's totally twisted. We've literally jumped into *Jurassic Park*.”

Casey bit her lip hard. “Twisted” didn't even begin to describe it. *Try unbelievable, vile, and deadly*. “Exactly. That's why I'm going.”

Jack pushed his brown hair out of his eyes. “Listen, you and Mike stay here. My dad taught me how to secure a perimeter. Don't worry, you two. I'll be right back.”

Why's he being like this? Casey wondered. Jack seemed as though he had something to prove, like a brave warrior heading into battle. She knew fighting with him would be useless because his mind was already made up. “Be careful, okay?” She leaned forward to give Jack's shoulder a quick squeeze.

“Everything's going to be alright.” He smiled and disappeared before she could say another word.

A throbbing pain began to radiate from behind her eyes. She needed to let off some steam fast, before she hurried after Jack to make sure nothing happened to him. She scooted closer to Mike. Flashbacks of him standing underneath the UFO infuriated her. She felt like shaking him. “Don't make me drag you away like that ever again. You could've got us killed. Why do you pull stunts like that?”

He blew out a breath. “I don't know. Maybe...well, maybe I just need to feel alive.”

Mike had a Type T personality, diagnosed by his doctor at the age of two; he never let her forget what the T stood for: thrill seeker. He tried to channel and diffuse it through surfing dangerous waves, but some of it still spilled over into his everyday life. It was part of what drew Casey to him; she was intrigued by his craving for adventure and life, but a lot of times he took it too far, and his crazy actions with the sharks, dinosaurs, and the UFOs were prime examples.

She pinched his arm.

“Ouch!” Mike rubbed the spot.

“Feel that?” She pinched him again. If something happened to her two best friends, she would never forgive herself. They meant everything to her. “See? You’re alive... even if you are an idiot.”

“I’m no different than you. You told me you need to paint to feel alive, to get that adrenaline rush.”

“Well, yeah, but last time I checked, paintbrushes and canvas don’t get anybody almost killed.”

“Sorry, I’m not perfect.” He pulled her close, smiling. “But I find perfection very boring. Don’t you?”

She pushed him away. She couldn’t believe he was joking when he’d almost been killed just moments earlier, but then again, it was Mike she was talking to. “What am I going to do with you?”

He winked. “Anything you want.”

“Stop it! Why can’t you be more serious... like Jack?”

“Like Einstein, huh? And have the personality of an iceberg?”

What? Jack wasn’t born wild and addicted to danger like Mike was, but he was far from an ice cube. Something was up between those two, and she had a sneaking feeling it had to do with the kiss between her and Mike. “What’s with all the insults and tension between you guys?”

Mike let out a huff, and then turned away. He didn’t want to talk about it, which only strengthened her suspicion. Casey decided it was not the time to push the issue, considering they were sitting in a jungle full of dinosaurs under a two-sun sky full of UFOs, trying to get to a glass city. There’d be time for talking when things got back to normal. She let out a long sigh. “You need to run faster next time.”

“I would’ve gladly ditched these sandals for a pair of tennis shoes with high-power rockets, had I known we’d be racing for our lives through some forest, dodging death ray beams. You told me we were going to spend the day out on your mom and dad’s sailboat having a great time. I thought we needed *swim gear*, not *running gear*.”

“Well, it’s not exactly what I imagined either.” Casey wished she could contact her parents, as she could picture them frantic with worry. She breathed in, blinking hard several times as she tried to push her thoughts of her parents to the back of her mind. There was no need to go there, because she couldn’t afford more worries than she was already dealing with. Casey tapped her chin. “I wonder what we saw. Is it classified military stuff or extraterrestrial? Part of me thinks it’s aliens, but another part screams it’s some kind of top secret government experiment.”

“I dunno. I’m leaning toward the other dimension theory myself. But look at the bright side. It’s you, me, and the termites all snuggled up close together.” Mike put an arm around her and brushed his warm lips across hers in a soft kiss. “Romantic, eh?”

She smiled. He had this mysterious way of making her anger melt away, no matter what kind of crazy stunts he pulled. It was impossible to stay mad at him, which is probably why he got away with so much. “We’re under a pile of rotting trees. Is this really the place to bust a move?”

He squeezed her tight. “When I’m around you, I can’t help myself.”

His words made her heart melt. “I have a confession to make. I have the same problem.” In a bold move, she cupped his face and kissed him softly, her heart spiking. He didn’t try to deepen the lingering kiss but kept it innocent and slow, and that was nice because it took the pressure off of trying to keep up with the experienced girls he usually dated. The heat from his touch surged through her body. She could have sworn that the whole crazy world stopped all around her—and she’d have been lucky if she could have remembered her own name in that moment.

Jack’s voice cut through the air, and Mike pulled away, taking a quick breath.

“One more sweep, and it’ll be safe to come out,” said Jack.

She gazed out through an opening. A plant she didn’t recognize tickled her ear as she let her gaze dart from the treetops to the forest floor. The landscape looked much like that of the prehistoric past: delicate ferns and Cycads, different species of lichen draped over the pine trees, green moss flowing over rocks and logs, and black sand sparkling as if mixed with millions of tiny pieces of glittering glass.

Mike leaned in closer and squinted through the gap. “Looks safe.” He draped an arm around her and asked, “Should we take a chance? ’Cause if you’re willing, then I am.”

Is he talking about venturing outside or being more than friends? She wiped her moist hands on her shorts, taking the bait. *He wants mysterious? Oh boy, can I give him mysterious.* “I want to—badly—but we might be crossing into dangerous territory. Part of me is just...terrified.”

His fingers traced her lips, and a tingle shot up her spine. “What’re you so afraid of?” he asked.

Lotsa stuff, to be honest. She knew he’d never stay faithful, and if he hurt her like that, they’d lose their friendship. She met his gaze. “Wild animals.”

He pushed a strand of hair away from her face. “A wild species can be tamed by the right trainer.”

“But they can never be fully domesticated,” she retorted.

He pulled her into his arms, and her heartbeat spiked...again. “Enough with the symbolism. I think we both know we’re talking about us, so why not take the risk and give me a shot?” He grabbed her hand and planted a soft and tender kiss. “I may not be perfect. I know that. But remember what we talked about earlier? Just think of me as beautifully flawed.”

“No, you’re a perfect diamond in my book.” She touched his face and noticed the hint of a smile on his lips. “Mike, can we talk about this later, when we’re safe?” *And alone.* She didn’t need Jack getting in her business.

Speaking of Jack, the leaves shuffled a second before he appeared. She dropped her palm too late; Jack’s lips tightened into a grim line, realization visible in his eyes. “It’s gone. Perimeter’s secure. And Mike, that daredevil behavior better stop. Next time, I might not come and rescue you.”

“Three’s a crowd,” said Mike.

“This is me ignoring you.” Jack turned and left.

“You know what that was, don’t you?” asked Casey. “That was Jack pissed off ’cause I was snuggled up to you and you getting mad at Jack because he interrupted us. Will you two ever grow up?” Casey started to crawl from their hiding place.

“Hey, don’t go!” Mike scurried after her. “I’m sorry. I’m a jerk. I know this isn’t the right time to talk about us, but can I help it if my best friend’s totally hot?”

She stopped and glanced over her shoulder with a smile. “I didn’t know you felt that way about Jack. Maybe you two should have a long talk.”

“Ha ha. My *other* best friend.”

Mike threw the word “hot” around quite a bit, and Casey had to wonder if their friendship meant so little to him that he’d keep flirting with the other girls. She wondered if he would even care if they lost their friendship in the process or if he really thought everything would just be cake: marriage, a house with a dog, and two-point-five kids playing behind the white picket fence. The *Cosmopolitan* articles her mom left lying around weren’t exactly based on lifelong research. Casey knew better than to believe anyone could “Turn a Guy from a Cheat into Husband Material in Just 10 Days!” but that didn’t mean she couldn’t *hope*.

With a sigh, she scampered out. The fresh smell of pine lingered in the air. She brushed the dirt off her clothing with a few quick strokes and stretched her neck to search the sky. “No hovering ships. Guess they didn’t radio their friends for backup.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” said Jack, his voice tense. “Whatever you do, don’t let your guard down.”

Mike nudged Casey and cleared his throat. “Like I said…” He sang the next few syllables. “...iceberg.” He walked off with that cocky grin of his.

“Hey, where’re you going?” Jack called out.

“To see if we’re anywhere near the river. I’ll be right back.”

“Mike, please come back. That’s not a good idea.” Casey chased after him but he had already disappeared into the foliage. She let out a long sigh and walked back toward Jack. Mike was probably hoping to run into a dinosaur. *Darn adrenaline junkie.*

Jack pushed his shaggy hair off his forehead, showing off those pretty blue eyes. He grinned as she met his gaze.

“What?” she asked. “How can you smile when we’re lost, probably being stalked for revenge by the fleet of UFOs we saw flying above our heads? They can’t be too happy we took down one of their comrades.” Technically, it was the fault of the brontosaurus, but she was sure the ships would somehow blame her.

Jack’s perfect white teeth gleamed as he smiled wider. “When you asked me to come on vacation, I never pictured jumping into an adventure like this.”

She laughed. He was like a beacon shining through all of the gloom. No way was Jack an iceberg. “Yeah, I’m full of surprises, aren’t I? So what do you think those disks were? I say military. Maybe aliens, but I think little green men is a big stretch.”

“Definitely military,” said Jack.

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. “Mike says we’re in another dimension. What do you think?”

He smiled. “I don’t believe in aliens or other dimensions, remember?”

She smiled back. “Of course you don’t. I don’t know why I bothered asking.” He smirked as she nudged him in the ribs. “Well, I know one thing for sure...we’ve got to find some help.”

Jack shifted his stance and exhaled. “So let’s head to the city.”

Seriously? Is he crazy? A chill ran down Casey’s spine. “You can’t be for real. *They* just tried to kill us.”

He stepped toward her, looking her intensely in the eyes. “You don’t know that. Do you have proof it was them?”

“Do you have proof it wasn’t?” She crossed her arms, waiting for his evidence.

“We’re not safe out here, that’s for sure. I’m going to that city, and I hope you’ll come with me.” His voice was pleading.

Biting her lip, Casey peered around her. “Well, we’ve lost the river.”

He straightened, poised with confidence. “We’ll hike north until we find it. Are you coming?”

Casey pictured her dad’s furrowed brows and her mom’s frantic tears as they begged the Fiji Navy to keep searching. Jack was right about one thing: They had no proof those UFOs had come from the glass city. She met Jack’s gaze straight on. “All right. Maybe they can help.”

Mike walked swiftly through a patch of ferns. “River’s nowhere in sight, but I’m sure Jack can track it.”

“Are you coming with us to the city?” she asked.

“Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Cause those ships that tried to kill us *could’ve* come from that fancy glass kingdom.”

He grinned. “We won’t know for sure until we check it out for ourselves.”

“Okay then, let’s go,” she said.

* * *

Casey was hiking through the dense forest of towering pines when a loud *crunch* jolted her out of her thoughts. Grabbing Mike's arm, she stopped to listen and craned her neck toward Jack.

"I heard it too," he said.

She stiffened and spun around. "We need to be extra careful." She swept an uneasy glance around the trees, her senses on full alert. "I have a funny feeling we're being watched."

"I don't see anything," said Mike.

Casey wrung her hands as her mind raced. "I'm not imagining things."

Jack's lips pressed into a grim line. "There *was* a noise. Someone's following us."

"Yeah, someone...or *something*," Casey retorted with a gulp. Angry pale blue eyes flashed in her head. She'd hoped her duckbilled dinosaur days were long gone, just a distant memory. She was sure there was no way that dino could have followed her, but the thing from the beach might have been trailing them. As she looked away, a shiver slid up her spine. *What if it isn't an animal at all? What if it's one of those things from inside the UFOs?* "I'm not sticking around here," Casey said, walking in the direction of the city. "Let's go."

The *snap* of a twig behind them, followed by the unmistakable *crunch* of dried leaves halted her mid step. Casey strained to listen, her hands clenched into tight fists. The *snap* of another twig drifted through the forest. She looked around the trees and high grass, calling out, "Hello! Who's there?" Her heart skipped a beat. "What do you want?"

The sound of singing crickets and chirping birds were her only reply. She jumped, startled, as a sudden flash of orange glinted to their left.

Jack pointed. "There! Did you see that in the grass? What is it?"

Casey flinched. For a split second, she saw yellow eyes in the foliage. "It's an animal of some kind, but I only caught a glimpse."

"Where?" Mike looked out into the surrounding woods.

Jack held up a hand. "Shh. Listen. The birds stopped chirping. This is exactly what happens in the jungle when a predator is following its prey."

"So...what is it?" asked Mike.

"It could be a harmless animal or maybe another so-called extinct one, possibly a predator."

The eerie silence made Casey's skin crawl. She'd never been hunted before, and the idea of it happening now, in this strange place, made her insides quake.

A loud call broke the silence. *Kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk!*

Mike, Casey, and Jack screamed in unison, their echoes carrying through the pine forest. The flutter of large wings sent another chill down Casey's spine as a crow-sized bird took off.

Casey was sure that the sweet-looking bird wasn't what was causing all the scuffle. She glanced up, her hand over her heart. "It's only a bird. Still... let's cruise on out of here."

Mike motioned them forward. "Off to Glasstropolis then."

Jack folded his arms over his chest. "Yeah, but what scared that bird?"

"Dunno," said Mike, "but I'll keep my eyes peeled."

Casey nodded as she started walking. "I will too."

A low throaty growl rumbled from the left and Casey jumped. She bit down hard on her bottom lip. The same pair of yellow eyes she had seen moments ago peered through the giant leaves of a tropical bush. Her heart lurched.

Chapter 3

A menacing growl broke the silence. Casey's heart thudded against her ribcage yet again as a shiver swept over her skin. A tangle of leaves with serrated edges covered the creature's legs and part of its orange-brown coat. Even still, she could tell it had to be roughly eight feet tall and at least six feet long. Streams of saliva oozed from the two gleaming eight-inch fangs jutting from its upper jaw. The animal turned its head, locking its fierce gaze on her, of course. From all the things on nature's buffet, it had to set its sights on Casey.

"It's a s-s-saber tooth tiger," whispered Casey, staggering back. Beads of sweat broke across her brow. Sunlight from above filtered through the high branches giving the menacing creature an eerie glow. She turned to run, but Jack's hand tightened around her arm, pulling her close. Her stomach clenched. "What're you doing? We've got to get outta here."

What's wrong with these guys? Surely, they had to have some sort of instinct telling them you stop to admire a bunny or deer frolicking in the woods, but you engage in serious cardio when a prehistoric tiger is salivating at you and showing its huge fangs.

“Don’t run!” yelled Jack. “A tiger’s instinct is to chase its prey.”

“Sure, and why don’t I just hold out my hand so it realizes I’m no trouble at all when it bites a chunk off?” Casey raised her eyebrows, and he loosened his death grip. She pulled herself free and then focused her gaze back on the predator. Jack could say whatever he wanted, but if that big, hungry cat came any closer, Casey was going to bolt.

The great cat sprang from the grass and dropped on all fours, causing Casey to shoot a terrified look at Jack. *Does he really expect us to stand here and face this thing?*

Jack’s face showed no sign of fear as he stepped forward. “Our only chance is to show this thing we’re not its regular prey! This tiger doesn’t *want* to fight. It just wants an easy meal!”

“Which it isn’t getting from us,” hissed Casey.

“Exactly. So try to look as tall as you can. Raise your arms and flap them. Yell and shout!”

For once, Mike refused to argue and did exactly what he was told, thrusting his arms high in the air.

For Casey, though, Jack’s plan was easier said than done. She opened her mouth, but the only noises that came out were thin and crispy. She cleared her throat and swallowed to ease the dryness, but even that didn’t help. Her mom used to say her voice could raise the dead, but where was that voice when she needed it the most?

Jack’s strong voice carried out over the snarls. “Casey, you can do this. You have no other choice.”

“I know.” Once she finished, the tiger would develop some major phobia so it never crossed another human’s path again. She gulped down some more air and flung her arms as she cried out; it didn’t really sound all that fierce, but Casey was just warming up. Her voice grew louder with each shriek. She tried to keep her eyes away from the tiger and focus on some other diversion, but her eyes instinctively kept darting between the animal and Jack. He looked so mean that she couldn’t decide who was more frightening.

“Can’t we hightail it up a tree?” came Mike’s voice from the left.

“Bad idea,” Jack replied. “Even *regular* tigers can jump twenty feet.”

Mike huffed. “So throw it a stick or something. Maybe prehistoric alien other-dimension tigers like to play fetch.”

Narrowing her gaze, Casey lips pressed into a grim line. “Yeah, and while we’re at it, why don’t we teach it how to sit and roll over? Bright idea, genius.”

The animal let out an intimidating roar, followed by a deep growl.

Casey had a sneaking feeling that it didn't fancy her company unless she was sitting *inside* its stomach. Adrenaline flooded her body. She flailed her arms and stomped, screaming like a banshee.

Mike waved a huge branch in the air, flapping his arms like he was trying to fly. "You want a piece of me? Huh? Come and get me then! C'mon!"

Snarling, the beast inched closer and closer, baring its teeth. Its fur stood on end, its ears laid back, and its eyes were blazing like the two suns above. If anything, Mike's acrobatic performance seemed to provoke it even more.

Casey glanced at him, hesitating. "Uh, Mike..." He didn't seem to acknowledge her, so she shouted louder. "Hey, yo, Mike! It's time for Plan B 'cause this tiger isn't getting the message."

Before he could answer, the tiger swatted at Casey with its massive paw, revealing a row of yellowed razor-sharp claws. She jumped back and narrowly dodged its swing. She wasn't about to become the animal's dinner, and being torn to shreds wasn't exactly the way she wanted to go.

She gasped as every muscle in her body tensed to flee, but there was no way she would leave her two best friends, even if they were being stubborn by sticking around. While Mike and Jack yelled and hurled rocks at the beast, Casey sucked in a trembling breath and scanned the forest floor for a weapon of her own. She spotted a pile of petrified wood and picked up a rotting, moss-covered log. Pieces of bark fell all over her as she hurled it like a javelin at the creature's face. "Take that!"

The tiger shook its head as the log bounced off its muscular neck. The creature let out a pig-like squeal and fled into the tall grass. Casey was sure she hadn't hit the tiger hard enough to hurt it. *Maybe I just spooked it. I'm sure it's not used to its prey fighting back like that.* Either that, or there was the slightest chance she was developing supernatural abilities; she was beginning to think nothing would surprise her in this place. Still, it had been rather easy to get rid of—not that she was complaining. She frowned as she planted a palm against her racing heart in the hopes of calming it down.

"Great, it's retreating," said Jack. "I'm going to go check it out and make sure it really left." He took a few steps into the jungle, peering around enormous umbrella-shaped leaves.

Mike shook a stick high in the air. "Hey, tiger, is that all you got? Yeah, that's right...run away!"

“You da man,” mocked Casey.

He dropped the branch, and wiped his hands on his shorts. “Too bad I didn’t have a chair and whip like a lion tamer.”

She shot him a sarcastic grin. “I figured you for the nut that’d stick his head inside a lion’s mouth.”

Mike wrapped his arms around her. “Boy, you *do* get me. That’s why you’re the woman of my dreams.”

She cupped his cheek, gazing into his eyes. “Aren’t you the sweetest? We almost got eaten by a tiger, and here you are declaring your undying devotion for me.” Vibrations shot up her legs as the ground beneath her feet trembled. She broke away from Mike’s embrace. “What’s going on? Did you guys feel that? Was that some kind of...earthquake or something?”

Jack raced toward them, frantic and pointing. “Turn around! Did you really think that tiger was scared of *us*?”

“Oh, man!” Her voice wavered, her fear coming through loud and clear. Another large creature approached this one with a long trunk and huge, slender ivory tusks that curved up and back, almost in a spiral. The animal had to be at least fifteen feet tall; taller than her basketball court in her gym at school. Her breathing quickened. *A woolly mammoth? Huh? What year is it again?*

For a minute, Casey had naively thought she was safe. Maybe they weren’t going to be dinner for a tiger, but that mammoth could easily use them as a welcome mat. She froze at the sight of the immense creature. Her legs refused to budge, as if they were glued to the ground. The animal had an enormous domed head and sloping back. Its shoulders carried a high, distinctive hump. A shaggy, reddish-brown coat trailed down to the ground. As it moved nearer, the Earth (or whatever planet they were on) shook, and twigs snapped underneath humongous circular feet.

Mike turned, his eyes darting around as though he was looking for a quick exit. Casey knew Mike feared nothing—except elephants. Jack had called it *pachydermophobia*, but whatever the scientific name of it was, it was sure to have Mike heading for the hills at the sight of the hairy jumbo Dumbo, and the elephant might even give chase on those giant legs. Casey decided she had to warn Mike before his instincts took over, but Jack’s brain was a step ahead of her, as usual.

“No, Mike! Don’t!” yelled Jack. “It can outrun us. We can only hope it has bad eyesight like a regular elephant. If that’s the case, we could use that to our advantage. Maybe we could get a head start and make some sharp turns downwind.”

Casey nodded. “Good idea, but this thing seems more harmless than the saber-tooth. Doesn’t it just eat leaves and grass?”

Jack took a deep breath as he peered into her eyes. “Elephants are far more dangerous than tigers, even if they are herbivores. One swipe of an elephant’s trunk can kill a lion.”

As if it was flattered by Jack’s comments and wanted to show off its brute strength, the woolly mammoth lifted its trunk and let out a piercing trumpet-call. It raised its two powerful front legs high in the air, only to come crashing down on a rotted tree trunk, exploding it into a hundred flying splinters. The ground shook, and Casey’s heart pounded. Those feet could easily smash a van.

They all screamed and jumped back, tumbling to the ground on top of one another. Casey covered her ears and winced as the massive beast trumpeted again. But instead of pulverizing them to dust, the mammoth just filled its trunk from a muddy pool of water and sprayed them.

A blast hit Casey, blinding her. “What do you think it’s trying to tell us? That we stink?”

Spluttering, she wiped her eyes and gave Jack a tug. “You’ve been to Africa countless times and seen lots of elephants. How can we get that head start you mentioned?” She coughed as another flurry of brownish-gray spray hit them, followed by a stream of mud and dirt.

Mike blinked, rubbing the mud from his eyes. “Maybe it’s just trying to play with us.” Jumping to his feet, he reached his hand down to help Casey up.

“Just because it gives us a good bath doesn’t mean it considers us playmates.” Jack stood, wiping droplets from his face. “One of my mom’s friends survived an elephant attack. She used the decoy method. We can throw a piece of clothing—a sock or t-shirt or anything. It might go after that, and then we can run off while it’s distracted.”

“Hmm...think that’ll work?” asked Mike.

Jack ran a hand through his wet tangle of brown hair. “Do you have a better idea?”

Mike ripped off his shirt and flung it to Jack. “Here!”

His sculpted chest snagged Casey’s gaze, but she quickly returned her focus to the mammoth that could pound them any second. Then, among all that long, shaggy fur, a second

pair of eyes caught her attention. Something stood on the ground next to the mammoth! She peered closer and watched a furry little brown trunk wave in the air.

“Hang on a minute, guys,” said Casey, pointing to a calf, covered in scraggly hair.

“Look! She has a baby.” The tiny mammoth peeked out from behind its mother, its green eyes staring right at her. Even with the tiny tusks protruding below its lower lip, the animal was the cutest thing she’d ever seen. She smiled in amazement. The little creature panted, probably hot from wearing a long natural fur coat in the summer.

Mike and Jack kept babbling about their getaway plan, ignoring her. She had to wonder if they were complete idiots or just immune to the charms of a little baby. She scowled and took a step forward, but no one noticed that either.

The mammoth sprayed her baby and then turned toward them. Casey threw her arms up to protect her face as a stream of water shot out at her. Following the shower, the animal covered everyone, including her calf, with a fresh coat of dirt and mud.

Casey wiped the mud off her face and spit out the dirt that had made its way into her mouth. So why was Mrs. Snuffleupagus treating her like a baby mammoth? Then she felt the light bulb flickering to life. “Guys! The mammoth’s trying to cool us and the baby down because it thinks we’re hot.” When the banter continued, she playfully slapped the back of Mike’s head and smiled. “Put your shirt back on. She isn’t gonna hurt us.”

Mike crossed his arms over his bare chest. “*She?* How do you know that thing’s a she? I didn’t see you crawling underneath it to look, and I’m sure it’s not wearing mascara.”

“Geesh. You two have been so busy arguing that you didn’t even notice the baby. Don’t you see what she’s trying to do? She saved us from that saber-tooth tiger. It probably preys on baby mammoths any chance it gets. We’re about the same size as her little one, so she must think we’re helpless babies who need to be rescued—and cooled off. She’s just being a good mama!” Casey pointed to the baby mammoth. “See? She’s spraying her baby again, just like us.”

Mike threw on his shirt, and it plastered to his chest in seconds. “I’d have never figured that one out.”

Jack nodded. “Pachyderms—uh, elephants—are like that. One time in Africa, I watched this elephant trying to help a baby rhino that was stuck in deep mud. She kept trying, even though the mother rhino charged her each time. She risked her life for a baby that wasn’t even hers.”

Casey’s heart melted. “It doesn’t take a genius to see she’s welcoming us.”

Mike tugged at his wet, muddy clothes as he gritted his teeth. “Well, she sure has a funny way of showing it.”

Casey gazed at the mammoth. Ignoring the uneasy feeling in her stomach, she took another daring step forward. The baby was the cutest thing she’d ever seen. She took a deep breath and let out a sigh as she gazed at its eyes, watching her every move as it stayed hidden behind its mother’s legs.

“Girl, you have guts of steel!” said Mike.

“Uh, Casey, if crazy Mike isn’t taking a step near that thing, shouldn’t that tell you something?” Jack called out. “Wild animals can be unpredictable, cute or not. You should know that by now.”

She smiled back at his warning. “Mike’s *scared* of elephants, remember?”

“You spoke of *it*,” came Mike’s voice from behind, “and you swore to never speak of it again.” When they were five, crazy Mike had jumped into an arena, where he was almost stomped to death by elephants. That taught him a lesson, and he wouldn’t even go near the pachyderm house at the zoo.

The creature stared curiously at Casey, swinging its head and flapping its ears. The baby trumpeted a small cry. The mother mammoth rubbed her trunk on the baby’s back, caressing her frightened calf.

Jack’s voice pierced through the air, “C’mon, Casey! Please turn around.”

“Casey, I’m going to say to you, what you and Jack have said to me a million times on this vacation—you’re going to get yourself killed. Now forget Dumbo here, and let’s go find the river. This isn’t a petting zoo.”

Despite their escalating alarm, she couldn’t peel her gaze off the animal. “Listen guys, she’s not dangerous. She’s just a good mother.”

“Did I forget to mention how dangerous their trunks can be?” called out Jack.

Out of nowhere, muscular arms wrapped around her chest and tackled her to the ground. Casey’s eyes widened as Jack rolled her over. “What’re you doing?” she shouted.

Jack had her pinned to the grass, water dripping down his face and hair, his eyes frantic. His hot breath tickled her chin as he lowered down and talked quietly. “I can’t let you do this! You’ve no idea what you’re doing, and I’d never be able to forgive myself if something happened to you.”

“Get off me, Jack! She’s friendly, and you’ve no right to hold me down like this. Do you hear me?” She struggled against his iron grip, her leg brushing against his as she tried to kick him off her.

He grabbed her arms tighter, his gaze boring into her, imploring. “Please, Casey. Listen. Don’t act like Mike. We have to get off this crazy island...alive.”

Mike swung a fist into Jack’s side and then tried to pull him off. “Let her go!”

“I’m not letting her go anywhere near that thing,” yelled Jack.

A trumpet-like sound deafened Casey. Something wasn’t right, and the sooner she got Jack off her, the better, because she had the nagging feeling she might need her legs.

Jack softened his grip, and his eyes bulged. “Nobody move.”

Chapter 4

Casey gave Jack a shove and pushed him aside. She scrambled to her feet. The woolly mammoth now stood inches away—so close she could have touched it if she wanted. Her mouth dropped open as the beast’s furry trunk swung on top of her head and gently tousled her hair. When she lifted her arm, a layer of mud slid off her body like hot fudge down the side of a sundae, falling to the ground in wet globs. She was sure the creature wouldn’t hurt her, not after it had chased the tiger away, but she couldn’t believe it was caring for her like one of its own.

With shaking fingers, she brushed the tip of its trunk gently, then with a little more pressure so it wouldn’t mistake her for an irritating fly. The mammoth was friendly. Casey knew it. Mike’s white smile gleamed as he gingerly touched the animal’s fur. “I guess elephants aren’t so bad after all. I don’t know why I was always so scared of ‘em, but I’m not anymore—at least not this one. I’m completely okay with being around her. I mean she’s cool, and we should call her Shaggy.”

“That’s the perfect name for her.” Casey placed a palm on the mammoth’s pillar-like leg and stroked its coarse hair that dangled like fringe on the bottom of an old pair of jeans. Her gaze drifted lower, and she marveled at its humongous feet. Each one had to be the size of two Frisbees.

Casey ran her hands across the baby mammoth's woolly fur. She couldn't stop staring at the beautiful baby and stroked its trunk. It flapped its ears and blinked at her with curious eyes. The baby raised its trunk and opened its mouth so Casey was able to see its pink tongue, and then softly blew a puff of warm air into her face. Casey giggled. "Was that a kiss?" Whatever it was, it was still the cutest thing she'd ever seen. She felt a tug and laughed as the baby pulled on her shoelaces with its trunk.

Jack patted the baby's head, too, and then turned to face Casey. "I'm so sorry I knocked you down like that. I panicked. I want to get off this island alive, with *both* of my best friends, all in one piece."

She sighed, not quite ready to forgive and forget. Her gaze locked with his, and she saw something—a glint that she couldn't quite pinpoint. Something dropped in the pit of her stomach. "I understand, but you didn't have to sack me like a quarterback at one of your football games. A little warning might have been nice so I could've at least worn a helmet and some shoulder pads. But I guess if the situation were reversed, I would've done the same thing—"

Something wrapped around Casey's waist and squeezed. Looking down, her eyes widened at her new furry belt—a fashion accessory she didn't expect. It was Shaggy's trunk. She felt a jerk as her feet left the ground. Casey flailed her arms and legs, but the mammoth lifted her higher. *What was I thinking? I shoulda run away when I had the chance.* She pounded on the creature's trunk, shrieking in the process. "She won't let go of me!" Her pulse started to race, and her body shook. She'd wanted to touch it, but a King Kong-style meeting wasn't quite what she'd bargained for. "Please don't tell me you're not just a good mama after all."

"Casey!" Jack and Mike shouted in unison.

"We have to help her," she heard Mike say as he shuffled across the ground beneath her.

Whoa! How high in the air am I? She wanted to take just a tiny peek from the corner of her eyes, but she shook her head. *No, don't look. Just a tiny peek. Oh, what the heck?* She opened her eyes wide and looked, letting out a tiny yelp when she realized it was far more than a few inches—more like a whole story.

"Hold on tight," said Mike. "We'll get you down."

"Don't move, Casey," shouted Jack.

Hyperventilating, she felt the hysteria bubble up inside.

"C'mon, Jack! Grab something like a stick or rock," she heard Mike's voice call.

“Don’t!” said Jack. “Stay calm, Mike, or you’ll spook it.”

Casey sucked in a deep breath and squeezed her eyes shut and then opened them again. Any minute now, the thing could drop her, or worse, throw her like a javelin. She’d never quite understood people’s fascination with flying, let alone playing human cannonball. Unfortunately, no one had given her an option in this little circus performance.

The creature let out a soft grunt. Gentle, green eyes slowly blinked, flashing long eyelashes. Casey smiled as a breeze ruffled a patch of brown, fuzzy hair on the top of the mammoth’s head. It didn’t look like a predator to her. *But then again, aren’t the cute, fluffy ones always the deadliest in the animal world?*

“I don’t think it’s going to hurt you,” said Mike. “Otherwise, it’d be stomping on you by now. Hey, while you’re up there, could you check whether we’re getting closer to the city?”

He didn’t seem too concerned about her safety, but Casey knew he was trying to calm her nerves with humor and distraction.

“Sounds like a good idea. If you hand me a pen and paper, I could draw us a map.”

“Good. My stomach’s grumbling like a bear,” said Mike. “How far are we?”

She spun slightly to glance down at him. “It’s right over there. And do you know what else I see? A McDonald’s. I’ll just jot down the address and throw it in the GPS.”

Turning carefully, Casey focused her attention back on the prehistoric animal. *Should I...touch it? Ah, why not?* If it wanted to bite her head off, it would have done so already. Stretching her arm, she caressed the fur on its trunk, marveling at how soft it was. “Hello there, girl. You sure are beautiful.” It wasn’t just some lie to mellow the mammoth’s mood; Casey did think it was absolutely amazing and gorgeous. “Don’t worry, guys.” Casey let out a laugh. “I guess you were right, Jack. Wild animals are unpredictable.” She reached out and touched a swirling ivory tusk. The surface was creamy white and smooth.

“I wish I were up there instead of you,” said Mike.

She ran her hand across the tusk one last time. “You’d trade places with a lion tamer if it would get you another adrenaline rush.”

“You betcha! So how can she even pick you up like that?”

“Elephants have over 100,000 muscles in their trunks alone,” said Jack. “Just imagine how many a mammoth has.”

Stepping closer, Mike patted the creature's fur. "You think if I wave my hands around, Shaggy will adopt me too?"

Jack chuckled. "Don't even think about it. I can't catch you both once she decides she's had enough."

Casey reached for the top of the mammoth's head and grabbed its fur, pulling herself upward until she sat on its neck with her legs tucked behind its ears. The mammoth's woolly locks felt gritty to the touch, as if it had taken a bath in sand. She grinned down at Mike's and Jack's speechless faces.

"You didn't just..." Jack's voice trailed off.

She grinned. "Yep. Sure did."

Mike whistled. "Sweet."

Jack's loud voice suddenly rang through the air. "What the heck?" The mammoth wrapped her trunk around Jack, lifting him up.

Casey laughed as she watched his face turning from surprise to confusion as the mammoth placed him on her huge head. "I'll move back." She reached and gave his hand a brief squeeze as he scooted in front of her, struggling to breathe. "Remember... deep breaths." Her tone was soft and gentle.

Jack nodded. Pearls of sweat gathered across his brows as he breathed in. "I can do this."

"I'm coming up!" Mike shouted, peering around like he was looking for a ladder or rope.

He was always finding new and exciting ways to break his neck. No one was as inventive as he was when it came to turning a perfectly harmless situation into a full-blown disaster. Before Casey could say a word, he jumped up, holding onto Shaggy's fur as he climbed higher.

Suddenly, Mike began to crawl awkwardly past Jack. "I'm joining the party, too, invited or not."

Jack clutched the mammoth's fur with a death grip. "Watch it, Mike! You're going to knock me off."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm trying to be careful, but it's kind of hard, you know?"

"You just elbowed me!" said Jack. "Why didn't you get on near the back?"

Casey sighed as Mike maneuvered past her. "Because that'd be too easy for Mike."

"Sorry," he said. "Everyone comfy? Because she's taking off, and I sure hope it's going to be a *fast* ride."

Should I shimmy back down? Casey wondered. *Probably.* But it was too good to pass up—a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to interact with a creature scientists had long ago declared as extinct from the face of the Earth. Curiosity got the best of her, and she had to at least go for a short ride. How could she possibly resist? Besides, even if she wanted to, she couldn't just jump down from such a height; she had no interest in breaking a leg or an arm...or her neck. So, Casey hung on as tightly as she could, gripping the mammoth's sides firmly with her knees. It felt very similar to riding a camel in Egypt—minus the camel's stinky breath and constant irritable bowel syndrome. *If only I had a saddle.*

The mammoth started to move, gaining in speed. The baby mammoth stayed right at her mother's side and kept pace on its much shorter hairy legs.

With each giant step, they swaggered from side to side. Casey continued to hold on tightly as Mike cheered in her ear. Of course he had nothing to fear. Riding waves had literally prepared him for all of this, but height and rocking motions were not exactly Casey's forte. "Oh my gosh!" The trees became blurred, her hands began to shake, and her stomach began to churn. "Guys, I think I might fall off."

"Geesh!" Mike huffed. "I don't even want to hear it. Jack gets to hang on to Shaggy's cone head, you get to hang on to the big hump on her shoulders, and I have nothing to hang on to except her long hair. Did I mention her back slopes down, like really low?"

Casey chuckled. Again, he had a point. Hopefully, Shaggy had visited the restroom before she decided to take them on a sightseeing tour.

The twin suns peeked out while clouds wisped across a blue sky. A cool breeze, carrying the chirping of birds, stirred the leaves. Swaying along at a leisurely pace was a wonderful ride indeed.

Mike cleared his throat and said, "You know, I've been thinking. I've come up with three explanations for why we're here. *Numero uno*—time travel. *Numero dos*—another dimension. And *numero*...hey, what's three in Spanish again?"

"*Tres,*" said Jack.

"Right, thanks bro. *Numero*, uh, whatever you just said—genetic experiments. Let's talk about theory *uno*. We could've landed here through some kind of time warp—you know, like going back millions of years to prehistoric times."

Casey stared down at the forest floor, covered with Jurassic-sized ferns and flowers. She had studied in class that ferns were one of the world's oldest forms of plant life, dating all the way back to the dinosaurs. When she thought about it, gazing at those huge ferns, Mike's first theory didn't seem so ridiculous. It explained the ancient forest and the outdated species of animals, but it didn't explain the glass city.

"Not buying it," Jack shot back.

"Of course not." Mike let out an exasperated sigh. "But I'd like to remind you I'm hanging onto the back of a woolly mammoth."

He had a great point this time. She bit her lip as she pondered. "Hey, Jack, I read in school that sharks are from prehistoric times too."

"Yeah, they were here a million years before the dinosaur age."

"See? It's all adding up," said Mike. "We went back in time! We could be the only humans on Earth. You know what that means, don't you?" he asked, casting a flirty grin toward Casey.

"What?"

"Well, it'd be our duty to make sure humanity doesn't die out. You know...that whole 'be fruitful and multiply' thing."

"You wish." Casey snorted when she felt muscular arms wrap around her, even though it felt wonderful. "Mike, have you forgotten about that city already?"

Mike inched closer. "Oh, yeah. Glasstropolis. I know it's stupid, but at least I'm throwing ideas out there."

Casey threw a glance over her shoulder. "Let's stick to one theory at a time."

He nodded. "So we might be the only humans on Earth. In that case, will you marry me, Casey Smith? You know, for the sake of humanity?"

"You want to marry her for the sake of humanity? How *romantic*," said Jack.

She had to admit the sound of "Mrs. Pierce" had a nice ring to it. Just the two of them on a tropical island sounded like a slice of heaven—no beach bunnies, screaming girls, or snapping cameras. "At least I wouldn't have to fight off your fan club."

Having Mike all to herself was a nice idea, but at what price? What would life be like if they were stuck in this crazy place? Would the people in the city even accept them? Would they live in their very own glass castle? Maybe they'd be outcasts and have to survive in the jungle like the natives in the rainforest she'd read about.

Thoughts flashed through her mind of wild animals using their small, shaky hut as a scratching post—if they weren't too big to see it and mistook it for a stone. Not all of them feasted on berries and leaves. The saber-tooth tiger's fangs flashed in her mind. *Yeah, it might take a few hundred years to domesticate that beast.* And she had a strong feeling a few leaves acting as a door wouldn't keep it out. Every day would be a battle for survival. She wondered how the people of ancient times fought off such deadly and powerful predators.

She swore she'd spend the rest of her life searching for a way to get back home. Saying goodbye to her parents, running around in a fur outfit, and holding a spear against a savage flesh-eater were things she refused to accept. A tiny skirt barely covering their modesty might suit Mike, but she sure didn't fancy trying a new look. He'd probably love the idea of waving a club around while wearing a loincloth, yelling, "Me Mike. Casey mine."

Jack's voice cut into her thoughts. "Why would Casey want to marry you, Mike? She has other choices, you know."

Oh gosh. Are they still bickering over that?

"Where? Oh! You're talking about yourself? Mr. Perfect?" Mike snuggled up against Casey. "Yeah, bro. I'm so worried I'm almost laughing my pants off." Mike had been on one too many magazine covers for his ego to be in check.

"Jack would make an awesome husband," said Casey. "He's just as hot as you are, only in a less-in-your-face kind of way. And you know what? The fact that he hasn't dated every single girl in California and bragged about it like you have makes him even hotter."

"Ouch! Boy, that hurt. I guess Jack would be your man if you're into that preppy jock thing." He gave her a squeeze. "But I know you like your men wild and free spirited."

She giggled as she pictured Mike surfing, the wind blowing through his blond hair, the sun glistening on his golden muscular frame. Most people who saw waves as tall as Mount Everest would run in the other direction, but not Mike. He lived to ride them, and it was downright cool to watch Mike perform his best moves and every trick he knew on his board in the face of a wave. She never missed one of his competitions—ever. "Well, you know I have a thing for surfers."

Jack sighed. "How about you two save your flirting for another time?"

"Sorry, Jack," said Mike. "I'll try and focus." He cleared his throat. "So... tell us more about prehistoric times."

Jack pointed down. “There was no grass or flowering plants or even crickets. They all came later.”

“Well, we have all those, so I guess we can rule out time travel,” said Casey.

Mike slapped her shoulder. “Okay, so let’s move to theory *dos*. Number two. Maybe we entered another dimension through that whirlpool.”

Her stomach fluttered. “Like a gateway or portal? How would we get home? We can’t go back the way we came.” It sounded ridiculous, but at the same time, nothing was making sense anyway. “It’s something I didn’t want to face, but the idea has crossed my mind.”

Jack called over his shoulder, “I’m not jumping to any conclusions just yet.”

“Let’s go to theory *tros*,” said Mike.

Casey laughed. “*Tres*.”

“Okay, *tres*. Number three, genetic experiments,” said Mike. “Maybe some loony scientist actually did it.”

“Did what?” asked Jack.

“Took DNA from old dinosaur bones, worked his magic, and—poof!—modern-day dinos.”

Boy, who would have thought Mike’s theories could get that deep? Maybe Casey should don a wet suit, strap on an oxygen tank, throw on some flippers, and dive in all the craziness.

“You’ve gotta let go of all that *Jurassic Park* craziness. I have a much more reasonable theory *quatro* for you.”

“*Quatro*?” asked Mike.

“That’s four in Spanish. Okay, so here’s theory number four.” Jack cleared his throat and paused for effect. “What if those creatures somehow survived extinction, and the people in the city protect them?”

Casey bit her lip hard. At this point, anything could be a possibility. However, all their theories still had a big gaping hole. “Not bad, guys, but none of your theories explain the UFOs.”

“Theory number two explains all of it,” Mike’s voice called from behind. “Another dimension could have spaceships.”

“Unless they were military,” she retorted.

Mike huffed. “You feel free to go with that theory if you want, but I’m going with aliens.”

Jack squirmed, clearly uncomfortable with the idea. “Are you sure it *was* a UFO? Could’ve been a new type of plane developed by—”

“The mad scientist who cloned the animals,” Mike interrupted.

Jack let out a frustrated sigh. “What you just said is beyond crazy. I only believe what science can prove, and cloning dinosaurs isn’t possible in our day and age. Anyway, speculating is pointless.”

Mike blew out a long breath. “Ironic that you’d say that now that your theory makes no sense and you’re losing the argument.”

“Honestly, time travel?” He let out a puff of air. “Sounds like someone has spent too much time watching Syfy.”

“And your theory sounds like...” Mike looked around, his forehead creased in concentration as Jack laughed.

Casey knew if she didn’t step in soon, a fight was gonna break out right there on the back of the woolly mammoth. “Yo, cut it back a notch, guys. Jack’s right. We could be debating this all day, and nobody would ever win, just like in tic-tac-toe.”

Mike let out a huff, but at least he dropped the subject.

The smell of damp wood, earth, and fish wafted past. Somewhere to her right, the sound of trickling water echoed in her ears. She pressed a finger against her lips and shushed Mike and Jack, scanning the area. Craning her neck, she caught a glimpse of the river sparkling in the bright light. “Hey, guys. We’re back on track. Look!”

“The river!” said Jack.

Mike gave her a squeeze. “Awesome!”

Shaggy sped up through the trees until they reached the rocky shore. Along the water’s edge were giant nests of dead grass, hanging from gnarled tree limbs. The shrill sound of squawking birds filled the air all around them. Casey knew if they followed the river, it would lead them to the city, but what she didn’t know was how to give a mammoth directions.

Without warning, their huge furry taxi jumped right in the river, and the baby followed.

“She’s taking us across to the other side!” Drops of water splashed on Casey’s face, arms, and legs. She wiped the moisture across her burning skin, enjoying the cooling sensation. Now all she needed was an ice-cold bottle of water.

Shaggy came to an abrupt stop, like a stubborn mule.

Casey jolted forward and grabbed Jack’s shoulders. “What the heck is she doing?”

Slurping filled the air, as the beast sucked up water through her trunk like a straw. The mammoth lifted her trunk high in the air, and a huge plume of spray shot skyward. The water streamed down on them like rain.

Casey giggled. “I know she’s hot, but has she forgotten we’re up here too?” She blinked and wiped her soaking-wet hair out of her eyes.

Everyone laughed.

The large animal took a few more steps, slowly submerging below the surface of the water. Casey wondered how deep the river was. From the shore, it had seemed wide and shallow. She could only hope this wasn’t Shaggy’s first time around the block. “Please tell me you’ve crossed this river before,” she said to the mammoth’s huge ear. As much as she liked to feed her competitive nature, she didn’t fancy a race against an anaconda or anything else that might be hiding in the depths.

A log swept past and grazed her legs. She glanced down. More floating logs, wood debris, and branches passed them, not to mention all the silver-colored fish. The river was like some kind of fisherman’s paradise.

Water seeped into her socks and tennis shoes. *Oh no! Not the soggy feet again.* First her knees sank in, then her stomach. A shiver ran down her spine. With a *splash*, Shaggy’s entire head plopped just a few inches under the surface of the water.

“Abandon ship!” came Mike’s sharp response. “We’re sinking like a big, giant rock.”

Casey clung on to the animal’s fur as water swirled past her hips. “Wait! I want to make sure Shaggy’s okay.” She knew elephants had excellent swimming skills, and she hoped their mammoth ancestors did too. In India, she’d seen elephants swim in deep water with trainers on their backs. Her soaked clothes clung to her body, dragging her down. She shivered as the cold water bit into her skin, and she put her arms around Jack to hold him close. His skin emanated more heat than an oven. Resting her chin on his shoulder, she noticed hundreds of bubbles rising to the surface. Shaggy’s trunk popped up as she used it as a snorkel, then she began swimming, dog-paddling underwater. “Look at that! She’s a natural.” The big animal was a better swimmer than any canine splasher she’d ever seen. Shaggy’s baby tried to keep up and was learning fast.

Could this day get any weirder? Casey shook her head. She was riding across the river on her very own personal giant raft—a woolly mammoth. It was fun, but it was definitely time to

get off. She nudged Jack's arm. "What do you think about getting off and swimming to the other side? 'Cause Shaggy could take us miles off course, and there's nothing we can do to stop her."

"You know I was thinking that myself," said Jack.

Mike tapped her shoulder and pointed. "Hey, I've got a better idea. We could catch a ride on the next log coming this way. The current's perfect and will take us straight to Glasstropolis." Up ahead, tree stumps floated toward them. "That one over there's big enough to carry all three of us."

Jack glanced back. "Not sure I'm keen on the idea of rafting in unknown waters."

"Look, it'll get us past the wild animals." Mike's tone conveyed his frustration. "If you have a better idea, I'm all ears."

Casey sighed. "Listen, the logs are a good idea, but there's just one flaw, Mike."

"And what's that?"

"Well, the current might get rough. What if we hit rapids? I say we hike it." Whitewater rafting, minus the inflatable boat and experienced guide, wasn't Casey's idea of the perfect adrenaline rush. She'd rather swim to the other side—or better, enjoy some chocolate while watching it all on TV.

Mike let out a huff. "Listen, I want to raft. We have no weapons against these beasts that are lurking around every corner."

"He has a good point," said Jack.

Of course Mike wanted to live life like some kind of *Huckleberry Finn* adventure, but how he got Jack to go along with it was beyond her. "Ahem. Earth to Mike, the last time I checked, that log wasn't a raft, and this isn't the Mississippi river." She glanced over her shoulder. "And I mean that in the nicest way, babe."

"Let's just ride for a bit to catch up on the lost time *you* wasted befriending a mammoth." Mike nudged her with a chuckle. "And I mean that in the nicest way, babe."

Jack cleared his throat. "*Babe?* You two call each other that now?"

She laughed. "We're just having fun, but maybe Mike's right about the river ride."

"I think it's a good idea," said Jack. "We'll catch up on time, rest our feet, and be off the radar of hungry animals."

"I really don't want to run into one of those saber-tooth tigers again. Let's go for it." Casey leaned over. She couldn't talk into Shaggy's ear because the animal was submerged in the river

like a submarine, her trunk raised up like a periscope. Still, Casey hoped she could hear her. “Thanks for the great ride and for saving us from that tiger. We’ll never forget you.” She gave Shaggy a pat on her side, and then reached out her hand for the nearest log. “I’m gonna catch this one.”

“No, not that one,” said Mike. “We’ll never fit. Wait for that big slab of wood. See it? It’s coming from upstream.”

Casey squeezed her eyes against the blinding suns. Something seemed odd about the long, bumpy piece of wood—and it wasn’t just that it was covered in scales. The so-called “log” opened its eyes, and Casey found herself staring intently at golden irises around slit pupils. The cold eyes just stared right back at her.

Chapter 5

Casey’s mouth gaped open, the breath caught in her throat. The bumpy piece of wood covered in scales was definitely no log. It looked more like a cold-blooded creature she’d once seen in Florida, with long, tapering jaws and yellow reptilian eyes peeking out of the river. Two teeth jutted out of the reptile’s bottom jaw. “It’s a freaking alligator! Right there, blending in with all those logs.” With shaking fingers she gripped Shaggy’s wet fur so hard her knuckles turned white.

“No, I don’t think so. Gators usually have a wide, U-shaped snout. That one’s more slender, pointed, and V-shaped.” Jack’s voice grew tight and strained. “Oh no!”

“What?” Casey panicked. “What is it?”

“That’s no alligator. That’s a...a croc!”

“Who cares? They both eat people, right?” She peered at the water and gulped. The marine predator emerged, exposing its entire armored body. She wondered what kind of fish, turtles, or dinos it had been snacking on, because it was huge. The rigid, brown, horn-like scales on its back and along its tail glistened under the suns. She wiped the sweat off her brows. “Oh my gosh! That thing’s as big as a city bus.”

“Its jaws are bigger than my whole body!” shouted Mike. Of course he had to chime in and top her.

Her heart pounded. “Oh, man. Let’s swim to shore! We have to get out of this river!”

Jack threw a glance over his shoulder. “No. Right now, it’s only curious. If you swim off, you’re inviting it to have a taste. It’ll snap you up before you could even set one foot on land. Listen... we’ll be out of the water any minute. The croc won’t be able to move as fast on land as good ol’ Shaggy here.” He patted the mammoth’s side, trying to downplay the situation and calm Casey, probably so she wouldn’t make a quick dash to shore.

He had a point. There was no need to panic...yet. Casey took a deep breath to calm her racing heart. The croc swam further away and then just seemed to watch from a distance, but Casey still didn’t feel any safer—not for a second.

Jack pointed, his voice calm, as if he was trying to put her mind at ease. “We can’t let our guard down, but look...it’s over there minding its own business.”

“Or it’s stalking us!” she retorted.

Of course Jack was smart enough to know that; he just didn’t want to freak her out.

“Doesn’t matter. We’ll be out of the water any minute,” called Mike. “So, Einstein, is this thing prehistoric too?”

“It lived millions of years ago. It was called sarco-something-or-other, but I think they called it SuperCroc for short.” He let out a long breath. “How’s this even possible?”

“I dunno.” An awkward pause ensued. Casey swallowed the lump in her throat. “But I’ve had it with extinct animals.”

Jack cleared his throat. “You know what? The croc never became extinct. It even outlasted the dinosaurs, and it hasn’t changed much.”

She let out a sarcastic chuckle. “Hasn’t changed much? I’ve been to the zoo. IF nothing else, they’ve shrunk, because I’ve never seen one like the one I’m looking at right now.”

“Exactly.” Mike’s voice chimed through the air. “Want to hear my mutant theory?”

“That’s NOT a mutant,” said Jack. “It’s the real deal.”

A *splash* and a blur of brown caught Casey’s attention. Ripples shot across the slow current as the SuperCroc slithered through in the water, slowly swimming past them until it was only about fifteen feet away. Casey’s stomach clenched. The creature’s long snout and eyes barely broke the surface of the river. It was so close to them that she could see the thin membrane slide over its eyes as it blinked and disappeared into the river. It was beyond creepy. A few moments passed when Mike suddenly pointed at more huge ripples in the river. Casey gulped as the

SuperCroc's body slightly rose out of the water. "It's so freaking huge...and it's getting closer!" She swore the forty-foot thing could easily tow a 5,000-ton submarine.

Mike grabbed her middle and pulled her closer. "Don't worry. I have a *cunning* plan."

"Why do I have the strong feeling it involves you croc-surfing or something stupid like that?" she asked.

"Oh, come on. Don't be ridiculous." He reached in the water and caught a twelve-inch squirming fish with his bare hands. Its tail slapped against Casey's back as a gush of water sprayed up. The thrashing fish wiggled in Mike's hands. "Okay. So I'll distract SuperCroc by feeding this fish to it while you guys swim to shore."

She frowned. "Feed it a fish? It's not going to spin a ball on its nose like some kind of trained seal, you know."

"Distraction's the key. I'm telling you, it'll work." The fish squirmed out of Mike's hands, making a quick dash to freedom.

"Feeding a croc fish a few inches away is like letting a lion choose between stinky dog food and fresh pork chops," said Jack. "You'll be croc-bait." Shaggy let out a big snort as her head popped above the surface.

"See? Even she agrees with me," said Jack.

The ground leveled, and Casey could feel a glimmer of hope. With each step the mammoth took, they rose higher out of the treacherous water. She scanned the surface as the water receded to her waist, then her knees, and lastly, her ankles. Relief swept through her. She'd come face to face with the largest reptile on the entire planet—and lived to tell about it.

Casey scanned the water one last time. "It's gone."

Everyone seemed calmer as they moved closer to the riverbank, assuming that if Mr. SuperCroc wanted to make a meal out of them, he'd already be picking what was left of them out of his nasty old teeth.

As Shaggy walked, the water behind her began to churn. A crashing *splash* erupted, and streams of water rose into the air and slapped against them. The humongous croc leapt out, snapping its bone-crushing jaws together and missing Shaggy Jr. by mere inches. The tiny mammoth squealed, and Shaggy roared, the ear-splitting cry echoing in the distance. The message was loud and clear: "*You're messing with the wrong momzilla.*"

Casey held on tightly as the woolly mammoth reared up. Digging her feet into the animal's sides, she screamed and weaved the fingers of both fists into Shaggy's fur. Casey's hair swayed around her, whipping into her face, while she clung to Shaggy like a cowboy atop a wild bull in a rodeo. Her hands slipped around Jack, and she held onto him tightly as the creature bucked again. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion, and they were all catapulted into the air, landing with a giant *splash*.

Groaning, Casey scrambled up, spitting out dirty water as her heartbeat spiked. She was in the river up to her waist, and the crocodile was there too—definitely not a good thing. Shaggy continued to buck like a spooked horse, and Casey moved back, knowing that getting turned into a pancake by a mammoth wasn't going to help her one bit. Shaggy was too busy to hand out any more free piggy-back rides, and it looked like they were on their own.

During her brief stay on that odd island (or wherever or whenever they were), she'd learned three important lessons: 1) Silence may be a good thing in yoga class, but not in the wilderness; 2) Don't judge a book by its cover because cute doesn't equal harmless—but neither does big and ugly; and 3) Don't think. Just run, because you may not get a second chance.

Casey pushed her wet hair out of her eyes. She blinked as she wiped the water from her lashes. "Get to the riverbank!" If they could get there, it would increase their odds because the river was the SuperCroc's turf, giving it home-field advantage. Casey craned her neck to peer behind her. She saw the monster gliding in the water next to Shaggy, its black eyes open and closing as they fixed on her, its cruel jaws snapping in her direction. She gasped and yelled, "RUN!"

"It's coming! And all three of us...w-we'll never make it to shore," yelled Jack. "Get outta here. I'll hold it off."

Mike yanked his arm. "That's a horrible idea, Boy Genius. Get your butt on land!"

"Either we're all running or we all play gladiator." Sure, it was as cliché as your average slasher movie, but Casey wasn't about to let either of her best friends be eaten alive.

"Get to safety, Mike! And take Casey with you!" Jack glanced over his shoulder, his lips pressed into grim lines. "I'll be right behind you, I swear. NOW go!"

Mike grabbed her hand, giving it a quick squeeze. "C'mon!" She could hear the tremor of fear in his voice.

She followed Mike for a few feet before jerking her hand away. “No! I’m not leaving him.” How could she? Jack had always been there for her—always. She’d die trying to save him if that was what it would come down to.

The croc lunged at Jack with snapping jaws as its tail shot up in the air, sending thousands of droplets spraying everywhere. For a second, watching in horror, Casey just held in her breath. Jack grunted and lurched backward. How could he fight a beast that was nothing but thousands of pounds of muscle and bad attitude? Jack sure might resemble Superman with his dark hair and blue eyes, but he sure didn’t have his powers.

Casey yelled, “Jack! Get outta there!”

He took a step back, but his foot became lodged under something. *A rock? An underwater tree from the river bottom?* She couldn’t see. Whatever it was, it caused him to lose his footing and fall backward into the waist-deep water. The croc powered toward him, ready to move in to kill its prey. *Think fast, Casey,* she told herself. *What can I do? Hit it with a branch? Right. It’ll probably feel like a feather on that thing’s thick skin. Maybe I can hit it with a rock. Nope. That’ll feel like nothing more than a pesky fly.* And then she saw it: mud. *Maybe I can blind it somehow!*

Before she could change her mind, she grabbed a giant handful of muddy sand and flicked it at the croc’s eyes. Mike followed suit. Her heart pounded as she watched on. Water splashed. The croc went for Jack’s throat, missing it only by inches as he twisted to the left like lightning. Then, rearing up, the woolly mammoth smashed its feet like a hammer right down on the SuperCroc’s head.

The reptile lay motionless, seeming disoriented from the heavy blow. Lesson learned: Don’t ever mess with Mama Shaggy.

Casey flinched as the armored beast suddenly moved, gliding slowly toward the deeper part of the river. It slipped silently into the glittering water and sank like a submarine. Bubbles rose to the surface, and then all was still. Casey clutched her chest while she caught her breath; she realized that was becoming a bit of a habit. Tears welled, threatening to spill down her cheeks. Jack was safe, and once again, she knew she could never live without him.

Holding in her breath, Casey quickly scoped out the area. She waited a moment before she dared to start breathing again. Grabbing Mike’s and Jack’s hands, she pulled them eagerly to shore. Casey sloshed through the water, mud, and sand until her feet reached dry land. A wave of

relief swept through her. Water dripped from her hair and poured from her clothes. A glint caught her eye: Water droplets, glittering in the sunshine, rolled off Shaggy's long woolly coat as she lumbered like a giant hippo to her baby waiting by the edge of the forest.

Mike gripped Casey's hand and led her toward one of the big slate rocks lining the riverbank. She pulled away as he sat down. There was no way Jack was getting off scot-free after playing action hero. Hugging and punching Jack at the same time, she cried, "What were you thinking?"

He leaned forward, hands resting on his knees as he breathed heavily in and out. "I only planned on stalling it for a second to give you two a head start. Trust me, I was right behind you, but if worse came to worst, I had a trick up my sleeve. There's a pouch in the croc's throat that keeps it from drowning. I knew if I stuck my arm down there and punched it, the darn thing would have no other choice but to let go or drown."

"Yeah, if its teeth didn't tear you to shreds first." She touched his face, tears sliding down her cheeks. "Thanks for saving my life, but please, no more Mike stunts."

Jack wiped one of her tears away and gazed into her eyes. "When it comes to protecting you, Casey, I can't say I won't go to any lengths."

From the tone in his voice, she believed every word. She rested her head against his strong chest, and he softly stroked her hair. "Thanks, Jack. I feel the same way. I'm sorry I got so upset, but the thought of losing you just...well, I was scared to death."

He held her close. Jack had risked his life to save hers, and that kind of stuff only happened in books or movies—or maybe dreams too.

Mike slapped his back. "Glad to see you're okay, bro. Please don't try that ever again." He pointed to himself, his eyes wide. "Even I wouldn't have tried something so stupid."

"Well, Mike, now you know how we feel when you pull your crazy stunts." Casey wiped her muddy hands on her soaking wet shorts when a trumpeting echoed in the distance. A shiver slid down her spine. She spun around as Mike darted to the edge of the woods. *More mammoths? Will they be as friendly?*

Shaggy called back, lumbering into the towering pine forest ahead, and her adorable baby followed.

Mike pushed through the leafy fronds and peeked in. "Whoa! Come check this out. If this doesn't blow your mind, nothing will."

“C’mon,” said Casey, giving Jack’s hand a squeeze. She rushed behind Mike and tapped him on the back. “What?”

He wrapped an arm around her waist and pointed ahead. “Look!”

As she burst through a tangle of vegetation, glossy, heart-shaped leaves whipped across her face. A soft breeze carrying the scent of wildflowers whirled all around her. She entered a pasture and spotted a whole herd of woolly mammoths. There must have been hundreds of them grazing in the field, each with long, flowing coats in a variety of colors: black, orange, dark brown, reddish brown, pale ginger, and even blond. Barks, snorts, and other soft, soothing noises filled the air. “This is the most amazing thing I’ve ever laid eyes on.” Casey pictured herself playing with the colors on her palette. *This would make the most fantastic portrait ever.*

Shaggy squealed, and an even bigger brown mammoth walked over. They greeted each other with their trunks outstretched. The reunited pair clicked tusks, flapped their ears, and intertwined trunks, like some kind of pachyderm handshake, and witnessing this, Casey was overcome by a sense of complete and utter happiness.

A chorus of trumpets echoed all around her. She watched in awe as members of the herd approached, greeting Shaggy by stroking her body with their trunks.

Jack pointed. “Is that a watermelon patch?”

“Oh, yeah, wow. Hey, guys, I’m going to whip us up some lunch.” Mike sprinted over to the nearby patch of undergrowth and picked up a green-and-yellow striped melon. Once Mike laid eyes on chow, there was no stopping him.

So much for showing some gratitude for Shaggy’s help. “I get that you’re hungry, but haven’t you forgotten something?” Casey asked, arching an eyebrow at him.

He didn’t even glance at her as he fidgeted about with his hands, trying to find a way to rip the fruit off its stem. “Huh?” He looked up. “Oh, yeah. You’re right. We need to wash those first.”

Shaggy let out another snort. “I’m so sorry,” said Casey. “He has the attention span of a five-year-old, but he’s a good guy—at least most of the time.” She turned to face Mike. Placing her hands on her hips, she said in a teasing manner, “Exactly how are you going to open that thing?”

He grinned, then pointed. “Just like them.”

She watched as mammoths in the watermelon patch gently stomped on the melons and sucked out the juicy pulp. A grin spread across her lips. Sometimes Mike really was very clever.

Mike bent down and heaved a huge melon into his arms, groaning at the effort.

Jack popped over and reached out. "Need a hand?"

"Nope. I can do it."

Casey waved a hand. "Don't be stupid. If this thing drops on your foot, you'll wish you hadn't tried to play waiter."

"What's wrong with me wanting to serve my lady?"

She laughed. "Plenty. Break some toes, and you'll slow us down big time. I'll have to sling you over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes and carry your sorry butt through the jungle."

Mike huffed, but he put the melon down and rolled it toward Shaggy's huge foot. The mama mammoth let out a grunt and stomped on the fruit until it burst open. Grinning, he picked up a piece and took a bite. "Dude, this is good stuff!"

Jack broke off a chunk and playfully put it in Casey's mouth. "Mmm. You gotta try this. It's so sweet."

She smiled as he grinned. "It's delicious!" She licked the tips of her fingers. It wasn't very ladylike, but she really couldn't have cared less. Looking good and demonstrating manners were the least of her worries in a world filled with prehistoric predators, most of which she was sure wouldn't bother with wiping their mouths after they bit a chunk off of her.

Mike smeared his hands across the grass. She could have sworn she saw him roll his eyes, and now she had to wonder if he was jealous of Jack?

A few minutes later, they had all filled their stomachs and then some.

Jack met Casey's gaze and grinned. "Remember when we teamed up and won that watermelon seed-spitting contest at the fair?"

She smiled sweetly. "Oh yeah! That was such a blast. I still have the pictures in my scrapbook and the trophy on my shelf."

Frowning, Mike wrapped his arm around her and pulled her away as he said, "We better get going. Glasstropolis is waiting."

Sweeping me away from Jack because I smiled at him? Geesh. As much as she hated not putting Mike's inflated ego in its right spot, this wasn't the time and place to argue. It would upset Jack even more, and they couldn't afford to be giving each other the cold shoulder when

more surprises could be lurking around the corner. They needed each other, and the silent treatment wasn't going to help anyone.

After Mike and Jack said their goodbyes, Casey said hers. She buried her face into the long, coarse hair on Shaggy's leg and gave her a tight hug. "Goodbye. I'll never forget you. Thanks so much for everything, Shaggy, but it's time for us to go. My mom and dad must be really worried, and I have to find them. Take care of your little one."

For a moment, the emotions overwhelmed her, and she had to fight to hold back a sob. She felt like Dorothy saying goodbye to the Scarecrow, only there was no hot air balloon or magic slippers to take her home.

When they stepped away, Casey threw a quick glance over her shoulder. The mammoth raised her trunk, and all the shaggy giants in the pasture trumpeted a farewell salute.

Mike waved his hand. "I don't speak elephant, but I think they're telling us goodbye."

Casey blew a kiss and bid farewell to the furry herd of animals that had captured her heart.

Chapter 6

The merciless suns beat down on Casey's neck and shoulders, heating her skin to unbearable temperatures as they traversed a mountainous incline. She gasped for air, partly because of the climb, and partly because of the thinning oxygen at the higher altitude. "Okay, guys! I'm at the top." Her voice came low and raspy, barely audible in her throbbing ears.

"You're the mountain master!" she heard Mike say from behind the foliage.

"Yeah?" she said.

"Yeah, you beat all of us up here." Mike heaved himself through a narrow opening in the leafy ferns and bent over, bracing his hands on his knees as he fought to catch his breath. She smiled and he draped his arm around her middle like it had always belonged there.

Casey's heart jumped in her throat. Her Mr. Right was finally clicking into place right where he belonged: at her side, with no hot chicks to grab his eyes. *Will his attention stray?* She certainly hoped not.

He bore his gaze into hers. "Whatcha thinking?"

She blinked, her cheeks growing hot. "What?" Rays of light caught in his eyes, destroying every bit of her focus.

“Is somebody thinkin’ of little ol’ me?” he smirked.

Jack appeared before them, drops of sweat beading on his forehead. “Yeah, right. Not in a million years.”

“I wasn’t talking about you, moron,” said Mike.

“Oh, you must’ve meant the tiger from before?” Jack shook his head. “Only you could be flattered by a predator wanting to make a meal out of you.”

He pasted on a weak smile and leaned his back against a tree. “Very funny, Jack.”

Casey laughed, happy to see that Jack was surely learning how to deal with Mike’s inflated ego. As much as she liked him, Mike needed to get knocked down a notch or two.

Jack took a few steps forward, peering into the distance. “I don’t believe my eyes.”

“Me neither,” said Mike. “This view’s enough to keep the adrenaline pumping.”

The crystal city spread out as far as she could see in the distance, just beyond the stone wall. The glass buildings, bathed in brilliant sunlight, glistened like jewels. Her gaze traveled upward. “Oh crap!” Hundreds of discs, just like the one that had tried to kill them, hovered above the city. She blinked, hoping her mind was playing tricks on her, but that wasn’t the case.

Jack’s eyes widened. “What the heck?”

Casey shot him an I-told-you-so look. “Those UFOs—they’ve been heading for the same place as we were, because this is *their* city.” She threw a hand up for dramatic effect. “We’re deep into hostile enemy territory.”

Mike scoffed. “Well, geesh, instead of shooting at us, they could’ve at least been nice enough to stop and give us a lift. So much for intergalactic hospitality.”

She touched Mike’s arm. “Listen, this is serious.”

He nodded, his blond hair damp with sweat.

Jack blew out a breath and pondered, his brows furrowed, as if he was deep in thought and trying to find a solution for the mess he’d gotten them into. After all, it’d been his idea to come to the city. Casey had warned him that the UFOs could have launched from there, but he refused to listen.

Casey took a deep breath to regain her composure. After all, to the best of their knowledge, they were going “where no man had gone before,” and that thought made her shudder. For a moment, she wished Scotty really could beam her up and out of there, but there was no Enterprise to whisk her home to her nice, warm bed.

Mike lifted a hand to shield his eyes from the glaring suns. “Think they’re really from the city? Maybe they’re just visitors—and hopefully not the mice-eating reptilian humanoid kind.”

“I don’t know, but I’m ready for some answers. Let’s go talk to whoever we can find,” Jack suggested.

Sucking in a lungful of air, Casey grabbed his sweaty arm and yanked him back. “You do realize those are the exact same UFOs that tried to barbecue us for the pig roast, right? I know! Let’s just present ourselves on a silver platter. I could be the ham, you could play the baked beans, and Mike could be the potato salad.” She had just about had it with Jack morphing into some slightly more intelligent version of Mike. At least with Mike, she knew where she stood, and she never bothered to pay attention to his plans. But Jack had the ability to persuade her to go along any time. She’d always done that, without even bothering to listen to his arguments, because his ideas always made perfect sense. But now she had to keep her ears open, because clearly Mike’s weird instinct of running toward danger instead of away from it was rubbing off on Jack.

Jack shifted his stance as he pointed to the strange aircraft. “Why would a fleet of ships just hang out above their own city? It doesn’t make sense. My gut feeling says this place is under attack from enemy forces, and I’m sure the people inside could help us.” He spun to face Casey. “I don’t know if they’re friendly, but they have to be nicer than the bad guys.”

The determination in his voice was so convincing, like a used car salesman trying to sell her a lemon, but she wasn’t about to be duped by a smooth talker. She could picture red hot laser beams flying between the two civilizations—with them right in the middle. “Hmm. I see your point, but there’s no way I’m going along with that. I don’t want to get caught up in this attack and then have aliens hatch in the back of my head. I say we run. I never thought I’d join the hype, but never has running been so healthy.”

Jack’s brows furrowed above his intense blue eyes, the wind whipping through his brown hair. “We don’t have a choice. For all we know, it could be miles through that animal-infested forest or river before we find another city—or maybe we won’t find one at all. And that’s not good, because we don’t have any food or water.”

She snorted. “A vegetarian diet and a hiking workout? Sounds fantastic. Just bring it on. I might not usually be in the whole workout-until-you-drop routine, but hey, that sounds way better than having to learn the alien language just to say ‘Get your teeth off me’.”

Jack shook his head. “Trust me, once one of those predators drags you home to meet the whole hungry family, you’ll regret having passed on the opportunity to experience a new culture.”

She gaped at him. *Is he for real?* “We’re not talking about a new culture. Those things tried to *kill* us, Jack. What makes you think they’ll change their minds once we trespass on their territory? Do you really think they’re just gonna invite us in for milk and cookies?”

Mike ran a hand through his hair. In all the drama, she’d forgotten about him. “Well, I was kind of hoping for a burger myself.” She shot him an unimpressed glare, and he held out his hands in mock defense. “Kidding,” he said.

“I can tell you, we’re more likely to end up *being* dinner than being invited to one.” She wrapped an arm around his waist and leaned in. “Right?”

Mike nodded as his eyes met Jack’s. “Uh, I hate to break it to you, but Casey’s right.”

Jack rubbed his forehead. “I can’t believe you’d rather take your chances with the car-sized teeth of a dinosaur than with a developed civilization that can build something as incredible as that.” He pointed behind his back to the gleaming city.

Mike sucked in a deep breath. “When he puts it that way, he makes a good point.”

It frustrated her that Mike was so wishy-washy and easily swayed. Casey glared at him, eyes narrowed to two tiny slits. Generations of women had done it before, with great effect. Now she was going to try the same: Keep silent and withdraw affection until he caved. Because whatever Jack said, she wasn’t about to find herself hanging from some pole, roasting over an open fire like a human shish kebob.

“What?” asked Mike, raising his hands in frustration.

She watched his eyes shift back and forth and noticed the insecurity starting to show on his face. It was working.

Mike inched closer. “I’m sorry. You know how much I hate to disagree with you.” He leaned forward and rubbed her shoulder. “Don’t look at me like that. I can’t stand it.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and bit hard on her inner lip to suppress her laughter. She knew he’d crumble any minute now.

Jack wore a brave, composed face. “Okay, so it’s two against one. It’s decided then. We’re going to the city.”

Mike fidgeted, his gaze fixed somewhere on her legs. “Well...uh...maybe we should think this through a bit more.”

“What?” Jack blinked, stunned. “Didn’t you say you’re dying for a burger?”

Glancing up, Casey noticed the sun had disappeared behind large dark clouds. Thunder softly rumbled in the distance and the wind picked up, blowing long strands of hair across her face. “Maybe he did say that, Jack, but none of us are dying to *be* one, I’m sure.”

Jack’s brows knitted together as he looked at her. He was determined, and he wasn’t giving up until she gave in. “So, are we ready? We really have to get going before this storm hits.”

She was losing—against Jack—and she found that absolutely embarrassing. She rolled her eyes and then motioned upward. “At least we’ll get a nice bath before they roast us.”

* * *

A brilliant flash of lightning lit the sky, followed by a loud clap of thunder. Casey shielded her eyes as torrents of rain showered down upon them. To make matters worse, Jack was running toward the city, right in the same direction as the fleet of UFOs hovering over Glasstropolis. She let out a puff. *What is Jack thinking? Even worse, what in the heck is Mike thinking to agree with Jack’s stupid plan?*

They must have been hiking for at least an hour down the mountain when a shimmer of light caught her attention. She squinted through her sopping wet hair. Her jaw dropped as silver disks glided overhead in the stormy sky. *The ships!* A shiver shot through her body. Suddenly, two powerful beams of blue light shot out simultaneously and swung like a pendulum. *Of course they wouldn’t leave us alone. That’d be too easy. But surely they had better things to do than pester a trio of lost teenagers.*

“They’ve sent the hounds after us,” said Mike, slicking back his wet hair.

She grabbed Jack’s shoulder and pointed toward the thickening vegetation. “We gotta hide!” She took off through the trees, weaving and sliding her way along the thick carpet of fallen leaves. Several times, she stopped and peered behind to make sure the guys had followed, and then she sped off again.

The silver disks still hovered above the forest. Dark clouds stood high on the horizon as she halted to hide behind a monster-sized log covered in bright green moss. Giant ferns towered over

them. Gathering her breath, she wiped her palms on her shorts and peered up at the strange disks. She still couldn't understand why they were so insistent on pursuing them. Aliens or not, they didn't seem to take too kindly to interlopers, or maybe it was the military trying to silence them because they'd seen way too much and didn't want them blabbing to *The National Enquirer* or on Facebook or YouTube about cloning experiments with modern-day woolly mammoths and saber-tooth tigers. Casey swallowed hard as beams continued to sweep back and forth across the forest floor.

Mike dropped to the ground. "It looks like a helicopter floodlight, like it's searching for something."

"Yeah—*us!*" said Casey, her voice wavering. Thunder cracked, and lightning bolts cast glowing webs across the sky. Rain dripped down her face and chin. The disk above whirred. She held in her breath as she gripped the log, hoping she'd miraculously morph with it.

A shaft of light bathed her, jolting her back to reality, and she jumped. She sneaked a peek through a gap in the giant log. An entire armada of spaceships turned and headed straight in their direction.

"Crap!" she yelled.

"What?" Mike and Jack asked in unison.

"They've seen us. RUN!"

Chapter 7

Casey sprinted through the creeping vines that draped from the trees like braided rope. Rain poured, and thunder rumbled. She pushed the wet hair back from her eyes. She wondered briefly how the flying disks had found them anyway, but then her mind flashed back to the moment at hand. They needed a place to hide...and quick.

Somewhere behind her, she thought she heard Mike calling her name, but she didn't dare turn around for fear of what she might see. Her feet crashed through giant ferns dotting the jungle landscape. She could hear the river close by as wet branches slapped against her body. The further south she moved, the louder the sound of running water became, until she finally saw

the shore less than fifty feet away. Darting forward, she jumped over logs and zigzagged through the thinning trees, finally stopping where the soil turned into mud. *What now?*

Hesitating, she took a tentative step. Swimming was out of the question, because she had never been interested in becoming the next crocodile hunter. She took a few paces down the shore when she slipped; the earth seemed to be sinking out from underneath her. Shrieking, she threw out her hands to catch her balance. From the corner of her eye, she noticed Mike and Jack approaching, but they were too late. Her cry ended in a terrified scream when she landed with a *thud*, facedown, loosened debris raining down around and on top of her.

She moaned, rolled over, and spat out a mouthful of dirt. Her vision was blurred by dancing spots that looked like some kind of neon grape jelly oozing all over the place. Her mom and dad had always taken her on adventurous vacations, but this one topped everything. The air felt a few degrees cooler. A damp, earthy smell filled her nostrils. Her eyes adjusted to the dimness, and she recognized brown walls around her. *Am I in a cave?* Casey groaned and dropped back down. She reached out and touched a gnarled, exposed tree root and ran her hands along the walls. It was then that she realized they were not solid rock, but more like soft dirt. Soil clung to her clothes, hair, and skin. Suddenly, she felt like Alice at the bottom of the rabbit hole—only this little Wonderland had saber-tooths instead of Cheshires.

A soft groan and cough carried from her right. Jack and Mike stirred from beneath debris and undergrowth. She wasn't thrilled to find out that all three of them were stuck down there, wherever "there" was.

Mike rubbed the back of his head. "What the heck just happened?" Blond hair tumbled in disarray as he scrambled up.

Casey pulled herself into a sitting position and shot him a weak smile. "We fell into a giant pothole, courtesy of Mother Nature."

"Could our luck get any worse?" A pang of disappointment filled Jack's voice. "We're so close to the city...and now this."

She sighed. "Well, yeah. You weren't supposed to follow my clumsy lead. But you know what?" Casey coughed from the swirling dust and looked around. "It might not be so bad. If the aliens didn't see us fall in here, this might actually be the perfect hiding place."

"Yeah, it's like a blessing in disguise," said Mike, his hair hanging in muddy clumps.

Groaning, Jack lifted his arm.

“Hurt?” she asked.

“I banged my hand pretty hard on the fall.” Jack wiped her cheek, a forced smile plastered across his lips, even though he probably wanted to wince in pain. “Are *you* okay?” She could see from the pinched expression on his face that he was hurting, but he was trying to downplay it for her sake.

“I’m fine, thanks.” She softly touched his arm. “I’m sorry. Want me to—”

“No, don’t even worry about me,” said Jack. “I’m just glad you’re okay. How about you, Mike?”

“Give me a minute, and I’ll let you know.” He moved his arms and legs and groaned.

“Besides my aching head and burning eyes, I’m just dandy.”

She stared at Mike for a while, waiting. When nothing happened, she rolled her eyes.

He blinked. “What?”

“Uh, yeah, I’m fine. At least Jack cared enough to ask.” Mike was so dense when it came to being a gentleman. She puffed and turned away, wondering if there would ever come a day when he wasn’t so self-involved. Most of the hole was still dry. The dust in the air began to clear and settle, but Casey’s eyes still watered.

Jack craned his neck. “Rain’s stopping.”

“That’s good,” said Casey, feeling the hard ground beneath her body. “Hey, what did we land on anyway?”

Mike shrugged. “Concrete?”

She poked her hand under the foliage and started removing layers of grass, leaves, and twigs from the ground. For the life of her, she couldn’t figure out why a hole in the middle of a prehistoric jungle would have a concrete floor—just another thing that made absolutely no sense.

“It’s probably just rocks,” said Mike, his back slumped against the wall.

She barely peered at him as she continued her digging. Looking down, she noticed oval, greenish-brown speckled rocks, each the size of the melons they’d just eaten. *What is that?* Several twigs cut into her skin as she dived right in, sweat beading on her forehead. From the corner of her eye, she noticed Jack walking over and standing right behind her.

His cold hand touched her shoulder. “Digging for gold?”

She met his eyes briefly, smiling, and then returned her focus to the ground. “See these big speckled things? I’m trying to find out what they are.”

“Speckled, huh? Let me have a look.” Jack knelt over, his warm breath brushing her shoulder as he huffed, “Hmm. That’s strange.”

“They look like giant polished stones to me.” She frowned, wondering how semi-precious stones would have found their way to such a place. Even if they’d been rained on for ages, it would have taken forever to achieve that smooth look of a brilliant cut diamond. Gently, she brushed the dirt and loose rock aside from one, revealing more of the shiny, speckled surface.

Jack’s bare arm touched her side as he moved nearer and said, “You look like Indiana Jones—only much cuter.”

She felt her cheeks turn to fire as Mike called over, “Let’s just hope your legs aren’t that hairy. Otherwise, I might confuse you with the giant spider we’re supposed to take down.”

Jack tugged away at the stone, his biceps bulging against his t-shirt. “Always know the right thing to say, don’t cha, Mike? Anyway, our Casey here’s not into fighting spiders as much as finding some real cool artifact.”

A short laugh escaped Mike’s mouth. “You’re turning her into the dirt detective. How exciting. Just make sure you have a shower nearby, ’cause I’m not into hugging a mud pie.”

Jack winked. “Lucky for her, I’d hug her, mud and all.”

If Casey hadn’t known any better, she would have sworn Jack was flirting with her, competing for her attention.

Mike chuckled. “I’m kidding. Of course I’d hug her, *mud and all*. In case you’ve forgotten, Casey was covered in green slime after doing battle with that gigantic spider. And I hugged her then, spider guts and all.”

“I did too,” said Jack. “My shirt was covered with the green stuff.”

Mike chuckled. “Lucky for us that gross goo came right off in the river.”

Casey smiled at them. “You guys are awesome! I couldn’t ask for better best friends.” They grinned and she started digging again. “You know what? I don’t mind being the dirt detective, as long as I don’t have to deal with all those slithering snakes and wicked curses.”

“Or big-time booby traps,” said Mike, “and if you just happen to find the Ark of the Covenant and some dudes have opened it—”

“Yeah, I know. Don’t look at it!” Casey interrupted. “Keep your eyes glued shut like Indy, and the ghosts can’t get ya.”

Mike shot her his movie-star smile. “Looks like you didn’t set off any booby traps yet. Guess you’ll have to try a bit harder.”

“Nah, I don’t want to press my luck.” She nudged Mike with her elbow. “What is it again you expect to happen if I were to trigger one of these so called traps? Spikes to come up from the ground?”

“Whizzing poisonous darts, falling rocks, and collapsing walls?” asked Jack.

“A giant bowling ball rock...” Casey looked around. “...to come rolling from who-knows-where?” She paused in her digging for a moment.

Mike shook his head, inching closer. “You two are funny. So what is it anyway?”

Her hands wrapped tightly around the smooth object, slipping in places. She searched for any edges but found none. “Don’t know. I can’t get it out,” she mumbled under her breath. Digging her nails into the ground, she scratched and pulled harder. The earth gave way slowly until the object came loose and she fell back, landing on her butt with a *thud*.

Jack rushed over. “Okay?”

She shook her head with a chuckle, regarding the smooth object in her hands. “I’m fine, thanks.”

“I’m dying to know what it is,” said Mike.

Jack huffed as he clawed at the ground, pulling another one out. “It’s not Indy’s golden idol, that’s for sure.” He scratched his head, spreading dirt across his forehead. “Maybe we can stack the rocks up to give us a boost to the top. I know they’re oval, but it could work if someone held them. It’s not like we have a whole lot of options anyway.”

Casey nodded as Mike shook his head. Jack made a great point and it was definitely worth a try. They pulled out rock after rock. Wet dirt stuck under her fingernails, reminding her of the days when she used to garden with her grandma, wearing her big straw hat and apron.

Mike chuckled. “You know, if we keep going like this, we’ll hit California by nightfall.”

“Either that, or we’ll unbury a dead body,” said Casey. Finding a skeleton was almost a given on any excavation site—at least when Steven Spielberg had anything to do with it.

Jack glanced up, his blue eyes shining. “If you find my great-great-great grandpa, let me know.”

She let out a soft chuckle. Glancing around, she noticed thick droplets trickling through the dirt from where they had just pulled out the rocks. “Oh, crap. I think we’ve sprung a leak.”

Mike started hauling a stone and rolling it into the puddle that had already formed. “Let’s put those fossil rocks right back where they came from.”

Sunlight spilled in and tiny dust particles danced in the air. She could have sworn that out of the corner of her eye, she saw one of the rocks roll to the left. She glanced up at Jack for validation. “Did you see that?”

“I really wish I could say I didn’t, but that’d be a lie.”

She turned and called over her shoulder, “Mike, look! Is that some kind of...egg?” With trembling fingers, she touched the smooth, warm shell, then pressed her ear close to listen. The scratching sound inside made her flinch.

Eyes wide, Mike rubbed his hands across the egg. “Dude, are we actually having a real-life *Eragon* moment? You know, when that kid found a dragon egg? You remember, right?”

“All too well,” said Jack.

“Something’s in there,” Casey whispered. “Oh my gosh! They *are* some kind of eggs. We’re in a nest. We’ve got to get out of here before we turn into baby food.”

Mike’s jaw dropped. “Dude! One of ’em is big enough to cook an omelet for—I dunno—like the entire football team, including the cheerleaders.”

“You mean, once they hatch they’ll be big enough to *eat* the entire football team, including the cheerleaders.” Casey punched his shoulder. “That reminds me. Why did you have to fall in too? Now there’s no one out there to pull us up.”

Jack touched the glossy surface. “I definitely feel movement. Let’s cover them back up.” He started throwing moist dirt on top of the eggs as he shuffled backward.

Mike tossed an armful of twigs over the dirt pile while she scooped up handfuls of earth and tossed them across the floor. With no weapons and no exit sign, burying the eggs did sound like a good choice—at least better than waiting for the things to hatch, hungry for breakfast.

The scratching grew louder. For a second, she stopped her earth-throwing to listen, then crept toward the mound they had made. The pile of dirt started to shake and shift, and she was terrified the eggs were hatching.

Mike pointed down. “Oh no!”

“More dirt!” yelled Casey.

She wondered if she was about to experience *Night of the Living Dead* meets *Jurassic Park*. Even worse, some snakelike alien creature dripping with acidic slime would come back to

protect its young. All kinds of horrific scenarios raced through Casey's mind. After all, judging from the sound, those things could crawl out any minute. The thought of some baby Godzilla, roaring and sinking its fangs straight into her ankle like a giant drumstick made her shudder. *Gosh, Casey!* she scolded herself. *Just switch it off already...and note to self: Stop watching so many horror movies!*

Debris flew in all directions as they frantically dumped tiny rocks, sticks, and leaves over the pile.

Jack brushed off his hands. "There. That oughtta do it."

"The saucer has to be gone by now," said Casey, letting out a breath. "Let's get outta here." She sprinted, and with a giant leap, she sprung up into the air, gripping the dirt wall and digging her feet in with every ounce of might she had. Her lips twitched as she felt herself sliding back down, followed by Jack, and then Mike.

Mike scrambled up; his clothes were soaked and splattered in mud. Shaking his head, he wiped off his dirty hands on his shirt.

"We've gotta keep trying." With a groan, Jack strained his arms, muscles bulging, and pushed himself upward, grunting as he landed roughly on the ground of the pit. "Almost!"

Cold water soaked through Casey's socks and tennis shoes in seconds, and a shiver ran through her, making the hairs on her arms stand. The memory of her feet immersed in seawater as the boat sank flashed through her mind.

Mike's eyes grew wide. "What's happenin'?"

Jack spun in a slow circle through an inch of muddy water, running his hands across the wall. "It looks like the nest is slowly flooding."

"Oh, man." Casey placed a hand over her heart, fighting to calm its racing beat.

Mike's gaze darted about. "I knew this place was booby trapped!"

"It was us, you big goof," said Jack. "By removing the eggs, we caused the wall to cave in. We're right by the river."

Mike turned to face Casey. "Why did you have to touch them anyway?"

"Curiosity, I guess. And like you even have room to talk. Your curiosity gets us into all kinds of trouble...*all* the time."

He had no comment and she focused her attention back on the water swirling around the giant mound of dirt and leaves where they had buried the speckled eggs. Sweat coursed down her

back. She felt bad for disturbing the eggs and landing them in such a mess—even if they were little monsters straight out of some horror movie. Once she was out of this hole, maybe she could help them somehow.

Wiping her brow, she took a few steps back. Peering up, Casey noticed a long, fibrous mass snaking through the dirt wall. She pointed upward to the rim of the pit. “There’s a white tree root sticking out. If you guys give me a lift, I think I could reach it.”

Jack took a step back and peered up. “Yeah, that just might work. Great idea!”

She placed a hand on their shoulders, steadying herself as they grabbed the bottom of her feet and legs. Slowly, they lifted her up over their heads. “Okay, guys. Nice and steady.” Cheerleading pyramids had never been her thing. She reached up for the root, but her body began to wobble, and her foot began to slide. “Crap!” She flung out her hands to regain her balance, but she fell backward.

Jack caught her and cradled her close. “Gotcha!” he said, grinning.

“Thanks. Now you know why I never joined the cheerleading squad.” She stared up into his blue eyes, glinting with amusement. Her breath halted as her gaze drifted to the curve of his lips. She looked away, hoping Mike hadn’t noticed the flush of heat rushing to her cheeks.

But he did. “Earth to Jack and Casey. If you guys take a picture, it’ll last longer.”

“Uh, yeah,” said Jack, setting her down. “Let’s try something else. Casey, we’ll get on our knees, you climb on our shoulders, and then we’ll boost you up, pom-poms and all.”

She laughed. “Go, Casey, go!”

They both knelt while she placed each foot on top of their shoulders.

“Scoot left,” said Casey, “and get closer together.”

Mike shifted his body weight, with a stupid grin on his lips, as he said, “I just love when she walks all over me.”

Funny. She could’ve sworn it was the other way around. “Ha ha. Now quit moving around, or I’ll fall, and you don’t want to see where my foot might land.”

They slowly stood while she jammed her hands into a crevice and then dug her fingernails into the wall and clawed her way up like a rock climber, minus the fancy equipment. *And Mike and Jack thought nails were just fashionable.* A shower of dirt fell on her, but it didn’t slow down her ascent. She reached for the exposed tree root at the very top and pulled the upper half

of her body out. Bracing her foot on the root, she pushed off, pulling herself over the rim just in time, right before the entire root snapped.

For a few seconds, she just lay there, her breath coming in ragged heaving. She had done it! She was out of the pit.

“Great!” yelled Mike. “You broke the darn thing. Now how are we going to get out?”

Jack glared at him. “It wasn’t her fault!”

She leaned over to catch her breath, staring at the long, thick root in Mike’s hands. “Sorry, guys. I’ll slide down a long log so you can climb up or something.”

“Don’t worry, Casey,” said Jack. “I’m sure we’ll find another way up.”

Her mind raced as she tried to think of a way to get her friends out before they were gobbled up by a bunch of miniature dragons or drowned in the bottom of a giant nest.

Mike’s scream jerked her out of her thoughts. He waved his arms and started yelling, “Look! They’re moving. They’re alive!”

Jack looked up, eyes wide, and caught Casey’s gaze.

“What’s he babbling about now?” she asked.

His mouth fell open. “Look! It’s the eggs! They’re...they’re hatching!”

She dropped to her knees and stared into the hole, feeling completely helpless once again.

Chapter 8

Casey peered down into the hole at the giant mound of shaking leaves, twigs, and dirt. Mike had dropped to his knees, and Jack had grabbed a stick. A shiver ran down her spine, and the *crack* of an eggshell made her gasp. *No way!* A face with green scaly skin and closed eyes popped through the tangle of debris. A squeaking lizard, bigger than a cat, crawled up from the vegetation. The baby yawned, revealing a mouthful of razor-sharp teeth that looked like they could bite, tear, and rip through metal—maybe even bone. Casey wasn’t about to stand there doing nothing while her friends were guinea pigs to put the theory to the test. She needed to get Mike and Jack the heck out of there.

Slowly, big yellow eyes blinked open, flicking out a yellow forked tongue.

“Oh my gosh! It’s a baby dinosaur!” Now she began to think all those sci-fi movie marathons had been worth it, like her own personal edition of *Surviving Prehistoric Times for*

Dummies. She forced her brain into first gear to try and remember what you should do upon your first encounter with a Godzilla baby. *Run! Unless you want to meet the parents...or brothers and sisters, uncles, aunts, and so on.*

“It’s a freakin’ dinosaur!” shouted Mike, meeting her gaze.

“Gosh, you think?” She stared down into the hole. Water inched up to Mike’s and Jack’s ankles. She clutched her chest. “Oh, man. This isn’t good. How did we land in a nest of hatching lizard eggs?”

“I dunno, but we did!” said Mike.

Freaking herself out wasn’t the best thing to do, and she had to convince herself that Mike and Jack were going to be okay. She needed to keep her cool and think straight.

Jack plucked off a piece of white shell that was stuck on top of the baby’s head like a tiny helmet. His biceps flexed as he picked the creature up and ran a hand down its back.

“Jack!” Casey called down. “What’re doing? Did you see all those razor-sharp teeth?”

Mike’s jaw dropped. “Dude. Put Bruno down! You want a rabies shot?”

Drawing the infant closer, Jack smiled. “C’mon. Just look at this innocent face. How can I let poor little Bruno drown? He’s just a helpless baby.”

Maybe Jack had a point. It wasn’t like the baby was trying to eat them whole like in some bad horror movie. It was adorable how Bruno cuddled into Jack’s neck for a nap like a newborn puppy. Who knew lizards could be so cute? Casey let out a long sigh. “Awwww. I can’t believe he’s letting you hold him like that.”

“Just remember your own words, Einstein,” said Mike. “Wildlife can be unpredictable.”

Jack ran a finger down the length of Bruno’s body. It was so cute how the creature nuzzled his head against his chest. Jack smiled as he patted the baby softly on its back.

Casey stared at the creature. He had huge back legs, small forearms, and long claws. He was adorable, in his own lizard way. “He reminds me of a Komodo dragon.” Once on a trip to Indonesia, a Komodo dragon had ventured pretty close. Casey could never forget the way its thick tail wagged from side to side as it crossed her path, shot her a look, and lumbered into the trees. Her guide had told her she’d never see anything that would come as close to a dinosaur, but boy, was he ever wrong.

Jack swished the baby around in the water and washed off the clear jelly- goop covering its body. He held the newborn tightly as Mike touched the shiny green scales on its stomach.

“Cool,” said Mike. “I wonder what kind of species he is.” The dino let out a tiny squawk and Mike leaned in closer. “What’s the matter, little fella? Are you hungry?”

Mike lightly patted the baby’s head. The dino let out a low growl as he snapped at Mike’s finger.

“Whoa!” Mike lurched back and the baby let out a piercing yelp.

Casey’s eyes widened and she called down, “Oh my gosh! Mike! Are you okay?” *The poor baby probably just got startled, that’s all...but with those teeth, he could easily take off a finger in one tiny bite.*

Mike gasped and threw his hands up. “Did you see Bruno try to eat my hand? What’s next? My face?”

“Man, sorry about that,” said Jack. “Did he bite you?”

Mike sucked on his pinky like he had a cut or something. “I’m fine,” he muttered. “He didn’t break any skin.”

Casey let out a sigh of relief. “Thank God.” Her tour guide had told her a Komodo dragon carried fifty to eighty strands of bacteria in their poisonous saliva. Who knew how many this little guy carried?

Biting her lip, Casey looked down at Jack. “What are we going to do with this little guy and the rest of the eggs?”

“We can’t leave them here in this pit. They’ll drown, and that’s our fault.” Jack had such a strong connection with animals and nature. It was one of the things Casey loved most about him.

“Okay, so let’s assume we try to carry them out.” Mike peered around them. “If we even manage to scale the dirt wall, what chance do you think they’ll really have out there, Beast Master? You know they’ll die up there too.”

Casey looked from one to the other, listening to their argument. As much as it pained her to admit it, Mike had a point. Still, watching the just-hatched lizardlings die wasn’t an option.

“Not if their mother is somewhere close, which she probably is because it isn’t like a mother to stray too far from a nest,” said Jack. “She’ll hear their cries and take care of them.”

Mike shook his head. “No, I think we’ve messed with the eggs enough. This is the way nature works. Yeah, it’s sad, but it’s the cycle of life.”

How could he say that? Casey wondered as she stared at the adorable sleeping creature in Jack’s arms. “You know, I’m still working on your surfing portrait. If you don’t be quiet, I might

make a mistake or two. Just a single stroke of the brush, and you'll be an orange-haired freak with horns."

He threw his arms up in the air. "Fine. You win, but I still think we're wasting our time—which we don't have a lot of, considering that Jack and I are still stuck down here. I'm not sure it's wise to walk into Glasstropolis at midnight. They might mistake us for burglars and shoot us in self-defense. And who could blame them? We look pretty scary caked in all this mud."

Casey couldn't hide her smirk. "What's a little mud? Maybe we'll start a new fashion trend." Her gaze then locked on Jack's. "Every creature should be given a chance at life."

Jack nodded. Besides, she still hoped they might reconsider their plan of walking right into the aliens' trap. Scanning the ground, Casey grabbed the longest stick known to man. She tossed it down to Jack and said, "Quick...tie your shirt onto this."

"Why does he get to take off his shirt and I don't?" asked Mike.

She glanced down from the rim. "'Cause he wants to help and you don't."

Mike shrugged. "They're reptiles, Casey—freakin' lizards that have already made it clear that they will grow up to be people-eaters. I think we're a little bit more important at this point. What if this hole floods?"

"Rainstorm's over, the suns are out, and it's not like you're in immediate danger. The water's only up to your ankles and trickling down the walls at a snail's pace. We have plenty of time." She winked at him. "Trust me. I'm not going to let anything happen to you, babe."

"Besides, it'll take less than five minutes to get these little guys out." Jack sat the baby down in the puddle of water and whipped his shirt over his head.

"Dude, you so just did that to impress her," said Mike.

For a moment, all Casey could do was stare. *Wow! Why haven't I ever noticed how toned he was?* Jack wasn't like Mike, all-gym-and-muscle-toned, but well proportioned, with broad shoulders and a well-defined torso. Heat rushed to her cheeks, and she had to turn away. She turned her focus onto a few pieces of floating eggshell swirling around in the water. *He'd go to all this effort and even give up the shirt on his back to save these creatures? Awww! How cute is that?*

Jack secured his shirt to the knobby stick with a double knot. "It may surprise you, Mike, but some people *like* helping others without having ulterior motives." He gently stuffed the baby into the makeshift net and tied another knot. "All right. You're good to go."

Wrapped up in Jack's shirt, the baby looked even cuter, and it seemed to enjoy the sling. Little Bruno opened his mouth and let out a soft yelp that sounded more like a yawn and then closed his eyes as if he wanted to fall sleep. Casey reached down and wrapped her fingers around the stick, giving a fierce yank to pull the dinosaur up.

The creature felt much lighter in her arms than she expected, and it snuggled against her like it already trusted her and accepted her as its mother. Smiling, she unwrapped Jack's shirt from its leathery body and tossed the makeshift net back down. Jack caught it and shouted up a thanks, but she was too busy inspecting the little creature to pay him any attention. Its skin was mottled black and green, covered in small bumps. She used some leaves to wipe off the excess mucous from its face and head, wishing she hadn't returned Jack's shirt so quickly.

The dino squeaked, and Casey stroked its cheek and gazed into its bright eyes. The baby rubbed its skin against her finger, making her laugh. "Moisturize daily, and you'll get rid of those rough, dry patches." The dino squeaked again, and she went on with her motherly advice. "But I'll admit, I've had days when I've felt a tad reptilian myself. Nothing a ton of vitamin E and aloe can't fix." The creature let out a long squawk, but this time more loudly. "Shhhh! Don't call for Mom and Dad—at least not yet."

"Hey, Casey! We're not here to adopt the wildlife," called Mike. "Do you think you could hurry up?"

"Sure. Send up the rest of the eggs." She shot the dino an apologetic smile. "So sorry about him. He's the mean one. You see the dark-haired guy? That's the one you'll be able to wrap around your finger—as long as you don't intend on making a snack out of him."

She pulled up one egg after another until all were rescued. By the time she retrieved the last, her arms were burning from the effort, and her wet hair was glued to the nape of her neck with a thick paste of sweat and mud and jungle dirt. She quickly gathered a collection of giant fan-shaped leaves that were folded like an accordion, and built a nest under a nearby tree. It wasn't exactly a padded bassinette, but it seemed cozy enough and should prove useful in hiding the baby dino's helpless siblings from any eagle-eyed predators. Within minutes, two more lizards hatched, leaving four eggs.

The three babies burrowed deeper under the leaves and cuddled together as though searching for comfort, squeaking excitedly. Casey squatted on the bare ground and held out her hand, letting them touch her with the tips of their pointed tongues. They seemed shy, but not

frightened. Really, they had no reason to be scared. Natural instinct told them to follow their mother, and as far as they knew, that was Casey. She sure didn't look like them, but a human was the first thing they had seen after hatching.

Turning, Casey inspected the remaining eggs. New brothers and sisters would be joining them soon, and if their chattering continued, it might just be an all-out family reunion. Suddenly, the thought inspired her to speed up Operation Rescue. She threw down Jack's shirt and he caught it with one hand.

How the heck am I gonna get those two out of there? Casey thought it best to look for a thick branch or something. Suddenly, she felt chilly water swirl around her shoes. She glanced up at the river and gasped. It flooded over the bank, soaking ferns, grass, and everything in its path. Then it struck her: This probably happened during every rainstorm here. The ground must not be level, so that's why the eggs fell into the hole in the first place. A current must have swept them away from their warm nest to that pit. *Boy, Mom needs to pick a better spot next time.* Something else flashed across Casey's mind. *How could I have ever thought I was in a nest created by Mama Dino? Duh. No dinosaur could even reach down there to lay a clutch.*

The water coming toward her only looked to be about two inches deep. It was actually harmless, unless you were trapped in a rather deep hole that might quickly turn into a lake.

Mike's scream pierced the air, causing her head to whip around.

"We've got a big problem!" said Mike.

Peering into the pit, Casey threw a hand over her mouth. Water was trickling over the sides, filling up the narrow space more quickly than she had anticipated. The water had already risen up to their knees.

"We have to figure out a way to get you guys out of this hole...and quick, before you drown!"

"Now who's playing Captain Obvious?" said Mike, looking around him at the rising flood.

Glancing up, Jack watched water spill over the sides. "Hey, what's going on up there?"

"The river's flooding," said Casey.

Mike heaved a sigh. "You've got to be kidding me!"

Thunder rumbled in the distance, echoing through the forest. She peered back at her two friends. "Hey, guys, do you hear that?"

Another roll of thunder clapped, this time much nearer. Casey jumped, startled, and the fresh batch of tiny dinos cowered under the leaves.

Mike leapt and tried to grip the wall, but fell back, water splashing around him. “Maybe another storm’s coming.”

She thrust out her hand as Jack tried, missing him only by inches. “Maybe it’s time one lifts the other. I’m not going to be able to catch you.”

Another noise rocked the nearby trees, making her jump as shudders ran across her body. She scanned the surrounding area. “This is no normal rain shower,” she whispered. “It’s... something else.”

“What?” Mike called. “Didn’t hear ya.”

“Just hurry up!” she shouted.

“Hold down the stick,” said Mike.

She looked down at the narrow branch, wondering how much Mike weighed. “It’ll never hold you. I’ll keep looking. Meanwhile, you two get your butts into action and keep trying.” Peering around her, she searched for anything she might be able to use. Off to the left, hundreds of long, rope-like vines dangled from towering trees.

Perfect! She raced over, splashing through the muddy water, and pulled hard on one of the vines. It came off halfway and fell to the ground. Bending forward, she noticed a familiar pair of tracks in the mud; the same bird-like footprints they had noticed at the beach earlier stretched across the mud to the other side of the shore. *Oh, man, this can’t be happening.* Whether she wanted to or not, she had the strong feeling she might not be able to avoid an encounter with this thing.

Her stomach twisted as she dragged the vine back to the hole and threw it in, “Hey, guys? Remember those giant footprints? The ones we saw in the sand?”

“Yeah, back at the beach,” said Jack. “What about them?”

“Well, I just saw them all over the place.”

The water rose to Mike’s waist as he eyed the vine. “Great. Add that to our list of problems.”

“We need to really get out of here!” Jack grabbed hold of the vine and pulled, almost throwing her off when he tried to test it.

Mike's eyes grew wide. He was always so reckless that seeing him worried made her even more impatient to get away from there. "C'mon, Jack! Just hurry up."

"The hole's going to cave in!" Jack turned to Mike, pushing him forward. "GO!"

"No, man. I'm a skilled free diver. You should get out of here first."

Casey blew out a breath. "Jack, grab the vine and climb up. Mike, don't you dare try to go on some crazy diving expedition."

Jack reluctantly grabbed the vine and called up, "Ready?"

Casey wrapped the rope around a tree trunk to make a pulley. She planted her feet firmly into the ground to steady herself. The earth shook beneath her feet. With trembling hands, she pulled the vine taut, bracing herself against a tree, and signaled for Jack to start climbing. "Okay. C'mon!"

She hoped it was just your average earthquake, something they'd grown slightly used to in California. *Please let it be that.* Not many people would wish for something so awful, but given her options, she'd gladly take a natural catastrophe over a Japanese nightmare like King Ghidorah. People survive earthquakes, but not a golden three-headed dragon.

They hadn't a moment to waste. She hauled backward with all her strength, throwing her weight into the pull. The vine tightened even more. *This thing had better not break!* She felt the rope burn like fire into her hands. Her feet slid in the dirt as Jack climbed up the side. Whatever she did, she knew she couldn't let go. "Hurry!"

With a grunt, Jack heaved himself over the edge, dropping on the wet grass next to the pit. "Mike... it's... it's your... your turn, man." His voice came raspy, his breathing in short heaves, as his clothes dripped with muddy water.

"I'm coming!" he yelled up.

Suddenly, a large shape approached. She searched her memory for anything that might fit the description: lazy, giant steps that would wake the dead; heroine and idiot friends in danger; enormous height that might give the impression of dark clouds, but was probably some strange physical occurrence caused by the thing's shadow. She gasped. The shape drew nearer, blocking the sunlight. *Okay, so it's not an earthquake.* Goosebumps rushed over her as the hair on the back of her neck rose.

"Hurry, Mike!" Casey shouted. "Something's getting closer. It's big, sorta like King Kong or something."

Casey and Jack pulled and tugged at the vine together, their heels digging into the ground. Gasping, she cast a nervous glance over her shoulder and flinched. An oversized reptile bounded nearer on two enormous, muscular hind legs. It must have stood as tall as a three-story building, and it looked like it really did walk right out of a low-budget Japanese studio, only far more real and horrifying. Her heart thundered, and she wondered if it was time to faint.

The vine loosened in her hands and a splash echoed from the pit. *Did Mike fall back in?* She heard his muffled voice. “Darn sandals!”

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me! Once this thing feasts on you, you won’t need them,” shouted Casey. “Lose the shoes... unless you’re hoping to give it indigestion, ’cause you’re about to be dinner if you don’t hurry the heck up!”

Jack and Casey grabbed the vine again and pulled hard, falling flat on their backs as Mike let go of the rope again. Just what makes a monster movie truly a *monster movie*? Well, Casey supposed it was an image seared into your brain—just like the one she was currently experiencing. She lay trembling from head to foot, looking up at her worst nightmare.

It’s a...a...no way! A Tyrannosaurus rex.

To be continued...